

Calcutta Notebook

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THE COURTESY SHOWN BY Miss Mamata Banerjee to Mr Buddhadeb Bhattacharya and Co on the occasion of the oath-taking ceremony of her council of ministers has served as rich fare for the ordinary newspaper-reading public of West Bengal. But diplomatic decorum is no substitute for the solution of burning problems. Mamata Banerjee, immediately after being sworn in as the Chief Minister, promised that the first task of her cabinet would be to recover 400 acres of land taken over by the Tatas in Singur and then return this land to the original owners. It may be recalled that these peasant proprietors who owned these 400 acres refused to part with their holdings and to accept the compensation money paid by the government. But it is not clear how her cabinet would fulfil the promise, because the Tatas made it evident long ago that they would not give up their possession of land unless they were paid back the money they had spent on infrastructure. What the Tatas would do with the 1000 acres or so handed over to them by the CPM-led Left Front Government on a 99-year lease and almost free of cost was however not clarified. If Mamata Banerjee's government wishes to acquire this land without taxing the state exchequer too much, it will have to put pressure on the Tatas, which Miss Banerjee is in all probability incapable of. Of course, her election ally, the Congress holds office at the centre. But Manmohan Singh, with his long record of wooing corporate capital, is also probably not in a position to force the Tatas to lower their demand.

Regarding the issue of release of political prisoners, Mamata Banerjee has told that she will form a 'screening committee'. A leaf out of recent history will not be out of place. After the fall of the Indira regime in 1977, a vigorous campaign for the release of political prisoners were launched in West Bengal, and at a convention held in the Students' Hall, College Square, Kolkata a committee named *Bandimukti O Ganadabi Committee* (Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners and People's Demands) was formed. This committee led the movement through signature collection, street corners, sit-in demonstrations and mass meetings. Then the assembly polls were held, and the left front came to power. This government decided to release all political prisoners and for the non-CPI(M) prisoners, left the task of screening to *Bandimukti O Ganadabi Committee* itself. It should be emphasized that the *Bandi Mukti Committee* of 1977 was created by popular movement and the government recognized it. Why then a government appointed screening committee now? Is it to release only those who will swear allegiance to Trinamul Congress?

On the economic front, the new government is not going to turn a new leaf, if the already stated views of the new finance minister are taken at their face value. The finance minister, even before getting elected, categorically declared his belief that the employment problem may be solved only if reforms of the Manmohan-style are pursued, implying that the corporate-led privatization will deliver the goods. The corporate sector is in search of greater profits, and they will come only if they are offered suitable facilities of profit making. Of course, an alternative path of development by means of employment generation through a process of decentralized planning and construction has been suggested by Professor Amit Bhaduri and others, but who cares?

In the election manifesto of the Trinamul Congress, it was argued that before 1977, the countryside of West Bengal was overflowing with abundance and prosperity, and a pledge was made to bring back those glorious days. It simply implies that even the inadequate land reform works accomplished after 1977-the claim of the Left Front in this regard was highly exaggerated- would be undone. The Left Front Government has crumbled because of a long process of opportunism and the forcible imposition of one party rule by its largest partner. But the way the new regime is starting its journey does not hold out much promise for the weaker sections of the society. □□□