

Dissent and Reconstruction : West Bengal Plunging into Anarchy

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This state of ours, West Bengal, is heedlessly abandoning democracy and the rule of law and racing towards anarchy and state-sponsored terror. The police and the administration, deriding normal expectations expressed by sane citizens, have taken on the reprehensible role of an unprincipled departure from their responsibilities. Our expectations are simple; a simple formulation is called for. Those of us who believe in democracy expect there to be a fundamental dividing line between hired thugs and the police force. Thugs are hired for pay for illegal purposes; the task of the police is to uphold the law. When the police force becomes the protector of thugs, it becomes inevitable that the rule of law and democracy in the state will reach a point of breakdown. When violent attacks take place not in secret but in broad daylight, with the police standing by as silent and unmoved spectators, that too is no less dangerous for democracy. When this reprehensible passivity of the police is supported by the government machinery and the apparatus of the ruling party, then such a terrible situation cannot be described by any term weaker than state-sponsored terror, can it? In foreign parlance, this is known as fascist rule. It is this that current expressions of horror are directed against - by artists, creative writers, thinkers, and innumerable nameless ordinary men and women; or perhaps we should say women and men, for it is women who are providing leadership to this movement of dissent. In these dark times, the main reason for hope is this feature of the protests. Independently of party lines and working with unorganized but serendipitously effective arrangements, people of conscience are taking a stand against a power-hungry, unscrupulous ruling group. This protest is unprecedented in independent India.

It is as if civil society in Bengal had been somnolent and has suddenly woken up. This dissidence today is perhaps ushering in a twenty-first century enlightenment in Bengal. To repeat, this awakening has not emerged through the efforts of any specific political party, although Bengalis tend to be strongly focused on party politics. The artists, creative writers and academic professionals taking part in the movement of dissent today are not associated with any specific party or parties. Some of them are on the left, and are not acting on the basis of any long held animus against the ruling party of the state. It is their values that have brought them to this point today. The basis of this movement is not party loyalties but a democratic culture from which it derives its strength. It is true that for some concrete reasons many people are speaking against the Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee; but it needs to be understood that the point is not criticism of any particular person but rather a protest against autocracy and state-sponsored terror. The respected Governor of our state (Gopalkrishna Gandhi) is not anti-Buddhadeb, he is anti-terror. It is for this reason that a person like Sankha Ghosh (the best known living poet in the Bangla language), with reluctance and dismay, becomes a critic of the Chief Minister. My own opposition is certainly not directed against any person or persons, although the tone used by a few individuals has indeed been distressing.

There is a debate in progress at this moment, in fact several debates on several planes. It is natural for there to be some differences. In this exposition I avoid elaborating on issues that require and will receive continuous discussion over a long period. But there are some clarifications that must be provided right now.

Mr Bhattacharjee and the CPM claim that they have at last restored peace in Nandigram. With some derision they have been asking whether this pleases the other side. What they make clear by asking this question is the fact that they are confused at the level of basic values. Our English rulers had once made the claim that they had established peace in India. Rulers such as Gandhiji had replied that that was the peace of the crematorium. What lay behind his remark was a simple point. Even more important than peace is absence of terror. The main question is whether people are able to speak unterrified, whether they are living without fear. When fear shuts people up we can choose to call it peace, but that is not a desirable type of peace. Rabindranath Tagore made the same point in his well-known poem “Where the head is held high and the mind is without fear”, in which he expressed the hope that our land would become such a paradise. Such an extreme felicity will surely remain beyond our reach. But those who cherish freedom as a value wish to move in the direction that that utopian goal expresses. Those who are drunk with power and regard autocracy as a legitimate style of functioning see fit to deride such wishes. Today’s protesters do want peace, and what they want even more is “insaaf” (Urdu term for ‘justice’), justice, absence of terror. This is what Rizwanur Rahman’s mother has asked for (a reference to the recent death of Rizwanur Rahman, a Muslim man whose marriage to a Hindu woman Priyanka Todi was broken up by Priyanka’s rich father with full cooperation from the police, whose actions led to Rizwanur’s death, a scandal that has been under investigation and has led to public protests). The deepest aspiration of people all over the state, including Nandigram, is justice.

Does Mr Bhattacharjee not understand this? Is it beyond his range of comprehension? I do not wish to be so cynical about him. He is a culture-focused and thoughtful man. He is related to the poet Sukanta Bhattacharya (this is a point the Chief Minister himself has often made in public, in order to gain support from the intellectuals). Is it entirely beyond his powers to be a stakeholder in Bengal’s twenty-first century enlightenment? We are disinclined to think so. However, power severely tests the best of us. Mr Bhattacharjee is in power, which is not an unmixed blessing, even for him. What looks like renown at one moment can turn at a later juncture in history into terrible notoriety.

Some time ago [in January 2007], some members of Mr Bhattacharjee’s party were forced to leave Nandigram. The supporters of the Bhumi Uchchedh Protirodh Committee (BUPC) (Committee for Resistance to Eviction from Land) did not choose the path of non-violent resistance. Mr Bhattacharjee has reminded everybody that they did not. He has said that those opposing his party have been paid back in their own coin. There has been discussion of the way he made this point; that avoidable discussion is best set aside; let us stick to the main point.

The plan or intention of the West Bengal government was to establish a chemical hub in Nandigram. To this end, they had initiated land acquisition there in order to transfer this land to a foreign industrial group. Many of us have heard certain negative things about that group (the Indonesia-based Salim group provided support for the mass murder of leftists and left sympathizers in Indonesia in 1966), but our government has decided to ignore such input. The main issue whether it is appropriate for a left government to acquire land in order to help a private capitalist group. The buying and selling of land can occur in the open market. If the government is able to persuade farmers to part with their land then no problem arises. But the

fact is that many of the farmers were unwilling to sell. The government sent in the police; the farmers who did not to sell their land organized the BUPC. This was the situation in which the conflict began. The people broke up into two antagonistic camps. Neither of these camps chose a non-violent method. If farmers trying to defend their right to keep their land have chosen the path of armed struggle, they may have erred. However, do the criteria normally used by the CPM make it possible to view this as a serious crime? Those who take the stand that the use of arms in their party's interests is licit and that violence directed against them is a heinous offence are unlikely to be able to elicit support outside their ranks.

In any event, the CPM have, at present, won a military victory in this conflict. This outcome is hardly surprising. In this unfortunate conflict, the ruling party had a few advantages. They were able to prevent entry into the Nandigram area by any "outsiders", even such a non-violent observer and social activist as Medha Patkar. But surely it is difficult to deny that the ruling party brought armed outsiders into Khejuri so that they could reassert CPM ascendancy over Nandigram. Outside gunmen are not outsiders, apparently, but Mamata Banerjee, (leader of the Trinamool Congress, the largest opposition party in the state) is an outsider, the artists, journalists, intellectuals are outsiders, we are told. Both sides were armed. But the gunmen brought in from outside had so many lethal weapons that the villagers were obviously overwhelmed at the level of weapons; this is easy to infer from what happened. It was no surprise that the combined strength of the police, the party cadres and the hired gunmen defeated the BUPC's forces. The victors are now engaged in the task of threatening and torturing the defeated into submission to the CPM. "My world is dissolving into nightmare" (a quote from a poem Rabindranath Tagore wrote after British atrocities). This is the picture that we are asked to construe as peace. It is only this that the power-hungry fascist administrative apparatus is anxious to accomplish. The ruling party has found it appropriate to take pride, publicly, in these achievements. It is against this that people of good will today direct their protest and condemnation.

If peace has any positive content then it is synonymous with justice, absence of terror, and democratic freedoms. There are many tasks that hired killers can be made to carry out, but social service is not one of them. Weapons can be used to kill people, but this makes the earth red, not green, it does not increase the soil's fertility. Nandigram's well-wishers will desire a reconstruction of its social order that will leave its soil fertile, its people adequately sheltered and fed, its villages transformed into havens of peace. It seems likely that the ruling party will regain its focus on thoughts of a chemical hub. This, however, is not the way to rescue West Bengal's economy. Dissidents too have serious responsibilities. With dissent one must combine thoughts of reconstruction. This can become a basis for the sustainability of a democratic platform: dissent and reconstruction.

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