

Calcutta Notebook

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KOLKATA IS IN HIGH GLEE AS it participates vicariously in the doings of the new chief minister. What you always wanted to tell the superintendent of a hospital, what your rural cousin dreamt of shouting during his brief syzygy with the ghost doctor of his village health centre, what you should have told your brother-in-law, of the (non)coordination committee, when he complained about the washing charges incurred in cleaning grime and sweat marks from his Johnny Walker shirt because he had now to bus at 9:15 like lesser mortals, well, she has done them all for you. Thereby hangs a tale.

For, as you sip your lukewarm tea the morning after, you wonder who will follow up her forays. The ministers? Well this writer is reminded of an ancient story which did the rounds of the midnight tables of bleary-eyed sub-editors some sixty years back. It was the silly season and a political hack found nothing better to do than interview a white-haired minister of Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy's cabinet, who was an old Congressman twice over and a fishing overlord from the swamplands to boot. The hack asked him, Sir, what work are you thinking of initiating at this stage in your ministry. Work, the venerable pirate asked, Thinking? After clearing his mind with a pinch of snuff, he told the hack, We are Dr Roy's tortoises. In the morning we waddle to Writers' Buildings. Then, Dr Roy inverts us upside down and all we can do is to jerk our legs and arms. Come 4.45 in the evening, Dr Roy straightens us and puts us on our legs. We waddle away home. Of course, today, the tortoise mode has been replaced by the runner mode, but there is such a thing as running very fast to stay at the same place.

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The civil servants? Completely self-serving with no patriotism to serve as a bridle, laziness and conservatism reinforcing each other till their only remaining aim is to do the least possible work before the sundowner, which makes them great supporters of the *status quo*. This is good class politics, too, because the *status quo* usually favours the owners of property. Their reaction to the Chief Minister's admonitions is incredulity: What? Follow up the forays of a workaholic? Who, me?

In any case, they have had sixty-four years to perfect methods of work which involve to and fro movement of a single file between three departments and up and down movement across three civil servants in each department. At least nine clerks and six peons will have laid hands on the file. After three years, the civil master will persuade the minister to write the momentous conclusion, There is no reason to change the colour of file covers from buff to grey. The art of the civil master is to provide the minister with reasons manufactured from facts which support that option which creates least extra work. The only exception in the recent past was Arka Prabha Deb, food secretary, who told his minister apropos a potato scam, Sir, the potatoes you are feeding the people of West Bengal won't be touched by my dog. The minister complained to Jyoti Basu, who summarily transferred Deb to minor irrigation. And, of course, on second thought, we have had as minister a younger member of Deb's set, who said, in the matter of the Nandigram police firing case, that there was no reason why the chief minister would not know of the incident at an early instant.

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Who will do the follow-up, then? The partymen of the Chief Minister? Will the local partyman go every day to a stinking hospital, listen with humility to the complaints of the patient and the patient party and check up if there is any improvement in the work of the GDA, the nursing sisters, the junior doctors, the visiting consultants, the superintendent and his

administrative corps? Will he check if the flushes are working in the toilets, if the floor is waterlogged, how many patients are inhabiting each bed and how many find solace on the floor, how many seriously ill people have been turned away from the emergency ward, which x-ray machine is still down after three months, and whether the brokers are back? Sounds too much like work, and nobody joins 'mainstream' politics to do serious work. To see everyday if shit stains remain on the toilet bowl, requires dedication. Even dedication to some abstract ideal like 'Sonar Bangla' is a starting point. But, while the local partyman will risk his life for Didi, because she is the fountainhead of even the little power he enjoys, such motivation, alas, does not necessarily overlap with dedicated and selfless service to Sonar Bangla or its hapless inhabitants.

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There is in every undertaking a bureaucratic and a democratic way of doing things. Even enlightened and benevolent projects fail if they are initiated from the top and run by big or small bureaucrats sans the people. The people themselves must be free to decide how an institution can best serve them, and they themselves must check the implementation. The wearer knows where the shoe pinches, and people's committees are the need of the hour. Without the groundswell of a people's movement, good intentions and exemplary actions will not suffice. □□□