

Calcutta Notebook

Shoummo

'I grow, I prosper. Now gods stand up for bastards!'
[Edmund in King Lear, Act I, Scene 2]

If one follows the recent happenings in Bengal and Kolkata the conclusion will be that the powers that be have indeed stood up for, well, everybody knows who.

On the night of 14 February, 16-year-old Rajib Das was escorting his sister, from Barasat railway station, to their residence. Barasat is the district headquarters of 24 Parganas (North). They were way laid by three roughs in front of the district court, in a high security zone. One poured alcohol on Rinku Das, the sister and when she along with a passerby ran for help to the nearby District Magistrate's bungalow, which is opposite the District Police Super's bungalow, Rinku's call for help was refused by the security guards on duty. She was advised to call the local police station. While the police station's number was being dialled repeatedly, Rinku saw her stabbed and bleeding brother, being carried away on a van rickshaw. Rajib Das was taken to the district hospital and from there to R G Kar hospital in Kolkata where he passed away on the morning of 15 February. He was scheduled to appear for Class X board exams commencing 23 February.

Barasat and Garia are the crowded northern and southern gateways to Kolkata. The not-so sprawling city is hemmed in between them and the eastern wetlands while the river Hooghly flows down its western edge. The traders and 'bhadraloks' of Kolkata have access to all the pickings that the economy offers while lumpens live of crumbs thrown at them or crumbs that they manage to snatch. During the day the lumpen's visibility is relatively low although it may not be so low in crowded areas and in urban slums where they live by flexing their muscles. Some have irregular day jobs like manning unofficial taxi and rickshaw stands, others while away their time in public spaces like parks, under construction buildings, crematoriums, under shelters provided by flyovers, in railway stations, inside hospitals and the like. A lucrative area of lumpen operation is the booming real estate business which can only survive and grow with the help of strong arms. There are 'club(s)', one room concrete or tiled structures, which are landmarks in most Kolkata localities. These establishments organize the local festivals and the odd blood donation camp but there is a free passage of local toughs, in and out of its inner sanctum. Every club has a political affiliation and this may change once in a while especially when the political temper sways from one end of the spectrum to the other. No land deal can be struck in any locality in Kolkata without the considered blessing of the local club and this is usually followed by an arrangement for supply of materials to the realty project by the local syndicate. A thesaurus lists mafia as a synonym for syndicate. The lucrative illicit hooch trade is also run by these hoods. Distilling is a cottage industry around the city and the major production centre catering to Kolkata, ironically named Leningarh, is located within the precinct of Bengal finance minister's Vidhan Sabha constituency. Lumpens also run small places of worship in most localities. These usually crop up in public spaces and an innocuous enclosure soon devolves into a permanent structure. Worship and appeasement of *shani* or the planet Saturn is a day long racket on Saturdays and it is a money spinner for locality toughs. The worship peaks during the evening hours and many genteel folk take their shoes off in front of the local shani temple, to fold their hands and close their eyes in obeisance to Saturn.

Hoods come into their own with the setting sun when the genteel folk return home from work to the secure comfort of their homes. As the night sets in the streets are ceded to the predators like those who went berserk on the night of 14 February. They can be usually

identified as the boisterous types that become louder by the hour. Many whiz around in motor bikes. High on some substance or the other, they do not cede the nooks and crannies that they occupied during the day; rather they extend their turf as the night creeps in. This city does not have much of a night life and by midnight, it is taken over by goons. They sit in awkward dark corners and gossip loudly and generally air a scary vibe to those who keep a timid but discreet watch over them. All the while they keep a controlling eye on the illegal goings on, a liquor speakeasy here, a satta/gambling den there, flourishing sex trade in the vicinity of parks or in the hollows of abandoned buildings. These activities yield sufficient protection money for the goons and they also participate in the excitement. This continues late, very late into the night. It is not accidental that Rajib and Rinku Das walked into one such revelry. It could happen to anybody if he/she chooses to venture out at dangerous hours. After all this is Kolkata—a marxist oasis of peace and harmony.

However, it is not that the trader and genteel folk's world is separate from the world of lumpens. At times it could be negotiating a subscription for a local festival or for doing the exteriors of one's house but it could also be to evacuate an errant tenant or to allow the functioning of the local departmental store. It is at the point of negotiation of the third and fourth kind that politicians and cops step in. During the process of negotiation, a lot of money gets thrown into the ring and the booty and the spin offs get shared by all. These negotiations yield a living to politicians and also ensure an additional picking for cops. Beyond this, lumpens are used by politicians to control the political society and cops use these scums to keep a tab on their brethrens and also to take care of the law keeper's illegal activities like the regular collection of protection money from illegal operations. It will not be out of context to add here that history-sheets of Barasat leaked the whereabouts, of the suspected murderers of Rajib Das and suspected transgressors of Rinku Das's modesty, to the police.

A sizeable section of the city's population ekes out a living in the unorganised sector. This sector operates through very small establishments at the local level, at times skirting the law to consolidate their skimpy profit base. The sector because of its inherent insecurity has to keep politicians and police happy. Here too negotiations take place through local lumpens. As a price for favours dispensed, politicians demand their pound of flesh in the form of crowd power during bandhs, strikes and political rallies. It is lumpens and local hoodlums that collect the herd, deliver the crowd to politicians and also manipulate the crowd's emotion to suit the incipient political situation. Once too many times these nefarious beings choose to strike at will and the incident on 14 February was one such instance. Such incidents have occurred in the city after 14 February and the administration and police have failed to provide protection to the citizens since they are hand in glove with these mischief makers.

Justice may seem to have been infinitesimally done on March 2 when Rinku Das during the course of an identification parade pointed out her brother's killer by whipping a resounding slap across the face of the culprit. It must be noted that it is not that these nefarious elements are not scared of the law enforcers. Reports from across the city suggest that there has been recent ebb in lumpen activity after the declaration of Vidhan Sabha polls. The news of the proposed arrival of additional forces has tamed the lumpen hordes to seek shelter in their secure warrens. At the cost of repetition it needs to be re-emphasised that lumpen proletariat is not a revolutionary force but a 'dangerous class'. It is destructive in its various manifestations and open to manipulation by money bags, politicians, administration, police and fascist forces and it is a perpetual threat to civil society since the rule of law is an anathema to lumpen class. It is for civil society to stand up and isolate these vermin or else no hue of political change or 'poriborton' will result in any change, whatsoever. □