

Calcutta Notebook

DRC

On 18th December, 2010, Kolkata witnessed a cultural occurrence as different from Nandan-sponsored programmes as chalk is from cheese. The 'Operation Green Hunt' Birodhi Nagarik Sammelan presented a programme called *The Voice of My Protest* at the Metro Channel.

The main draw was Gadar, the poet and singer from Andhra Pradesh, famous for his presentation of the politics of protest and resistance in a form close to the perception and sensibility of the toiling people. Across his white tunic and cloth was draped a red scarf, and with his white mane of hair swirling as he leapt and fell on the stage, Gadar was in characteristic harmony with his audience, who laughed at his fierce lampooning of the governments and grew grim as he shifted to the suppression of people's struggles. Age had not tamed the stormy petrel, the charan kaviyal of the struggle of the peoples of India for freedom from oppression and hunger. He was ably seconded by Sambhaji Bhagat of the Vidrohi cultural troupe from Maharashtra, who, too, sang songs ridiculing the governments which presided over scams and corruption, and upholding people's struggles against state repression. The Vidrohi troupe ably accompanied Gadar and Sambhaji on percussion, apart from performing on the stage to applause and appreciation.

On the home side Bibhas Chakraborty read a play, which featured an imaginary conversation between himself and a statue of poet Sukanta, an icon of the Left, played by Shyamal Chakravarti. The theme was the bankruptcy of the "Left" establishment. Street plays were enacted by *Anarya* and *Chena Adhuli*, and, *Pran-tuli*, a children's group from Halishahar mimed their understanding of the exploitative nature of society. The audience caught its breath as Badal Sarkar, the grand old rebel who fought the system with his plays, the absurdist who pitted himself against conventional theatre with forms freed of the restriction of walls, came up with difficulty up the steps and onto the stage to add his testimony against state terror.

After Pratul Mukhopadhyay inaugurated the programme with a song, youngsters Charul and Vinay sang more of his songs. A choir from Protibadi Lok Sanskriti presented Salil Chowdhury's songs. 'Ganabishan', noted jhumur singer Ajit Mahato and his troupe, and many other groups and individuals sang and performed till late in the evening.

A resolution was taken urging the state government to shed its indifference and hostility towards the then 15-day-old hunger strike by some 150 prisoners (including three women) of Medinipur central jail against Operation Green Hunt and conditions in the jail, and intervene before the condition of the prisoners deteriorated further. The strike started on December 10, 2010 Human Rights Day, and had a 29-point charter of demands.

Amitabha Bhattacharya, Kabir Suman, Sujato Bhadra and others addressed the rally which ended with everybody singing together *Amar Protibaader Bhasha* (The Voice of My Protest).

One is reminded of the late fifties and sixties of the last century when songs and plays were used as weapons against the enemies of the people. Utpal Dutta made a whirlwind tour of the state with *Din Bodoler Pala* (An Opera of the Changing Times) during the run-off to the elections of 1967, which threw out the Congress from Writers' Buildings. Not much of a change, one will say with hindsight, but it gave heart to the people and the era of struggle,

which began with the Tram Movement and the Food Movement (1965-66), intensified in content and changed its quality. Utpal Dutta was then on the side of the people. Alas, the people lost him even when he was alive and now he is no more, and the People's Little Theatre, too, is a shadow of what it was when it was producing *Angaar* (Coal), *Kallol* (The Flood), *Teer* (Arrows), and *Manusher Adhikaar* (The Rights of Man). The songs of those times seem to have made a comeback. The people await another LTG (or more LTGs), travelling all over the state. LTG's success was due to the pains it took, right from research of the material to the way every player in even a crowd scene was to move hands and feet, laugh or frown or mutter and flutter.

Great art is never neutral. It is always on the side of humanity. But this is not all. Great art requires hard work and perfect craft to fit together form and content around a great idea in a way which would move the hearts of the people. □□□