

## Calcutta Notebook

Shoummo

THERE IS NOTHING SACRED about Holi. Spring is presumed to be welcomed all over India by this festival. Perhaps intended to be a kind of spring-cleaning, the festival is loud and raucous at its best and at its worst. Like bad money driving good money out of circulation, Holi has driven the more sedate Doljatra to oblivion. Denizens of this city have also actively joined this trend. This is reflected in many local television serials showing Holi episodes spread over a week with a grand finale where the cast gyrates to the tune of a Bollywood item number, the favourite being 'holi ke din dil khil jaati hai rangon mein rang mil jati hai' filmed on Hema Malini in Sholay. The upcountry situation is substantially worse. In Sohana, Punjab, 'bones of calves and dogs serve as decorations outside homes, and the ashes of corpses as colour to "play with".' (<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/ashes-for-colour/925100/0>)

The situation 60 years ago in this city was none the better. Here is a description of Holi celebrations from the memoirs of a leading city polemicist with no mean connection to this column. "Probably, it was the day of doljatra in 1949. At that time, Naresh (Guha) lived in a small room in an alley off Barrackpore Trunk Road, adjacent to Paikpara. Early in the morning, I landed at Naresh's place and after some time we started walking along BT road, heading for Shyambazar. We intended to take a bus from Shyambazar and head for Ballygunge. We found a small crowd at one end of Tala bridge, a group of revellers with coloured powder and sprinklers containing coloured water were in a merry mood. On seeing us, their enthusiasm increased manifold and they said 'Dada, come and have a taste of things'. I submitted to their request without a murmur and escaped with a few patches of coloured powder on my cheeks. But Naresh was from a different kettle of fish, a vigorously active combatant for individual freedom and liberty he indulged in a long harangue on an individual's liberty of not participating in the celebrations. The revellers were in a hurry and after a minute of being at the receiving end, they bodily lifted Naresh and plunged him in a container filled with coloured water. A person in spotless kurta-pyjama and Gandhi topi was supervising the operation. I enquired with a reveller as to why this person was being spared the colours. Pat came the reply, 'he is the secretary of our club.' Naresh was still fretting and fuming. Consoling Naresh, I explained to him that he should cool down and have no regrets because the revellers were the aggressive section of a political party which like him believes in individual freedom and liberty and hates the communists". (*Apila-Chapila* by Ashok Mitra, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 2003, page 51, translation by this correspondent)

The situation has worsened over the years and to believe that these mischief makers could only belong to 'a political party which like him believes in individual freedom and liberty and hates the communists' is an over statement coupled with wishful thinking. It must be put on record that the revellers cum mischief makers of 1949 vintage have metamorphosed into vicious criminals that grab and kill at will and irrespective of what the memoir writer quoted may opine, these criminals have a cosy symbiotic relationship with politicians of all hues. The

incidents during this year's Holi reflect the festering rot that the society has become and the contribution of omnipresent politics to this rot.

The setting was not far away from the place where on the night of 14 February 2011, Rajib Das was killed while trying to save his sister's modesty (*Calcutta Notebook*, April 3-9, 2011). On 8 February, the day of Holi there was a small congregation of about 50 people, some of them were singing kirtan, in the Dam household located within the jurisdiction of Kolkata airport police station. In the afternoon, a group of 15 drunken youths suddenly veered into the celebrations within the precincts of Dam household and started applying colours to all present.

On facing resistance, they pushed aside an 80-year-old woman. They then started taking liberties with a younger female member of the Dam household. This is when three male members including Ashim Dam, who is a constable with the Calcutta police, physically resisted the aggressive incursion. However, the drunken youths overpowered the resistance and left the household in shambles. One of the Dam brothers was left bleeding from a head wound. This was not the end of it. The group of drunks returned after half an hour with more troublemakers. This time there were about 20 to 25 goons armed with rods, hockey sticks, stumps, knives and pistols. The louts set themselves upon the members of the Dam household and attacked viciously whosoever they came across. The 80-year-old lady received knife wounds, this time around. Other female members were also at the receiving end and the thugs once again went after the lady whose modesty they had earlier impinged upon. Ashim Dam, tried to resist but was outnumbered and was soon on the ground with a broken and bleeding head. The murderers were yelling 'this is how we slaughter policemen and there is no prison in the world that can contain us'. The agony of the sufferers did not end here and it continued all the way to the hospital to which they rushed for treatment. The goons had reached the hospital before the injured and were seen threatening the doctors with dire consequences, in case they dared to admit the victims. Ashim Dam was unattended for a couple of hours and he was then shifted to another hospital. 48-year old Ashim Dam passed away on 10 March.

On the day of the incident, Nimta police station not only refused to register the complaint but literally pushed the complainants out on the plea that the incident did not take place within their jurisdiction. The Airport police station also refused to register the FIR and only did so on the following day under pressure from local residents. The killer goons were local criminals well entrenched in the hooch and realty business and some of them were close to local police as well as CPI(M) leadership. However, some party leaders denied this allegation. One of the killer goons had crossed swords with Ashim Dam's brother over a plot of land on which a realty project is scheduled to come up. Police believe the violence and death on the day of holi was an extension of this professional rivalry however, they were evasive in their replies when questioned by the media about the inordinate delay in registering FIR as well as arresting the killers.

It must be noted that the police, made its first arrest on 13 March. This after the names of most of the miscreants were known and they were local people. And more so since they were

alleged to be CPI(M) sheltered miscreants. The story is that some of them had switched their allegiance to the TMC as soon as CPI(M)'s fortunes flipped. The gang that carried out the murder and violence is a business syndicate with interests in realty, illicit hooch and supply contracts to government agencies. Much like industrialists who contribute to the coffers of Congress and BJP, the business syndicate employs rogue elements belonging to both the political parties.

It is no secret that many such incidents may have taken all over the state on that day and only this incident received prominence because a police officer was killed. Even then, the first substantive newspaper reports appeared on 12 March. One may shy away from admitting but it is a fact that the society is victim of competitive politics of a strange kind. Moneyed interests control the politics and politicians while a stratum of strong arms or anti-socials or goons mediates mass participation in this kind of politics and in turn, they make a living out of it. While the toiling masses are at the receiving end, the middle class provides the stamp of legitimacy to this system. Perpetually in want of job opportunities and eternally insecure in their place of work, some of them make an 'onerous' living by speaking & writing for or against political parties of one kind or the other while the rest nibble at the system for their self preservation. Most from this chattering class detest politicians, moneybags and goons but are happy as long as the system provides for them and the boat is not rocked. The status quo of a society locked in a vice like grip of these three estates continues. □□□