

ROAD TO HELL?

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IN AND AROUND THE University of Kolkata and Presidency University are a plethora of bookshops and tea-shops, where students, would-be-poets, little magazine groups, freelance journalists, a multitude of couples and multiples undergoing pairing, are putting the world to right every day. Many of the established intellectuals of different eras have served their apprenticeship here. In this bohemia, Big Brother has made his entry in search of Maoists camouflaging as students. Bookshops have been visited by young, shamefaced scions of the Special Branch and famous teashops have been provided with CCTV cameras. This correspondent was accosted, as he stepped out of a rather traditional mainstream Left sort of meeting with students to discuss some piece of dry, new legislation on education, by a weedy, old watcher. He muttered resignedly, "Meeting still going on?" Beware Lancelot as you whisper sweet nothings to Guinivere, behind Arthur's back, not only of Arthur or Mordred, but of hidden mikes of the cheap variety that might distort "sailing into the haven of your eyes" into "selling the AK47 likewise".

Apart from students, the other category of people who, according to this government, are responsible for the discontent of the emaciated, dishonoured people of the forests, battered by security forces of the state and vigilante groups of the parties of the Right, are, yes, the intellectuals, even their octogenarian doyen. The party lords and bad gentry who siphoned off the money allotted for them out of people's taxes for 34 years are not responsible for their discontent. The police who knocked out Chitamani Murmu's eye are not responsible for their discontent. The joint security forces who killed Lalmohan, the aged president of the people's committee, refused to hand over his body, and molested the wife of a CPI(M) activist, are not responsible for their discontent. The Harnad and the Bhairab vigilantes are not responsible for their discontent. The far Left line of individual assassination and the consequent killings are not responsible for their discontent. Their discontent is created and manipulated by dyspeptic professors and disobedient students of the metropolis (from secret tea-shops?) via 'hired supari killers'.

Of course, this is the government which has said that it seems that there are women whose job is to complain of being raped whenever the security forces enter a village. Something jogs the memory. Didn't the CPI(M)'s women's front leaders make this sort of fun when a footpath dweller was raped by a policeman, later found culpable by the courts? The people have, unfortunately, a sort of penchant for remembering such remarks, which were the trademark of the likes of Benoy Konar and Anil Bose of the unlamented previous regime. Now, such remarks emanate from this government.

The students' union funds and the admissions racket have made 'organising' the students a lucrative business, run by local party toughs. Till before the assembly elections the CPI(M) students' wing dominated most undergraduate colleges. Now the students' wing of the major ruling party has taken over the monopoly and are 'winning' the students' union elections without allowing any other organisation to put up a show. Recently, the authorities are themselves interfering in the election process to marginalise opposition, as happened in the Calcutta Medical College. This is the season when managing committees of private schools are elected. An example will suffice to illustrate. A school in Belghoria, just north of the metropolis, was holding an election to form the new committee. The major ruling party was trailing. Hence, counting of votes was stopped.

In the meantime, business is as usual. In Rajarhat, two factions of the major ruling party are at one another's throats for control of the 'syndicates' which supply, by force and at inflated rates, all building materials. The newspapers claim that one faction is blest by a minister. A major player has recently been gunned down by his opponents.

Indeed, God is in heaven and all is right with the world. In the last six months, six farmers have committed suicide. Ananda Das Bairagya, Joydeb Mondal, Basudeb Mondal, Jagannath Mondal, Kartik Bagdi, and another who is still nameless in the media. In every case, the lack of cheap credit was implicated. The procession towards heaven is likely to become longer.

Oblivious of the large increase in paddy production this year, the government set the support price at Rs 1080 per quintal, while the market price didn't rise above Rs 700-800. The rice mills and the BDO office did not buy paddy from the farmers at support price, and even in the third week of November, the key procurement agencies like Confed, Benfed, and ECSC did not start purchases. However, better quality paddy streamed in from outside the state. There is always distress sale in such a situation. Such sales flooded the market. What were the star economists and advisers doing while all this happened? Or is it what they intended to happen? Incompetence or malafide intent? The present major ruling party is outdoing the previous one in party-politicking. The party-political panchayet pradhan is to decide how much paddy will be bought from a given farmer at support price. And most people thought that the CPI(M) was the past master of partisan stratagems! Many a peasant cannot wait for the government and sells at the low market price. The heavenward procession of farmers lengthens: add Bhabani Porel and Safar Molla.

Incompetence and dependence on bureaucrats has made shambles of the policy on education. To remove the admittedly partisan Vice-chancellors, appointed by the previous regime, an ordinance was hastily passed on the lines of the statutes of Delhi University, bypassing the legislature. The ordinance places University governance squarely in the hands of bureaucrats and nominated heads of different boards and committees. Autonomy is further eroded by making the Chancellor (usually the Governor of the state) sole authority for removal of the Vice-chancellor.

The people in charge of school education are enacting a drama of indecision in their less than competent efforts to balance the Right to Education Act and the compulsions of popular perceptions. No Pass-Fail, yes Pass-Fail; No admission by lottery, yes admission by lottery; Medical entrance tests as per norms of the Medical Council of India, Medical Entrance tests flouting these norms. Meanwhile, the chairman of the advisory committee on the school curriculum has resigned. Broad hints have been given regarding the cold shoulder extended to expert advice.

The bureaucrats are having a field day. The police are becoming trigger happy. News is coming in from Magrahat in south Bengal, regarding police firing on a mass of people, which claimed the lives of two women, a school girl and a young housewife. Bullets hit them on the head. A young boy is in a hospital with a bullet in his abdomen. Who knows what danger they posed to the state. An estimated 40 people have been injured, with more bullet injuries.

The road to authoritarianism is paved with good intentions. □□□

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