

Calcutta Notebook

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THE OLD ARTISAN LOOKED lost in the cacophony of Kolkata. It's not that Nabakumar Mistry is a stranger to the city. He had visited it earlier to sell his handicrafts. He also knew that the city with its elite—ministers, government mandarins as well as culture tsars, page-three celebrities and upwardly mobile middle class—is crucial for his as well as his people's survival.

Yet he resented the way the citizens ignore their pleas as the heavy evening traffic moved past their Metro channel dharna where many of his likes were trying to draw the public attention and eventually, the government.

Christmas mood was already in the air as the whiffs of pre-revelry Park Street wafted over the huge throngs of consumers at the heart of the city. A serpentine queue of shoppers at the 'Big Bazaar' mall on the opposite corner of the road waited patiently for their turn to make a kill at the year-end stock-clearing sale.

Nabakumar and his friends too had something to sell in order to eke out a living. But they have hardly any place in this increasingly market-friendly city and the neo-liberal economy that now rules the land.

"We are children of a lesser god. Nobody cares for us," he lamented at the sideline of the Dharna by Nagarik Mancha and other 51 organisations of various marginal communities that continued for three days from 15 December.

Mistry belongs to the stone-cutter cum artisan community in West Midnapore's Belpahari block, which is at the heart of Bengal's Junglemahal, known as Maoist hotbed.

They make stone utensils; bowls and dishes by shaping and chiselling 'soft' stones quarried from 'hills', 5-10 km away from their villages. He could not name the stone but said 'It's not limestone or sandstone but a much harder one'.

"We don't know the name of the stone. But our families are engaged in quarrying the stones and making the utensils for generations. Traditionally, each village has its own 'hill' for its source of stones and each family gets its own quarry after paying fees to the government. Now around 270 families of seven villages are involved in the handicraft. Earlier, more people were engaged in it. But lack of market and increasing cost of production have compelled them to leave the job," Mistry continued.

The name of the villages sounds lyrical in the urban ears. Each of the seven villages of Junglemahal—Simulpal, Chandanpur, Dhangikusum, Kashidanga, Birmadal, Satgram and Laboni-dakai—must have a history behind their names which is only buried in the collective

memory of their children and revenue and police department archives since colonial days. But for the successive governments and state agencies as well as most of urban people, they are located at the end of the civilised world and market.

Most of the artisans are landless and belong to lower castes of Hindu hierarchy and tribes—Sabars, Bagals, Mistry and Bhumij. “There is nothing left for our livelihood except the stones in the hills and wood from the forest. What else we can do to survive?” Mistry asked. It’s a back-breaking job.

One has to walk around 10 km, carrying on shoulders 40-50 Kg stone on two cane baskets attached to strings on each side of a wooden plank to reach home from the hills. Now being old, Mistry can’t carry such load and needs to employ ‘labour’, must be some one from the poorest of the poor in his village.

This adds to his production cost that has already gone up with the increasing price of ‘Lakkha’ (lac). The latter is used as adhesive, which fill up the small cracks in the stone or to smooth the rough edges.

The job involves the whole family. Naba’s wife herself is an artist. “It’s a team work. We need to work together as we handle chisels, hammers and other implements in turn. It would have been a great help if we have small machines to size up the rough stones and make bowls. But not every family can afford it. We could have produced more in lesser time. We need financial support of the government in this respect, ” he added.

The partly mechanised jobs may disappoint the urban connoisseurs of ‘pure and authentic’ ethnic or tribal handicraft. But Mistry’s people know in their hard way that they need to modernise their craft as well as look for remunerative market in cities.

“Rural people can’t afford our product as a stone dish costs Rs 200 while a small bowl sells at Rs 40-50. Neither we are inclined to sell our product to wholesalers nor are they interested much to buy. We know that the market is still unexplored both in our cities and overseas. But most of us can’t hire vehicle to take fragile products to Kolkata, let alone the other big cities,” he said.

“We can carve out designs on the stones to add value to the product. But it needs money and machines. No bank is ready to give us loans since we can’t provide the security they demand for it. Rural moneylenders have thrown many of us in a bottomless pit. That’s why we look for government support in finance,” the old man said.

He also insisted on the government’s role in selling their products not only at seasonal craft fair, but also regular market outlets and its promotion overseas. But the continued government apathy turned them to new source of fund. “We welcome private sector business if they fund and market our work and give us remunerative price,” he added.

The left front government occasionally provided implements like shovels, chisels, pick-axes, hammers as well as cane baskets to these artisans after they had agitated demanding such supports.

The current Block Development Officer at Belpahari sometimes arranged vehicle for Mistry to take his produces to craft bazaars. But not everybody is so fortunate. Their imminent eviction from the shed adjacent to the BDO office, used for displaying and sale of their products, is a major concern for Jharna Acharya, the activist who fights for their cause.

She wanted the government to recognise the 'hat'(weekly village market) as a regular space for marketing for these handicrafts. According to her, these artisans have been demanding that the government should issue 'artisan card' as well as 'smart credit card' to all of them, provide better tools both for quarrying stone as well as better products and training to add value to it. They want all of them to be included in BPL list as well as land for landless among them.

The 'march for rights of the marginal people' under Nagarik Mancha and other similar organisations also demanded inclusion of these artisans in the Provident Fund scheme for unorganised workers as well as Rajiv Gandhi Health Insurance scheme. They also asked the government to stop police repression on this community and official notification for enlisting the stone quarries in the name of its traditional users in the line of rights given to forest people in forest rights act.

The state government's small and cottage industries as well as backward classes welfare departments have multiple agencies, schemes and marketing outlets to take care of marginal communities like these artisans. But nothing substantial or long-term had been done in 34 years of the Left front rule to ensure the survival of this traditional skill and a community who has no other livelihood.

The new government of Mamata Banerjee is busy with macro issues and larger communities who can make or break a regime. But her claims of bringing peace through development in Junglemahal will fall on its face if she fails to take care of these micro resentments and aspirations.

Nabakumar recalled his involvement in Naxalite movements in the early seventies. Now in his late sixties, he is more concerned about his family, its sustenance and uncertainties ahead. For predictable reasons, he declined to speak about Maoists and their role in Junglemahal. "Neither they came to us nor we had approached them," he hastily added.

But he reminded that youths of new generation at home are more restive than his time.

"With TVs and Video halls reaching villages, they know much better about the world beyond our horizons. They watch how city rich are enjoying the creature comforts and other fruits of independence. They may not accept the disparity between two Indias any longer."

As he spoke, the momentary glint in his sunken eyes turned into a poignant gaze that lingered on the carnival mood around shoppers' paradise along the Jawaharlal Nehru road. The December night was too young for party-hopping Kolkatans as he rushed back to Howrah station to take the train to his home in Junglemahal. □□□