

Calcutta Notebook

Shoummo

Nabarum Bhattacharya in the latest episode of his ongoing *tour de force* 'Mobologe Novel' that is being serialised in the monthly 'Bhasabandhan' has written that quite often famous personas strut on the world stage in pairs. His list of pairs reads 'Buddha-Biman, Marx-Engels, Laurel-Hardy, Lenin-Stalin, Nonte-Phonte, Handa-Bhonda, Bhanu-Jahar, Harshabar-dhan-Gobhardhan, Babul-Supriyo, Charu-Haru, Chyanga-Byanga, Tutu-Bhutu, Jonson-Boswell ..'. Curiously he missed Tridib-Sudhangsu, the pair that has been fox trotting the Calcutta Book Fair turf for the past decade, manufacturing crisis one after another, shooting from the Chief Minister's shoulder and then dumping him at will and always, yes, always laughing all the way to the bank. This year the duo was at their smartest. As is the norm, they got the CM to inaugurate the fair and later were all glee when an opposition leader declared in the fair that the next fair will not be inaugurated by Buddhadeb Bhattacharya.

This year's Calcutta Book Fair, which ended on 6 February, was Tridib-Sudhangsu show all the way. There were dramas galore from the drawing board stage till the time the bell gonged for the fair to end. The state government had asked the Calcutta Book Fair organisers to pay the normal rent for the fair ground. The organisers heed and hawed, steep were the rates they said; the fair was for the benefit of the public at large and not for business they grumbled. The weak Nirupam Sen gave in after the organisers donned the garb of classifying themselves as an NGO and to prove their point the organisers rid themselves the bother of charging entry fee at the gate. This was a clever sleight of hand as the organisers were getting back their money through enhanced rents and this was reflected in cups of tea that were being sold inside the fair grounds for a neat price of INR 12/-. The organisers were not only robbing Peter, they were also robbing Paul.

Free entry was not welcomed by all and certainly not by the bazaar press group. A possibly literary fortnightly from the bazaar stable, that is followed by bibliophiles more to check the book release advertisements and less for literary outpourings, worried that 'beno jol', flood waters literally but essentially unwanted elements, will join the throng inside the fair ground. Oh! When will they introspect and look for 'beno jol' in their own backyard or stable which today is populated more with mules than with stallions or mares. A columnist in a bazaar daily carried this bhadrakok worldview a mile farther. His suggestion was to fix an entry fee of INR 200/- to keep the 'beno jol' at bay, to do away with the little magazine enclosure completely and restrict participation to publishers only.

Reportedly 2 million people attended this year's book fair and this is an encouraging number for book lovers. The grounds were crowded from start to finish and although facilities this year were superior to years of yore it could never be enough for the crowds. Since tickets were banished there were no queues at the gates, most pathways were paved but footfalls still kicked dust, there was a well constructed food court that was always crowded, although refuse bins were being cleared regularly they were still brimming with left over and although there were enough toilets on the ground they continued to sport a wet look.

At the centre of the fair ground stood a replica of the White House and there were lengthy queues all through the day to take a peep inside. Adjacent to the White House was a stall from the World Bank. At one end of the fair the patuas displayed their craft and there were crowds around them throughout the day. Little magazine publishers seemed a happier lot

this year with their enclosure being centrally located. A prime location in the fair was ceded to the Income Tax department. This department is known all over for its rent seeking propensity and one was a trifle baffled at this favour shown to them by the Tridib-Sudhansu duo. Intellectual or academic pursuits of any kind are an anathema to the denizens of this revenue department and their prime presence raised many eye brows. This correspondent walked into the two storeyed stall to seek solutions to his Income tax refund problems. A few enquiries here and there revealed that the stall was being run by a TPA or a third party agency. A sprightly lad took me aside from my meanderings and whispered the gospel in my ears. He suggested that I pay the clerks and get my refund and that he had no other solution to offer to my woes.

Like all good things, the book fair came to an end. Crowds departed as they came and there was no inundation of 'beno jol' as the bazaar press had predicted. Business must have been good as there were no post fair wails by vendors that business was always better at the maidan, whatever may have been the damage to the greens. It was left to the English flagship of the bazaar group to lament that Jaipur Festival is the most important literary festival in South Asia.

Tailpiece : Political rhetoric in Bengal has already reached its nadir and it is now posing a challenge to linguists. Recently, a high court lawyer who doubles up as a Congress party worker attacked the 'bidjojans' ('intellectuals' who have teamed up with TMC) by comparing them with cosmetics and additions to a harem. However the icing on the cake was yet to come. He said that these 'bidjojans' were actually 'chokle(s)'. □