

SOME LESSONS FOR 'POLITICALS' FROM THE RIJWANUR TRAGEDY

The death of Rijwanur Rahman on September 21, after relentless hounding by Kolkata Police at the behest of his father-in-law Ashok Todi, Kolkata's hosiery baron of "Lux Cozi" fame, has stirred up civil society in Kolkata in a way not usually seen.

At first the police top brass tried to brazen it out, and the state government and its major partner tried to back the police. On September 23, the Commissioner of Police, Kolkata, held a Press Conference, to assert that the death of Rizwanur was a suicide. Instead of fielding the queries of journalists, especially regarding the unusual interest taken by the police in the private affairs of an adult married couple, the Commissioner abruptly left, but not before asserting, "This is the way we act."

On the same day the State Secretary (and a Politbureau member) of the CPI(M) asserted that the police were not to blame in Rizwanur's death.

Rizwanur's body was handed over to his relations only after the entire locality erupted in anger at police procrastination. There was violence when the police tried to break up the protest, and a police jeep was burnt. A long procession took the body to the burial ground, with a banner accusing Todi of murder.

Rizwanur had been in touch with the APDR since the Todis and the police began to intimidate him, pressing him to send his wife back to her father's place, and the APDR made out a strong case for murder. Almost every day, protest meetings were held by different groups of people near the Rahman residence and processions taken out. Rahman's school, St Lawrence's School went public with its protest. A candlelight vigil started in front of St. Xavier's College, Rizwanur's alma mater. The Rahman family demanded a CBI enquiry and removal of the police officers responsible for the intimidation programme..

The state government had to back out step by step, and swallow, unwillingly, a CBI enquiry ordered by the High Court, and transfer the police officers, who were directly responsible for interfering in the marriage of two adults. So great was the effect of the civil society protests that the Commissioner of Kolkata Police was among those transferred to other posts.

Some features of the stir need to be discussed.

The formal protest rallies by the APDR and other organisations were not impressive. For example, a joint rally at Subodh Mallik Square by several organisations was disappointingly small and was not attended by the general public unattached to the organisers. The subsequent procession, while featuring the usual grey heads seen at all demonstrations, did also include a few young men and women, but they were really few and their faces, too, were familiar by now, -- faces of committed people seen at all such gatherings. Processions which started from Rijwanur's locality had had, at least, a sprinkling of locals.

But, now comes the contrast. The understandably heated crowd of mourners on day 1 has already been alluded to. On Id-ul-Fitr day, a 3000 strong mass, which also included some intellectuals from outside the locality, proceeded from Rijwanur's house to the prayer meeting. During this whole period there was a steady stream of visitors to the Rizwanur residence. Take the visitor from Murshidabad. He had come to Kolkata on private business, and, being in the neighbourhood, thought that he should search out the house and express his feelings to Rijwanur's family.

Most remarkable was the 21-day vigil at St. Xavier's (discontinued after the CBI were called in). Hosts of young people, including many couples, attended the vigil and signed the huge posters put up at the site by nameless protesters. Cris-crossed by signatures and diatribes against Todi and the police, the posters were a testimony to the indignation felt and expressed

by sections of civil society which wouldn't even have heard of the rally at S.M.Square, leave aside attending it.

Lessons may be drawn if there is the will.

Young urban people, muddled by the 'industrialisation' hoax, and, consequently, unaffected by, if not hostile to the resistance movements in Singur and Nandigram, were furious with the police for the intolerable assault on young love, privacy, and freedom, and the government for its dithering in disciplining the khaki. This disaffection was palpable even in localities where the major ruling party had a commanding presence. Especially disaffected were the young urban people of the main minority community, who rightly felt that, though the police were emboldened primarily by Rijwanur's economic weakness, they became as reckless as they did because he belonged to a minority community. This disaffection within a compact vote bank profoundly frightened, first, the party stalwarts of this community, and, then, the party leadership, which had, no doubt, registered also the mood of its 'own' young people. Note, that the 'political' elements in civil society could not play an effective part in this mobilisation of the urban young (apart from the well publicised, forthright stand taken by the APDR).

While the 'political' elements took unthinking recourse to worn-out, hackneyed forms of protest, incapable of attracting the uncommitted, the people devised innovative methods of protest, convenient, capable of encompassing the participation of many, direct and effective. Had the CBI enquiry been further delayed, Kolkata might have seen even more spectacular modes of action. Imagine one locality after another joining a daily five minutes black-out, till the whole of Kolkata became a ghostly poster against the government every night.

The fact is that civil society was enraged as a whole, and was finding its own ways of expressing the united disapproval. 'Political' were reduced to spectators. Or, does some-one seriously believe that the tiny protest organised by his group shook the government?

Perhaps the main problem is the strange complacency of the opposition Left with the small span of support for any of its 'parties' and organisations, its programmes and forms of movement. It cannot dream of participating in uniting civil society as a formidable whole on any issue of civil rights. The 'non-political' initiators of the candlelight vigil and the big posters dared to have this dream, which became a nightmare for the government.

Of course, the rich Todis and the powerful police officers are likely to go scot-free, but, whether Rijwanur's message is a fiction, or not, civil society has 'raised its voice'.

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