

QUO Vadis Bengal

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Quo Vadis? ("Where am I going?"), Jesus asked his disciples before Judas Iscariot betrayed him to the Jews who crucified him. It is time, some 8.5 crore people of West Bengal ask themselves and their government a similar question, "Where are we going?" Like Jesus's, the question is one of agony, because the governments in the State and Centre are aiming to take them from a predominantly agricultural to an urban and industrial lifestyle. The State's second post-Independence Chief Minister, Dr B C Roy initiated industrialisation in the 1950s but did not encounter the resistance that his present incumbent is facing since he returned to power in May, 2006. Much of what Dr Roy achieved in 14 years (1948-1962) was undone by successive Congress and six leftist governments in 46 years after his death. It is said, some 65,000 industrial units—big and small in both public and private sectors closed or went out of the State in the Left regime, impoverishing the State and rendering tens of thousands of their owners and workers jobless. Suffering probably from this guilt complex, the present Chief Minister has embarked on a very ambitious programme of industrialisation, which his political opponents and bulk of the media criticize as utopian and anti-people. This would entail acquisition of some 1.5 lakh acres of farm land, causing a yearly shortfall of at least two lakh tones of rice alone and render tens of thousands of farmers, share-croppers, farm labour and others who live on and off land jobless and alien in their own habitats. The beleaguered Chief Minister may ultimately succeed with his strong-arm methods, as Joseph Stalin did in Russia, while forcing collective farming on reluctant peasants. The displaced and uprooted people will, of course, get monetary compensation over a period of time but with not enough arable land available near their hearths and homes, they will have to change to other occupations, or just squander the money on trades and businesses for which they do not have any experience or expertise. The benefits of acquisition will accrue to the educated middle class and will, as a cliché goes, "make the rich richer and the poor poorer". It is in this context, that the people of once 'golden Bengal' should ask, 'Quo Vadis'? (Where are we going?).

Not only some five lakh farming families will lose (Singur farmers on 1000 acres have already lost) their sustenance for an uncertain future but the life of the State's over 8.5 crore people will also change in just one generation. Change is the law of Nature and in the past one decade, the life style of many Bengalees has changed under the impact of newer technologies, like cell phone, computer, electronic household gadgets under a gradually globalised economy. The younger generation is smarter, cleverer and more career-conscious than the previous. Poverty and hunger are easing except in tribal regions, although some 9%, i.e., nearly 75 lakh people starve or semi-starve. Higher education is spreading, although of indifferent quality, illiteracy persists but the government's efforts to remove it have become more vigorous with opening of additional schools under *Sarba Siksha Abhijan*, subsidy, free textbooks and mid-day meals etc. Although more than one in ten persons is jobless, there is not enough anger or protest and

people survive on a multitude of self-employment occupations, nearer their hearths and homes. Nevertheless, the Chief Minister is painting a rosy picture of future and urging people to part with their arable land which have been sustaining them for generations.

Will this utopia really come about? Will people be happier and more contented when they earn their livelihood in mills and factories? Will they be really earning more than they have been by tilling the land? Will they ever get back their land they are now handing over to the State, if industries fail, as thousands of them did in the last three decades, or never come up, as in many acquired places? These questions and doubts are agitating the minds of both affected and unaffected in the planned massive land acquisition?

The government is the most powerful force in any society; no individual or organisation, howsoever affluent or potent, can do greater service, or disservice, to the people at large; the government's power is ubiquitous in a democratic society. A Marxist government like West Bengal's goes much farther; it even decides petty appointments in schools, colleges and universities, making a mockery of merit and justice. When a government pursues a policy like this to the detriment of some five lakh farming households, trampling human rights and using the police to wrest their land without their consent, ordinary citizens feel helpless. The government claims a monopoly of wisdom and vision and therefore, does not care a fig for the farmers' protests or pleas, for exposure of its malafide acts and intentions by the media and does not heed the advice of specialists and makes shortcuts with law. The Left Front government shows, every day, how lawmakers become law-breakers without compunction, because each of its action from acquiring land in Singur to the issue of acquisition notices in Nandigram by the Haldia Development Authority has been illegal. The UPA government in Delhi can neither stop nor challenge its illegalities, because it survives on the external support of 60 MPs of left and allied parties.

The Left Front government has covered a generation; those who were born when it came to power in 1977 are now 30. They have not seen life before 1977; they grew up in the leftist ambience and cannot compare the life of Bengalees who were born and grew up in the previous 30 years, from 1947 to 1977. It's easy to ignore the elders' frustration as nostalgia, typical of generation gap but facts speak otherwise. In the first 30 years, the government catered to lesser people and but for two United Front governments, spanning some three years, from 1967 to 1970, it was a Congress regime under four Chief Ministers—Prafulla Chandra Ghosh (twice), Dr B C Roy, Prafulla Chandra Sen and Siddhartha Shankar Ray. The economy was much less buoyant than now; globalisation was not even heard. The left parties were then in opposition and made noises in and out of the Assembly; Jyoti Basu, Biswanath and Geeta Mukherjee, Harekrishna Konar, Jatin Chakraborti, Subodh Banerjee (of the SUC) used to make fiery speeches but the CPI(M) and the CPI did not have the huge army of cadres and activists that they have now. The twilight glow of the British Raj that ended in 1947 was still seen in education, judiciary and administration. Computer and management studies were unknown; when the Front came to power, they resisted computerisation, fearing that it would lead to layoffs and job shrinkage. Good students went for graduate studies in science; among the humanities, only

economics and English literature attracted some of them. Pass rates in school final-graduate and post-graduate courses were not as phenomenally high as now. First classes in BA and MA were much fewer than now and securing 60% marks was considered really very tough and in subjects like English literature and economics rather 'divine', as a Calcutta University professor used to say. Students' politics had begun and union election saw keen and often stormy contests between the SFI and *Chhatra Parishad*. Pass-outs with honours were certain to get at least teaching jobs in schools or colleges. Inter-party strife in the villages, cities and towns were almost unknown except before elections. Infrastructure of power, roads as well as of school and college buildings was not as developed as now.

Notwithstanding all these minuses, there was peace and contentment, everywhere, although many more families used to be hungry, particularly in pre-harvesting months- from September to December. Political interference, or influence peddling in managing committees, or in recruitment of teachers and non-teachers was unheard of. There was no mockery of justice in these affairs as now.

Elders know and moan, how the society has degenerated under the left rule. These days, everybody is known by his or her political identity, as if there is no other. Goebbels-like propaganda on practically every matter buries truth; dissenters are roughly dealt with. Elections have long ceased to be free and fair; people are afraid to vote against the ruling parties for fear of reprisal, or persecution. Corruption is rife in every utilisation of government funds, as recently revealed in the report by the Comptroller & Auditor-General. Central funds for amelioration of poverty remain largely unspent, while government and party leaders accuse the Centre of discrimination and neglect. Hypocrisy abounds, whether it is brinkmanship over the Indo-US civil nuclear pact, curtailment in ration supplies following failure to draw allotments and so on. Civil strife, much more violent than in Nandigram, is in the offing, as the Panchayet election draws near, because it will be like a semi-final before the 2009 Lok Sabha and 2011 Assembly polls. Sensing a larger victory of the opposition parties, the State CPI(M) and Left Front chief has given a call to cadres and loyalists for a 'do or die' battle. Not for nothing, Maoists kill CPI(M) leaders in Adivasi areas, because they are behind the backwardness and widespread hunger in tribal belts.

If the government thus becomes anti-people, whom will the people ask, "Quo Vadis"? Who will give them an honest answer? Or will they go the way of the Jesus Christ and embrace crucifixion by a vindictive government? Or should they bury fears and doubts and trust the Chief Minister to lead them to a brighter future? Will tens of thousands who live on and off the land not only lose their ancestral occupations but in turn, will also get nothing in return and become waifs and strays? If industries succeed in spite of a poor work culture, inadequate infrastructure and mounting public debt of the government, who will actually benefit- the legion of farmers, or the educated middle class and the rich? What will be the quality of life in an urbanised industrial society? Who can afford it? In fact, the most agonising question of the day is 'Quo Vadis, Bengal?' □□

