

DISASTER BEYOND MANAGEMENT

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Buddhadev Bhattacharjee's recent visit to some Aila-ravaged areas in the Sunderbans in south Bengal was a desperate attempt to refurbish his soiled image. It is not only that the attempt absolutely fell flat; it rather added to the ignominy of the government he heads and is flamboyantly proud of. While the local MLA had literally mud on his face, furious public demonstration of the victims simply put the Chief Minister (CM) out. Angry people refused to relent even when the visibly unnerved CM helplessly tried to defend his government's role with folded hands. Aila exposed the utter callousness of the administration of a government that has been ruling this state for over three decades. And the above incident pointed to the extent of public wrath against the ruling power, particularly the CM.

Being an experienced politician, Jyoti Basu was clever enough to know that all that he passes off as his government's 'unprecedented' achievements were not based on solid facts. Hence, as chief Minister, he had made it a point not to meet the people face-to-face on any occasion in times of crisis. But Buddhadev Bhattacharjee is of a different breed. He always poses as a cultural-minded person and after having assumed office as CM, he tried to put a public-friendly face. The fact however is that he is a combination of ignorance coupled with arrogance. He took the people for granted and thought that his word would always be regarded as the last word.

Hence he began to teach the rural people that agriculture was no longer profitable and their future lay in the kind of 'industrialisation' he had planned. He even went to the extent of proclaiming that come what may, he would go ahead with his industrialisation drive. He riddled those who opposed his policy as stupid persons with their heads filled with 'potatoes and cucumbers only'.

Singur and Nandigram have already proved that Mr Bhattacharjee and his cohorts have little knowledge of public perception of development. The Left leaders gave out an impression that the government's performance in other areas was an exemplary success; and industrialisation at the cost of fertile farmlands was essential for the sake of 'development'—for economic revival and public good in general. The public however didn't buy their arguments; because their bitter experience didn't correspond with the leader's claims.

The horrible disaster caused by Aila has bared the government's incompetence in almost every respect. The administration proves lacking in knowledge and capacity to address a great calamity such as Aila. The government notoriously failed on both counts. It could not take pre-emptive measures to protect public life and property in the cyclone-prone areas. And it also failed to provide relief to the victims in the cyclone-hit Sunderbans. In spite of having a separate ministry and various departments for the protection and development of this area, the government took several days to gauge the magnitude of the devastation. The concerned departments are now engaged in a blame-game passing the buck on each other to explain away the government's failure. It has been widely reported in the media that lakhs of victims are now crying out for food, shelter and even drinking water. They are now literally living under the sun. The health officials maintain that the disaster management team has not only failed to shift people in interior

villages to a safer zone; they have not even able to arrange transportation services for the medical teams. And the accused department pleads helplessness by admitting that it lacks adequate number of boats to ferry relief materials and rescue workers. What kind of administration is this for a government that has been in power for more than thirty years! Where has the money meant for disaster management gone!

Aila has also exposed the government's failure to repair the age -old embankments and keep them in good shape to meet any eventuality. This failure has led to the inundation of thousands of villages rendering lakhs of people homeless. They are now hopelessly waiting for food, water and medical relief. In the wake of Nandigram, the Left Front government embarked on a damage control project. The results of the recently concluded Lok Sabha polls have proved that the exercise has totally fallen through. Aila has played havoc not only with human settlements but with the existence of the ruling power in West Bengal. The damage, already done, has now assumed disastrous proportions both in the literal and figurative senses. To go by the results of the last elections and the angry outbursts of the cyclone-victims, public mandate seems to be clear; this worthless government must go. □□□