

Calcutta Notebook

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HARDLY HAD THE STOCK OF the Nonadanga evictions, followed by the arrest of intellectuals participating in a solidarity movement, been 'assimilated, when there occurred the swoop down on a JU professor by local TMC stalwarts, and subservient policemen, ostensibly for circulation of an almost innocuous lampoon, featuring the recent replacement drama in the rail ministry. In both cases, the ruling party had links with syndicates, knee-deep in the real estate materials supply racket. The high-handed and partisan posture of the government has caused a well-deserved outcry among the intellectuals of Kolkata. Two points to be noted are that the chief minister has been chosen in person as the target of protests, and there has been much let-out of remorse over support to her in the last assembly polls. The media has had a field day.

There is no doubt that people who supported the TMC out of expectations from its leader, have had a rude kick administered where it affects dignity most. But, who told them to have such expectations? Mamata Banerjee's turn-around to success started with Singur. A careful study of her Singur stand will reveal that her point was that the policy of alienation of fertile agricultural land in favour of private capital was bad, but the right of the peasant to say 'No' to displacement manoeuvres of the state was never acknowledged by her. After forming the government, she was faced with the need of land acquisition, and the West Bengal land acquisition act left no doubt that she rested solidly on the principle of 'eminent domain': the state had the right of acquisition. But, important is the main difference with the central law - the state would not acquire land for use by private capital, while the centre was quite willing to act as cat's paw for the corporates. There was a clause, as in the central law, regarding consent of 80% of the displaced people, and there was an elaborate compensation package. However, there was no explanation of the term "consent", no specification of the stage at which this consent became mandatory, no guarantee of replacement before acquisition, and no lock on future super-profits from the acquired land. A signal lacuna vis a vis the Union law was the absence of a pegging of compensation to market price of land, present or future.

Big capital, obviously favours the Union law. This is not to say that the Bengal chief minister is anti-big capital. She, too, hopes for big investment led growth, and there is no real alternative in her vision. But, big investment is jobless. After hypes regarding employment, the facts, at least, seem to be sinking in, and the recent Dugapur speech of the leader tells the young to be self-enterprising and not hanker after government jobs. To make any progress on the employment front, it is necessary to abandon the big investment-led growth paradigm, and there is no indication of such a paradigm shift in Bengal. Instead, the present government seems to have taken more than one leaf out of the book penned by the previous government and awarded uninterrupted control over real estate development and construction supplies to syndicates of local supporters.

In the case of Nonadanga itself, the evictions are aimed at parcelling the land on 99 years' lease among big corporate players, for investment, presumably in shopping malls, hotels, multiplexes, residential complexes. Key provisions of the land acquisition act, namely, the government will acquire land only for public utilities like hospitals, bridges, embankments, irrigation projects, railway tracks, or security purposes, and private investors will have to buy land directly from the owners or a land bank set up by the government., sound hollow and hypocritical in the context of the Bengal government's plans for Nonadanga. It may be remarked that even for those inhabitants of the Nonadanga land who arc legit, as recorded by government pattas(?). there is no school nearby, or health centre. The communication system is abysmal. The less said about sanitation, potable water, and electricity the better.

As is the case everywhere in this country, there are laws to rein in big capital, which are reversed, in practice, to drive the government down to destinations set by the self-same giant corporate riders. But, it would be simplistic to dismiss as showbiz Mamata Banerjee's stands on land acquisition, passenger fares vs goods tariff, prices, including oil prices, or Union vs states on internal security centralization. Three highlights need to be noted.

One, these standpoints are not essentially or purposefully anti-big capital, but in each case, important side-effects disturb some nexus between the Union and big capital from which the latter were garnering undue benefits.

Two, each stand is immensely popular, among small businessmen, traders, hawkers, middle peasants and rich farmers, white and blue collar workers in the lower income brackets, the unemployed and the lumpen-proletariat. An image of the chief minister is being built as a champion of the poor and uneducated masses.

In every state, these strata arc afflicted by the measures of the Union to garner economic benefits centrally for big capital. In most states, the reaction of the afflicted strata is expressed through an alliance of the relevant castes led by landlords and rich farmers, who, desperately attempt to control the state government in question. Politically, these alliances, which bid for control over state governments, often contain forces which belong, at the level of Delhi, to opposing factions of big capital. The economic question of who (the local satraps or the Delhi hukumat?) will be able to grab more of the wealth produced by industrious people ends up politically as a centre-state contradiction, often with paradoxical alliances as mentioned.

Mamata Banerjee is in the forefront of this centre vs state game. Of course, once again, her political moves are not, as yet, purposefully or deliberately anti-centre. She makes populist calculations, regarding how votes can be maximized, and this brings her into conflict with the Union, whose government is constrained by the needs of big capital, at home and abroad, even at the cost of votes as in UP. On the other hand, Mamata Banerjee's stance as the local giant-killer is the stuff from which fairy tales originate among the masses.

Three, given such a class basis of the local supporters of the principal ruling party, erosion of democratic rights and the voices raised in protest are matters of little concern to this party and

the state government. In fact, all over the world this is the class basis of vigilante groups. In the case of Bengal, the groups support the ruling party on condition of unfettered control over real estate materials supply. More-over, in and around Kolkata snatchers and eveteasers on bikes are testing the proposition that the police are ineffective if miscreants are close to the ruling party.

Criticism of the backsliding of the Bengal government along such a path of authoritarian oppression and partisan policing, as well as active protests are certainly necessary to expose the actual role of the ruling party. In this notebook, what is being underlined is that this will be a difficult task, as Mamata Banerjee's populist stance dovetails with objective contradictions of the polity. It carries, of course, the burden of repayment of grudges, old and emergent, but there is an infectious new call of uniting for poor Bengal against pro-rich Delhi. The intellectual response against Mamata Banerjee as a person, is likely to miss the rich and complex political tapestry being woven by her. It is imperative to remember that intellectual support may well have been lost, but voting Bengal is very much with her, still.

However, ominous is the signal given by the evictions at Nonadanga. The poor will not support such displacement and the news that the new government echoes the old in the matter of the homeless must be travelling fast. If the state government continues to extend support to such evictions, a low tide of resentment will set in, tomorrow if not today. This is the tide which in flood brought her to power and it will turn if the present policies continue; especially, in the absence of a policy on employment. □□□