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## KNEEJERKS AND FRESH STARTS: A HISTORY OF SPEAKERS AND AUTHORS OF *PROTIBAAD*

Atreyee Majumder\*

*I hadn't seen a michheel<sup>1</sup> in close to a decade. Until yesterday. Middle-aged Writers' Buildings<sup>2</sup> officials, of Congress leanings, protested the attacks on Congress leaders in Burdwan saying that it was possible due to police apathy and negligence. There were hardly any banners, mostly slogans. Even as some tyres are deflated and buses burnt down in the heart of South Calcutta. The Congress is back with a bang, say the newspapers. These attacks have reinvigorated our workers. A Congress leader is quoted. A feeble identity that was getting increasingly engulfed by the grassroot diva of the state is now fed fodder.<sup>3</sup> The good old pellet of political energy is back in fashion. The burning of the bus.*

*I think of disparate scenes from Ray's<sup>4</sup> Mohanogor, Gonoshotroo, and various Rituporno Ghosh films. Of middle-class dining tables, afternoon irritation, whirring fans, chilled bottles of water, khuchro<sup>5</sup> angst – the texture of all of it being sharpened by the din of a michheel in the background. Memories of gentry lives lived in their whole range of pains and pleasures – from khuchro prem<sup>6</sup> on lake-er dhaar<sup>7</sup> to political outrage to business rivalries – across a continuing din of cholbe na cholbe na.<sup>8</sup> Protibaad<sup>9</sup> is a less popular word on graffiti these days. The words okormonyota,<sup>10</sup> noirajyo<sup>11</sup> – and various other versions of abyss, impasse, stagnation, anarchy – find adequate representation on posters of all parties.*

– My field notes, July 2009.

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<sup>1</sup> The word means procession in Bengali.

<sup>2</sup> The main Secretariat building complex in the heart of Calcutta.

<sup>3</sup> Mamata Banerjee, the charismatic yet crass leader of the rising opposition party, the Trinamool Congress, which is an offshoot of the Congress. She defected to form her own party, the Trinamool in the mid-eighties.

<sup>4</sup> Satyajit Ray, a renowned figure of Indian art-house cinema, known especially for his experiments poetic realism in cinema.

<sup>5</sup> 'Khuchro' means insignificant in Bengali.

<sup>6</sup> 'Prem' may be taken to mean 'everyday romance'.

<sup>7</sup> By the Lake. A landscape in South Calcutta that is famous in urban folklore for its sheltering of marijuana peddlers and young lovers.

<sup>8</sup> 'This will not do': a popular Communist slogan in Kolkata.

<sup>9</sup> In Bengali, 'protibaad' means protest.

<sup>10</sup> The word means lethargy.

<sup>11</sup> The word may mean sloth or anarchy.

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## **I. THE CRISIS**

In the summer of 2009, something felt different about the old culture of *protibaad* on the walls of Kolkata, even as its avuncular participants and their rhythmic shoulder-thrusts remained familiar. This was not the voice of *protibaad* for being treated unfairly, neither was it an account of failed promises of the State; this *protibaad* was an expression of the bottled expectation of new opportunities, fresh starts – perhaps the only form of public expression available in the abyss that Kolkata found itself in at this time.

In the summer of 2009, Trinamool Congress posters all over the metropolis of Kolkata spoke of kneejerk reactions – a need for fresh blood, new energies, despondency over the impasse of the Left and a time to change laidback attitudes of ‘people’. A destructive cyclone hit the southern shores of the state, only to add to the brewing chaos. In the weeks following the Aila cyclone, the mismanagement of relief measures made the thirty-year-old Left Front coalition government of West Bengal look unfit, under-confident and a most fitting target for scathing political criticism in the public spheres of Kolkata and wider, in the nation. In the following weeks, a spate of killings ensued between cadre youths of Trinamool Congress cadre and the CPI (M) (Communist Party of India (Marxist), also known as CPM). Soon after, the far left (Maoist) outfit, under Chhatradhar Mahato, engineered a blockade of the Lalgarh and Shalboni areas in West Medinipur, which was brought to an end with the dispatch of paramilitary forces from the centre.<sup>12</sup> The confused energies on the walls of West Bengal, at this time, revealed not simply an ideological battle over solicitation (or not) of the forces of global capital, but also decades of bottled expectation of a citizenry who demanded to be shaken out of the inertia that they had come to be trapped in. The posters here in Kolkata, said: *Singur-e factory holo na kaeno?* (Why *didn't* we get our Nano factory?) Quite different from the critiques that rose in the event of rapid acquisition of rural land using the eminent domain powers of State towards installing big industrial ventures –

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<sup>12</sup> Suhrid Sankar Chattopadhyay, *Lalgarh Battle*, 26(14) FRONTLINE July 04-17, 2009, <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2614/stories/20090717261412900.htm>.

famously the case of Singur and the Tata automobile project –that came from the intellectual left.<sup>13</sup> This was a call to end a long-drawn spell of impasse – an anger at having fallen through the cracks of failed socialism and a never-taken-off-life of the market.

The defeats suffered by the CPI (M) in the Parliamentary elections of 2009 and in the Municipal elections of June 2010 were symptomatic of a strong state having ruled in an uninterrupted thirty-year stint, in a democratic setup, being on the decline. This turmoil over shaky political legitimacy is reflected in recent events following from the party-state's attempts to solicit big industrial capital and promote growth. In recent years, the Left Front government has been at the forefront of public discontent because of a long-drawn, violent tussle over acquiring land for an SEZ (Special Economic Zone) project in Nandigram, in March 2007, which was sought to be built through financial support of an Indonesian conglomerate known to have close ties with the Suharto regime.<sup>14</sup> In the same timeframe, Tata was being offered a package including 997 acres of land in a township called Singur, in Hooghly district, to build an automobile plant.<sup>15</sup> 2007 was a year of large-scale violence and atrocity in Nandigram, between the resistant groups (supported by the Opposition party, the Trinamool Congress) and the Communist establishment. The government sought to salvage its image by attributing responsibility for the violence to 'outside' extremist actors like Maoists. Much as the Communist government was suddenly being confronted with uncomfortable questions about enticing private capital for development, wearing, as it was its Communist cloak, I am specifically interested in the layers of meaning of 'industrialisation' being negotiated at different levels of the political establishment. The Singur and Nandigram incidents took place in the background of the Buddhadeb Bhattacharya government taking active steps to marshal investor-support and the entry of big capital to accelerate industrial growth in West Bengal. The incidents involving TATA and the Indonesian Salim Group featured violent conflict between the Left Front and agrarian citizenry, outrage among leftist intelligentsia, and strong criticism from the main opposition party– the Trinamool Congress. The Left Front rapidly watered its stance

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<sup>13</sup> See e.g., Praful Bidwai, *The Left Needs Rethinking, not Abject Apologia*, COUNTERCURRENTS, January 2, 2008, at <http://www.countercurrents.org/bidwai020108.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Dia Da Costa, *Tensions of Neo-liberal Development: State Discourse and Dramatic Oppositions in West Bengal*, 41(3) CONTRIB. INDIAN SOCIOL. 287 (2007).

<sup>15</sup> Suhrid Sankar Chattopadhyay, *Starting Trouble*, 23(25) FRONTLINE December 16-29, 2006, <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2325/stories/20061229002003300.htm>; Suhrid Sankar Chattopadhyay, *Singur's Loss*, 25(22) FRONTLINE October 25-November 7, 2008, <http://www.hindu.com/fline/fl2522/stories/20081107252203700.htm>.

down on land acquisition to announce a 'landbank' to inventorise non-agricultural lands which would be available for conversion to industrial purpose.<sup>16</sup>

In this paper, I follow the moment of political crisis in West Bengal to trace out voices of agony, despair, hope and disillusionment that echo across its political public spheres of West Bengal. I began ethnographic research in West Bengal in 2009, at the time that municipal elections had brought heavy losses to the ruling Left Front, in many of its stronghold constituencies. In the backdrop of the legislative elections of May 2011 in West Bengal that has recently overthrown the Left Front out of its thirty-year regime, I show the deep historical sediment that has collected on the planes of discourse, speech, gesture and sentiment in West Bengal.<sup>17</sup> In this paper, I disentangle some genealogies of this political culture that speaks *expectation* in the idiom of *resistance*. I use as primary sources newspaper clips, speeches, graffiti texts and ethnographic observation. I argue that anxieties and uncertainties of this time of political instability refracts through such historical sediment of socialist rule of the past three decades. *Protibaad* or *protest* that uses words and phrases borrowed from the classic revolutionary scriptures (Marx, Lenin, Mao) are uttered in this moment in expressive gestures of the emotional condition and material expectation of a population caught in an abyss, watching a wider nation-state pass it by at neo-liberal speed. I make this argument in two segments – the first is a contemporary one that draws from my ethnographic research as well as discourse analysis of recent reportage on various aspects of the crisis of 'the left'. The second is a historical one that draws out resonances of the present moment of anxiety and abyss in West Bengal with earlier makings of the post-colonial protesting citizen who comes to locate his political presence in the vocabulary of 'the left'. I also show the close resemblance that this citizen bears with the protest forms that rise out of contemporary social democracy and late capitalism (anti-dam movements, environmentalism, feminism, queer sexualities, urban governance movements) which are taken up by new social movements as also NGOs, through which I articulate the contemporary crisis of identity experienced by leftist protest forms.<sup>18</sup> It is this close resemblance, I argue, that

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<sup>16</sup> Sutanka Ghosal and Atmadip Ray, *Bengal Seek 500 cr Loans for Land Bank*, The Economic Times, July 6, 2009, [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2009-07-06/news/28449696\\_1\\_land-bank-land-acquisition-united-bank](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2009-07-06/news/28449696_1_land-bank-land-acquisition-united-bank).

<sup>17</sup> The contemporary component of this research is based on ethnographic observations, interviews and discourse analysis. Such methods (as ethnography, primarily) are my primary research tools as a socio-cultural anthropologist. My focus, at the beginning of fieldwork, were about the nature of post-Nandigram moment in politics of West Bengal, and over time, I found public cultures of politics the best handle with which to get at this question. I owe insights in this paper to many friends and colleagues, not least of who is my advisor, Prof. K. Sivaramakrishnan.

<sup>18</sup> On the nature of civic engagements coming out of late capitalism, see ANNA LOWENHAUPT TSING, *FRICTION: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF GLOBAL CONNECTION* (2005); TANIA LI, *THE WILL TO IMPROVE: GOVERNMENTALITY*,

causes the anxiety of contemporary 'left' politics (in the theatre of party politics and beyond) and makes the idiom of *protibaad* more urgent in the current moment. The political culture of complaint may ask for similar redress or reform from state and capital just as a citizen's group or an NGO, but is different in that it forms the familiar routine of many in West Bengal for whom it is the most reassuring way of being a citizen-in-criticism (derived from socialist language) at a time of crisis. *Protibaad* of this moment is not as much about the 'resistant' citizen seeking justice as it is about restoring familiarity at a time of ambiguity, anxiety and change.

### **1. Talking politics in West Bengal**

The irony of Kolkata of this moment was that the cry for a kneejerk reaction, a new beginning and new economic opportunities – followed the language of blockades, sabotage and protest. A party-state being the only and over-arching repertoire of resource and road to opportunity – featured in strategies of aggrandizement, upward mobility, clientilism, resistance, dissent, factionalism, community, masculinity – available to anyone outside of the obviously privileged urban classes.<sup>19</sup> Citizenry in West Bengal spoke of an entrapment of three decades – that has led them today to an abyss, the rescuing bridge to which is sometimes private capital, sometimes the distant central state, and sometimes their very own provincial socialist government. In the language of protest, what was being argued for was a fresh start at fulfilment of citizens' expectation. The summer of 2009 unfolded in a cacophony around 'the left' – of a party, a government and beyond.

An old Communist, a trade unionist and a writer, Mohammed<sup>20</sup> speaks of the supposedly last phase of power of the Left Front, sitting in his frugal living room in Howrah. He is troubled about the contemporary world. Funnily enough, the reason he gives as the source of his troubles is not the Maoist insurgency in Lalgarh or rise in prices, but the tendencies of people to cheat one another. He says people have lost a sense of integrity that they used to have. He is writing a book

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DEVELOPMENT, AND THE PRACTICE OF POLITICS (2007); Joseph Andoni Massad, *Re-orienting Desire: the Gay International and the Arab World*, 14(2) PUB. CULTURE 361-85 (2002); DAVID MOSSE, CULTIVATING DEVELOPMENT: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF AID POLICY AND PRACTICE (2005). Compare ARADHANNA SHARMA, LOGICS OF EMPOWERMENT: DEVELOPMENT, GENDER, AND GOVERNANCE IN NEOLIBERAL INDIA (2008), with DIA DA COSTA, DEVELOPMENT DRAMAS: REIMAGINING RURAL POLITICAL ACTION IN EASTERN INDIA (2010) on the leftist variant in socialist West Bengal.

<sup>19</sup> On the party being a vehicle of marginal masculinity, see especially ANANYA ROY, CITY REQUIEM, CALCUTTA: GENDER AND THE POLITICS OF POVERTY, GLOBALIZATION AND COMMUNITY: VOL. 10 (2003).

<sup>20</sup> Name disguised.

about *dunombori* (fraudulence). He acknowledges that increasing economic pressures are brought to bear on the man of today, because of which he has no choice but to cheat. Upper classes have a higher propensity towards *dunombori*, he believes. He laments the loosening of social governance structures – because of which people are able to give expression to their base instincts. There has been a transition from *manobik* (human) to *jantrik* (technological), he says. Similarly, he disapproves of the free market threatening Indian goods in its own market. The remedy, he thinks, lies in control and monitoring of both society and economy. Consumerism is responsible for creating new desires, and blinding the valuable sensibilities of men. As I am about to leave, he says *kichhu korte hobe, noile shob dhongsbo boye jaabe* (something will have to be done, or else all will be destroyed). The fear of the loss of something sacred drives his intellectual endeavour. Mohammed is confident, even in the summer of 2010, that the Left Front will not be thrown out of power in the coming Assembly elections (contrary to all political speculation) – the Left Front is a plant borne out of seed, while the Trinamool is one growing of a stem cutting, he says.

The *faults of the Left Front* form the focus of most talk of politics in West Bengal at this time. But I argue that the analysis of the career of the Left Front is only the *expressive form* that is assumed for political sentiments of varying alignments and origins to circulate in the public spheres of West Bengal. The deep entrenchment of the edifices of the Left Front government in social interstices, for over three decades, has yielded an ethos of speaking and through the lens of ‘politics’ among common people. Political subjects come to express dream, fear, aspiration, frustration, disgust and anger of varied origin in the language they have been handed down over the years, through the party-state. But it would be naïve, even ahistorical to say that a sensibility developed only with the installation of a government. The unhappy consciousness of the lettered Bengali *bhdroloke* (prosperous, well-educated people, typically Bengalis, regarded as members of a social class) is said to have crystallized along the making of his urban, loyalist self as a petty clerk in colonial bureaucracy – with little hope of material uplift, and yet burdened with the apparatus of letters with which to decipher and express the ‘unhappy consciousness’.<sup>21</sup> It is an uncanny continuity that the ‘unhappy consciousness’ has maintained with citizenry of West Bengal (beyond the circles of metropolitan privilege) who have repeatedly found the political arena to be the only outlet in which to enact the anxious, modern stance of public-spiritedness and reflexivity built on an old familiarity

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<sup>21</sup> SUDIPTA KAVIRAJ, *THE UNHAPPY CONSCIOUSNESS: BANKIMCHANDRA CHATTOPADHYAY AND THE FORMATION OF NATIONALIST DISCOURSE IN INDIA* (1995).

with the lettered worlds. Thus, the *bhodroloke* found in nationalist politics, an arena in which to express the tragedy of agrarian loss, urban anxiety and ambivalent reactions to colonial modernity.<sup>22</sup> More than a century later, Mohammed is concerned about the spread of *dunombori* among people in this time, as he expresses his anxiety about the very urgent material troubles of his world, especially in the backdrop of imminent regime change.

A cacophony about ‘the left’ and the various crises brewing around it can be heard in tea-stalls, newspapers, living rooms and bus stops. Alongside, one hears the suffocation of being entrapped in a regime, and a much longer, multi-strand history of publicly arguing with State, on account of non-fulfillment of a promise to the collective. The familiar routine of speaking complaints shrouds the more urgent desperation of this moment. A citizenry watches the wider nation-state from a political and economic abyss— often speaking out for better jobs and roads, for a private upliftment from middle-class drudgery— but in a socialist idiom of revolutionary struggle. Hence, Mohammed’s disgruntlement about the state of abyss that he finds his immediate surroundings in a peri-urban Howrah neighbourhood to be in, finds the old route of complaint about a current state of decay in State and society. Mohammed speaks as a dreamer for the collective future, a narrator of a collective past, and almost necessarily, never an individual node of demand for goods and services.

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A young Maoist, Manoj, in an interview to the national English daily, *The Times of India*, around the time of the Lalgarh Maoist blockade in 2009, says:<sup>23</sup>

*“I was just 18 at the time. I was in class XII at the local school. But, I too joined in protests against the police. Within days, the police filed a case against me, my father and brother. They accused all of us of working for the Peoples’ War Group (PWG). We had nothing to do with the PWG. Our family has always supported the Congress party. In 1998, when Mamata Banerjee formed the Trinamool Congress (TMC), we switched loyalty to her.*

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<sup>22</sup> PARTHA CHATTERJEE, *THE NATION AND ITS FRAGMENTS: COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL HISTORIES* (1993); PARTHA CHATTERJEE, *THE PRESENT HISTORY OF WEST BENGAL: ESSAYS IN POLITICAL CRITICISM* (1997); DIPESU CHAKRABARTY, *PROVINCIALIZING EUROPE: POSTCOLONIAL THOUGHT AND HISTORICAL DIFFERENCE* (2000); TITHI BHATTACHARYA, *THE SENTINELS OF CULTURE: CLASS, EDUCATION, AND THE COLONIAL INTELLECTUAL IN BENGAL: 1848-1885* (2005).

<sup>23</sup> Sukumar Mahato, *We Will Spread this Fire, Says the Maoist from Lalgarh*, *THE TIMES OF INDIA*, June 29, 2009, available at [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2009-06-21/special-report/28156377\\_1\\_lalgarh-pwg-west-midnapore](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2009-06-21/special-report/28156377_1_lalgarh-pwg-west-midnapore).



*One day, police jeeps rolled into our village, picked up people from their houses, bundled everyone into their vehicles and dumped all of us into the Midnapore jail. That was where I first met Maoist leader Sushil Roy. I found the Maoist ideology very appealing. Roy asked me to join the Maoists so that I could help the poor. I liked his ideas. Then I met two PWG leaders in prison. And I realised that neither Congress nor the TMC can stop the CPM's terror. I also realised that under CPM rule, we had lost the right to speak up. It was time to take a stand and speak up."*

Manoj, the young Maoist, speaks of his resentment against the bully party-state, whose continued harassment coupled with lack of delivery of services has fueled his decision to switch loyalties first to Mamata Banerjee, the leader of the TMC, and later, significantly, to the Maoists. In the long summer of 2009, the Lalgarh/Shalboni tribal belt in the West Medinipur district was captured by the Maoists (an outfit known as People's Committee Against Police Atrocities led by Kishenji Mahato), stopping all State agents (including police) from entering the region and using human chains of women and children to stop the State's inroad. The inability of the Left Front to tackle the situation invited central censure and the dispatch of Central forces to break the blockade.<sup>24</sup> The Maoist 'episode' of 2009 and its subsequent chapters, not only resurrected the non-electoral left on the political map of West Bengal (their earlier presence having been recorded through the Naxalbari uprising of 1969 and the Naxal movement of the early 1970s), but also created an additional pocket of Left- opposition – the far left.<sup>25</sup> In the public domain, the Left Front was being decried for not delivering goods of social security according to its socialist promises (jobs, agro-marketing, education, health), not being able to bring in the neo-liberal markers of growth with much success, unleashing violence when cornered, and now facing 'tribal' rejection and Maoist opposition.

At around the same time, an older faction of the 'far left' criticises the Maoists strongly for inflicting violence on poor rural citizenry, and calls for a move closer to socialism within democratic frameworks. Santosh Rana, the General-Secretary of the Provincial Central Committee,

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<sup>24</sup> K.P.S. Gill, *Crack Tactics, Tackle Maoists*, THE TELEGRAPH, June 22, 2009, [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1090704/jsp/frontpage/story\\_11195165.jsp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1090704/jsp/frontpage/story_11195165.jsp).

<sup>25</sup> The Far Left factions are supposed to be the political vehicles expressing the resentment of 'tribal' populations who are completely at the margins of the focus of attention of the developmental state. See Jaideep Mazumdar, *The Marxists' Private Army*, OPEN MAG., November 6, 2010, <http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/nation/the-marxists-private-army>; Sudeep Chakravarti, *Pursuit of Democracy by Dare*, OPEN MAG., January 15, 2011, <http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/voices/pursuit-of-democracy-by-dare>.

Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), writes in a publication of his party, in the context of Lalgarh and other episodes of violence in the past two years, for which the Maoists were responsible:<sup>26</sup>

*“This indiscriminate butchering of CPM and other political party workers is totally unacceptable. Kisenji claimed that old feudalism is extinct in Bengal and the CPM rank and file now represent the feudal class. This is ridiculous. Majority of CPM party members in Bengal belong to poor and toiling people by their class background. It is dangerous to declare them as class enemies on the basis of their political allegiance. It has no relation with Marxism- Leninism and Mao Tse-tung thought but with Fascism. If this Fascist politics wins in Lalgarh, the future of democratic movement will be doomed. We strongly believe that political differences cannot be sorted out by killing the political rivals or evicting them from their home. If we want to fight against the corruption, arrogance and nepotism of the CPM leaders and Panchayat functionaries, their killing can’t be the solution.”*

Rana’s faith in the democratic method of public persuasion and argument with the State has strengthened in recent years, despite him being a renowned participant of the earlier iteration of the ‘far left’ movement in West Bengal – the Naxalbari movement of the 1969. In an interview to me, in the summer of 2010, Rana expressed disillusionment with true communism. He sees democratic transformation alongside the unfolding of the capitalist project a useful way of bringing in socialism without one-party system. He expresses strong contempt for middle-class Bengalis and left intelligentsia – saying that they are all implicated in the business of appropriating the highest share of the social product.

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In the atmosphere of struggle for recovery of Left dignity in public discourse, *Bortoman*, a left-leaning Bengali daily writes:<sup>27</sup> “...edinei mohakorone montrishobhar core committee-r boithhoke montrider-o ‘do it now’ slogan shuniychhen mukkebo montri...”. Translated: “...on the same day, at the secretariat, the Chief Minister sounded the slogan ‘do it now’ to his ministers...”.

The description of the Chief Minister’s internal stock-taking and inspiring his ministers to take on the challenge of the moment by the slogan ‘do it now’, appears in the news piece, as a

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<sup>26</sup> Biswajit Roy, *Red Resurgence: Interview with Santosh Rana*, 607 SEMINAR (March 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Correspondent, *Momotar Mokabilay Moriya Buddhodeb*, BORTOMAN, May 29, 2009.

direct counter to the sharp criticisms from the opposing newspapers. *Ajkal*,<sup>28</sup> another Left-leaning Bengali daily, on the same day, reports that the Chief Minister has asked all ministers to send him a ‘note’ by June 7, conveying their work plan across the next two years. *Anondo Bajar Potrika* (ABP), on the same day, makes fun of the flurry of activity in the Secretariat, saying that the Chief Minister is trying to arrange for ‘damage control’ before the state elections of 2011. Shyamalendu Mitra in ABP says:<sup>29</sup>

“*Bostuto, mukkeho montrir note-e ‘obhutopurbo’ kono porikolponar kothba bola boyni. Proshashone ‘shocchota o drutota’ anar slogan diyei aager duti bidhan shobha nirbachon-e shaphollo peyechhilo bam front. Aemonki, 2006-er bidhanshobha vote-er pore goto teen bochhore je shob prostab bam front-er ondore ekadbik bar eshechhe abong birodhirao ja niye shorob hoyechhe, shei kbetrogulikei shunirdishto chehara deoar cheshta boyechhe ei ‘note-e’. Birodhi shibir jake akhya dichhe, ‘notun botole purono maud’.*”

Translated:

“*Practically, in the Chief Minister’s note, there is nothing that has not been on their agenda before. For the past two elections, they have successfully used the ‘transparency and efficiency’ card. In fact, this note consists of versions of all points that were brought up after the 2006 elections, and has spoken about their implementation. The opposition explains this ‘note’ as ‘old wine in a new bottle’.*”

The protagonist, in these news clippings, is Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, the Chief Minister of the state. In *Ajkal*, he is a figure of ridicule – trying to carry out ‘damage control’, while in the *Bortoman*’s sympathetic piece, he is shown as a ‘man of action’ trying to get his cabinet in order. When Bhattacharya first assumed office, he spoke the language of ‘kneejerk reactions’, the need to jolt the State out of its contemporary reverie, and enter into a robust conversation with larger economic forces. He was meant to be a boost for the defeatism of the Bengali middle-classes who aspired to lifestyles of Mumbai and Bengaluru, and blamed the State’s lethargy for their own economic backwardness in the race toward ‘progress’.

These snippets from media outcries for and against the Left Front, and evidently its last hours in power, form a crucial part of the theatre of ‘the left’ in the contemporary moment. ‘The left’ encompasses the range of electoral parties that stand by a communist/socialist agenda of

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<sup>28</sup> Correspondent, *Agami Dubochhorer Kormoshuchi Mukkeho Montrike June-ei Janiye Deben Montrira*, *AJKAL*, May 29, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Shyamalendu Mitra, *Jomite Rash Tene Jomi Udbharer Cheshtay Buddhodeb*, *ANONDO BAJAR POTRIKA*, June 29, 2009.

whatever hue as well as intelligentsia who have sympathies with such parties or with a general socialist project tailored for post-colonial India, constantly negotiating a controversial country-cousin – the violent ‘far left’. The rise and fall of the Left Front is remembered, analysed, fought over, memberships within and without are re-organised in anticipation of a future with different gradations of political distance from its career. The extreme politics of the Maoist factions is measured in their outrageous deviation from ‘the left’ rulebook whereas the performance of Buddhadeb Bhattacharya’s cabinet is measured on the parameters of their ability or failure in performing the correct version of ‘the left’ mandate. Rana straddles a corridor of ‘the left’ measuring the pros and cons of locating at varying distances from electoral, participatory democratic theatre. The opponent Trinamool Congress spews out the slogan of ‘*ma, mati, manush*’ (mother, soil, human) substituting a sterilised, secular ‘left’ language with pristinenationalist words of community-building, nation-making and confidence-restoration. Mamata Banerjee, the leader of the Trinamool party, avows new jobs –beginning in the railways sector where she has influence, at the moment, being a minister of state at the Parliament in the railway ministry – and makes gestures towards re-awakening the railway-wagon-manufacturing Burn Standard Co., in Shibpur, from its decadent ‘sick industry’ status.<sup>30</sup> Many poor youth in Kolkata speak of having been offered railway jobs for the price of joining the Trinamool cadre. An old ‘left’ strategy of harnessing youthful expectation and economic anxiety is re-applied.

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Tanika and Sumit Sarkar write,<sup>31</sup> in the days following Maoist blockade in West Midnapore district:

*“Post-election West Bengal is, indeed, a gloomy, even alarming place. With the first ever defeat of the CPI (M) after decades of virtually one-party rule, leftists all over India had hoped to see the beginnings of a new and democratic political culture. Especially after Singur, Nandigram and multiple other movements of resistance have shown how much popular defiance can accomplish even against the combined might of an entrenched State power, multinational corporates and an autocratic party. Instead, we now see a politics of reprisals: CPI (M) political practice seems to have left an indelible mark on all organized politics in the state.”*

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<sup>30</sup> Jayanta Roychoudhury, *Bid to Revive Burn Standard*, THE TELEGRAPH, June 1, 2009, [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1090601/jsp/business/story\\_11046840.jsp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1090601/jsp/business/story_11046840.jsp).

<sup>31</sup> Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, *Notes on a Dying People*, 44(26/27) ECON. & POL. WKLY 10, 10-14 (2009).

The Sarkars applaud the losses suffered by the CPI (M) as an aftermath of the pitiable inaction it showed during the Singur-Nandigram crises. They see this as a point of rupture in the history of the electoral left, a moment for configuration of a new left politics in India and hope for a more democratic one. Three decades of party-capture seems to have left an indelible mark on the political landscape of the state, which they fear will chip away at a more glorious future of the left and produce more reprisals, which are counter-productive. The Sarkars are renowned Marxist historians who gave up their Communist Party memberships at the time of the Nandigram violence. The CPI (M)'s bad record in governance, hence, not just calls for decrying them in criticism and in electoral politics, but a re-affirmation of faith in the pure 'left'.

Prabhat Patnaik continues to defend the party-state as he writes that despite its passing phase of naiveté around adopting principles of neo-liberalism, the CPI(M) and its left allies are the only modernist political faction in India and hence, a useful bulwark against the burgeoning Hindu right.<sup>32</sup> These are some instances in the past decade, of the discussions and critiques of the party-centered 'left' within the quarters of the intelligentsia that bears direct political or intellectual affinity for socialist agendas within the Indian State. Patnaik too, a renowned left-leaning economist, has devoted much of his work to critiques of economic reforms that developing countries undergo in the wake of liberalization – especially, structural adjustment that struck roots in India through the reforms of 1991. The turbulent theatre of West Bengal is nested in this constellation of political theatres. Many things fold into the old and familiar tarpaulin – 'the left'. A political culture emerges out of everyday routines of making vocal complaints about un-kept promises from the governmental establishment – most often about price rises and other uncomfortable turns in policy. These are found in spoken words at rallies and meetings, on graffiti on walls, on posters and pamphlets, in *chai*-stall chitchat. Most often, the component of a disagreement with government that might it *socialist* is not easily recognizable. Often, these are cathartic words – spelling out a familiar and comfortable terrain of becoming visible, vocal political actors by *speaking criticism*. Patnaik's affirmation of the Communist establishment as an attempt to salvage the political reputation of 'the left' (the nation-wide Communist party system, the intellectual left as also a 'left' ethos, one supposes) after the recent spate of controversies that it has been confronted with, especially in West Bengal, seem reflective of an intellectual anxiety about the

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<sup>32</sup> Prabhat Patnaik, *Dial M for Modernity*, THE TELEGRAPH, September 16, 2010, [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1100916/jsp/opinion/story\\_12935621.jsp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1100916/jsp/opinion/story_12935621.jsp).

purpose of political criticism and commentary in the post-colony. Empire's liberalism refracts through the postcolonial distributive lens to form this dispenser of 'good politics' – 'the left'.

In the next section, I try to extend the historical dotted line to show that the historical sediment from which the currents argument with 'the left' have emerged in recent years, emanate from a century of makings of political landscapes and actors.

## II. THE HISTORY

The incidents of the Left Front party-state's active solicitation of investor-capital to promote big industry met with criticism from wider civil society and leftist intelligentsia (as is clear from the criticism of the Sarkars). In many utterances of critique of the regime, in the months following the Singur and Nandigram incidents of sabotage of the projects and consequent violence, the Left Front's deep and wide network of patronage and practices of everyday violence was spoken of. The peculiar character of the inter-penetration of society and party in the rural hinterland of West Bengal has been described by Bhattacharyya<sup>33</sup> as 'party society' – an improvisation on Chatterjee's 'political society'.<sup>34</sup> I find it necessary, here, to refer to the well-documented agrarian history of post-independence West Bengal that readied the stage for the Left Front's long reign.

### 1. *Agrarian Reform and Political Cache*

West Bengal, the Indian share of the colonial state of Bengal, was sliced between India and Pakistan (the eastern slice became East Pakistan that broke away from Pakistan in 1971 to constitute Bangladesh) in 1947. In the earlier half of the twentieth century, there grew a new grade of agrarian power elite – from among middle-peasants (those whose tenancy rights were newly consolidated) as the landowning classes slowly abandoned their positions of power in the countryside for new avenues of power and influence in the city.<sup>35</sup> Joya Chatterji details the struggles of the early Congress governments of the 50s and the 60s in newly partitioned West Bengal<sup>36</sup> – having to maintain popular government through communal riots, influx of refugees, famines and a

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<sup>33</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharya, *Of Control and Factions: The Changing 'Party Society' in Rural West Bengal*, 44(9) ECON. & POL. WKLY 59-69 (2009).

<sup>34</sup> PARTHA CHATTERJEE, *THE POLITICS OF THE GOVERNED: REFLECTIONS ON POPULAR POLITICS IN MOST OF THE WORLD*, LEONARD HASTINGS SCHOFF MEMORIAL LECTURES (2004).

<sup>35</sup> PARTHA CHATTERJEE, *BENGAL 1920-47: THE LAND QUESTION* (1984).

<sup>36</sup> JOYA CHATTERJI, *THE SPOILS OF PARTITION: BENGAL AND INDIA 1947-1967* (2007).

breakdown industrial and trade networks in around Calcutta. Chatterji's account shows a composite anarchy brought about by central step-motherliness and the elite Bengali gentry floundering in the business of actually carrying out governance according to the politics it had been spouting in the pre-Independence time, not having perfected the role of a 'political class'.<sup>37</sup> An alliance of left-leaning parties grew through the 60s, taking advantage of refugee despondency and the repression of the Congress-led state governments of unruly elements who posed threats to its own political stability. The Communists had shared power, in the State, under the title United Front in the 1960s (1967 and 1969). The early years of Indian independence saw a continuing tussle between the Communist factions over the question of accepting the roles accorded to political parties by parliamentary democracy. As the Communist Party of India (CPI) went towards an active participation in electoral democracy and parliamentarianism, the CPI (M) found itself at the other end – the split between CPI and CPI (M) became official in 1964. It was in 1969, with the Naxalbari movement, with the adoption of the revolutionary stance of the socialist movement by Charu Mazumdar and Kanu Sanyal in the tea estate region of northern Bengal, under the banner of the Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) the CPI (ML), that the divide between the electoral and non-electoral factions of the 'left' ['electoral' left primarily encompassing CPI (M) in West Bengal and the CPI with a strong presence in Kerala– both participating in electoral politics at the parliamentary level as well at the state level] was explicit. The CPI (M) was now the dominant electoral actor among the socialist parties in West Bengal.

The 'radical left' continued to argue for revolution amongst peasant communities for effective control over their agricultural yield and the market that was going to buy their yield, through land reform program. The Naxalbari movement, originating in tea plantations of the Dooars in north Bengal, spread across many parts, and was met with brutal State repression under the Congress government of Siddhartha Shankar Ray. It is pertinent to mention that earlier iterations of the land reform program in the 1940s in the form of the Tehbhaga movement had argued for the landlord's share of the yield to not exceed one-third; and the efforts of land revenue minister Hare Krishna Konar's at recording names of sharecroppers in the late 1960s. The Left Front's program, of tenure reform, known as *Operation Barga*, was overseen by Benoy Choudhury in 1977. Through an extensive program of recording of names of sharecroppers or *bargas* (traditionally, subjects of exploitation by absentee landlords who lived in cities and hired labour to

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

farm their lands) *on the fields* (rather than the earlier practice of recording in bureaucratic offices, where the muscle-power of landlords could be deployed more easily) and the strengthening of the peasant's political say in the village, the Left Front built its deep and widespread legitimacy in rural West Bengal. Ronald Herring remarks that *Operation Barga* was an initiative of *tenure reform* and not *land reform* in the sense that it was being talked of in the wake of the Nehruvian socialist initiative or later in the Indira Gandhi 'Eradicate Poverty' era.<sup>38</sup>

The limited tenure reform earns the governing regime sufficient legitimacy for performing their anti-landowner stance, without disturbing the structure of rural property relations too much. It has short-term negative impact of dis-embedding the tenant as an 'equal' opponent (while being a weaker one in terms of social hierarchies in the rural society) in a formal legal battle, bringing hostility and violence directly to the door of the tenant, shrinks the sharecropper base by freezing the number of tenants that there can be over time, and dries up social security guarantees from landowners that had been forthcoming in the pre-reform milieu.<sup>39</sup> It has the impact of creating a middle peasant class, over time, from among those who worked the bureaucracies effectively enough to secure their control over land and inputs.<sup>40</sup> These sections have the potential to progress towards political power in the region creating a new grade of political leadership. Tenure reform requires constant intervention and regulation to ensure its implementation on the ground, for which the reforming regime needs a local political elite. The features of not directly dispossessing older owners, while creating a new base of political loyalty from amongst peasants, makes tenure reform attractive for a State/regime looking for legitimacy as a polity that espouses justice and equity. *Operation Barga* was the highlight of the rise of the CPI (M) in a coalition of left-leaning local parties called the Left Front that contributed to the gain and maintenance of their control over the electoral majority in the state consistently since 1977.<sup>41</sup> The communist coalition government of West Bengal (known as the Left Front), built on agrarian reforms and rural empowerment programs (beginning with *Operation Barga* on sharecropper tenure security in 1977 and subsequent

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<sup>38</sup> RONALD HERRING, *LAND TO THE TILLER: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF AGRARIAN REFORM IN SOUTH ASIA* 11 (1983).

<sup>39</sup> ATUL KOHLI, *THE STATE AND POVERTY IN INDIA: THE POLITICS OF REFORM*, (1987); HERRING, *supra* note 38, 48.

<sup>40</sup> HERRING, *supra* note 38, 49.

<sup>41</sup> ARILD E. RUUD, *POETICS OF VILLAGE POLITICS: THE MAKING OF WEST BENGAL'S RURAL COMMUNISM* (2003); Arild E. Ruud, *Land and Power: The Marxists' Conquest of Rural West Bengal*, 28(2) MOD. ASIAN STUD. 357, 357-80 (1994).



state investment in Panchayats).<sup>42</sup> The creation of a new political capital around the championing of the rights of the hitherto subjugated sharecropper is widely perceptible on writings recording *Operation Barga* in the late 1970s. The expectations from *Operation Barga* are explicit in Pradip Bhowmick's preface to his study on land reforms in West Bengal:<sup>43</sup>

*"Land reform is not only a reform of the way land is held, but just as much reform of the man who tills the land. Land has a social significance which goes beyond the purely economic advantages it offers it is a source of prestige and social identity and not merely a means of livelihood. Land ownership and tenure may actually define social status; the class structure may be so rigid that social mobility is virtually impossible. It is accepted fact that rural poor cannot raise their productivity and income unless they have proper access to land and complimentary resources."*

The expectations out of *Operation Barga* were poverty alleviation as well as furthering of modernist state-aspiration of making agriculture more productive and advanced.<sup>44</sup> Chakraborti et al.'s study in Burdwan (a district in West Bengal, sporting one of the highest agricultural yields) to assess the effectiveness of land reform is based on the premise that rural citizenry were in some degree ought to be pushed towards the project of modernity (education, urbanisation, modern employment, leaving behind caste system, etc.) by being subjected to land reform. Through the 1980s, there arose in West Bengal, a grade of rural elite of mid-level peasants who affirmed loyalty to the party-state, and found prominence and affluence through participation in politics mediated through the party.

Criticisms of *Operation Barga* take the form of inadequate implementation, lack of integration with other poverty alleviation schemes, inadequate materialising the claim of 'growth with distributive justice' that Kohli expects developmental-capitalist states to assume. This picture is complicated by the micro-politics of performing reform or change in the form of conflicts

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<sup>42</sup> KOHLI, *supra* note 39; D. Bandyopadhyay, *Land Reform in West Bengal: Remembering Hare Krishna Konar and Benoy Choudhury*, 35(21/22) ECON. & POL. WKLY 1795, 1795-97 (2000); D. Bandyopadhyay, *Tebhaga Movement in Bengal: A Retrospect*, 36(41) ECON. & POL. WKLY 3901, 3901-907 (2001); D. Bandyopadhyay, *Land Reforms and Agriculture: The West Bengal Experience*, 38(9) ECON. & POL. WKLY 879, 879-84 (2003).

<sup>43</sup> PRADIP BHOWMICK, *LAND REFORM AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE STATE OF WEST BENGAL* (2001).

<sup>44</sup> ANIL K. CHAKRABORTI, APURBA K. MUKHOPADHYAY AND DEBESHI ROY, *NON-LAND INPUTS IN LAND REFORMS: THE SCENARIO OF A WEST BENGAL DISTRICT* 6 (SIPRD, 1999).

between the parties within the Left Front that come into conflict leading to bloody battles often.<sup>45</sup> Each contesting faction – the RSP, the CPI or the CPM – had its pet constituency represented by a particular bracket of agrarian stakeholder such as the agricultural labourer or the sharecropper and were twisting the principles of *Operation Barga* so as not to completely alienate some landed gentry that they were closer to. Many small peasants, owning more than 2.5 acre plots, found themselves in a disadvantageous position as they were ostracised or persecuted by CPI (M) party cadres.<sup>46</sup>

The political currency of ‘land reform’ that the Left Front collected in the early years of its rule is evident from the strong faith in the policy logic of ‘land reform’ in the commentary on whether or not the Left Front did it right. Nripen Bandyopadhyaya charts out the political significance of Operation Barga at the occasion of the government’s seminar commemorating the completion of 125 years of the Santhal rebellion of 1855, as the event that had brought redress to the indigenous community from centuries of economic exploitation by moneylenders, landowners and the British establishment, as well as ritual subordination within mainstream Hindu society.<sup>47</sup> Various state-aligned intellectual voices seem to resonate the view that the century-long organic struggle and dissent of the indigenous peasant has now found (from the late 1970s onwards) security and support in the form of a peasant-friendly government.<sup>48</sup> From these writings of left-aligned intellectuals and technocrats, it is clear that the motif of the ‘agrarian’ had come to stay in politics in West Bengal, the afterlife of which we see in the events of recent years around state-corporation-liaisons around acquisition of agrarian land.

## 2. *The Rise of the Notable*

In the months following the Nandigram episode, the Left Front appeared exposed in all its manoeuvres of three decades. These *manoeuvres* narrate the Left Front as cruelly misleading and entrapping marginal and poor youth with empty political energy, and no real avenue towards progress and economic improvement. But three decades of the party-state and the consequent planting of cultures of clientelism in the political landscape of West Bengal, I argue, are not the only possible unpacking of the social life of the Left Front regime that can be gleaned from

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<sup>45</sup> Asim Mukhopadhyay, *Operation Barga*, 14(37) ECON. & POL. WKLY 1566 (1979).

<sup>46</sup> *Id.*

<sup>47</sup> Nripen Bandyopadhyaya, ‘Operation Barga’ and Land Reforms Perspective in West Bengal: A Discursive Review, 16(25/16) ECON. & POL. WKLY A38 (1981).

<sup>48</sup> ARUN CHOUDHURY, SHOSHONE MUKTIR JONNO GORIBER SHONGRAM O BIRBITUMER UPOJATI SHOMAAJ (Land & Land Reforms Department ed., 1980).

ethnographic research in contemporary West Bengal. Mohammed frames his political criticism in the idiom of domestic value-systems –of youth’s allegiance to familial discipline having been ruined by structures of party masculinity. Mohammed expresses a sense of loss and tragedy at the state of affairs, perhaps an unqualified anger, but never at the thwarting of crass material ambition. His entrenchment in ‘leftness’ seems not only in the use of words to frame political frustration, but in the framing of the legitimate limits to citizens’ aspirations. As a citizen, he stands out in a wider canvas of burgeoning aspiration in the nation-state, especially in its leap towards high economic growth in the post-1991 era. Although he mentions the lack of enough information for rural and small town youth to access opportunities like standardised tests to get into the elite institutes of technological learning as the primary reason for youth frustration and unemployment in contemporary non-metropolitan West Bengal, Mohammed seems to stop short of calling it an unaddressed need that merits direct state attention towards supporting ambitions of youth. His frustrations with State and society were directed at the decay in human value-systems in the contemporary moment. Writing about Mohammed, I remember various histories of Indian nationalism in which the organisation of meetings, strikes, demonstrations, petitions emerges as a key site of production of political leadership. Sarkar speaks<sup>49</sup> of the ‘extremist’ insistence of inward-looking strategies in the Swadeshi program of the Extremist nationalists in the early twentieth century – especially, mechanisms and routines of self-strengthening, the enhancement of *atma-shakti*. Pandey<sup>50</sup> points out, as far back at the 1920s, the mobilization initiatives undertaken by the Congress to spread and deepen its influence among the rural and small town masses, which often included a wide network of social work and religious organisational structures like the Arya Samaj, workers’ unions, youth organisations. Bayly<sup>51</sup> historicises the growth of ‘urban notables’ who ‘came into politics’<sup>52</sup> through the concurrent spread of colonial urban governance institutions and the Congress mobilization networks in the towns of north India – especially Allahabad.

The various political factions (including the elite-leaning Congress, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, under the influence of Gandhian organisational vehicles) were effective in picking up agrarian grievances around droughts and taxes as key and effective methods of creating and

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<sup>49</sup> SUMIT SARKAR, *THE SWADESHI MOVEMENT IN BENGAL* (1973).

<sup>50</sup> GYANENDRA PANDEY, *THE ASCENDANCY OF THE CONGRESS IN NORTH INDIA 1926 – 1934* (1978).

<sup>51</sup> CHRISTOPHER A. BAYLY, *PATRONS AND POLITICS IN NORTHERN INDIA*. IN *LOCALITY, PROVINCE, AND NATION: ESSAYS ON INDIAN POLITICS, 1870 TO 1940* (John Gallagher ed., 1973); CHRISTOPHER A. BAYLY, *THE LOCAL ROOTS OF INDIAN POLITICS: ALLAHABAD, 1880-1920* (1975).

<sup>52</sup> BAYLY 1975, *supra* note 51, 4.

sustaining nationalist enthusiasm. In the post-colonial Nehruvian phase of nation-building, these vessels of collective, local energy begin to feed into ‘reform’ politics. Movements for autonomy of language, security of land tenure, elimination of caste and religious discrimination populate the political discourse around a young and hopeful nation. At this point, the larger agenda of the expanding welfare state and those of the ‘electoral left’ (to start with, the CPI, and later the CPI (M)) are largely coincident. What marks ‘the left’ and its various political hues in West Bengal today, then, are repeated claims of an active involvement in agrarian distributive justice initiatives. I find the key speaker and author of such ‘left’ political claims and their social equivalent in the languages of *protibaad* to be a more recent version of Bayly’s *notable*.

### 3. *Re-tracing the Left*

Seedoo and Kanoo Manjee, the rebels of the Santhal uprising of 1855, were treated as historical protagonists by Ranajit Guha to form the foundations of what has come to be known as Subaltern Studies in South Asian historiography. Guha poses a very simple question in his epic work *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*:<sup>53</sup> how do we derive a clear understanding of whom and what the rebellion of peasants was directed towards? It was clearly not imagined, managed, coordinated by the elite nationalist organisational vehicles. It grew its own program, leaders and its own objects of destruction and protection. Multiple ethnic enclaves not necessarily tied by a communitarian bond, came together, avoided inflicting violence on members of each other and determined as their targets persons who represented the nexus of power that influenced their lives – colonial officials, landlords, moneylenders (*mahajans*). The enemy was not conceptualised in straightforward ideological categories such as State, corporate capital, landowner, bureaucrat and the upper-caste – but there was a clear and perceptible string running through the recognitions of who was a foe and who an ally. Guha celebrates this spontaneous rise of class-informed expression of dissent and an attempt to recuperate prestige and sovereignty on the part of the ‘marginal’ – the ‘subaltern’. There was no PWG or CPI (M) in this spontaneous rebellion of history, which was what made it worthy of a historian’s eye for picking out the little agents of history.

Many registers of organised resistance to agents of structural violence have emerged in the late colonial and post-colonial canvas of India. Resistance begins with finding the most urgent enemy – most often, a mediator of discrimination or violence on a weak multitude – usually part of

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<sup>53</sup> RANAJIT GUHA, *ELEMENTARY ASPECTS OF PEASANT INSURGENCY IN COLONIAL INDIA* (1983).

a perceptible liaison of the historically advantaged elite, the ambitious and aggrandising State and resource-hungry forces of capital. Such resistance adopts an ideology that promises an overhaul of structures of systemic violence and deprivation. Such ideology, in the inherited vocabulary that circulates in post-colonial India, runs across a spectrum with nationalism on one end and socialism on the other. We inherit a correct politics of empathy and outrage, an aggressive politics of one-upmanship, and an emotional politics of victimhood. All of these jumbled together often go by ‘left politics’ – the version of it that India has inherited. Its presence in coalition governments in Parliament, its resistance over big national issues like nuclear energy treaties and its squeamish relationship with its increasingly violent and widespread cousin, the ‘far left’, do not require much elaboration. Its distancing from the radical and violent ‘far left’ for its anti-state activities, and its fraught relations with principles of social democracy make its identity at best ambiguously ‘left’.<sup>54</sup> Considering the various histories of Indian mainstream politics, the idioms of resistance –sabotage, strikes, *gheraos*, rhetorical energy, spoils available to the leaderships that are closest to the edifices of the party are not the sole preserve of the left political establishment. Historical sediment has accumulated in the political discourse of and around ‘the left’ in West Bengal – party and beyond. This sediment screens public expressions of anxiety, disillusionment, anger and hope that the graffiti on the walls of Kolkata have been hosting in the past couple of years.

A *protibaadi* (protesting) citizen-subject becomes visible on the stage of ‘the left’ in an interpellation from State, while also individually visible to his/her original community.<sup>55</sup> The subject while mediating a collective grievance against a State machine, also makes himself or herself visible, jumping across a wider chasm of anonymity through which he would otherwise be seen as another grain in a sack of vulnerability and need, waiting for redress. The visible, individuated subject is hence, available as a channel of communication with the collective – a channel that is lined with resource or opportunity. Thus, access to the platform of leadership in speaking criticism, affords a visibility that would redress the gap in job-related information that Mohammed feared would never reach rural youth. Mohammed’s worries about this segregation of rural and small town West Bengal, from the channels of resource and opportunity that are concentrated in metropolitan

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<sup>54</sup> This bit about ‘resistance’ of the Guha genealogy and its current iterations in radical left politics has appeared in a small essay by me, titled *Rebels and Rulers*, on [www.mylaw.net](http://www.mylaw.net) (March 2011).

<sup>55</sup> On Tamil political oratory, see Bernard Bate, *The Ethics of Textuality: The Protestant Sermon and the Tamil Public Sphere*, in *ETHICAL LIFE IN SOUTH ASIA* (A. Pandian and D. Ali eds., 2010).

Kolkata and beyond, though, is expressed in a general sigh about the loss of good values amongst people, and the need for reinvigorated public-spiritedness.

### III. CONCLUSIONS

In West Bengal, a political culture and energy routinely directs its standardised, long-rehearsed dissent at the ‘event’ of the day, Nandigram or Lalgarh being the most recent ones. In the summers of 2009 and 2010, I found in political *talk* of West Bengal, expressions of expectation towards new bearers of opportunity – namely corporates – hence, the slogan – *Singur-e factory bolo na kaeno*. Expectations of personal upward mobility (more obviously, expectations of jobs) found sheepish ways into rhetoric of public-mindedness, collective welfare and *protest* – languages that the post-colonial socialist machine had taught its subjects to speak. Nevertheless, ‘the left’ ethos has coalesced on the domain of *ethics* in the public spheres of West Bengal, even as the real, political ‘left’ is faced with brickbats for straying from the correct path of left politics. It is ironic, hence, that the left-right binary is strongly invoked in the political public sphere (and in Kolkata at this time, the good-left-bad-left binary) in contemporary India, while a common ethos of a charismatic, parental leader speaking of a collective hurt, need and history continues to animate the political theatres on both ends of the spectrum. As political commentators debate over whether the time of the Left Front is over, or whether it will continue on its deathbed for a while, I show the case of publics and public spheres in West Bengal that invoke ‘the left’ and its current crises, in their articulation of frustration, aspiration and anxieties of the present time, especially in expressing the feeling of being in an abyss while the dynamic vehicles of the wider nation-state passes one by. Even as ‘the left’ finds not many novel things to *do*, it continues to fill the public domain in West Bengal with words and images that nourish a *protibaadi* self.

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