

Calcutta Notebook

Shoummo

This blemished light, this dawn by night half-devoured.

Is surely not the dawn for which we were waiting....

(Faiz Ahmed Faiz on the subcontinent's independence in August, 1947)

Reading this weekly is like inhaling a whiff of fresh air. With West Bengal on the brink of a make or break (break and only break, according to some) state assembly elections held in six phases between April 27 and May 10, *Frontier* has stayed magnificently aloof from the heat and dust generated by the hustings. It may be an instance of once bitten twice shy. The founder editor of this weekly reminisced in his memoirs that 'Frontier supported the United Front (Left Front's previous incarnation, author's note) in the 1969 state assembly elections but its performance in government did not cover with glory'. He also wrote that 'After the formation of the first United Front government; NOW supported the CPM. But this did not continue for long and certainly not at an individual level'. The present state of aloofness is therefore well understood.

It could also be due to a transcendental belief that 'parliament is a pigsty'. There is nothing to complain about this world view too since, courtesy the electronic media, the public at large has a ringside view of the drama that is often enacted behind the imposing facade of structures that house parliamentary institutions. Audiences of the drama are free to draw their conclusions and one can presume that these may not be at a significant variance with the aforesaid world view. However, one can only add that, the conclusion may be a trifle uncharitable to pigsties. After all George Orwell's 'Animal Farm' played itself out in a manor if not in a pigsty while an intolerant Left front government went all out to suppress performances of the same play (*Poshukhamar* in Bangla) during the run up to the polls and even earlier.

It may not be out of place to state that this election does not have any issues save anti-incumbency where the electorate has chosen to vote with their feet. Frayed tempers, unaccounted money and verbal abuse have driven the pre-election debate and discourse to its nadir. That the electorate waited for 34 years to even think of exercising the anti-incumbency option speaks volumes for their patience, inertia and helplessness in a situation where there were no credible alternatives to the ruling formation. An undercurrent missed by most analysts is that the *bhadraloks* are worried stiff that for the first time they will lose their easy access to the levers of power. Left or right, the genteel folks have been served well by a fair sprinkling of the *kabab* (kayastha, brahmin, baidya) caste block representatives in the leadership of all political formations that have enjoyed power in Bengal since the dawn of independence. A majority of the TMC is from the *kabab* block but the genteel folk are apprehensive that these leaders do not have the cultural finesse to be one of their own. The *bhadraloks* know that their contempt for the TMC will be paid back by the TMC leadership with an equivalent coin of disdain.

Prof Santosh Bhattacharya, Vice- Chancellor of Calcutta University (1984-1987) passed away on 12 March 2011 at the age of 86. He steered the University during those four tumultuous years when the Left Front government tried every dirty trick in its repertoire to make the VC bite the dust. Prof Bhattacharya bit the bullet instead. The VC who as a CPI cadre manned barricades in 1948, wrote in an introduction to a collection of his essays published in 2002, that 'I believe that in our country's politics BJP has a natural place' and that 'Leftists have to make a historic compromise with the BJP as has been done by the

Italian communists with the catholic church'. He went on to add a rider that he does not support everything that the BJP does.

This correspondent does not intend to analyse or trace or even guess the course through which Prof Bhattacharya veered to his aforesaid view. But the years 1984 to 1987 were a phase during which he seriously reviewed his earlier political conviction. In December 2007, the book 'Red Hammer over Calcutta University' by Prof Santosh Bhatta-charya was published. He undertook the task of writing the book in 1991 and the nearly 700- page tome demands tremendous application and patience to browse through for the simple reason that every chapter is followed by copies of documents filed meticulously by the VC in his personal records.

To set the tone, the first chapter is titled 'Stalinists impose hegemony' and begins as follows; 'This volume is intended to be a record of the Stalinists' power game in the Calcutta University during the four tumultuous years 1984-87....'. The title of the segments and chapters of the tome gives the reader a flavour of its contents. A few samples like *The Battle Starts, Emasculating the Vice Chancellor, Protecting Turf, Enforcing Hegemony, Unleashing Employee Cadre* gives readers an idea of the structured belligerence let loose by the Left Front Government-through its organisations of teachers, students and non-teaching employees. Only seven persons, comrade-in-arms as per the author and 'Seven Samurai' as per his spouse, stood by him during those four years .Prof Bhattacharya has chosen to name only two, the late Dr Chandan Ray Chaudhury and the late Prof Jyoti Bhattacharya, of the 'Seven Samurai'.

That Calcutta University is *helluva* place is well known. Prof Bhatta-charya takes the reader on a guided tour through this hell. Some snippets are listed below:

1. 'In the morning of 11 December, 1983, the CPM sent another emissary, a leading lady member of the party, not an academic, but well known to my wife and myself (Pg.55) The lady had come with the threat that Prof Bhattacharya, in case he took up the appointment, will not be allowed to function. The VC's tenure was scheduled/commence from 31 December, 1983.
2. 'Their leaders refused to attend the marriage reception of our daughter even, though they have been my friends for long.' (Pg 57)
3. 'On 1 October 1986 they (employees of left backed unions, author's note) ransacked my office. They have not expressed any regret for such action and they have stood by their declaration that whenever I go back to office they would demonstrate similarly'. (Pg 107, statement issued to protest against the Higher Education Minister, Nirmal Bose's repeated act of going to the press to criticize the VC.)
4. 'Thus, in all, CPM cadre caused a loss of 117 working days in total, that is 30 working days per year of my tenure of 4 years.' (Pg 499)
5. Prof A N Chakraborty, wrote to the VC in a letter dated 9 January 1986 that on that date he was prevented from entering his room and Asim Sil, a non-teaching employee, led a group who used filthy language and pushed him out of the building, to the pavement outside. (Pg 518)
6. Ardhendu Chakraborty, Senior Office Assistant, in a letter dated 10 January 1986 to the VC wrote that 'Senator' Sunil Das Gupta, General Secretary of Calcutta University Employees Association told him that 'call your father Santosh Bhattacharya who got you transferred from Ballygunge Science College, to save you now. You son of a pig, you will be shoed till you end up as a cadaver.' (Pg521)
7. Dr Chandan Ray Chaudhury in a letter to the Chancellor dated 3 October 1986 wrote that on 24 September 1986 he was accosted by 30-40 employees in the College street who abused him and raised slogans in filthy language and demanded that he leave the premises and never ever enter the place again. Prof Jyoti Bhattacharya, in a letter to the Chancellor narrating the same incident wrote that the main slogan was 'Dr Ray

Chaudhury was an accomplice/agent of the Vice Chancellor, and he must get out of the University.' (Pg 544, 545)

8. Bholanath Ray Chaudhury, Assistant Controller of Examination (Retired) in a letter to the Vice Chancellor dated 8 January 1987 wrote that on 7 January he had been to the College Street campus to collect his pension. He was encircled by some men who not only physically assaulted him but used language like 'You have come to University as a spy of the Vice chancellor' and 'We will pull your tongue out to make you dumb for all times' (Pg 558)
9. Mr Biman Bose 'admitted that his party had put my (i.e. VC's, author's note) home under surveillance....' (Pg 672)
10. 'Among the most active post graduate teachers, who went to court also challenging my decisions, Dr Ashis Roy was appointed as Vice Chancellor of Kalyani University, Dr Amaljyoti Sengupta was appointed as Vice Chancellor of Bengal Engineering University and Dr Swapan Pramanik as Vice Chancellor of Vidyasagar University.

There were notable people in the civil society who stood by him. Those named by Prof Bhattacharya are Nikhil Chakravarty, Dr Bhabatosh Datta, Asapurna Debi, Prof Sushil Mukherjee, Prof Amlan Dutta, Pratul Gupta, Premendra Mitra, Gouri Ayub, Prativa Basu, Mahasweta Devi, Sagarmoy Ghose and Samar Sen. The press intervened directly by writing editorials. Prof Bhattacharya adds 'Many periodicals joined the issue too including *People's Democracy* (the CPM's central committee mouthpiece) and *Frontier* (an organ of extreme left)...' (Pg 674) He also goes on to add that 'The non-party public too voiced their protests in different ways and different fora. Apart from university teachers and college teachers, one form of protest by several non-political bodies was to invite me to inaugurate or preside over their annual meetings or award-giving ceremonies, even though they hardly knew me before.'(Pg 675)

As a parting shot, Prof Bhattacharya does not forget to record the names of persons of the Left Front establishment, who with a glint in their eyes, appreciated his spirit of not giving an inch without a fight. They were Mansur Habibullah (then Minister of Justice), Snehangsu Acharya (then Advocate General) and Kamal Bose (then Mayor of Calcutta). □□□ 11-05-2011