

Days of Outrage

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With their shanties demolished and bodies brutalised by repeated police assaults since March 30, the poor and homeless families in Nonadanga at Kolkata's backyard have now joined the rank of disillusioned and betrayed who had longed for an essential Paribartan in political culture and believed her to be the harbinger of real change.

The Didi or big sis of Bengal whose party, Trinamul has replaced 34 years of LF rule in the name of *Ma-Mati-Manush* has not only made the mockery of her pre-poll vows to these marginal urban poor. She has also dishonored her pledges to the middle class civil society which had largely supported Mamata's campaign for regime-change with the hope to end the intolerant and arrogant one-party rule and return of space for dissent in a democracy.

However, the repeated police assaults on the peaceful processions and sit-in demonstrations by the evicted families and their middle class supporters, arrests of women and children, detention of seven 'Naxalite' activists under fabricated cases who stood in support of the homeless, TMC-police joint attack on rights body APDR's rally—all belied the hopes, even of a section of her vocal supporters in the Kolkata's civil society. For many of them, the last straw that broke the camel's back came in the form of the assault and arrest of the Jadavpur University Chemistry professor Ambikesh Mahapatra and his 72-year-old neighbor Subrata Sengupta for merely forwarding a harmless cartoon, already widely circulated in the social networking websites, on Mamata Banerjee and her successive nominees in railway ministry, Dinesh Trivedi and Mukul Roy.

Mamata Banerjee's government has not only denied the basic human rights to food and shelter to Nonadanga people but also continues to violate their constitutionally guaranteed democratic rights—right to assemble, protest and freedom of expression. Police mercilessly caned homeless men, women and children after they had brought out a protest rally demanding rehabilitation on Eastern Metropolitan Bypass close to Nonadanga on 4 April. Even, a pregnant mother and a child were not spared. A large number of participants including some Naxalite activists who had joined them in solidarity were arrested.

The city witnessed the same repressive pattern again next day when police broke up a sit-in demonstration across Rubi hospital crossing off the Bypass and 69 persons arrested. Seven activists were prosecuted under non-bailable sections while the rest were released at night.

Two of the detained activists are women—Debalina Chakroborty; the leader of Matangini Mahila Samiti, formed during the Nandigram agitation and named after the legendary freedom fighter of undivided Midnapur, and Debjani Ghosh; a student of Jadavpur university. Rest are Partho Sarathi Ray, a bright young scientist, Avigyan Sarkar; a research fellow of the JU and

Samik Chakorborty; a member of Mazdoor Kranti Parisad—all three are the moving spirit behind the Sanhati.com, a radical web paper that reports on people's movements and resistance across the country—as well as Sidhartha Gupta; a doctor and Manas Chatterjee; a CPI(ML) Liberation activist.

All of them have been working under the banner of Ucched Birodhi Pratirodh Committee in Nonadanga. Next day they were remanded to police custody for three days after a Trinamul MLA and lawyer told the court that the accused were Maoists who had stockpiled illegal arms in Nonadanga. But the arrested persons were neither booked under the Arms Act nor the police records did mention such wild allegations. Next day, police again forcibly dispersed protesters after affected people and mass organizations supporting them converged at College Street, the traditional hub of the student protesters since the sixties, to bring out a rally. Eighty-six people including women and six children from Nonadanga were taken to city police headquarters and released after a daylong detention. Fifty-one CPI (ML) liberation activists were arrested next day in the similar fashion.

But the most bizarre attack came on 12 April when the TMC musclemen assaulted the members of Association for Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR) who had assembled at Hazra crossing—in the vicinity of the chief minister's home—in order to hold a rally in support of the arrested activists. The latter were scheduled to be produced in the nearby Alipore court on that day. Police did nothing to prevent the storm-troopers of the new ruling party who chased and roughed up APDR activists. Instead, the law enforcers arrested six of the rights activists for violating section 144 of the CrPC. They claimed that the law prohibiting assemblies had been promulgated across the city in view of the ongoing higher secondary examination.

A government minister later blamed the factional feuds among Naxalites for the attack while chief minister ignored the incident claiming to be unaware of it. The irony of the history is unmistakable as 19 years back CPM's hoodlums had attacked Mamata Banerjee's rally at the other end of the same Hazra crossing inflicting serious head injury to her. CPM initially had blamed it on Congress' internal fights. Since then, citizens had witnessed series of attacks by the CPM cadres with red bandana or red flags tied to wooden poles, who later become morphed into lethally armed 'Harmads', on various opposition party-led rallies across the state. Mamata, the then opposition leader, had always called the ruling Marxists as the butchers of democracy for these crimes. Today, she fumes and frets against 'conspirators' and 'rabble-rousers' when the same complaints are being made against her and her green-shirts, known as Bhairabs. Clearly, the powerspeak has remained unchanged after the much-hyped Paribartan.

On 12 April, the Alipore court sent all the seven activists to jail custody until 26 April as the prosecution insisted on their continued interrogation. However, Debalina was remanded to CID custody after the state agency booked her in two old cases framed by the earlier Left Front government, in connection with Maoist activities in Nandigram. Abhigyan too named as Debalina's co-accused in a similar case and sent back to police. Facing sedition and related

charges, the draconian UAPA act may be clamped on both of them which would add them to around 10 other detainees booked under the anti-terror act in post-poll Bengal. Around 90 persons have been arrested under the UAPA during the earlier LF rule.

It's another matter that CPM had harped on TMC-Maoist nexus while Mamata denied it during Nandigram movement but she did not mind having them involved in people's resistance against proposed land-grab in 2007. Later, she tried her best to keep the Maoists in good humour by feigning friendly concerns about the demands of the Maoist-dominated People's Committee Against Police Atrocities in Lalgarh in 2008-10. She echoed the demand of judicial probe into the 'encounter' killing of top CPI (Maoist) leader Azad before the 2011 assembly polls, evidently to ensure Maoist support to her party in Junglemahal.

The Maoists, partly being charmed by her populist rhetoric and partly being compelled to sleep with the enemy's enemy, helped her to harvest the anti-CPM votes in the parliamentary and assembly elections in 2009-11. However, post- regime change equations changed drastically after the half-hearted peace-process between Mamata and Maoists ended in the killing of Kisenji, the rebel top gun in eastern India. Not only the Maoists, but some of the Naxalite groups and individuals close to the stream had also come under the spell of Mamata or she co-opted them in her bid to gain widest possible currency among anti-CPM forces. Some of them along with a good section of left-wing intellectuals shared Mamata's platform during her 26-days long hunger strike against the forcible land takeover in Singur in 2006. Today some of them are leading the hunger strike against Nonadanga eviction or joined protest rallies and meetings condemning Mamata's increasingly autocratic action.

Kabir Suman, the popular activist singer turned rebel TMC (Member of Parliament) is one of them. He fought the Lok Sabha Polls as a TMC candidate representing its culture brigade and hailed her by a chant, 'Joy Mamata'. However, he invited Mamata's wrath by criticizing her cronies or protesting against her policies in public. Now Suman wonders how the leader who had opposed the farmer's eviction from their land in Singur today demolished poor people's home. "I know that these Nonadanga people had voted for us. It's great shame that Trinamul government is making them homeless", media reports quoted him as saying at a protest meeting organized by a section of intellectuals. He reminded that Amitabha Bhattacharya and other members of the Majdoor Kranti Parisad had joined Mamata's hunger strike and had been beaten up repeatedly by the police-CPM combine during Singur agitation. "The arrest of yours friends of yesterdays is worst kind of ingratitude," he told Mamata Banerjee. Educationist Sunandya Sanyal who had campaigned valiantly for free election during the left rule and joined Mamata in regime-change today found her treading the CPM's path.

Theatre personality Kaushik Sen and poet Sankha Ghosh, two of the few consistent members of the civil society who had voiced protests during Singur-Nandigram but chosen not to lose their independence by joining any partisan camp, also came out this time. "The new government is considering even the constructive criticism as conspiracy. Every dissenters are being tagged with CPM which was the practice of the earlier regime," Sen said at a protest

meeting of intellectuals and activists organized at his initiative on 12 April evening. “The government should realize that it can’t stop protest by gagging it,” Ghosh told the media. Theatre and film director Suman Mukherjee, political commentator Asim Chatterjee, social activist Miratun Nahar and Jaya Mitra were among others present at the meeting.

The arrest of the Jadavpur professor and his neighbor triggered stronger and widespread condemnations. “This is very autocratic. I earlier did not want to use the word ‘scary’. But I have to admit that this scares me,” economist Avirup Sarkar, a high-profile supporter of the new regime, told the media. “This is not a good report at all... extremely undemocratic and wrong,” commented singer Nachiketa, known to be close to Didi. “This is fascism in making. The CM herself is trying to bring the CPM back which I hate,” Sanyal was quoted saying. “Now I will have to worry about how whatever I say might be interpreted and whether I will end up behind bar if I am critical of the government,” author Suchitra Bhattacharya commented. Mamata Banerjee defended the arrests saying that ‘mischief makers were needed to be booked’ and castigated pro-CPM channels and some other newspapers for running ‘slander campaign’ against her.

If these ‘baby steps’ of this infant government is indicative of its intent to bulldoze—both the poor and powerless people’s homes as well as all forms of democratic protests under the pretext of containing Maoists and sundry ‘conspirators’—Bengal seems to be destined to reel under another spell of one-party rule with a pro-corporate development agenda. □□□