

'PORIBARTAN'

Transgression Masquerading as "Transformation"

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LET ME BEGIN WITH A warning. This article will hurt the sentiments of a lot of my friends—both in West Bengal and outside, both among the CPI(M) and the Maoists, both in the civil rights movement and the circle of writers and intellectuals who influence Bengali civil society. I am afraid, I have to be brutally frank in expressing my views—often in stark terms and naming names—about the way the above-mentioned political parties, civil society groups and intellectuals have betrayed, and continue to betray, the people of West Bengal. I shall be talking about the behaviour of these sections during the crucial period preceding the assembly election in the state, and their role following it now, when the Trinamul Congress-led government celebrates its six months rule, with the killing of the Maoist leader Kishenji (Koteshwar Rao) in the forests of Jangalmahal. They have created an environment of stinking hypocrisy and opportunism.

Three intriguing cases of turn-arounds by prominent intellectuals and groups in West Bengal in the recent weeks prompt me to express my views. First, the interlocutors appointed by Mamata Banerjee to negotiate with the Maoists, at first announced their decision to withdraw from the talks because of the continuing violence in Jangal-mahal by the joint forces. But as soon as Mamata called them over, they made an about turn and accepted her diktat to resume negotiations with the Maoists—despite the fact that Mamata made it clear that she was in no mood to accept any of the demands of the Maoists (e.g. end to the operations of the joint forces, release of political prisoners, etc.). True to her norms, the next thing she did was to permit the joint forces to kill Kishenji. The team of interlocutors lost its face, and barring one, all of them pulled out from the negotiations (following the Maoists' announcement of discontinuing the talks). Two, on November 21, the well-known author and social activist Mahashweta Devi, who was in the forefront of the pro-Mamata campaign against the CPI(M) in the period preceding the assembly election, suddenly made a U-turn and accused her erstwhile heroine of behaving like a 'fascist'. The occasion was a press conference called by the Calcutta based human rights group—APDR (Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights)—to protest against the Trinamul Congress government's refusal to permit them to hold a public meeting at a particular spot, demanding the release of political prisoners. Mamata Banerjee immediately reacted by issuing a stern warning (through a Bengali TV channel) that she did not like such statements. Mahashweta Devi soon knuckled under, and retracted in an article in the Bengali daily 'Bartaman' on November 24, stating that she did not call Mamata a 'fascist', that she retained her affection for Mamata, and did not want any harm done to the Trinamul government! Ironically enough, it was on that same day, that Kishenji was killed by the joint forces backed by the same Mamata Banerjee on whom Mahashweta Devi was showering her affection. Three, on November 18, the West Bengal units of the Congress and Youth Congress—

which had collaborated with the Trinamul Congress during the assembly election campaign—in a volte face, organized a rally in south Kolkata to protest against the killing of their cadres by the goons of their ally, the Trinamul. A few days later, at a public meeting of the Congress party, Union ministers Jairam Ramesh and Pranab Mukherjee, in order to assuage the anti-Trinamul rebellious mood of their leaders and cadres in West Bengal (represented by Deepa Das Munshi and Adhir Chowdhury), resorted to a damage-control measure by asserting that the Congress was not opting for a voluntary retirement scheme and was determined to retain their identity in Bengali politics!

These three cases of somersaults do not indicate any qualitative change in the minds of the Bengali middle class stakeholders in the above mentioned issues, that may lead to the emergence of a radical alternative to the present Mamata-led government in West Bengal. They merely reflect their belated realization of the mistake they made by voting her to power—a mood succinctly expressed in the old Bengali saying: ‘Chore palaley, buddhi barey’ (You become intelligent or careful, only after the thieves escape with your goods). And it is precisely on this issue that I am questioning the “buddhi”—the intelligence—of the Bengali human rights activists, actors and artists, Maoists and Congress leaders, who went the whole hog in propelling Mamata Banerjee as an alternative to the widely hated CPI(M) regime. To describe their mad rush in her support, one can again use a Bengali term: ‘kachakhuley chhota’ (running heedless of the loincloth which had slipped away from your behind)!

The context of the Bengali euphoric idolization of Mamata Banerjee on the eve of the elections is well-known.

During the last three decades, the ruling Left Front wasted the opportunity (that it got in 1977) of bringing about a ‘poribarton’ (in the human development index terms of health and educational benefits, as well as the political education of the masses). Instead, led by the CPI(M), it installed a regime of patron-client relationship in village panchayats, trade unions, urban ‘paras’—where the local party ‘dadas’ (known as ‘wholetimers’ who received monthly wages from the CPI-M, but were totally devoid of any ideological commitment)) doled out benefits to their followers. It was these apolitical district secretaries and corrupt panchayat heads of the CPI(M), who recruited armed mercenaries (to be known as ‘harmads’) to suppress any opposition to the dictates that were being issued by their bosses in Alimuddin Street. The ruling CPI(M) reached its nemesis in Nandigram, when the villagers resisted its arrogant decision to acquire their land for its ambition of setting up an SEZ under the neo-liberalist economic model—the same model against which the CPI(M)’s national leaders like Prakash Karat and Sitaram Yechury breathe fire in Delhi.

Matching this hypocrisy of the CPI(M) was the duplicity and naivete of the West Bengal Maoists, who in their animosity against the CPI(M) reached the nadir of political degeneration by acting as armed mercenaries of the Trinamul in Lalgarh and other parts, to oust CPI(M) cadres and supporters from their village homes, and thus paved the way for the defeat of their candidates in the election. Contrary to the Maoist party’s declared objective of boycotting

elections, its leaders and cadres in West Bengal urged their followers to vote for Trinamul candidates. Their argument was that once voted to power, Mamata Banerjee—in a gesture of gratitude for their electoral support—would release the political prisoners (the Maoist activists and their sympathizers) and withdraw the joint forces. What was Mamata's reward for them? Their ideologue and military strategist Kishenji (who openly supported Mamata Banerjee during the Nandigram and Lalgarh movements) was eliminated in a swift military action soon after Mamata Banerjee came to power. Was the Maoist strategy of supporting Mamata, mere political naivete, or sheer opportunism to seek protection from a leader (otherwise notorious for her congenital anti-Communism from her Youth Congress days since the 1970s) just because she opposed the ruling CPI(M)?

Surprisingly, this illusion about Mamata's generosity was shared even by a lot of Left-leaning Bengali intellectuals and human rights activists. In the face of all evidence (of Mamata's past record of volatile politics, opportunism, and administrative inefficiency as a railway minister), they chose to remain blind and contrived instead to create a halo around her, elevating her to the pedestal of the future saviour of West Bengal. Credulity and naivete among the Bengali intelligentsia almost developed into a new superstitious faith in Mamata's prowess. Let me recount a personal experience in this connection. Sometime at the end of March in 2011, I was invited to speak at a small gathering of politically like-minded friends at 'Boi-Chitra' (on the 2nd floor of Calcutta Coffee House) on the pre-election political situation. In continuation of the spirit of my earlier 'Open Letter to Mahashweta Devi, et al' (August 23, 2010), I pleaded for the development of a Leftist mass movement at the grassroots level on the daily problems of the rural and urban poor, and other deprived and oppressed sections of our society, as a priority over the prevalent Leftist obsession with the electoral race alone, which encouraged the people only to depend on one victorious party or another at regular intervals. I warned that Mamata's victory would not make any difference to the plight of the villagers of Nandigram, Singur or Lalgarh, and I humbly suggested that instead of chasing the chimera of 'poriborton' under the chief ministership of Mamata, we should take up the task of 'poriborton' through mass movements from the base—a task that the undivided CPI (although small in size, and with a few elected representatives in the legislatures) carried out in the 1940-50-60 period. To my surprise, I found among the participants, Sujato Bhadra (a veteran leader of West Bengal's democratic rights movement, whom I respect as a courageous champion of human rights), going all gaga over Mamata Banerjee's credentials, and assuring us that by voting her to power we can ensure the release of all political prisoners and end to the depredations of the joint forces. I was a bit disappointed with Sujato's naive hopes. I was therefore not surprised when I heard that he had agreed to be a part of the team of interlocutors set up by the Mamata-led government for talks with the Maoists. As expected, the talks did not yield any results, the final blow to them being inflicted by the government itself.

But my question to Sujato and his colleagues is: why did they agree to negotiate on behalf of the government? Even before the killing of Kishenji, could they not read the reality, and anticipate that Mamata Banerjee would renege on her earlier promises? Being political beings,

could they not read the signs in Mamata's utterances which were tilting towards the Union Home Minister Chidambaram's line of unleashing the joint forces in Jangalmahal to finish off the Maoists? The interlocutors may argue that they were pushing the envelope—trying their best to extend the limits of a negotiated settlement. I agree that the doors for negotiations should remain open. But the levers for opening and closing the doors are being operated by the chief minister Mamata Banerjee, who determines the course of action of her appointees—the interlocutors. That she decides is evident from her allowing the joint forces to kill Kishenji, the main Maoist leader, whom the interlocutors should have met to negotiate. I hope that Sujato Bhadra and his friends realize now that Mamata Banerjee used them in her electoral campaign, and has now, true to her self, discarded them as toilet paper!

This method of mediation (between the Maoists and the state) in West Bengal is totally different from the experiment that was carried out in Andhra Pradesh during the 1997-2002 period. Unlike West Bengal, where a group of human rights activists agreed to be appointed by the government as interlocutors, in Andhra Pradesh the Committee of Concerned Citizens emerged as an independent group of persons, consisting of well-respected personalities like the retired IAS officer S R Sankaran, the national president of the PUCL K G Kannabiran (both departed), and senior academics, lawyers and journalists. They could arrange talks between representatives of the Maoists and the Andhra Pradesh government, but they failed—primarily due to the intransigence of the police and state administration. Despite their failure, the reports of the Committee of Concerned Citizens remain an important historical record of the prevailing situation in the villages of Andhra Pradesh at that time, the ideology and praxis of the Naxalites, the tensions between them and the human rights groups, and above all - the intransigence of the police administration in coming to a peaceful settlement.

But in the context of the latest case of Kishenji's killing, mediators who are appointed or nominated by the government to negotiate with Maoists, should have second thoughts. Some time ago, Swami Agnivesh was authorized (informally may be) by the Union Home Ministry to negotiate with the Maoist ideologue Azad. His well-meaning efforts to contact Azad could have been intercepted by the state's predatory intelligence agencies which helped them to follow Azad's movements and whereabouts, and eventually pounce upon him and kill him. So, is the Indian state using the mediators—whether Gandhians or Leftists—to locate the Maoist leaders, in their plans to eliminate them?

My next query in this connection is directed towards the veteran author Mahasweta Devi, whom I have always respected as a powerful writer and a courageous social activist. I am selecting her in particular because she was at the helm of the group of Bengali intellectuals (including some artists, theatre directors and actors, and film stars) who campaigned in favour of Mamata Banerjee during the last elections. Mahasweta Devi's recent political off-again-on-again relationship with Mamata Banerjee (which I referred to above) intrigues me. To start with, having been an active participant in the Communist movement in the 1940s, and a keen observer and canny analyst of the political scenario of West Bengal in the later period (as evident in her fiction), how could she have poured her blessings upon Mamata Banerjee of all

persons, at public meetings all through 2010-11 to promote her electoral prospects? What makes her recant her criticism of Mamata, immediately after Mamata frowns upon her in a TV interview? It is up to Mahashweta Devi to reconcile her professed commitment to radical causes with her support to a chief minister who militarily suppresses those fighting for those causes. You can't hunt with the hounds and run with the hares at the same time.

As for the third party in the game of somersaults, the West Bengal Congress does not deserve any sympathy. It is whimpering today, but should have known better, given the way it had always been treated by Mamata Banerjee in the past. Why did it allow itself to be stampeded by its central leadership into a humiliating electoral alliance with an arrogant Trinamul Congress?

COMPLIANT AND COMPLICIT BENGALI INTELLECTUALS

The last decade (2010-11) in West Bengal—which saw tumultuous events—posed challenges to Bengali economists, intellectuals and artists from different fields, as well as social and political activists. Barring a few independent minded people from among them, the majority split into two sections. One chose to remain loyal to the CPI(M)-led government, and the other fell for the lottery tickets offered by Mamata Banerjee. The former willynilly became complicit in the atrocities carried out by the state government and the party's armed mercenaries on the common people in Nandigram, Lalgarh and other areas.

The loyalty among some of them (mainly the older generation) could have been rooted to their misplaced ideological faith in, and emotional attachment to the CPI(M). But as for the rest of this pro-CPI(M) section of the Bengali middle classes, their loyalty was motivated by purely apolitical reasons—proximity to the ruling party opening up prospects in their careers in the academia, material benefits in the shape of higher emoluments and perks, among other advantages enabling them to rise up in the ladder of a consumerist lifestyle.

The other section, partly well-meaning in its protest against such atrocities, and partly driven by the same apolitical motive of improving their careers and obtaining favours under a new regime, bought Mamata Banerjee's lottery tickets. As with all such buyers, a few are lucky while the rest are now bemoaning their decision to back a wrong horse.

The sad experience of the last decade should stir up a new generation of intelligentsia in West Bengal, who can break out from the circle of dependence on a bankrupt CPI(M) followed by a populist Trinamul Congress. They have to come up with a radical Left alternative programme that can mobilize the industrial proletariat and the rural poor against the onslaught of the neo-liberal corporatocracy, and also rescue the Bengali middle class society from a state where the moral sense is dead, the social conscience callous, the intellectual capacity dwarfed, enfeebled and confused. It takes a great deal of optimism however to envisage the emergence of such an intelligentsia in the near future in West Bengal, which for the next five years will be ruled by a politician selling tickets of a lottery that will never be drawn. □□□