

# BENGAL : NOW AND THEN

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West Bengal will complete 60 years of its truncated existence after India's Independence, next year. Two generations grew up in this period; those born in the late 1940s have past their prime and the second generation, born in the late 1970s, is reaching it. The older people, everywhere, are nostalgic; they say, everything was better in their time but is worse now. The second generation cannot compare their life with that of Bengalees who were born in the penultimate years of British rule.

What was life like in West Bengal in the penultimate years of British rule? It was very placid, despite a stagnant economy and a tumultuous politics. Coming after the devastating cyclone of October 1941, the Great Bengal Famine of 1942-43 took a heavy toll in Midnapur district. To curb the seditious freedom movement, spearheaded by the Free Tamralipta Government, the Raj administration punished the rebellious people of the district through draconian measures. My remembrance starts from 1944 when I saw war planes tearing the sky over Contai where I spent first eight years of life. Life in my ancestral village, some 50 kilometres north, where we moved in 1949 was very slow but never dull. I first boarded a bus at the age of 14 and a train, a year later, on a visit to Kolkata with my father and an elder sister. I saw and listened to a valve radio set at the age of 13 and could buy a television at the age of 40. Those who were born in the 1970s began enjoying these media blisses from their childhood.

Infrastructure was virtually nil in Bengal villages in British India. There was no motorable road within 10 kilometres from our house. Phone and electrically-operated gadgets were seen in movies only, which we saw, occasionally, in a thatched cinema-hall, some eight kilometres away. In the 1950s, films, featuring Uttam-Suchitra and those based on Sarat Chandra's maudlin stories were our favourites and haunted us for months, particularly the songs which we sang, full-throated, when away from elders. Reading at night was difficult with hurricane lamps, burning kerosene. Drinking water was collected by our sisters in earthen pitchers from a mid-field pond; tube wells were sunk from the 1950s but remained inoperative, most of the time.

Nevertheless, our lives were full of joy with hours spent in sports like football, badminton, carom etc., occasional festivals and *pujas*, Rabindra Jayanti, Jatras and cinema once or twice a month. We had our dreams, of someday studying and living in Kolkata; the robust among us pined to see football matches between Mohan Bagan and East Bengal teams in the maidan. Teachers in primary and high schools taught with cane and care and overall, our days glided in halcyon calm. Pre-Independence politics was a closed book to me but I heard of the Congress party, everywhere. I saw Mahatma Gandhi in Contai where he came to address a meeting, leaning on

two ladies, a few months before he was killed but my maternal uncle's family had taken to charkha long before and virtually worshipped him.

Primary and high schools were there, not far from our village but colleges were few and far away. Medical facilities were practically nil except homeopathic and bio-chemic quacks for a song. A 10-bed primary hospital came up, some two kilometres from our village in the mid-1950s; qualified private doctors began to be available at considerable distances from the 1970s. Hordes of children used to die of virulent cholera and dehydration. Tuberculosis was common; so were other diseases caused by water-borne viruses, like jaundice and typhoid. Among the mass media, only newspapers came by post to a handful of the educated. The rich and the well-off bought valve radio sets, to which people other than their family members and relatives had little access.

### **CHANGES FOR THE BETTER**

The first change in this placid life came with community transistor sets, given free to clubs by the government from 1955. I used to trudge miles to a friend's house to hear Pankaj Mullick's music lessons on Sundays, radio plays on Fridays and '*Adhunik*' songs on *Anurodher Asar*. Our English teachers focused on grammars and idioms; arithmetic, algebra and geometry teachers were indefatigable in helping us master them and score letter marks in final examinations.

Infrastructure began to be built after 1947 but very slowly. The second Chief Minister after Independence, Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy felt the need for industries to relieve pressure on low-yielding agriculture and extracted from the Centre licenses for new industries which came up, with liberal government help, in Durgapur, Asansol, Kalyani and nearby Haringhata. Industries from other States also converged to West Bengal. After his death in 1962, very few new industries were built under successive Congress Chief Ministers and during two United Front governments but after the Marxists came to power on their own in 1977, there was a dead stop. To secure their vote banks, they focused on rural areas and embarked on a massive land reforms programme, unprecedented in India. They completed implementation of the Estate Acquisition Act very rigorously and recorded the surplus land, wrested from intermediaries in the names of small farmers and share-croppers. Village roads were improved with brick-dusts and culverts. Although thousands of big and small industries closed, became sick or left the State because of mounting labour unrest, abetted by leftist trade unions, agriculture improved because of successive good monsoons, irrigation by shallow tube wells and change-over to high-yielding seeds of virtually every crop. Rural water supply improved after tube-wells were sunk and ring-wells repaired. Under the Centre's programmes, rural electrification and telecom made headway. The panchayati system of local self-government which was moribund under the Congress rule was revamped with elections held regularly for the three-tier system. It has now dug roots, although party-based polls politicised it and bred corruption in CPI (M) functionaries. Self-governance has improved too in municipalities, notified

areas and corporation with holding of regular elections and liberal government grants.

The wage and work ethos of industrial labours increased substantially through trade union bargains with the management but a militant unionism, gheraos of executives and owners led to massive closures and flight of capital, rendering the State an 'industrial wasteland'. Survival allowances were introduced for the rural unemployed, widows and destitute old people but became irregular because of financial stringency and restricted to fewer people. After myopic opposition to computerisation of public utility offices in the 1980s, the Front government realised its importance and earmarked a whole sector of Bidhan Nagar (Salt Lake City) to IT firms. Computer literacy improved with the mushrooming of numerous schools and training outfits. Information technology is transforming urban life with government, public sector and private offices doing work in computers and delivering public utility services more efficiently. Barring occasional inter-party clashes, armed dacoities and sex-related crimes, an ambience of peace prevails over West Bengal, which used to be disrupted in the Congress regime by the Marxist parties on petty pretexts and by underground Naxalites for about a decade from the mid-1960s.

There has been a telecom revolution in the last 10 years. Mobile phones have become ubiquitous and land phones have penetrated remote villages. Battery-operated cheap television sets have dislodged transistor radios; many rural families even own VCD players, on which they see films and hear disc music. Nobody drinks pond water any more, as tube wells are aplenty; pipe water has reached some villages too. Despite frequent power-offs, electricity has cheered up many homes and works which were impossible at night, can be done now, comfortably. As in the rest of India, an air of development and modernisation is blowing over West Bengal too but very little has been achieved yet, compared to many other States. Many more colleges have come up, but with dubious standards; honours courses in many subjects have been opened without adequate full-time teachers. Standards of formal education have fallen; graduates cannot write two sentences in English without errors of grammar or idiom.

### **CHANGES FOR THE WORSE**

For some 20 years after Independence, the life of Bengalees all over the State was very much the same. The first major change for students came through their union politics in the undergraduate classes. Fierce fights between the leftist Students Federation of India and the rightist Chhatra Parishad from Kolkata to moffusil colleges gave them the first taste of divisive politics. Bitter rivalry and contest followed for capture of student unions and misuse of their funds. Academic peace was shattered. Came, one after the other, the waves of influx from Bangladesh, the squalor and poverty of refugee camps and resettlement colonies, food movement of the 1960s and the Marxist politics engulfing a large chunk of the student community. This was the beginning of the decline of West Bengal for the next 30 years.

What is this decline that elders bemoan? Is it just their nostalgia everything hunky-dory in our time but worse now—a generation gap syndrome or a real socio-cultural decadence? The quality of life has gone down in other spheres too. Healthcare has become dismal in government hospitals in the cities and villages. Hordes of primary hospitals do not have doctors and nurses; hygienic infrastructure is substandard and essential medicines are in short supply. Private nursing homes, mostly sub-standard, have sprung up to fill this vacuum but are beyond the reach of poorer people. Even noted government hospitals in Kolkata and district towns compare poorly with private hospitals, some of them set up with foreign collaboration. Like almost every infrastructure, healthcare in pre-Independence Bengal was, of course, much inferior but it did not develop, as it should have, in 60 years.

Standards have fallen awfully in formal education too. Schools and colleges have proliferated but owing to shortage of eligible teachers and funds, the government runs them with para-teachers on contract basis. Abolition of English teaching in primary classes from 1980 dealt a severe blow to the prospects of students to do well in under-graduate and postgraduate classes in which most books and the medium of teaching is in English, or to get jobs outside the State and the country. Government's instruction to schools through the ABTA not to fail any student up to the 10th class lowered the standard of pass-outs and bred frustration in them, because many of them could not cross the higher secondary barrier.

Teachers in schools and colleges in the Congress regime were recruited by the managing committees comprising the local gentry and educationists. The Front government set up two commissions to eliminate 'arbitrary' recruitments but used these to push to its own candidates, edging out more eligible applicants. Inevitably, the standards of teachers and teaching have fallen, resulting in low standards of the pass-outs. In secondary and higher secondary examinations, the toppers score over 90 per cent, much beyond their expectation. The Secondary Board and the Higher Secondary Council liberalise standards to pass out maximum students, undeservingly. Up to the mid-1960s, first division or class, i.e, scoring just 60 in 100 used to be called 'divine' and students securing these were truly deserving. Thus formal education has been politicised, burying standards but the government publicises it as spread of education.

West Bengal has slid back in nearly all fronts in 30 years of left rule. The society has split vertically. The worst thing to happen, particularly in the last three decades, is the deep division in the society on ephemeral political belief. The middle class which propped the freedom movement remained a staunch pillar of the Congress party. The Communist Party of India, formed in 1927, gradually weaned away farm and industrial labour through Tebhaga, distribution of vested land and militant trade unionism. The Congress government's policies at the Centre and in the States did no good to these fringe work forces. The CPI and later the CPI (M) could reach the political pariahs; with this began the deep chasm in the rural and urban societies. Popular culture which the middle class created and sustained began to be dissipated. The standards in music, drama and other arts fell, to cater to hordes

of illiterate and lumpen masses. The communist ideology of equality and pro-poor slogans had a great attraction to the laymen and the intelligentsia alike. In the 1940s the IPTA became the purveyor of this new communist culture through plays, songs and films. The standard of politics and politicians also fell, as criminals entered the arena, hitherto the preserve of the idealistic middle class. Leaders of the CPI (M) used them to protect and enlarge their interests. Most of them are ignorant of Marxist ideology, as much as of Bengali culture. A senior minister said publicly that Rabindranath Tagore got Nobel prize in literature because of lobbying and high connections that his grandfather, Dwarkanath established in Europe. The government sponsored a number of general strikes (*bandhs*) in these 30 years and supported a larger number. The party considers *bandh*, processions and rallies as people's democratic rights, even if they are a protest against the government's policies. These were unimaginable three decades ago.

From 1977, the coming to power of a coalition of half a dozen leftist parties, led by the CPI (M), drove a deep wedge in the society. This, to my mind, has been the worst change that my generation witnessed. Rising brutalities and violence by leftist cadres ruined social cohesion; many supporters and workers for opposition parties were attacked, killed, or driven out of their hearth and homes by scheming and persecuting cadres, at the behest of party bosses.

### **STRAWS IN THE WIND**

It is in this strife-torn society that I see straws in the wind before the coming of a storm. V S Naipal warned of a thousand mutinies in India; in West Bengal a political cyclone is brewing and will some day blow away dead and yellow leaves. Much of the media considers the present government as an evil. Except the CPI (M)'s organ, *Ganashakti*, a lone Kolkata Bengali daily and three CPI (M)-funded TV channels, every other newspaper and TV channel tear the government and CPI (M) party bosses to shreds, everyday; they are not funded by the opposition. Police caning of innocent farming families on 30th November'06 over their legitimate resistance to acquisition of 998 acres of fertile land and events in its aftermath have belied its pro-poor policies and democratic credentials. This will snowball when affected farmers in other places in the State too join it, because with planned acquisition of some 1.25 lakh acres of farm land, not only they would lose their occupation and means of permanent sustenance but an annual loss of some two lakh tonnes of rice alone would weaken food security and starve or under-nourish more poor people. This would be a bleak prospect which, nobody could imagine, a leftist government would make real because of its flawed and shortsighted moves to bring about an industrial regeneration of West Bengal.

Urban Bengalees, traditionally a cultured and idealistic race have become, barring a few exceptions, mute watchers of this 'heart of darkness'. The electorate is divided with about half of them voting for the six-party Left Front and the other half for the three main opposition parties who remain perennially divided. Their conscience has been blunted and like the proverbial 'one-eyed deer' half of them are blind to the damages done by a Marxist government for three decades. Human values that Marxists boast of upholding,

have been turned on the head and to them, as to the witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, "fair is foul and foul is fair". They are spoilt by avarice which the clever government fulfils in many subtle ways, if they support the Front parties. They have also become utterly politicised and the constant Goebbelsian propaganda by senior left leaders would not let them see the truth. They do not see the coming storm, with their heads buried in the sand. ~~del del~~