

Calcutta Notebook

Shoummo

'Let us all light long biris.

We will not survive this assault.'

(Sudhin Dhar to his fellow activists in Rajshahi jail, Bangladesh, in the face of firing on 24 April 1950 that killed 7 communist prisoners and injured 31)

FOLLOWERS OF CALCUTTA Notebook may be under the impression that this column, over the years, has been spawned, bred and nurtured by AM who was also for sometime the FM to the discredited regime that was sent to the cleaners on Friday, the 13th of May. Readers of his autobiography in Bangla, *Aapila Chaapila* (Ananda Publishers, January 2003 & also available in English as 'A Prattler's Tale'), may also veer to this point of view since the author writes that he started writing a weekly column, Calcutta Notebook, for NOW and that the column, after a brief stoppage in the interim, found its way to Economic & Political Weekly in 1972 (*Aapila Chaapila*, page 154). Browsing through dog eared issues of NOW weekly reveals that he has not told the full story. Between June 1965 and December 1967 (Now's maiden issue hit the stands in October 1964) not less than 46 Notebooks were written by J Mohan which was the nom de plume of Jolly Mohan Kaul, the last Calcutta district secretary of the undivided CPI. During the same period AM and Charan Gupta (an alter ego of AM) combine wrote about 38 notebooks. In fact, for quite sometime the authorship of Calcutta Notebook in NOW alternated between J Mohan and AM/Charan Gupta. While quoting these numbers, I would add there are some missing issues in the collection that I browsed and the actual number of notebooks written could have been slightly more. The point here is that in its initial years, Calcutta Notebook was set on a firm footing and kept rolling by J Mohan too.

Writing on, AM claims that at inception, articles in NOW had a 'social butterfly' flavour (*Aapila Chaapila*, page 148) and that 'NOW was a typically bourgeois weekly' (*Aapila Chaapila*, page 153). Further, AM adds that NOW's necessary turn to the left was steered by him. To be fair to AM, this 'favour' is acknowledged by Samar Sen (NOW's founder editor) in his memoirs. However, a casual flip through the Calcutta Notebooks before AM came in and later could lead to a different conclusion. The topics that J Mohan covered in NOW, before and contemporarily with AM, were as varied as rise in kerosene prices, scarcity of food articles in Bengal, the Farakka project, shortfall in production of jute crop, failure of the Dandakaranya project, sad state of plantation workers, child mortality in Midnapore, agitation over rise in tram fares, shortage of baby food, food movement, water crisis in Kolkata, inter-district cordoning of rice in Bengal, Vietnam struggle, PL 480, pay scales of State Transport Corporation employees, political vendetta in Kolkata localities, the Public Distribution System, communal disturbances in the city, infighting within the United Front Government and the like. Whether these were sufficiently to the left or not can only be judged if interested readers take the time out to read the articles as they were carried in the pages of NOW. None the less, one can safely conclude that the issues per se were those that blazed newspaper headlines during that period, agitated the denizens of this city and the state and could hardly have been of much interest to 'social butterflies' other than as a cause for discomfort.

For the sake of balance but not impartiality, one must take note of the issues covered by AM and Charan Gupta in their Calcutta Notebook pieces published in NOW. These were equally varied and ranged from student discontent, refugee problem, Defence of India Regulations, opportunism of Kolkata newspapers, support for revolution vis-a-vis peaceful movements, 250th performance of Utpal Dutt's 'Kallo', Muzaffar Ahmed, middle class

leadership of revolutionary parties, Rupee devaluation, pro-American Indian army officers, admiration for Mao, fascination with cultural revolution & the great leap forward, role of Ford & other American foundations, criticism of police action in Naxalbari, flight of talent from Bengal and the like. To reiterate AM's own claim, these notebook pieces and other edit page articles helped NOW to its left turn. However, some of the Calcutta Notebook pieces authored by AM and Charan Gupta were on visits abroad, *tete a tete* with *boxwallahs*, reasonableness of prices in Peking restaurants vis-a-vis prices in Park Street establishments, the charm of Baroda, easy life of corporate executives and the like. Admittedly, these could certainly have been of much interest to the social butterfly set.

Whatever may have been the faults or merits of the column, Calcutta Notebook pieces abstained from snide personal remarks especially against intellectuals who had earned their space in the public domain. This veneer was shed during the first decade of this century. After the death of *Padatik* (foot soldier) poet Subhas Mukhopadhyay, AM wrote 'Subhas Mukhopadhyay chose, particularly during the closing years, coarse company. It was a coarse funeral he received. It is a cruel thing to say, but bluntness it has to be, he dug his own grave. It is a tragedy, but there it is.' (Calcutta Notebook, *EPW*, 16 August 2003) On the poet's association with Mamata Banerjee, he went on to add that 'The demagogue lady's doorpost was the inevitable final destination. Water finds its own level, dishwater also does. The people's poet, alas, became a court jester. And it was in the grimmest possible court.' It is best to numb one's senses, while reading this sample of one public intellectual's disregard for another.

Reminiscing of Dharma Kumar, founder and editor of *Indian Economic and Social History Review* and also a general editor *Cambridge Economic History of India*, AM wrote 'She would pass hours on end in New Delhi's close elitist circle, exchanging gossip, often malicious gossip and confidences.' (Calcutta notebook, *EPW*, 4 March 2000). Talking of gossip, the pages of *Aapila Chaapila* is replete with malicious bits. Like AM writes of an incident when a member of the Bolshevik Party while walking on the street chose to relieve himself in public while a female comrade of his looked the other way (*Aapila Chaapila*, page 61) or, a president of India, with a 'roving eye', staring at female guests at a social gathering in Holland (*Aapila Chaapila*, page 95). Coming back to Dharma Kumar, AM wrote in the same Calcutta Notebook that 'A series of cerebral attacks, a series of surgeries, now all hopes are seemingly over, the latest communications suggests, she has to spend the rest of her existence as a vegetable. Pardon the shocking parallel, her present state of nothingness has an eerie resemblance to the shambles the country is currently in'. To pay, AM, back in his own coin, the depth of his profundity as exhibited in these lines is not more than a pail of dish water.

One could have stopped here, keeping in mind the constraint of time, newsprint space and also the impossibility to hold on to the reader's attention span for long by small talk of a person's malice towards one and all. It may not be out of place to give one more example to establish the point that while malice was reserved for some fellow intellectuals and peers, for commoners and riff raff the potion dished out was more distasteful. Writing his column in a local English daily on 29 January 2010, AM willfully drew the reading public's attention to a sad tale of 1935 vintage, the sad tale of a young lady who was exploited by some from the local political class for their immoral wants. The sad tale blew up into a scandal and was hushed up by moneyed interests. A long forgotten scandal was not only dug by AM from its grave but he also chose to name the lady in print. It takes two to tango and the daily, that patronises AM as an adviser to the parliamentary left and as a peddler of smut as in this instance, added the icing to the cake by publishing a photograph of the unfortunate lady. Committed readers can still search for the promised left bend in the article but it does not require clairvoyance to conclude that water has indeed searched and found its own level. Dish water dripping from a full to the brim pail has flowed to a media house that is a cesspool. □□□