

Calcutta Notebook

Shoummo

Before winter could descend on Kolkata a hermit from the Duns was here for his annual sojourn to this 'city of dreadful night' and day, some will add. A few of us had a rendezvous with him in a central Kolkata salon. With infusions to sip and crackers to nibble, the meeting without agenda soon found its own course.

The elections to the West Bengal state assembly scheduled for the first half of 2011 being round the corner, an apparition of Jeanne d' Arc from Kalighat, too, made her quiet entry into the discussion. A participant enthusiastically attempted to sense the sense of the house and was on the verge of calling for a show of hands. The sense, if any, was that the house was split down the middle. The more articulate were all for Jeanne. A noted human rights activist thought that 'poriborton' would usher in a democratic space where activists will breathe free. To him, Trinamul Congress (TMC) was welcome from the perspective of governance. Another of his ilk expected Jeanne to bring forth a manifesto that would transcend the electoral process. However, he was cautious enough to suggest that parties may come and go but the left agenda should not be allowed to be obliterated from the political sphere of Bengal.

The session got carried way forward by a Presidency College alumnus and a debater to the core. He threw down the gauntlet. 'It is the will of the people that CPM must go and TMC is the only formation in a position to fill the vacuum' he said. 'People have been repeatedly waylaid by the party during the past 33 years and yet they have forgiven them and succumbed to the party's hegemony. But, Singur was the turning point when people found their feet and convinced themselves that even a 'red' monolithic party can be resisted'. That Jeanne is a populist and can very soon jump on to the neoliberal bandwagon was not lost, however, upon him or the house.

A professor felt that TMC's warm up act is in the same league of thuggery as CPM's 'in power' muscle flexing. A lady who still resonates to the rumblings of the 'spring thunder over India' said that TMC communicates in a language that power vests in a political party. A political scientist went hammer and tongs to point out that CPM had subverted all democratic institutions and that it must go at all costs. He felt that TMC must be supported to for this limited but significant purpose. The situation in West Bengal, he opined, was akin to 1977 when opposition votes from the Sangh to the Socialists united to oust an autocrat Indira Gandhi. This view was contested immediately by a physicist who felt that to support TMC is to find an easy way out. He was clear that since TMC glorifies the murderous 70s, the genie will be unleashed from the bottle the moment the party tastes power.

The visitor from the northern plains took a perspective of things to suggest that the intelligentsia must, rather than crunch numbers and be part of the electoral game, occupy the moral high ground. However, he admitted that the CPM had emasculated democratic institutions in the state much more than BJP in Gujarat. The second lady participant saw light in this point of view. The bull was taken by its horns at this point by a student activist who was ill at ease in a meeting without an agenda. He sounded annoyed that a room full of boffin types should allow themselves to be tossed in this manner between the CPM devil and the TMC deep sea, or vice versa. His angst ridden cry was for all to think at this hour of 'what you can do for mass movements in Bengal'?

The hermit had his full say in the end. He despaired that after 33 years of CPM's rule there was no alternative beyond the electoral united front politics, no mass movement of note. There was politics sans ideology and the people had to wait for Jeanne to finish their hatchet job. He was not sure whether the intelligentsia was supporting Jeanne or Jeanne leading them down the garden path. He quoted Lenin to say that if ever the intelligentsia feels compelled to support Jeanne it should be as tenuous and asphyxiating as a hangman's rope. Clearly, he doubted whether the attitude of the intelligentsia was as pristine pure as this.

The salon closed for the night, the participants dispersed, the city (not) of joy carried on. The soft underbelly of the city had no understatements. Everything was loud and clear and a microcosm of the putrid state that the state is in. Low on nutrition, low on dwelling space, high on inflation, low on health, a sad city under left rule for the past 33 years. It is the sordid epilogue of a volume on the state of Bengal that is perforce being driven to a close. The blank sheets for the yet to be penned prologue of the new volume are drifting around in the stale air, in search of an author. □□□