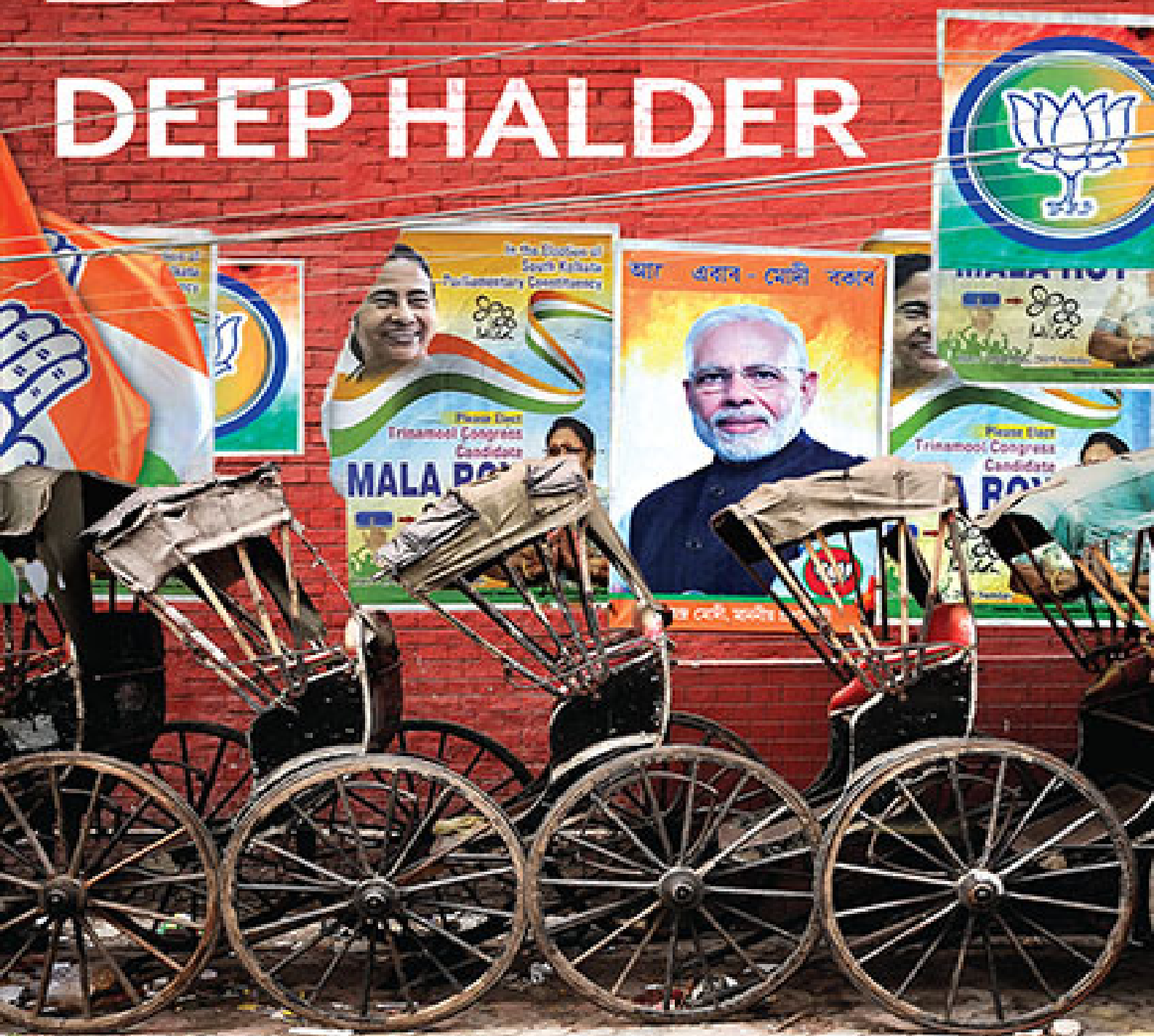


BENGAL

2021

AN ELECTION
DIARY

DEEP HALDER



BENGAL 2021

AN ELECTION DIARY

DEEP HALDER



HarperCollins Publishers India

To Ma
for the books and the reading gene

সাত কোটি সন্তানেরে, হে মুগ্ধ জননী,
রেখেছ বাঙালি করে – মানুষ কর নি।।

– ‘বঙ্গমাতা’, রবীন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুর

‘O dotting mother, your seventy million children
You have kept as Bengalis, but you haven’t made them
men.’

– ‘Bangamata’, Rabindranath Tagore

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Preface

Bengal 2021 is not the Bengal I left behind twenty years ago. In 2001, the year I moved to Delhi, few would have believed that the Left citadel would ever fall in Bengal. One of the Left Front's more palatable political slogans, meant to taunt Opposition leader Mamata Banerjee, over the years was '*Dekhe jaa Mamata, kar haat e khomota*' (Come and see, Mamata, in whose hands power rests). The rest are unprintable. That Mamata Banerjee could rise to power seemed impossible. But then, she did. With a war cry for 'Poriborton' (Change), Banerjee ('Didi' to followers) became Bengal's first woman chief minister in 2011, promising to better the lives of its people, with a government for '*Ma, Mati, Manush*' (Mother, Motherland, and the People).

The Left Front had ruled West Bengal for seven consecutive terms from 1977 to 2011, five with Jyoti Basu as Chief Minister and two under Buddhadeb Bhattacharya. And what was Mamata Banerjee's plank when she came to power? She replaced a regime that had unleashed a reign of political violence and terror from the massacre of thousands of Dalits in the Sunderbans' Marichjhapi island in 1978-79, barely a year after coming to power, right up to the killings and rapes in Nandigram, in East Midnapore, after a failed project to acquire land for a special economic zone in 2007. Mamata Banerjee herself was almost clobbered to death at a political rally on August 16, 1990, by CPM activist Lalu Alam.

But that was not the only thing Mamata Banerjee stood against. After coming to power, the Left Front government had launched Operation Barga, a land reform movement throughout rural West Bengal that gave sharecroppers legal protection against eviction by landlords, and entitled them to the due share of the produce. Ironically, it was the same farming community

that Left Front went to war with during the Nandigram agitation and later at Singur when the Buddhadeb Bhattacharya government wanted to give away multi-alluvial farm land to the Tatas to produce the world's cheapest car Nano. Mamata Banerjee stood with the farmers. Ratan Tata retreated to Sanand in Gujarat. And Buddhadeb Bhattacharya lost power in West Bengal.

West Bengal's wait for Poriborton was finally over. Even Lalu Alam, who was being tried by a Kolkata court for attempting to murder Banerjee, cheered her victory. In an interview to India Today on 17 May 2011, Alam said: 'I am elated that Mamata will become the chief minister. I'm innocent. I have been quiet for the last 20 years. It was the Left which targeted me.'

Thus began Mamata's reign.

Since 2011, every time I went back to Kolkata to meet my ageing parents, I wondered whether the old Kolkata was giving way to a new city and if my home state was changing for the better. Banerjee had promised she will transform Kolkata into London. She even erected a Big Ben, a 30-metre high replica at the LakeTown main road. The original is nearly three times taller. Her government also went on an overdrive to spruce up the old city with new lights, new flyovers and new names for old roads.

So did 'Poriborton' come?

Over the decade that Mamta Banerjee has ruled the state, this four-word question has been dissected on many news channels, in panel discussions, newspaper columns, op-ed pieces and neighbourhood addas, and has inspired analytical tomes. The 2021 Assembly elections will examine the question once again, during a crucial and unprecedented time and perhaps the elections during a pandemic year will give us a definitive answer.

It is not easy to read the mind of a voter. To read the mind of the Bengali voter is a tougher ask. When

Bengali cinema legend Soumitra Chatterjee died on 15 November 2020, the writer and political commentator Sandip Ghose tweeted: ‘Bengalis have always been bipolar – East Bengal–Mohun Bagan; Manik (Satyajit Ray)–Mrinal (Sen); Uttam Kumar–Soumitra Chatterjee. Uttam was the star – Soumitra the true thespian and quintessential Renaissance man. The last of the Mohicans. RIP #Soumitra Chatterjee.’

I agree with Ghose. Not just in their opinions on football teams and cinema, in their political views too Bengalis are bipolar – alternating between the Left and the Right ideologies. The Left, of course, has had a long history in West Bengal. Even the extreme Left, the Naxalites, who have rejected parliamentary democracy and picked up the gun against the state, have their origins in the small hamlet of Naxalbari in North Bengal. That is the reason why, in West Bengal and outside, the default image of the Bengali Bhadrakalok is that of a Leftist. Soumitra Chatterjee himself was a Leftist and wore his political colours on his sleeve, something Bengalis of a certain type did not hesitate to remind Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Twitter when he paid homage to the late actor.

And many would argue that Mamata Banerjee’s Ma, Mati, Manush brand of grassroots politics has been borrowed heavily from the Left’s playbook.

So, as Bengal readies for an epic battle in 2021, it is interesting to remember the bipolarity of the Bengali mind when it comes to politics. The rise of the Right did not happen overnight with the BJP winning for the first time, eighteen of the forty-two seats in West Bengal in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, touching an impressive double digit in Bengal for the first time. In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the saffron party had managed only two seats from the state.

As impressive as the poll performance was, the Right in Bengal goes back in time to the writings of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838–1894) to the life and

times of Syama Prasad Mookerjee, who founded the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, predecessor of the BJP, in 1951. These histories are not talked about often enough, but Bengal was once the fulcrum of Rightist intellectual thought in the country.

In this book, I have tried to examine the rise and spread of the Right in Bengal by speaking to a swathe of people—from those in the BJP headquarters in Delhi to Thakurnagar village near Bengal's border with Bangladesh, from the most prominent names in the Right-wing ecosystem on social media to faceless RSS functionaries on the ground (Chapter 7)—to debunk the myth that Rightist thought is not inherent to the Bengali mind.

There are three other factors that will play a big part in deciding who will rule West Bengal for the next five years. One of them is the question of Bengali identity itself. Does the BJP pose a threat to the modern-day Bengali's socio-cultural moorings? Is it an essentially non-Bengali party that pushes a somewhat North-Indian version of Hindu religiosity and nationalism at the expense of the Bengali version of secularism and internationalism? If the BJP comes to power in Bengal, will the Bengali be able to freely gorge on mutton biryani during Durga Pujo when Hindus in the north go vegetarian for Navaratri?

Intertwined with this question of Bengali identity is the second factor that I have tried to examine: caste. It is a misconception that 'there is no caste in Bengal'. Sure, unlike in some parts of India, you are not casually asked your caste by a stranger at a tea stall, but a cursory look at a matrimonial column in a Bengali daily newspaper will tell you that caste identity exists in Bengal. In fact, in my first book *Blood Island: An Oral History of the Marichjhapi Massacre*, survivors told me the Left Front government unleashed unspeakable horrors on them simply because they were Dalits, while Kolkata's genteel class looked the other way. In the chapter Chotolok versus Bhadraklok (Chapter 8), I examine

whether caste will play a prominent role in the 2021 elections in Bengal and whether the Sangh Parivar has deliberately moved away from the Bhadrakalok and towards the underclass to upstage Mamata Banerjee. Five of the ten Lok Sabha seats reserved for Scheduled Castes in Bengal went to the BJP in 2019, showing that the party has made big dents in the community's Trinamool support base. This even as Dalit writer-activist Manoranjan Byapari argues that Dalits are being fooled by the BJP: 'The Bhadrakalok used to hide caste in their heart and speak of the upliftment of the Dalit. Now, thanks to the Manuvadi politics practised openly by the BJP, they are showing off their sacred thread,' he tells me.

Religious identity is the other factor I have tried to examine as Bengal gears up for the Battle of 2021. Bengali superstar and Trinamool Congress MP Nusrat Jahan told me what many in Bengal like to hear and believe: Bengal is a truly secular state. Jahan herself is married to a Jain, takes active part in Hindu festivals, and blames the BJP and mainstream media for spreading communal hatred in the state. 'There are television anchors who call Maulvis to their shows every evening and help stereotype Muslims in a certain way. These Maulvis neither represent me nor my community,' she tells me.

But is that all there is to the Muslim question? Or is there some truth to the allegations that unchecked infiltration and politics of appeasement and radicalization have created pockets within Bengal that have become a national security issue? I try to find answers in Nusrat Jahan and the Muslim Question (Chapter 6)

There are other, more recent, issues that have wracked Bengal: the effects of Cyclone Amphan and allegations of misappropriation of relief funds by the Bengal government; the government's effectiveness, or lack of it, in its battle against the coronavirus pandemic; and its opposition to the Citizenship Amendment Bill

stood against which became an act, the CAA, on 12 December 2019.

‘In these times, personal is political. I have always worn my refugee origins on my sleeves. I am grateful and unflinchingly loyal to #India, my country of birth. I live, breathe and dream India. And I believe I have been a useful member of the nation’s citizenry. I back #CAB,’ veteran journalist Kanchan Gupta tweeted on 11 December 2019. Is Gupta’s view the view of other refugees too, and will that be a game changer in the Bengal elections? Or, will Banerjee’s brand of secularism convince the Bengali voter to punish the BJP for CAA?

Then there are the issues long debated by the argumentative Bengali, such as the alleged deterioration of law and order in the state, which some would say is far worse than during the Left Front’s time (Law and disorder, Chapter 9), prevalence of the Syndicate Raj, the aftermath of Singur and the question of jobs ... into these I have attempted a peek. Bengal 2021 will also be the battle of the brands: Brand Modi versus Brand Didi. While the Modi-Shah juggernaut is an unstoppable 24/7 election-winning machine, Mamata Banerjee is a relentless streetfighter who takes no prisoners.

But this may just be the toughest battle of her life so far. At the time of going to press, Trinammol Congress minister and Mamata Banerjee’s one-time aide Suwendu Adhikari had jumped ship. Mamata Banerjee made frantic efforts to stop Adhikari, who rebelled over the growing importance of her nephew Abhishek Banerjee in the party. Adhikari and nine other sitting MLAs joined the BJP. At a public rally in North Bengal, Mamata Banerjee in an impassioned appeal to voters, asked what did she do wrong to lose all seats in the 2019 Lok Sabha in the region. She will have to find the answers soon.

By the time this book will come out, there will be more heart burns, defections, turf wars and mud

throwing that would make this a Battle Royale and an extremely difficult election to call. I have not even tried.

Instead, for the book, I did what I do for a living. I stepped out of the restricted spaces that breed closed minds and conversed with a diverse set of people and recorded interviews, outside Kolkata and in it. In journalism, as in life, it helps to listen more, to opine less. The book encapsulates some of the most compelling conversations and arguments in the Bengali voter's mind on Election Year 2021.

1

Bengal Club, Bangal, Ghoti

MARCH 2020

Twenty-four years ago, I would have recoiled at the idea of two grown men meeting at 34, Chowringee Road over single malt and cigars, with a large swig of communist contempt. But twenty-four years is a long time. The skinny alleys of College Street where joints are passed and local whisky bottles cracked open, hemmed in by walls plastered with hammer-and-sickle posters, the stench of stale piss and gorom cha, and the beautiful lie of the Revolution hanging in the air, all seem to be from a very long time ago.

During these years, I have graduated, completed my masters programme and left Kolkata and the heady student politics of the Left, when Vietnam and Cuba were closer to one's heart than any Indian city, to pursue journalism. Carrying Kolkata with me, I have lived and worked in Delhi, Mumbai, Bhopal and come back to Delhi again, while Bengal has moved on from the hammer and the sickle to the twin flowers in grass, from the Left Front to Mamata Banerjee. Every time I have come back to Kolkata, I have seen the city change and wondered whether it is for the bad or worse.

So I meet my friend Mr M at the Bengal Club, the 'hub of arrogant imperialism during the high noon of the Empire', as Geoffrey Moorhouse described it in his book *Calcutta*. The city and the state may have changed, but the expansive white building in the Park Street area, founded in 1827 but allowing Indians in only since 1959, has safely guarded the ghosts of Calcutta's colonial past through Independence,

Naxalism and three decades of Leftist rule. With the strictest of rules even today, the Club gives membership to very few. Set up by a group of East India Company officials, the Bengal Club had as its first president Lt Col J Finch, military secretary to Lord Combermere, commander-in-chief of the East India Company's army and also the first patron of the club. Now Bengal Club is frequented by Mr M and other children of Macaulay's, the scotch-sipping elite – retired high court judges, big bureaucrats and businessmen, who exist in their own bubbles, ignoring the din outside.

Mr M is a large-hearted host, a man with fingers in many business pies, who could have settled in an old house overlooking a vast loch in Scotland, but chose to stay back in Kolkata. This evening, he insists I reduce him to 'M' since I want to interview him for a book on the mood of Bengal before the polls. 'Kolkata is no longer a safe place to shout out your political prejudices, especially if you are in business.' I would, in the course of my later interviews for the book, hear this line repeated often; people were scared of repercussions for speaking their mind, not fully unfounded if you have a business to run or a high-profile job to keep. There have been arrests in West Bengal for Facebook posts and harassment at the workplace for being vocal about politics, and the circle people have drawn around themselves of those they can open their minds to has become smaller and smaller.

We have settled down with our Glenlivet, the bearer having taken the order for fish fingers, after a quick tour of the library, my favourite place in the club. I complain to Mr M that I can't spot a copy of my first book *Blood Island* and ask whether the club's uppity members have deliberately kept the subalterns of Marichjhapi away from their Brown Sahib gaze. Mr M laughs his big laugh and says: 'Don't forget this club had hosted a talk on your book!'

Indeed it had, and Mr M and I return to the massacre at Marichjhapi, when thousands of Dalit refugees from

erstwhile East Pakistan died from starvation and police brutality because they dared to defy the government in West Bengal and settle down in an island in the Sunderbans in 1978, a year after the Left Front came to power in this eastern state from where the ‘unscrupulous Empire makers’ once cast their colonialist gaze on the rest of India.

In the thirty-four long years that the Left Front ruled Bengal, the ‘classless, casteless’ Left gaze shrank Bengal, Mr M tells me, biting into a juicy fish finger, with its massacres and mayhem and the killing of industry. There were other massacres, apart from the one at Marichjhapi, and Mr M remembers with a shudder the Bijon Setu killings when sixteen sadhus and a sadhvi belonging to the Ananda Marga sect were burnt alive at a bridge near Ballygunge in south Kolkata on 30 April 1982. The burnings happened in broad daylight, but no arrests were ever made. Repeated calls for a judicial investigation led to the appointment of a single-member judicial commission to investigate the killings as late as in 2012, a year after the Left Front lost power in West Bengal. Nothing has happened till date.

But it is the killing of industry that stings Mr M more, understandably, as he comes from a family that has never had to work for other people. ‘There was this industrialist, staring at bankruptcy due to frequent strikes at all his Calcutta factories organized by Leftist unions. He sought an appointment and went to meet chief minister Jyoti Basu at what was then the state secretariat, the Writers’ Building. Basu, the Bhadrakol Marxist, heard him out. Then told him to his face that capitalists were class enemies and the poor sod should expect no sympathy,’ Mr M tells me.

‘In communist Russia and China, economic development was a must. In India, communism came in through the politics of votes. Basu knew land reforms, Panchayati Raj and fanning of pro-labour sentiments would keep them in power. And painting the industrialist as the class enemy would cement their hold

on the state. They did just that. Sucked out the lifeblood of industry in the three decades they ruled this state.’

I remind Mr M that in the last Assembly polls in 2016, the Left Front won only 32 seats out of 294. The party has also lost power in Tripura, which it ruled for twenty-five years. It is only in power in Kerala, and it is highly unlikely it will make any headway in Bengal in 2021.

We should talk about Mamata Banerjee instead.

‘Tell me, how is she different? I would have preferred a Right-wing government, you know, for Bengal. Economically Right, that is. Left of Centre socially.’ So, he wants the BJP to form the next government in Bengal in 2021? ‘No! The BJP says maximum governance, minimum government. But where is the proof of that? Modi 1.0 has come and gone, we are into Modi 2.0 and the government is everywhere! I also cannot stomach the BJP’s stand on NRC and CAA. They have reduced the Muslim to a second-class citizen. That is very wrong.’

Who will he vote for then? Trinamool Congress again? Congress is not even a serious player in the state anymore. ‘Do you know the story behind this club’s crest?’ Mr M asks me instead. I shake my head. ‘The story goes that a cobra was discovered while workers were digging for the foundation of the building. Work stopped. A priest was brought in ... and after he offered milk to the snake, it quietly left. And the cobra became the club’s crest. An Indian belief became a European-only club’s identity.’

As I wonder about the significance of this story to my question on who Mr M would vote for in 2021, he says: ‘NOTA. I will vote for nobody. Nobody can change Bengal’s fate. Like the English adapted a local belief and made the cobra the crest of the Bengal Club, a political party that had hardly any presence in Bengal even a few years ago needs to know this state before trying to win it.’

And that would be the BJP, right?

Mr M smiles, says nothing. He then quietly adds, ‘West Bengal’s economy has been marked by a striking decline in industrial and manufacturing activity in the organized sector for almost five decades. Pick up the study done by the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, and you will see.

‘Bengal also has a debt problem. In 2016, Finance Minister Amit Mitra had said the state was in a “perfect debt trap”. In 1990, West Bengal’s ratio of debt to gross state domestic product (GSDP) was same as the national average, but in 2013, its debt-GSDP ratio was highest among the non-special-category states. At the end of March 2017, West Bengal had the second highest debt-GSDP ratio, at 33.8 per cent. As far as revenue deficit is concerned, West Bengal has secularly done worse than the average of non-special-category states,’ Mr M rattles on.

‘After presenting the state budget for 2019-20, Mitra had said the state’s public debt will reach over Rs 4.3 lakh crore – more than twice the sum it had inherited from the Left Front government.’

I tell Mr M that it’s too much data for me.

Outside, the sun has dipped and the sultry March day has given way to a pleasant evening. I call a taxi, a yellow Ambassador that seems to have leapt out of a kitschy Kolkata postcard, and give the cabbie an address for Kasba suburb.

84 Gouranga Sarani houses someone who could seem like the antithesis of Mr M.

Jyotirmoy Mandal smokes bidi, croons loudly and swears when I ask him if I need to keep his identity a secret in this book. ‘Kon shala ki korbe amar? (Which rascal will do me harm?),’ he hollers. ‘Ma, Mati, Manush, my foot! There is only one M: Mamata. What does Ma, Mati, Manush even mean? Arbitrary words strung together. Mamata has this penchant for coining

phrases that are best suited for jatra parties. Like her pet project, Biswa Bangla. Ridiculous coinage! And yet people cheer her on like fools!

Why is he so anti-Mamata? 'I wasn't. Despite her upper-caste surname Banerjee, she is a true subaltern. She rose from the dumps, worked among the people, gained their trust and finally dethroned the Left. 'But what has she done for people like us? Those who came from the other side of the border?'

Mandal is what you call in Bengal a Bangal; people whose roots are in East Bengal, which became East Pakistan and now Bangladesh, and were forced to migrate to West Bengal.

Mandal is also a Namasudra, a Dalit sub-caste. His immediate neighbours and also the larger Kasba and surrounding areas of south Kolkata are steeped in refugee history. Brick lane after brick lane bears testimony to the struggles of a people who came here as refugees and made the marshlands of south Kolkata their permanent address. The original inhabitants of the city, the Ghotis, who are clustered mostly in the north, often looked down on these settlers with smug derision. From food habits to pronunciation of Bengali words to support for rival football teams, there are sworn differences between Bangals and the Ghotis.

Unlike the Ghotis, the Bangals migrated to India. The lower castes among them like Mandal came in later and saw far more riots and rapes than the upper-caste Bangals who came in before them. But among the lower-caste migrants, as I would gradually come to know, the Citizenship Amendment Act has found some favour.

In popular discourse, in newspaper editorials and on Facebook posts, one may find opposition to CAA among Bengalis of the Left-liberal kind, but for many of the Namasudras this side of Bengal (the other side is now an independent country, Bangladesh), it is a step

that recognizes the struggles of the Hindus left behind in Bangladesh.

Mandal recalls the tortured history of his people who had stayed back in East Pakistan after Partition in the hope that Muslims would give them the dignity caste Hindus didn't. Instead, they faced a worse fate and many migrated to West Bengal. 'And it is those same Muslims whom the Mamata government is allowing inside West Bengal. People have a short memory, politicians shorter. Don't you remember when a political power was behind sending a man to kill Mamata? Beloved Didi has forgotten that and opened up our borders with Bangladesh to fatten her vote bank. I am happy the BJP has brought in the CAA. I support the CAA. The Namasudras left behind in Bangladesh are maimed, killed and converted to this day by Muslims in that country. Who will stand up for them? I want the BJP to seal Bengal's borders once and for all. No more infiltration. We have had enough!'

Gorom cha tastes funny after Glenlivet, but I finish it anyway and come out of the house with my head buzzing.

It is this digging up of the past that Dr Nazma Parveen detests. This practising doctor and army wife from Kolkata is vocal about the hate Muslims in India are subjected to on Twitter and off it. For her, West Bengal was that safe space where Muslims could live in peace. 'My religious identity never mattered to me. Originally, I hail from the Murshidabad district of West Bengal and my mother is from Birbhum district. So I know that not just in mainland Kolkata, but also in the interior districts, we never felt different in Bengal as Muslims. It is the same culture, language and rituals. Maybe the rest of the country has always been different. But Bengalis are a different people, they are liberal, they are educated, bigotry is not inherent in them. There is an amalgamation of Hindu and Muslim identities in Bengal that is beautiful.'

I tell Dr Nazma I have seen her take on hardline Muslim voices on Twitter as much as she does the hardline Hindu voices. ‘Why shouldn’t I? I would be a hypocrite if I didn’t criticize someone’s objectionable views simply because that person belongs to my community. I will also tell you this, Mamata Banerjee should not have appeased us. She is letting the BJP come in by her minority appeasement. As a community, Muslims are way behind, so talk about our education, jobs, and not silly optics. It creates space for the Hindu Right to exploit.’

But hasn’t the BJP already found a foothold in Bengal and isn’t Bengal society sharply polarized now? ‘Who are the BJP in Bengal? They are disgruntled cadre from the CPM and the Trinamool Congress. Even some of Bengal BJP’s top leaders are from these two parties. The BJP is not a natural-born party in Bengal. Bengalis are not like that. And I hope, despite what is happening in the rest of the country, Bengal remains BJP-free.’

Ujjainee Roy, a woman in her mid-twenties who stays in the Naktala neighbourhood in south Kolkata, is a features writer with a national daily and agrees with Dr Nazma: ‘Bengalis are not like that!’ Maybe because of the age difference between Ujjainee and Jyotirmoy Mandal or maybe because of her station in life, she shares none of Mandal’s Partition angst, even though she too is a Bangal.

In fact, voting didn’t involve a lot of decision making for the first few years of her adult life. ‘It was more of a statement. Even after the Left toppled from power in Bengal in 2011, I consistently voted for the CPI(M). The 2019 general elections was the first time when I seriously considered voting for the Trinamool Congress because I didn’t want the BJP to take over. Mamata Banerjee’s vicious anti-BJP stance has earned her legitimacy among the same crowd who had voted for years to keep her out of power, and she knows it too.’

‘Stopping the BJP in its tracks is a big-ticket item in Mamata Banerjee’s campaign, which was designed to make the voters think about the maths involved and not her own failings. But it’s a trick that may not work in the party’s favour in 2021,’ Ujjainee says.

When I speak to Ujjainee again after a severe cyclone hits Bengal, she tells me the TMC’s ineptitude in dealing with cyclone Amphan and the reprehensible lack of transparency about Covid-19 casualties in the state will cost them votes. But Ujjainee will still vote for Mamata Banerjee in 2021. ‘Voting in 2021 is solely about creating speed bumps for the BJP; so voting for TMC is majorly a form of deflection, and in no way a reflection of support.’

Unlike Ujjainee, ‘proud-to-be-followed-by-Narendra Modi’ Seemantini Bose is a vocal voice for the BJP on Twitter. Outside it, Seemantini is into digital marketing and a ‘concerned citizen’ from north Kolkata, where there are mostly Ghotis. The Ghoti–Bengal divide is a thing of the past now, and Seemantini tells me over the phone that it means nothing to her really. Part of her family had also stayed behind and worked in East Bengal, which is now another country. The divide that bothers her instead is the one that plays out relentlessly on social media between ‘the so-called liberals and Modi bhakts’ and what she feels is the tone deafness of the former to the socio-economic realities of Bengal.

She recalls a chance meeting with BJP’s Sunil Deodhar, months before the 2019 polls that brought Modi and the BJP back in power at the Centre. ‘I happened to be in a room with mostly Hindi-speaking, young RSS workers who had gathered to meet Deodhar. I had a certain image of the BJP and RSS in mind – that they are socially conservative, staunch vegetarians, not open to debate, etc. The first thing I noticed was Deodhar asking for non-vegetarian food. When a few eyebrows were raised in the room, Deodhar said he had travelled a long distance and needed protein. Also, his work in the northeast had made him develop a craving

for meat. He said when you work among people, you adapt their culture, their food habits, you become them to lead them to a better tomorrow. Those words changed my perception of the Sangh.

‘But there were bigger surprises for me. When a young RSS worker asked him about the date for Ram Mandir construction, Deodhar brushed it aside. He said that is for the top leaders of the party to decide. What that worker should instead focus on was the temple in his remote village in Bengal, where Dalits are not allowed. Work with them, he advised the worker, see to it that the discrimination ends, make them part of your family. There is no better way to serve your motherland.’

That meeting made Seemantini a vocal BJP supporter. Though, by her own admission, she had started veering towards the Right after years of ‘Left hypocrisy’. ‘I come from a family that voted Left. I have heard my father talk of Left’s lofty ideals since childhood. But as I grew up, I observed that in my own city there were two classes of citizens. One that follows the law and one that doesn’t. The bus I took to college daily was witness to a curious scene. Near Belgharia, men in skull caps and lungis would board the bus in hordes, misbehave with the conductor, never pay the fare, and nobody would dare to question them. As time went by I saw how easy it is to abuse Hindu gods, mock my religion ... but you question the impunity with which a certain section of Muslims behave in my city and you are immediately branded communal or a bhakt. Why this hypocrisy?’

Is Seemantini anti-Muslim?

‘The answer to that is a big no,’ she says, ‘but I am done saying politically correct things. If we are equal citizens, do not have different standards. I can speak of Bengal. Under the Left Front and now under Mamata Banerjee, Muslims have never been targeted or made to feel unsafe, which is a good thing. What is unacceptable is the rampant lawlessness that is allowed to some of

them for the sake of votes. Mamata herself has called them milch cows in a press conference. That is as derogatory as it comes and yet the BJP is made out to be the villain.'

So, will she vote for the BJP in 2021 to end minority appeasement in Bengal?

'Not just that. I have come to believe in Narendra Modi. I feel he keeps India's interests first. It is not that his government has made no mistakes, but there is an intent to change the country for the better. Bengal needs industry, jobs, restoration of law and order and a stop to illegal immigration. We have suffered the Left and now two terms of Mamata Banerjee. We need to give the BJP a chance in Bengal.'

But BJP in Bengal is a big ideological shift, I remind Seemantini. The Left never really left Bengal. Even as Mamata defeated the Left Front in the polls, her critics say her politics became 'Left of the Left'. So, bringing BJP in Bengal is like replacing the Communist Manifesto with the Bhagvad Gita. Has Bengal changed that much?

'It has,' she says. 'The ground has shifted. You will see in 2021.'

Three months later, there is a news flash on my phone. 'Kolkata man orders Communist Manifesto. Amazon delivers Bhagvad Gita.'

I call up Seemantini. She laughs.

2

Tollywood Trifurcated

MARCH 2020

The Roastery Coffee Shop in the Calcutta South India Club boasts 'India's finest handcrafted coffee'. It's 12 p.m., late for black coffee and breakfast, but Kolkata wakes up at noon on weekends, the Bengali film industry even later. That, though, may end soon for the stars who are now shining in the twin galaxies of Tollywood (today's pejorative term for the Bengali film industry, where Satyajit Ray once worked and made films that took Bengali cinema to the world) and politics. As campaigning for the 2021 Assembly elections draws near, one section of Tollywood will clash with another as Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress fights the BJP. On one side are the Tollywood superstars from the Trinamool Congress camp, most notably Ghatal MP Dev Adhikari, Jadavpur MP Mimi Chakraborty and MP from Basirhat constituency, Nusrat Jahan. On the other, in the BJP camp, are Roopa Ganguly, who played Draupadi in B.R. Chopra's hit television series *Mahabharat* in 1988 and is now a nominated MP, actress and MP from Hooghly constituency Locket Chatterjee and playback singer and Minister of State for Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Babul Supriyo. There are others; the BJP has scooped up a whole set of younger stars from Tollywood, but the electoral success of this lot shows how important Tollywood has become for Bengal politics. There was a time when the women and men who underlined Bengali cinema steered clear of electoral politics, from actors Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar to directors like Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Tapan Sinha. From their films and their public posturing, you could sometimes guess where their

loyalties lay, but they never stepped into the dirt and grime of seeking votes in Bengal's lanes and by-lanes. But now, theatrical has become the political.

Over the chicken sausage omelette platter, bubble waffle and chocolate syrup with seasonal fruits and cinnamon latte, I ask Badshah Moitra why Bengal is on fire over a single word: Bnara. 'Bnara' translates to dick or cock in English, a cuss word used in daily talk. It is a common word in Bengal, but in this case it has been used before a line from Tagore by four women students who painted the words on their bare backs at a university fest. 'Students on the BT Road campus of Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata celebrated Basanta Utsav 2020 yesterday with offensive words from the Bangla language and expletives in English in what is being seen as part of a recent cultural decline of West Bengal. Some of the images of their celebrations went viral on social media,' sirfnews.com reported on 6 March 2020.

Understandably, both culture keepers and 'those without culture' are in riot mode. There are demands for arrest of the students. You can't touch Tagore in Bengal. The incident soon took on a political colour, with BJP's Rajya Sabha MP Swapan Dasgupta tweeting: 'I don't want to translate the writing on the backs of the ladies because it is so disgusting. This is at an institution dedicated to Rabindranath Tagore and is this what is meant by culture and freedom? A blot on Bengal.'

Badshah, a popular face in Bengali TV serials and theatre, tells me he also found what the students did in 'very bad taste'. 'Tagore is like Taj Mahal to me. You are free to not like the Taj, but should you have the freedom of expression to throw ink over it?'

And just as I had expected, the conversation turns to politics without my prodding, as Badshah continues, 'You have to see the action of those female students in the context of the general degradation of politics and culture brought in by Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool

Congress. Mamata keeps quoting Tagore out of context and most of us do not even comprehend where she is going wrong.

‘Not just Tagore. No one commands any respect in Bengal society anymore. Doctors, professors, lawyers, women and men of arts and letters ... you can get away with disregarding or abusing anyone today, as long as you are on the right side of Mamata’s government.’

Badshah’s concern reminds me of Tapan Sinha’s 1986 film *Atanka* , where on a rainy night a retired school teacher witnesses a political murder by one of his former students. All through the film, to stop the schoolteacher from reporting the political murder to the police, his former student who has now turned into a political thug tells him time and again, as a dire warning: ‘*Mastermoshai, apni kichu dekhni ni* . (Sir, you have not seen anything).’ Actor Soumitra Chatterjee as the retired school teacher becomes a metaphor for a generation that cannot come to terms with the urban dystopia that Kolkata turns into, where the punishment for witnessing or commenting on a crime becomes more severe than the crime itself. In April 2012, Ambikesh Mahapatra would know what that feels like. This professor of chemistry at the prestigious Jadavpur University was arrested and jailed for one night for forwarding to friends a cartoon lampooning Mamata Banerjee. He has, after this incident, formed a group called Amra Akranto or ‘We the Attacked’ along with other victims of ‘state injustice’.

When Badshah comes on TV to comment on current affairs, he is widely perceived in Bengal as one of the voices of the Left. So, I ask him if things were really that different during the three decades of Left rule in Bengal. ‘The Left is guilty of many things. But not the systematic destruction of the Bengali value system.’ Badshah is all agitprop.

The coffee shop is bustling with people and conversation now, some young women throwing quick

glances at Badshah. It is difficult to ignore the din and keep pace with Badshah's train of thought. But the third occupant of the table, ace film journalist Bhaswati Ghosh, who speed-dialled and opened Tollywood's doors for me, makes a call to the manager of the coffee shop and arranges an exclusive space for us. Bhaswati is a regular at the Roastery. She tells me a lot of her stories come from her sources at the coffee shop. Who is hooking up with whom in Tollywood makes for rather engaging conversation and Bhaswati is just the right person to keep me updated. But this is not the time for that, what with Badshah holding forth on the future of Bengal itself!

'The Prashant Kishor-ization of politics has destroyed Bengal. This is politics without value, politics for profit,' the impassioned Leftist in Badshah said. I had met Kishore at my Noida office for an off-the-cuff chat only a few weeks ago and he had seemed confident of the advisory role he was playing to keep Mamata Banerjee in power.

'The Left has a certain ideology, the Trinamool none. Even at blood donation camps, during the Left's time, we would do it out of a sense of social service. Today you are lured with gifts, a mixer here, a grinder there, to donate blood. Club culture has been hit, the government hands out money to local clubs for various activities but never asks for receipts, encouraging corruption. From that level up, money laundering has been normalized. Now even Narada and Saradha scams do not affect Bengalis.'

Prashant Kishor has pitched Mamata Banerjee as '*Banglar Gorbo Mamata*' or 'Bengal's pride, Mamata'.

This came after the '*Didi ke bolo* (Tell Didi [Mamata])' outreach, where a dedicated line would take calls from the common people to the chief minister herself in an effort to re-imagine Banerjee as a 'fierce protector and guardian'.

Despite the best efforts of Kishor to recast Mamata in a new mould, the stench of the Narada scam and Saradha financial scandal that rocked Bengal in 2013-2014 is still in the air as the BJP doesn't let Banerjee forget the past. The Narada scam exploded when a sting operation carried out in 2014 by journalist Mathew Samuel targeting high-ranking officials and politicians of the Trinamool Congress showed several politicians accepting cash bribes in exchange for providing unofficial favours to a fictitious company. The Saradha case was an alleged political scandal in 2013 caused by the collapse of a Ponzi scheme run by the Saradha Group, a consortium of over 200 private companies that was believed to be running collective investment schemes as chit funds.

But how has the murky world of politics affected Badshah's industry? 'You think when everything else has been tainted, politics would have spared Tollywood? A director today will cast an actor according to her or his politics. It is all about which actor is seen next to Mamata Banerjee and how many times a month. There is no space for talent here anymore. Everybody is vying for Mamata's attention.'

Badshah moves effortlessly from society to politics to films, and I ask him how all this will play out next year. Would 2021 return Mamata Banerjee to power or see a BJP government for the first time in Bengal? 'You know a lot of people feel *aage Didi jaak, BJP asuk, tar por Left ashbe* (Let Mamata go first and BJP come in; and then bring the Left back). With the Left decimated, only the BJP can oust Mamata now. But it seems the BJP's bigger enemy is the Left, even though it is out of power. Mamata stands for nothing, the BJP knows sooner or later she will fall. It is more concerned about finishing off what remains of the Left.'

A second round of coffee has come and gone cold, Badshah has appointments to keep and I have a meeting scheduled with the Trinamool Congress MP from Jadavpur, Mimi Chakraborty. It is lunch time and Mimi

is shooting for an ad film in Kasba which is not too far away from the cafe. So I skip lunch (a full breakfast past breakfast time being enough fuel till evening), and head to where this surprise option was sprung upon the constituents of Jadavpur by Mamata Banerjee. Announcing her candidature, Mamata had said: '*Mimi bhalo meye. Bakita ami dekhe nebo* . (Mimi is a good girl. The rest I will manage).'

A high-profile south Kolkata constituency, Jadavpur was from where Mimi's party chief Mamata Banerjee, then a young Congress leader, had defeated CPI(M) leader and later Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Somnath Chatterjee, in 1984.

Tollywood's Mimi, up against BJP's Anupam Hazra and CPI- M's Bikash Ranjan Bhattacharya, won in 2019. She defeated Hazra by 2.9 lakh votes. The rest is Parliament selfie history as the petite actor and her fellow actor-MP colleague Nusrat Jahan regaled the Delhi press with poise and Page 3 pictures that leapt over to Page 1.

As her attendant hands her an energy drink, Mimi tells me her party will defeat the BJP in the 2021 Assembly polls as comfortably as she had defeated her rival from the BJP two years ago. 'Yes, BJP fared well in the 2019 parliamentary polls, winning eighteen seats from Bengal, but since then, the economy has tanked, politics has been communalised, culminating most recently in the Delhi riots that shook the country like in 2002. Bengal will reject the BJP and bring Trinamool Congress back to power.'

But surely, she must be a little scared of what is being touted as the bloodiest elections in Bengal in a long time? 'I am not scared of anything, except heights and ghosts.'

Not even Amit Shah? I ask.

Mimi laughs. 'When I left the safety of my hometown in Jalpaiguri and came to Kolkata, I left my fears

behind. The struggle of making it on my own in Tollywood, then entering politics and going to Parliament has given me the courage to face and fight anybody. There was a wave in 2019. That wave has now gone due to the BJP's communal politics.'

But what about the charges of minority appeasement levelled against her leader Mamata Banerjee? 'That is a lie. Our Didi is as secular as they come, she goes to church, masjid and temple, doesn't discriminate among her people like the BJP does.'

What if, as is popularly believed, the BJP fields Bengal's pride Sourav Ganguly? 'Sourav is a great cricketer but Didi is Didi. So down to earth, so committed to Bengal, and so focused. She has done so much for the Bengali film industry also.' Before Mimi can get into election-speak, I thank her for her time and head out as the sun sets on a lazy Kolkata afternoon. There has been too much political talk for me since morning. But I need the Right perspective from an industry insider.

I meet the mythical Sanaka at a corner coffee shop in Golf Green next morning. It is a stone's throw from my parents' house in Jadavpur and frequented by TV actors, writers, camerapersons and other fantasy peddlers who get out of the Tollygunge studios close by for cha and cigarette breaks to gossip about Tollywood.

Sanaka, or Rupanjana Mitra, outside her famous role in the TV serial *Behula*, which even Mamata Banerjee had said in public she was a big fan of, is in casual wear since it's a Sunday, and not her bejewelled TV avatar. I had read a news story of her levelling allegations of sexual harassment against actor-director Arindam Sil. Tollywood has been rocked by other #MeToo allegations, but Rupanjana's charges took on a political hue as Sil supports Mamata's Trinamool Congress and Rupanjana is now in the BJP.

'Politics had nothing to do with the charges I levelled on Sil. As a woman I felt humiliated, and this has been

happening in the industry for far too long. Somebody had to speak up. I did. But nothing happened. It seems to me that he has Mamata's blessings.'

So as a woman and a politician, what does she think of Mamata Banerjee? 'I used to be a big fan of Mamata. I never hesitate to say this. In fact, she loved my character Sanaka. She has said this in public many times. But Mamata is a different person now.'

Is she saying so because she is in the BJP now?

'No. Even from our industry perspective, Mamata had initially done some work, like studio modernization, welfare of technicians, trying to address the issue of late payment of actors. But now, she has turned the industry political. Either you are with Trinamool Congress or you aren't. If you hold a different political view you are kept out of work.

'It is the Brothers Biswas who keep a vice-like grip on Tollywood now.'

Minister for North Bengal Development Arup Biswas is more interested in Tollywood than development, Rupanjana says. His brother Swarup, president, Federation for Senior Technicians and Workers of Eastern India, practically runs the industry, she adds. 'Even Babul [Supriyo], playback singer and Modi minister, has spoken about how they arm-twist actors into leaving their work and campaigning for Trinamool, how the "cut money" menace has come to Tollywood, how the Artists' Forum has had enough of these two.'

'There are other issues as well. I feel threatened as a woman for my political beliefs,' Rupanjana says. 'You should see the comments I get on social media from Mamata supporters for joining the BJP: *Etodin dhore Mamata-r chakor chile, ekhon BJP-r chakor* (You were Mamata's servant for so long and now you are BJP's). Other comments can't even be mentioned.

'Outside the virtual world and the glamour of our industry, I have seen what Mamata's politics of minority

appeasement has done to the state's law and order situation. I had gone to give a speech at Haridaspur. A Muslim mob gheraoed us as we were on our way back. There was a Trinamool ward office right there. No one came out to help. Policemen were standing there and laughing at us. Political workers who were with me somehow managed to form a ring around me and escort me to the car. I would have been gangraped and killed that day.'

Does she think the BJP will come to power in 2021? 'It would be a tight contest but I am confident of our win. Things need to change.'

Things indeed need to change, asserts Indranil Roy, a popular entertainment journalist and a friend of many years. Indranil tells me Tollywood, much like the entire state, is trifurcated. 'During the Left Front's ruling years, the arts and culture scene was somewhat Left-leaning. Rudraprasad Sengupta from theatre, Soumitra Chatterjee from the film industry, Sankha Ghosh from the world of poetry, were prominent Left voices. Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee (former Bengal chief minister) used to spend quality time at Nandan, Kolkata's prominent culture centre, hold film festivals and engage in adda with actors and litterateurs. Post 2011, after Mamata came to power, there has been a massive change. Mamata was always a big fan of Bengali TV serials. She would call up channel heads and discuss plot-lines. Like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, she soon had almost the whole of Tollywood following her.

'The biggest name in the Bengali film industry is Shrikant Mohta. He is the founder of Shree Venkatesh Films, which happens to be the largest production house in east India with over 135 films and counting since 1996 ... Srikant helped in the Mamata-fication of Tollywood. All the big stars would line up at state government events, stand next to her, take selfies. How incestuous the relationship between Tollywood and Bengal politics is became evident on 5 March 2012,

when Mamata announced candidates for the Lok Sabha elections. Dev Adhikari, Tollywood's most popular face, got a ticket. It was Srikant who convinced him to enter politics. Dev did and won.

‘That was the beginning of the slide. Actors, whose views were Left of Centre, stopped getting work. It was the same story for those from the Right. Except for a Rupa Ganguly or a Kaushik Sen, not toeing the Mamata line meant you were a pariah for the industry. Anik Dutta's film *Bhobishyoter Bhoot* was taken off the screens two days after its release because it was critical of the politics of Bengal.’

BJP MP and *Mahabharat*'s Draupadi Roopa Ganguly rued the politicization of Tollywood in an interview to Bhaswati Ghosh for the Bengali newspaper *Ei Samay* in June 2019. In a startling statement that made headlines, she had said even the BJP should not enter Tollywood. Tollywood, she had gone on to say, has its own heritage, and its filmmakers have a certain prestige that party politics should not tarnish, not even her own party BJP.

It is not just politics, Indranil tells me, even police have entered Tollywood. He was questioned by Kolkata Police for tweeting that a film starring Dev Adhikari has been copied from a Pakistani film.

With the CBI arresting Shrikant Mohta in the Rose Valley scam case there is now more mistrust among industry insiders. This 2013 scam was one of the biggest financial frauds in Bengal. It was even bigger than the Saradha scam and, as per Enforcement Directorate estimates, Rs 17,520 crore was reportedly raised from investors across India. ED said a portion of the money was also used to bribe politicians so that the scam could run smoothly.

‘At a famous film director's wedding reception,’ says Indranil, ‘a Mamata minister told me to mind my ways. He said I am a film journalist and should only tweet or post on films and stay away from politics. Or else...’

Is Indranil worried?

‘This is still a free country. I will say what I want to.
Not what Mamata wants to hear.’

3

Corona as Paash Balish

MAY 2020

It was Donald Duck that got Dr Indranil Khan into trouble. The cartoon waterbird, embossed on raincoats given to doctors fighting coronavirus in Bengal, started a chain of events at the start of the Covid-19 nightmare in India.

‘What kind of government gives raincoats as protective gear to healthcare workers fighting a global pandemic?’ Dr Khan asks me, exasperated. ‘PPE kits, N-95 masks are absolute essentials. But whether it was at Calcutta Medical College or North Bengal Medical College, doctors and healthcare workers across West Bengal were made to fight the virus wearing Donald Duck raincoats! In different doctors’ WhatsApp groups, I read messages after messages of anger and frustration with the system. So, of course, I couldn’t keep shut.’

On 28 March, the clinical oncologist took to Facebook. ‘Dear Government of West Bengal, fighting coronavirus is not a joke. Sending your doctors to fight Covid-19 in raincoats instead of PPE is akin to sending your soldiers to guard borders with lathis instead of guns,’ he posted, along with photographs of doctors in raincoats.

He took the fight to Twitter too: ‘Welcome to India’s #RainCoatDoctors fighting #Covid19 in West Bengal govt hospitals. Asked to wear #raincoats & substandard #masks instead of #PPE, these are frontline medical workers fighting #Coronavirus in WB.’

The Department of Health and Family Welfare replied a day after: ‘Dear Doctor Khan, thank you for highlighting this matter. We are taking immediate steps

to not only reject any defective or substandard piece (that does not conform to the Health Department's approved sample), but also supply the PPE of microfiber variety subject to availability.'

A content Dr Khan thanked Mamata Banerjee on Twitter. Message delivered, matter sorted.

It was 29 March. Around 9.30 p.m., after a day spent attending to critically ill patients at various hospitals in the city, Dr Khan came out of a south Kolkata nursing home to find uniformed policemen waiting for him. '*Khub Facebook, Twitter korchen? Thanay cholun* . (Always on Facebook and Twitter, are you? Come to the police station),' an officer told him.

At the Maheshtala police station, Dr Khan was detained for almost sixteen hours, whole of that night and next day till noon, his pleas of attending to patients ignored, his mobile phone taken away from him. A notice under Section 41 of the CrPC – arrest without warrant – was given by sub-inspector Rabindra Nath Roy, under three sections of the IPC: 505 (making statements to cause public mischief), 506 (criminal intimidation) and 153A (promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence and language). All for a Facebook post and a tweet, cautioning the state government on issues around the coronavirus.

'All through the night, they kept telling me to delete my posts. When I asked the police who had complained against me, they said: Higher-ups. They shot videos of me at the station with their phones, and sent them to somebody, maybe that mythical Higher-up! An additional SP came and went, asking me to apologise, telling me to admit to sharing fake pictures on social media. I didn't,' Dr Khan tells me now.

Dr Khan was finally released at noon the next day. Without his mobile phone.

On 1 April, in response to a writ petition by Dr Khan, the Calcutta High Court ordered the West Bengal police to return his mobile phone and SIM card, and said he cannot be interrogated like this.

‘Freedom of speech and expression which is granted under Article 19 of the Constitution of India has to be scrupulously upheld by the State. If an expression of opinion brings the government into disrepute, it cannot defend this allegation by intimidation of the person expressing the opinion by subjecting him to prolonged interrogation, threatening arrest seizing his mobile phone and SIM card and so on,’ the court order said.

Dr Khan got his mobile phone and his freedom back. But the incident left him shaken. ‘My posts had debunked the state government’s PR campaign that it was doing its bit to fight the deadly virus. But after the court order, other doctors started speaking up and kept exposing the rot within, how Bengal was losing the coronavirus fight.’

Soon after Dr Khan’s ordeal, a group of healthcare professionals and scientists originally from West Bengal, now spread across the globe, wrote to Mamata Banerjee and expressed concern over the state’s response to the pandemic. Among other things, they questioned the government’s decision to segregate Covid-19 deaths from deaths of Covid-19 patients with co-morbid conditions.

This created a flutter and senior business journalist and long-time Bengal watcher Shantanu Guha Ray investigated why the state government and the doctors were at loggerheads. ‘The state government is working to re-establish control over the narrative by releasing expensive advertisements to news channels; filmmakers have been encouraged to make films to highlight the government’s coronavirus-related health operations. Arindam Sil, a top filmmaker, has started directing a movie, titled *Ek Din Jhor Theme Jabe* (One Day the Storm Will End). The lines, interestingly, are from a

poem penned by Mamata Banerjee herself. But all this won't hide the truth. The cases are shooting up and the fact that authorities in Bengal are slowing down the detection of coronavirus cases with a cumbersome, bureaucratic testing process is, in turn, putting health workers at risk,' Guha Ray tells me.

'Mamata Banerjee lost the plot because she is surrounded by people who have no idea how to handle a pandemic. Her instruction was simply this: Hide deaths, protect my image. Her image managers in turn told her: *Rastay nebe porun* (Hit the streets). This, she has borrowed from the CPM playbook: Always be seen and heard and people will think you are at the forefront no matter how big the problem. Hence, Mamata resorted to gimmicks like drawing circles on streets to make people aware of social distancing. And then someone released a video from inside a hospital. It showed Covid-19 patients sharing a room with the dead. All hell broke loose.'

On 18 April, Guha Ray wrote a piece for *The Sunday Guardian* headlined 'Bengal sitting on a coronavirus time bomb'. He wrote how doctors are complaining that state authorities' approval is needed for each Covid-19 test, and is regularly refused. As a result, patients suspected to be suffering from Covid-19 are not being isolated soon enough.

'When the Governor went to meet Mamata, he took a copy of my report and letters from NRI doctors expressing concern at the state government's handling of the situation. True to her style, Mamata instructed her spokesperson Derek O' Brien to dismiss my report. He simply said it is a BJP paper. But I don't give a damn about what they say. I don't take a penny from the Modi government at the Centre or any state government. My job is to dig dirt and my report became national news. As Mamata kept on denying permission to teams sent by the Centre to assess the Bengal situation, and Delhi journalists opposed to Modi kept highlighting lapses in Gujarat and other BJP states on corona, my report at

least helped a larger audience know the true story from Bengal.’

Guha Ray says it is very difficult to report from Bengal, especially at a time when the Mamata government is on the back foot. The Bengali press is scared of her wrath and any adverse report may lead to withdrawal of state government advertisements when the media is already in financial trouble. ‘Can you really blame the Opposition parties for being on her case, given how Mamata bungled up the corona fight?’

On 2 May, Dr Anirban Ganguly, director of Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation, invites me to a Zoom webinar on Bengal’s fight against the coronavirus with the BJP Rajya Sabha MP Swapan Dasgupta as the main speaker.

Dasgupta sums up ‘the Bengal government’s gross mismanagement’ of the coronavirus crisis in five broad points. The first, he says, is the statistical anomaly: underreporting the number of coronavirus deaths. Dasgupta says bureaucratic firewalls have been put in place to hide the actual number of people dying in the state from the virus. ‘There has been underreporting from the rest of India too. But no state has done it so blatantly,’ he says.

Secret cremation and burials is Dasgupta’s second point of contention against Bengal’s Covid-19 fight. ‘When bodies are secretly piled up, covered in petrol and set on fire, it is a cause for concern. In Nagtala area, when they tried to dispose of a body in the dead of the night, locals got together and scared them away. There is no dignity to those dying of Covid in Bengal. Bodies are being secretly cremated or buried.’

The third critical problem, Dasgupta says, is the complete breakdown of the healthcare system in the state. ‘Hospitals have become horror stories. Mobile phones are not allowed inside so that no one can take photographs of what’s happening inside. Healthcare workers without protective gear, Covid-19 patients

sharing rooms with the dead, pathetic condition of the premises, healthcare has become a joke in Bengal.’

Dasgupta’s fourth grouse has been highlighted in the media and debated on primetime news TV several times since the lockdown was announced. The fact that the lockdown, in Dasgupta’s words, has been ‘selectively and patchily enforced’. ‘The brazenness with which a section of the population has resisted the lockdown and the way the Mamata administration has turned a blind eye to the problem have not escaped anybody. I agree this is not a time for communal polarisation, but everyone can see what’s happening in Tikiapara, Malda, North Dinajpur and Cooch Bihar. I will be blunt and say this: Muslims in Bengal have been allowed to ignore lockdown and as a result of which the infection has spread so much. Covid has deepened existing faultlines and Mamata Banerjee is squarely to blame for this.’

Lastly, Dasgupta says, the rampant overpoliticisation of the PDS system in the state has made the fight against the coronavirus that much tougher. ‘There is selectiveness in the distribution of relief material during the lockdown. Blaming the Centre will not help Mamata this time. Bengal will come out of Covid terribly, terribly scarred,’ he says.

Debangshu Bhattachariya, Trinamool Congress’s young spokesperson, blames it squarely on the Centre. ‘*Shob Kendra’r dosh* (The Centre is to be blamed for everything)’ is an old adage in the politics of Bengal, right from the Left Front’s time, and even before. But Bhattachariya, who publicly calls Mamata Banerjee ‘Ma’, has his arguments ready.

‘Firstly, Bengal announced lockdown before the Centre did. We sealed our borders, identified hotspots. Strangely though, in the national media, we started getting compared to Kerala where the first Corona case was detected almost forty-seven days before the virus hit Bengal. Tell me how can you compare us to states where Corona came early and hence testing started

early? Obviously, they would have tested more initially because they had to deal with the problem much before us.

‘Secondly, when this argument failed, the kits that came from Delhi were faulty. My government protested and said change the kits. They didn’t listen to us. Many people who were Corona positive in Bengal tested negative because of those faulty kits and went around spreading the virus.

‘But the worst thing that the Centre did to us was the Corona Express. The heartless government at the Centre packed unfed migrants in trains without maintaining social distancing and sent them in large numbers to Bengal.’ Bhattachariya tells me.

Bhattachariya has got into impassioned poll-speak, but I interject. Why did the Bengal government not allow the Central team to do its job? To find out the state of the State during the pandemic? ‘The whole country is fighting the pandemic. Why single out Bengal to send a Central team? Are you aware members of that team wore masks but did not follow social distancing norms themselves? Do you know their security personnel and their driver tested positive for Corona? We had in fact welcomed the team, but the members went around with infected people among them. God knows how many people the fact-finding team itself infected in the process!’

And what about the charge that the Bengal government has been fudging the coronavirus death figures? ‘Dada, tell me something. If a Corona patient dies of accident, do we say she has died of Corona?’

But how many coronavirus patients have died in accidents in Bengal? I ask Bhattachariya, genuinely curious. ‘No, I am just saying. WHO has itself said segregate deaths. We never hid deaths, we simply segregated deaths according to international guidelines. Eventually, ICMR followed us. But by then the BJP had

done its bit to shame us nationally by saying Bengal is hiding Corona deaths.’

Bhattachariya is convinced the BJP’s one-point agenda in its criticism of the Bengal government’s handling of the coronavirus situation is the 2021 elections in Bengal. So I ask him about the BJP’s big charge that the Bengal government didn’t enforce lockdown in Muslim areas with an eye on Bengal polls. ‘The issue is not religion, the issue is literacy. Police can’t enforce lockdown by force, the people have to themselves understand how serious the coronavirus is. If you tell me certain Muslim-majority areas in Kolkata and outside didn’t follow lockdown, then I will tell you that Burrabazar which is filled with Hindi speakers, most of whom are Hindus and have roots in other states, also did the same. So does that mean we will blame all non-Bengalis for spreading the coronavirus in Bengal?’

‘Let me also tell you Kidderpore is a Muslim-majority area, but people followed lockdown protocol there. Why? Because literacy rate is high in that area. So, it is not an issue of Hindu-Muslim, it is simply a case of which area is literate and which isn’t. Hindu-Muslim divide is the BJP’s only hope in elections. It won’t work in Bengal though.’

So what will work for the BJP in 2021?

‘Nothing really. As we know by now, people vote differently for state polls and Central election. In Bengal, Mamata Banerjee will return. Who is her alternative in the BJP? Dilip Ghosh? You can’t be serious! Babul Supriyo? Or Rahul Sinha? Or will it be Mukul Roy? Bengal BJP has no face. The state will reject this bairer party (outsider party).’

Coming back to the pandemic, I ask him how the state is faring now? ‘We have increased testing manifold, our state-run hospitals are fully equipped and our CM is monitoring the situation every hour.’

I am reminded of a Mamata Banerjee presser where the CM said one has to learn to live with the coronavirus now, treat it as a 'paash balish' (a bolster, literally 'side pillow') and sleep.

I think of asking Bhattachariya if he finds that comfortable, hugging the corona virus like it is a paash balish.

But I let it be.

Postscript:

With the pandemic showing no signs of going away or slowing down even five months later, Mamata Banerjee would be left staring at a ticking time bomb as Durga Pujo approached. The BJP was in no mood to spare her if she were to scale down Pujo below the 'acceptable level'. 'Were Eid celebrations in Bengal scaled down this year due to the pandemic? Why are Hindu festivals like Holi, Akshaya Tritiya, Janmashtami, Diwali always the target for so-called secular politicians? We will not spare this government if Durga Pujo doesn't happen properly,' BJP youth wing national secretary Saurav Sikdar told me mid-September. 'We have had enough of Mamata's appeasement politics for Muslims.'

And if overcrowding during the festive season led to an 'uncontrollable' rise in Covid-19 cases, she would again be attacked. A perfect Catch-22.

But there's a proverb in Bengali that goes: *rakhe hari, mare ke* which roughly translates to 'If God is with you, who can bring you harm'. In Mamata's case it was the court that solved her dilemma.

On 20 October, two days before Durga Pujo, the Calcutta High Court ordered that Pujo pandals in Bengal will be out of bounds for visitors in public interest. After hearing a PIL, a Division Bench of the High Court said no one, except select members of the pujo organizing committee, would be allowed to enter pandals. The Bench said, 'When students ... have been prevented from attending educational institutions for more than six

months and several students stand to lose a year, it is rather incongruous that Puja festivities would continue as in the previous years.'

'Life has not been normal for the human species since or about March 2020 and it may have been better if restrictions were put in place as to how the Durga Puja festivities would be celebrated this year.'

A day later, the court eased its order and allowed entry of up to forty-five organizers at a time, dhakis (traditional drummers) would also be allowed to perform just outside the no-entry zone. However, for visitors, the pandals were still out of bounds.

With no significant spike in the coronavirus numbers reported a week after Pujo, Mamata managed to dodge the bullet even as the number of cases was still a bother and so also the state's preparedness to provide medical care to all.

4

Amphan, After

JUNE 2020

Outside, cyclone Amphan tore into the city. Inside her Cornfield Road apartment, actor Parno Mitra sat tight with her family and two dogs, waiting for the superstorm to pass. Her doors and windows, shut tight though they were, couldn't shut out the sounds of the disaster unfolding. 'And then, the lights went out,' she says. 'For almost three hours, we sat in darkness as the storm raged and receded, wondering what damage it had done to our Kolkata.'

Next morning, on 21 May, local TV news channel ABP Ananda would tell Parno that Kolkata had turned into a city of fallen trees, waterlogged streets, broken lampposts, and entangled television, telephone and electric wires. Her part of the city, heavily housed and posh, didn't bear the brunt of Amphan the way some other parts did, but a tree had crashed into an ATM kiosk on the road behind her house. A metaphor for a city suddenly interrupted.

The BBC reported that Amphan was the first super cyclone to form in the Bay of Bengal since 1999. 'Though its winds had weakened by the time it struck, it was still classified as a very severe cyclone ... Amphan began hitting the Sunderbans, a mangrove area around the India–Bangladesh border, home to four million people, on Wednesday afternoon, before carving north and north-eastwards towards Kolkata, a historic city that was the capital of the British Raj and widely known as Calcutta. Parts of West Bengal and Orissa (also known as Odisha) states in India, and areas in south-west Bangladesh, bore the brunt, with winds gusting up to 185km/h (115mph),' [bbc.com](https://www.bbc.com/news/health-55888888) said.

‘My friends and I decided to pool in money to provide relief for as many people as possible, especially to those living on the streets and shanties. We tied up with a restaurant to distribute cooked meals to them. At every police picket, we were told to turn back and get official permission to do so. I took permission from my local thana, which got revoked the next day itself!’ Parno tells me.

Not one to give up, Parno tied up with the NGO GFI which worked in the Sunderbans, where Amphan had made its landfall and spread mayhem. ‘What Kolkata residents suffered pales in comparison to what happened in the Sunderbans. Days after Amphan, when we reached the Sunderbans, I could not hold back my tears. Village after village devastated, huts reduced to rubble, agricultural fields covered in saline water, hungry children waiting for food packets. The relief material we took was not enough to even begin to bring the Sundarbans back to normal.’

Parno pinned a tweet appealing for help to rebuild the Sunderbans. To work among the people is what, she says, had made her take the plunge into politics (she is part of the Tollywood brigade that has joined the BJP), and the helplessness of the Sunderbans residents after Amphan has strengthened her resolve to bring her party to power in the state.

‘Where are the hospitals in the Sunderbans? Too few for a region so vulnerable to the vagaries of nature. From some villages, the nearest health centre is almost two hours away. Are those sitting at Nabanna even bothered about the Sunderbans? The archipelago needs special attention. So does the rest of the state, of course!’

‘The twin blows of Covid and Amphan will dislodge Mamata Banerjee from power,’ Parno says, stressing she is speaking only as a concerned citizen of Bengal, not as a BJP member. I tell her that is as political a statement as it gets!

In the coming weeks, politics would break out even over Amphan relief. The Mamata government would be in trouble over a relief 'scam' and allegations of cut-money and PDS corruption.

On 30 June, Madhuparna Das from the news site *The Print* would report that the most glaring example of this was in the Garalgacha gram panchayat in Hooghly district, where the pradhan, Manoj Singh, had listed his own phone number against more than 100 beneficiary names out of a total list of 166. His wife's name was also on the list, a Trinamool statement accepted. The pradhan was removed. There were many similar cases.

But the politics, the blame games and the name calling after Amphan do not interest Seema Sengupta. She has seen up close the disfigured face of the Sunderbans. Hers was the first NGO to reach the region after the cyclone. And her only concern, weeks later, is to reach relief to the ravaged there. 'They have lost everything, Deep. Everything.'

Mehrunisa, a second standard student from Deulbari, would tell her that everyone is housed in a school now, her parents, herself, their neighbours, as every other structure in her village has gone with the wind. The school building is now a relief centre.

Seema and her husband Sagnik were at their Greenwood Sonata tenth floor apartment in New Town when Amphan struck. They knew where they had to be ... in the region five hours away from their home that would be devastated, the region they know intimately through their NGO SAGE. The Sunderbans.

'Sagnik went out in the storm to collect as much relief material as possible, puffed rice, cheeda, water bottles, milk powder. We decided to set off for the Sunderbans as soon as we could, knowing the roads would be waterlogged all the way and the islands cut off from the mainland. But there are times when divine intervention opens up roads for you. Sagnik got an unexpected call from Dr S Kulan Daival, joint director

of Sunderban Biosphere, Directorate of Forests, Government of West Bengal. He asked if our NGO would be able to do relief work as soon as the cyclone passed. Sagnik said an emphatic yes.'

Seema and Sagnik had to wait a day to reach the Sunderbans, the city roads being covered with fallen trees and electric poles. A day spent worrying about Sunderbans' unfed, activating WhatsApp groups and gathering more relief material. On 22 May, Seema and her team became the first NGO to reach the Sunderbans after Amphan. When the boat reached Deulbari at 5 p.m., they saw the entire stretch of the bank covered with cement blocks and broken bricks, remnants of houses that had stood there before the cyclone.

The whole village had taken shelter in the primary school building, the only sturdy structure that survived the storm. The village itself, like the other villages across the Sunderbans, had suffered long-term damage, with its agricultural fields and fish reserves destroyed by saline water. 'The villagers, dignified in the face of devastation, did not let out a single wail or shed a single tear. Their faces covered with handkerchiefs or gamchas due to Covid, they made neat lines as we set up a desk to distribute food packets. A young man took out his phone to show me a picture of a floor. That was all that remained of his house, he said. I couldn't stop the tears rolling down my face.'

Since then, Seema and Sagnik would come back again and again to the Sunderbans for relief and medical camps. 'Urinary infections are common at such times when people have to wade through water for long hours, as well as skin infections, diarrhoea, other ailments. We are taking as much medicines as we can there. Friends, family, strangers are contributing with open hearts. At such times, you know that Bengal will always save its own people.'

Outside the Sunderbans, rage ripped through the state with as much force as Amphan. The first object of the

anger was the national media. Is Bengal a pariah for the Delhi press?

Singer Malini Banerjee wrote angry post after angry post on Facebook after Amphan. Weeks have passed since and I ask her if she is still mad at the press.

‘As a Bengali, I’m used to being relegated to the sidelines – in school, at work, in sports ... the list is endless,’ she says. ‘So, to be honest, I was not entirely surprised by the lack of national interest about a “regional” emergency. Some of the fault, of course, lies with us. We haven’t yet mastered the art of conversing in Hindi, even in company we tend to align with our own kind, we migrate in lakhs but whine every day about wanting to go home, yada yada ... Bengalis seldom run the show. We are always on the fringes, waiting in the wings – a community past its prime, living in the shadows of its great past. But one would hope that in the face of something calamitous, things might be a little different. Sadly, that wasn’t the case when Amphan struck.

‘Here was a neglected state having to fight Covid *and* a frightful, massive cyclone, and yet there was absolutely no awareness about it among people outside Bengal – no Twitter chatter, no voices of concern, no pledges of help. And, for this I squarely blame the national media houses. Barring NDTV, which ran a little segment voiced by Vishnu Som with inputs from Monideepa, I don’t recall seeing any other television channel even bothering to mention that a part of India was being ravaged by wind and water.’

I tell Malini that may not be wholly true. She reminds me instead that as a former media professional she had seen bosses ruthlessly dropping stories they did not deem newsworthy. ‘National media buried the Amphan story. For two days the state was mercilessly butchered by nature, and nobody beyond its borders got to know. Vernacular journalists were wading through chest-high water, braving winds over 130 kilometres an hour and

getting exposed to Covid to bring the latest news while their national counterparts sat in air-conditioned newsrooms and basked in the glow of blissful ignorance!’

Malini’s was one of many Facebook posts and tweets that blamed the national media for being tone-deaf to Amphan. A quick binary was re-established – of one between Bengalis and non-Bengalis – that the latter is uninterested in the fate of Bengal. And, in a curious twist, the debate took on a political colour: homegrown Trinamool Congress versus the Hindi-belt party BJP.

As posters of Mamata Banerjee staring down a cyclone were shared on social media, there was some heat on the BJP after the prime minister announced a package of Rs 1,000 crore. ‘Too less,’ TMC and angry citizens cried, even as the Bengal governor Jagdeep Dhankhar clarified it was only the beginning. The Bengal BJP, on its part, accused the ruling party of not allowing its leaders to help the Amphan-hit. State party chief Dilip Ghosh himself was not allowed to inspect the devastation in the city in the wake of Amphan, the BJP alleged.

The debate got so shrill that even Devlina Ganguly, who says she is apolitical, couldn’t keep a neutral stand. A content writer with an MNC and a cancer survivor, Devlina, in her own words, lived through hell for the next four days after Amphan.

‘The first casualty was my broadband internet connection, then the Vodafone internet gave up too. I remember sending a WhatsApp message to a friend that I would get in touch as soon as Internet was back. I didn’t know I would have to wait for days to do so.

‘I went to sleep thinking the worst was over, and I felt electricity would be back for sure next morning. But it wasn’t back in the morning, afternoon or night. Or in the next few days.

‘I am a cancer survivor, having had two back-to-back radiations in 2017 and 2018. My mother has multiple arterial blockages and has suffered two strokes. Those few days were a never-ending nightmare for us. Maa takes sleeping pills and thankfully she would fall asleep. But I would be awake all night, the heat and the mosquitoes making sleep impossible. The next morning I would see my hands and legs full of red marks.’

Water scarcity came next. With no electricity, the water pump couldn’t be operated. So, to save water, it was one-two mugs for a shower. Devlina actually stopped eating on day two for fear that she may have to use the toilet. ‘I started having one meal a day. At one point, I felt either or both of us wouldn’t survive this.’

With helplessness came rage. At the powers that be. For Devlina, first in the line of fire was the state government itself. ‘Internet was back intermittently, and I decided to let the world know what was happening to us. I never talked about my cancer on social media since it was detected in 2016. I felt so helpless and scared, I mentioned it on Twitter and sent out a plea for help. I could see TMC leaders tweeting and I would tag them in my tweets, hoping for a response, which never came.’

When her ordeal finally ended and Devlina had uninterrupted access to news, she had questions for the Modi government at the Centre. ‘This is not just about me. When I see migrants dying on their way home walking or on trains that lose their way, I feel a helpless rage within me once again. With the number of Covid cases rising every day, what is the Centre doing? How is the PM Cares fund being used? All they care for is our votes. Yes, the Mamata government is inept. But the BJP wants to rule Bengal. What new hope are they offering? Rs 1,000 crore as Amphan relief package? Is that a joke? How does the BJP wish to rule Bengal without caring for Bengal?’

That question may not be only Devlina’s.

Five months after Amphan, the cyclone would continue to disrupt the Trinamool Congress government's journey to 2021 with allegations of corruption against the party in relief distribution refusing to die down. On 13 October 2020, news18.com reported:

‘The gram panchayat pradhan of Kendemari village, her husband and two other leaders were officially suspended by the Trinamool Congress on Tuesday for their alleged role in malpractice while distributing Amphan relief to villagers.

‘The decision was taken after Mansura Bibi, her husband Sheikh Shahabuddin, and the two leaders refused to step down despite the party's order a few days back.

‘It was learnt that Mansura Bibi refused to obey the party's command after being advised by her husband. Nandigram, a small hamlet in East Midnapore district, was once the epicentre of TMC chief Mamata Banerjee's land movement in 2007 and it was from here she went close to the corridors of power in the state.

“‘The block president (Meghnath Pal) doesn't have any power to remove us. I only know Mamata Banerjee and I don't know anyone else in the party. I have already spoken to my party leaders in the senior level regarding this matter,” said Shahabuddin.’

‘Elections are in mid-2021, will the Trinamool government's handling of Amphan be an issue?’ I ask Dilip Ghosh at the end of July, when I meet him at his two-storied sarkari bungalow at 8, North Avenue, in Delhi.

‘Of course! A government that steals the poor's relief package after such a disaster needs to go.’

5

BJP versus BJP in Matua Den, Elsewhere

AUGUST 2020

Narendra Modi had taken an Air Force chopper to come here in 2019. I book a new SUV with an old driver who knows all the shortcuts to places in Bengal I have never been to. It still takes us three hours by car to travel almost 70 kilometres north-east of Kolkata near the Indo–Bangladesh border to reach a sleepy hamlet that neither Mamata Banerjee nor the prime minister can afford to ignore.

Thakurnagar is the heartland of the Matuas, a Namasudra or Scheduled Caste group that is spread out in as many as six parliamentary seats in West Bengal, with an influence in as many as sixty to sixty-five Assembly seats, and comprising 17.74 per cent of the population of the state. The founder of the Matua sect, Harichand Thakur (1812–1878), had worked among the untouchables, strived for their upliftment and prevented them from going into Islam’s fold in large numbers.

An expert on Bengal’s Dalit history, Avik Sarkar, in his article headlined ‘Subaltern Resistance to Islam and Prospects of Dalit-Muslim Alliance in West Bengal’, published in swarajyamag.com, writes:

‘Harichand Thakur, the founder of the Matua Mahasangha, the religious movement to which the majority of the Namasudras adhere to, was born as a Namasudra who were then known by the pejorative slur of “Chandal”. Widely regarded as “Purnabrahma” (Complete God), Thakur’s “earthly descent” amongst the Namasudras swayed them away from Islamising

influences. Thakur was able to offer an independent and alternative space to the Namasudras, away from both Islam and Brahminical Hinduism, but closer to “Dharmic syncretism”, an admixture of pre-Vedic Kaumadharm, Sahajiya Buddhism and Vaishnavism. The Guruchand Charit is replete with vivid descriptions of the two incidents of communal violence between the Namasudra-Matuas and the Muslims in Eastern Bengal. Guruchand Thakur, the second Sanghadhipati of the Matuas, often addressed Namasudras as “Bir Jaati” (brave race) and called for resisting any attempt to denigrate their collective honour.’

Today, the concern among the Matuas is whether to vote for the Trinamool Congress or the BJP in 2021. And who better to ask about this than BJP’s Bongaon MP Shantanu Thakur, grandson of Boroma, the Matua matriarch whom Modi had come to meet on 2 February 2019, during the run-up to the last Lok Sabha election.

Boroma, who died on 5 March 2019 and whose funeral was held with full state honours on 7 March 2019 with a gun salute by the Mamata Banerjee government, was married to Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, great-grandson of Harichand Thakur. When Boroma’s husband died, she became the chief adviser and matriarch of the Matuas. She spread the teachings of Harichand Thakur across India. Now the BJP’s 2021 hopes are riding on her grandson and party MP Shantanu Thakur to swing the Matua vote in its favour.

The Matuas had migrated to India from what was then East Pakistan – now Bangladesh – mostly during the Bangladesh War in 1971. They form the state’s second largest SC population and are spread across North and South 24 Parganas, Nadia, Howrah, Cooch Behar, North and South Dinajpur and Malda districts.

‘While no official count is available, community leaders put Matua population at 3 crore, while a state minister said there are 1.75 crore Namasudra voters,’ *The Indian Express* reported on 6 February 2019 in an

article headlined ‘Matua community – Why are they important for Trinamool and BJP?’. The article describes the political history of the Thakur family:

‘Initially behind the Congress, the community turned to the Left Front from 1977 but was disillusioned again, as citizenship and land rights eluded many. In 2009, Left leaders and Mamata separately approached Boroma, who chose the latter. In 2010, Boro ma made Mamata the chief patron of Matua Mahasabha; in 2011, the government provided grants to spruce up Kamonasagar, the community’s holy pond in Thakurnagar. In 2018, Mamata visited Boro ma and the government later announced a welfare board for Matuas. Boroma’s son Kapil Krishna Thakur won the Bongaon Lok Sabha on a Trinamool ticket in 2014. After his death, his wife Mamata Thakur won the seat. Her rival was also from the family – Subrata, another grandson of Boro ma, and in the BJP. Subrata’s father Manjul Krishna Thakur (Boro ma’s son) was a Trinamool minister of state but later he and Subrata joined the BJP. Shantanu too is Manjul Krishna’s son, and organized Saturday’s event; he invited Modi to speak,’ the article reads.

But the announcement of the Citizenship Amendment Bill (introduced in the seventeenth Lok Sabha by Amit Shah on 9 December 2019) and the promise of permanent citizenship would make the Matuas vote for the BJP in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, with two Matua majority seats, Bongaon and Ranaghat, going to the BJP’s kitty.

The Bill is now an Act (passed on 10 December 2019, with 311 MPs voting in favour and 80 against) and the BJP’s best hope in Bengal 2021 lies in the Matuas voting for them in large numbers.

A crowd has gathered outside Shantanu Thakur’s house in Thakur Nagar. A middle-aged BJP neta is exhorting party workers to rise against Shankar Chatterjee, president of the BJP’s Barasat organizing district. He reminds them they have gathered here today

to petition Shantanu Thakur, BJP's Lok Sabha MP from Bongaon, to end Chatterjee's 'misrule'.

'Sign the petition, brothers. Make a neat line, maintain social distance, come to the table one by one and sign the petition,' he says.

Curious, I ask the neta, after the cries of 'Jai Shri Ram' and 'Bharat Mata ki Jai' from his followers die down, whether the fight isn't against Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress.

'It should be! That is who we should be fighting against,' says the man, his mask hanging loose from his neck, his nose and mouth unprotected in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. 'But tell me, how do you expect us party workers to fight Mamata when our own leaders are hell bent on destroying the party from within?'

He thrusts a copy of the petition he has with him, which details the charges against Shankar Chatterjee. From inappropriate behaviour towards women party members to sending rape threats on WhatsApp, to divulging secret party strategies to Trinamool Congress leaders to selling crucial organizational posts before the all-important Assembly polls in 2021 to the highest bidder within the party, the charges against Chatterjee are many. And, looking at the angry faces in the crowd, it seems Chatterjee is in some trouble.

The tall, fair-skinned MP Shantanu Thakur comes out of his house, mingles with the crowd, receives the copy of the petition that has now been duly signed by the BJP workers assembled outside his house and tells them he will 'look into the matter'.

So, will Matuas vote en masse for the BJP in 2021? 'They should,' Shantanu tells me. 'There are fifty Matua-majority constituencies in Bengal and the community has presence in almost sixty-five. At least thirty to thirty-five seats we should get in 2021, provided my party fields Matua candidates,' says Thakur. 'Modiji had come to Thakur Nagar and

promised us the CAA. Result? Wherever Matuas are present, in Balaghat, Bongaon, Barrackpore, Hoogly, Bishnupur, Durgapur, Malad, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakhin Dinajpur, Cooch Bihar, the BJP got votes. Thus, eighteen Lok Sabha seats were won in 2019.’

There is no challenge? ‘Every election is a challenge. 2021 Bengal election is a big one. The ground is fertile for change. We have to put up a united front against Mamata Banerjee.’

And avoid internal conflicts like the one I just witnessed, I quip. Shantanu smiles and says he has just been given the petition and that he will discuss with party colleagues the next course of action.

‘How united is the BJP in Bengal?’ I ask him.

Shantanu smiles again.

‘We are united. We need to be more united.’

‘*Aapni reporter* (Are you a reporter)?’ A stout party worker asks me as I come out of Thakur’s house. I nod and ask him how long has he been with the party. ‘I am not with the BJP. I work with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad.’

I ask him if he is also a Matua. ‘I am not. But I am a Namasudra from this village. Please do not mention my name if you are going to write all this.’ I won’t, I promise him.

We make our way to Kamna Sagar, the holy lake of the Matuas where the Mahabaruni Snan (holy bath) takes place around March every year. There are young men splashing about in the water, laughing loudly, and two sadhus on the bank, more sombre, bathing.

We halt at the bank of the lake and I ask the VHP man how united the Matuas are politically. ‘The Thakur family itself is divided. I am sure you know Shantanu Thakur’s own aunt Mamata Bala Thakur is with the Trinamool Congress and was also an MP. The Matuas had voted for the TMC before and Mamata will not give

in so easy. There is talk of reviving the Matua Welfare Board and the TMC also promises a college and a university for Matuas. But the ground has shifted.’

How?

‘See, it is not only because of the CAA that the Matuas have shifted to the BJP. Several Hindu organizations like the VHP have been working in this region, among these people, for a long time. In 2018, Tapan Ghosh’s Hindu Samhiti had organized a huge cultural exhibition in Thakur Nagar, extolling the virtues of Shri Harichand Thakur. The BJP is reaping the benefits of what the Sangh and its affiliates have done over the years. The problem is with the BJP itself. The BJP says it is for the Hindus, and stands for Hindu values. But are there not cow smugglers within the party in these border towns?’

I frown. Cow smugglers in the BJP?

‘Please do not write my name. I will be in trouble. The party has grown fast in the state. There are many new members, leaders from other parties whom the cadre once fought against. They do not even subscribe to our ideology. None of them have gone to sakhas or even believe in Hindutva. They are here because the BJP is all set to take over Bengal.’

I think of my interview with Bengal BJP president Dilip Ghosh in Delhi last month. At his sarkari bungalow in central Delhi, the Bengal BJP president was in a meeting with his predecessor Rahul Sinha, the BJP general secretary tasked with Bengal, Kailash Vijayvargiya, and other leaders from Bengal. Conspicuous by his absence was Mukul Roy, formerly Mamata Banerjee’s number two and now in the BJP to take the party to the number one spot in Bengal.

The two men, Ghosh and Roy, on whom BJP’s 2021 fortunes depend, cannot be more different. Ghosh is a dyed-in-the-wool RSS man. An article in news18.com, titled ‘Mukul Roy and Dilip Ghosh: BJP Banking on

Avowed Garry Sobers and Gabbar Singh of Indian Politics to Deliver Bengal in 2021' on 18 August 2020, profiles Ghosh's rise in the party:

'He left home at the age of 20 and started working for the RSS under the mentorship of veteran Sangh leader Keshav Dixit. His father, Bholanath Ghosh, a social worker and his mother, Puspalata Ghosh, allowed him to work for the RSS in 1984. He was also given the charge of the Sangh in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. After that he became the BJP's Bengal unit president in 2015. The party witnessed a meteoric rise in its fortunes under his leadership in the state. In the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the BJP's vote share went up to 42 per cent from 17 per cent in 2014. From 2011 to 2018, the state's tribal-dominated Jangalmahal region comprising the districts of Jhargram, Bankura, Purulia, Paschim Medinipur and Birbhum was a bastion of the ruling TMC. But with the 2018 panchayat elections and the previous parliamentary polls, the BJP expanded its footprints considerably in these areas.'

As I waited in the ante-room for Ghosh, a news alert on my phone had told me Mukul Roy is unhappy with the party and may be considering a move back to Banerjee's fold. For Bengal, it was big news because Roy is not only a treasure trove of inside information on Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress but has also been instrumental in BJP's stellar performance in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls.

'Everything is okay,' Ghosh had told me as he stepped into the room. But isn't Bengal BJP a divided house? I asked Ghosh. After all, Ghosh and the men in the other room were not always on the same page. And now there was news of a disgruntled Roy rushing back to Bengal in a huff after removing Modi's picture from his Delhi home, a source in Delhi BJP had told me.

'Everything is okay,' Ghosh had insisted. 'The real issue is, Bengal can't even wait for May 2021 to dislodge Mamata Banerjee. From mismanagement of

the coronavirus situation to stealing money from Amphan relief, Mamata has messed it up completely.’

But BJP doesn’t have a chief ministerial face yet. Won’t Bengal ask – if not Mamata Banerjee, then who? ‘No, Bengal wants Mamata Banerjee to go. Every square inch of the state is crying for change.’

The news cycle had turned the next day and Mukul Roy had told the press that his future is safe in the BJP. Exactly a month later, on 26 September 2020, from an ordinary member of the BJP’s national executive, Roy would be promoted to the post of national vice-president of the BJP.

But the man I cannot name from the VHP has a point. No matter what the Bengal BJP chief told me, much is not okay with the party in Bengal, notwithstanding Ghosh’s optimism and Mukul Roy’s clarification. Like every other state unit of any big party, there are factions and frictions. What I saw and heard in Thakurnagar is true for most units of the BJP in Bengal. In district after district, Bengal BJP’s old guard has not been able to digest the influx of Trinamool Congress leaders into the party. It is not just about Dilip Ghosh and Mukul Roy; on the ground the cadre is unable to come to terms with the fact that Trinamool Congress foot soldiers, whom they once bitterly opposed, have now crossed over and are on the same side.

And then there are these unending speculations as to who the next chief minister would be if the BJP were to come to power in 2021. No one knows or can know the view of the RSS on this matter either. The RSS has made deep inroads into the state by ignoring the Bengali Bhadrak and working among the SC and OBC communities, not just in the city but also in the hinterlands like Thakur Nagar, trying to put them in the mainstream, establishing shakhas and giving tickets to SC/ST candidates.

Many forget that West Bengal is the home state of Jana Sangh ideologue Syama Prasad Mookerjee. And it

is only recently, after Narendra Modi became the prime minister in 2014 and after the BJP's spectacular performance in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls which brought Modi back to power once more in Delhi, that Bengal seems to have woken up to the fact that the RSS is a force to contend with in the state. And being notoriously secretive, the RSS, which is almost like a deep state in several parts of the country, never advertised its growing relevance in Bengal.

From 28 February to 1 March 2020, I attend the sixth India Ideas Conclave 2020 organized by the think-tank India Foundation, in Narmada, Gujarat. I was invited as a speaker by Ram Madhav, who was a member of the national executive of the RSS before he came to the BJP. There, several old-timers of the Sangh told me that at no point in India's post-Independence history was the RSS away from Bengal.

'The RSS is like a mother ship to the BJP, which functions like its political wing. If BJP is the froth, the RSS is the coffee,' a senior Sangh functionary told me. 'We ran refugee camps for Bengali Hindu refugees who escaped from East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, with life and limb after Partition. Now the number of RSS sakhas across Bengal is well over 2,000.'

Dilip Ghosh, who has spent more than twenty-five years with the RSS, has seen and been part of the growth of the RSS in Bengal. But given his penchant for making statements to the press that the Bhadrakal Bengali finds hard to digest, a certain section of the media and intelligentsia feels that Bengal's heartthrob Sourav Ganguly is a better fit as the next Bengal CM, even though he is yet to step into politics.

An article in *FirstPost* by journalist Abhijit Majumder on 12 August 2020 headlined 'After Yogi in UP, will a Swami rise in Bengal BJP?' speculated on who BJP's choice of chief minister might be:

'It started as a gently flaming whisper. Now, it is spreading through Facebook posts, hushed talk in

Bengal BJP circles, and local Right-leaning magazines, setting popular imagination on fire. There is intense speculation in Bengal about the probable political rise of a yogi, Swami Kripakarananda Maharaj of Ramakrishna Mission. Hindutva insider groups have already started describing him as the future chief minister of Bengal. It could be a startlingly game-altering move if – and it is a very big if – the BJP leadership can convince him to join politics and be at the forefront of the party’s most crucial clash ahead in 2021, the Battle of Bengal.’

But why did he think the Swami would be a good fit as the next chief minister of Bengal? ‘It’s a do-or-die battle in Bengal and the BJP does not have a credible face to take on Mamata Banerjee’s mass appeal. Sourav Ganguly’s name does the rounds, but despite his tremendous popularity he is ideologically untested in the violent and tumultuous political waters of the state. State chief Dilip Ghosh is a gritty street fighter and organization man, but educated Bengalis dislike his coarseness. You can’t do a Mamata on Mamata. Mukul Roy, despite being a prolific organizer and TMC team-breaker, has a corruption taint and is not fully trusted by core Hindutva leadership and cadre,’ Majumder says. ‘If the BJP manages to spring the unknown weapon named Kripakarananda, it could be a stroke of genius.’

Majumder is a strong Right-wing voice on Twitter (with more than five lakh followers) and off it, and is also writing a book on the ‘New Right’ in India. But Ramakrishna Mission and the BJP denied the news of the Swami as a possible CM candidate for Bengal. On 14 August 2020, *The Times of India* ran an article, ‘RKM, BJP deny monk’s poll entry rumours’, where it said: ‘The Ramakrishna Math and Mission has categorically dismissed speculations that a senior monk of the order has been approached by the BJP for the chief ministerial candidate in the 2021 Assembly elections.... The BJP leadership in Bengal has also debunked the claims.’

BJP's national general secretary Kailash Vijayvargiya also tried to put all speculation about the party's chief ministerial candidate to rest by announcing that the party would not fight the 2021 polls with a chief ministerial face. But in the last week of August, the return of Tathagata Roy, till recently the governor of Meghalaya and BJP's former Bengal boss, to Kolkata has again set tongues rolling. Roy, who describes himself as an unabashedly Right-wing Hindu sociopolitical activist, thinker, writer, and ideologue on Twitter, had a distinguished academic career, having ranked sixth in the Higher Secondary Examination of the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education as a student of St Lawrence High School, Kolkata, and a recipient of the Jagadis Bose National Science Talent Search Scholarship. An engineering graduate, he joined the Indian Railways Service of engineers. He worked as general manager, RITES, and as chief engineer, design, of Metro Railways, Calcutta. Roy also holds a law degree from Calcutta University. He was felicitated as an 'Eminent Engineering Personality' by the Institution of Engineers (India) at the Engineering Congress held at Guwahati in December 2015 and won the distinguished alumni award of the Indian Institute of Engineering Science and Technology, Shibpur, in March 2016. His fans within the Bengal BJP feel his academic and professional achievements will make him more acceptable to the Bhadrakol Bengali than Dilip Ghosh.

'Tathagata Roy is no mass leader, Dada. The BJP can decide the chief ministerial candidate after it wins the election in 2021. The party needs to come together now. Or else, in these factional fights between the Dilip Ghoshes and the Mukul Roys, and the unending speculations over the chief ministerial face, the hard work of the Hindutva fighters on the ground like me will all go to waste. Mamata Banerjee is quietly watching as the BJP is fighting the BJP in Bengal. The BJP should not become its worst enemy in Bengal,' the VHP man tells me.

‘Don’t write my name please. Truth hurts.’

I won’t. I promise again.

6

Nusrat Jahan and the Muslim Question

AUGUST 2020

Nineteen years ago my first newspaper report, ‘Guns n’ Golf in Squalor Slum’, appeared in *Hindustan Times*’ Kolkata edition. The story was about a Muslim-majority shanty town named Madartala, a basti located behind the boundary wall of the Royal Calcutta Golf Club, India’s oldest golf club, in the Golf Gardens area of south Kolkata. Many of the inhabitants of this slum have turned full-time golfers after working as caddies and have won major trophies. Some of them have criminal records. The story got front-page lead space, and since then Madartala’s golfers have been featured by other print journalists and television reporters several times.

The reason I remembered the story all these years later was what Bhondor Ali, a caddie-turned-golfer, who was rechristened John after he turned a full-time golfer, had told me.

In 2001, I had asked Bhondor while writing my story: How did he see himself? As a Muslim? A petty criminal? A golfer? Bhondor? Or John? Or all at once?

‘I see myself as a human being,’ Bhondor had answered.

Bhondor came to mind during my conversation with Nusrat Jahan, in the run-up to the 2021 Assembly elections. The BJP has consistently blamed the ruling Trinamool Congress government of minority appeasement. And there is fear and loathing among some sections of the community over the CAA and a

possible NRC at some future date. Nusrat is the Trinamool Congress MP from Basirhat, a crazily popular Bengali film actor who has now shifted to politics, a Muslim married to a Jain, an eyesore for mullahs on account of her open participation in Hindu festivals, and an ambassador of sorts for Mamata Banerjee's secular brand of politics.

'I see myself as a human being first,' Nusrat Jahan tells me, echoing Bhondor's words from years ago.

I had asked Nusrat if she sees herself as a Bengali first or as a Muslim, an actor or a politician. 'I see myself as a human being first. But I know what you are hinting at. I see no problem in celebrating Hindu festivals or Christian ones for that matter, while not letting go of my faith. You know, I grew up during the nineties in Park Circus, a Muslim-majority area in the heart of Kolkata, and say, there were ten Hindu families surrounded by a hundred Muslim houses. Such was the culture there that we would put up a tarpaulin during Qurbani so that the sensibilities of vegetarian Hindus are not offended. Again, during Kali Pujo, we would hear Shyama Sangeet from Hindu houses and were perfectly okay with it.'

But surely there are divergent voices in the Muslim community? 'Yes, there were people from my community who had expressed their reservations about my marriage, my lifestyle, my participation in Durga Pujo. My father had asked them politely to let me be. But then there are radicals in all religions.'

Does she not sense a sharp polarization in Bengal? 'I do, and that is politics. There is a political agenda behind dividing people along religious lines. There is a party with a lot of money and muscle and media support that is dividing people. Then there are television anchors who call maulvis to their shows every evening and help stereotype Muslims in a certain way. These maulvis neither represent me nor my community.'

Her leader Mamata Banerjee has been accused of minority appeasement. ‘Appeasement? Is caring for minorities a crime? And like a mother, she cares for all her citizens. My party doesn’t discriminate on the basis of religion. That is not who we are. Look at what is happening in the rest of the country. Let’s not make Bengal like that.’

For the Bhadrakol Bengali, Nusrat Jahan is in a sense the very idea of secular Bengal, the sankha-pola-wearing Muslim who celebrates Durga Pujo and Eid with equal elan. But there is a Bengal beyond that multiculturalism of Kolkata.

I interviewed Nusrat in July. In early August, a news report appeared in *New Indian Express* of a Muslim-majority village in Bengal’s Murshidabad district where simple joys of life, like listening to music, playing carom, watching television or buying lottery tickets, are banned. A fatwa by the heads of Adwaita Nagar village, with a population of around 12,000, is armed with penalties for those who flout it. The Trinamool Congress-dominated panchayat chief reportedly said there is nothing wrong about this.

The fatwa was issued on 9 August under the banner of a ‘social reforms committee’, *New Indian Express* reported. ‘We decided to impose a ban on a series of activities to stop the young generation from adopting methods which will lead to their moral and cultural degradation. We cannot allow them to listen to music and watch movies and serials which do not fit our religious culture,’ said Azharul Sheikh, secretary of the Adwaita Nagar Social Reforms Committee, to *New Indian Express* .

Predictably, the report drew sharp criticism on social media from the Hindu Right and a somewhat awkward silence from the centrists and those Left of Centre. There was some fear that West Bengal would be partitioned again on religious grounds.

This took me back to my time in Kolkata. Growing up during the eighties, when the Left Front was in power, there was a sense that Muslims were different, in their names and customs, but they were not the ‘other’. I had Muslim friends in school and college and they were all part of the larger (then) Calcutta story, where every festival, from Saraswati Pujo to Durga Pujo to Eid was celebrated and many Bengalis have grown up eating beef chaanp, chops and parantha in the hotels in the New Market area. Yes, a Hindu–Muslim marriage would perhaps raise a few eyebrows, but that was about it, and the fate of such marriages would often be as good or bad as that of any other marriage! But that was what Calcutta and Bengal has for long remained – a one-city state in terms of perception. Which is why, even if you were politically aware, you never really knew what was happening outside the city. Or sometimes, inside.

Writer-activist Taslima Nasreen reminded the world with her article ‘A sign of hope — Bengali Muslims are finally protesting Mamata’s appeasement politics’ in the *Print*, on 29 June 2009, that even during the rule of the Left, minority appeasement was a given:

‘Imam Barkati of the Tipu Sultan mosque had issued a fatwa against me in broad daylight at a public meeting in Dharamtala (on 10 June 2006), in the heart of the city of Kolkata. He had put a price on my head – for anyone who would murder me. There had been many police officers at that meeting that day, but let alone arresting the imam, no one even questioned why he did something that was ostensibly against the laws of the country. Rather, I remember the police providing him with security and then CM Buddhadeb Bhattacharya and his ministers showering him with favours.’

The *New Indian Express* report on the fatwa in the village in Murshidabad told me how little things have changed between 2006 and 2020, from Left’s rule to Mamata’s.

Quoting the report, I ask Nargis Sattar sometime in mid-August, at her two-bedroom apartment in Anandapur behind Ruby General Hospital, whether there is indeed a problem in West Bengal of what is loosely called ‘minority appeasement’ but what is essentially pandering to those who advocate regressive practices in the Muslim community that end up harming the community itself by keeping it backward.

‘Yes, there is,’ the eighty-year-old retired college teacher tells me. Daughter of freedom fighter and Congress minister Abdus Sattar and wife of a Leftist politician, Nargis is an eminent educationist herself, now spending her retirement life with a keen eye on Bengal’s society and politics. During my freelance journalism days in 2001 in Kolkata, I would often speak to Nargis when I wrote on issues of development at the intersection of religion, caste and politics.

‘Muslims have been othered systematically. I blame Mamata as much as I blame Modi for this. Why did she announce a Rs 2,500-monthly stipend for imams in March 2012? It led to such unnecessary controversy and charges of favouritism. Weren’t there poor Hindu priests also? After BJP’s stellar performance in Bengal in 2019, she tried to balance it by announcing that the Kolkata Municipal Corporation will give Rs 380 to priests for every cremation they preside over in the city. Such measures don’t help Muslims, you know. They just help the BJP more.’

Is BJP’s coming to power in Bengal a fear among Muslims? ‘Oh yes, it is. Mamata is bad, but the BJP is worse. Mamata stereotyped us, infantilized us, but will the BJP allow us to live peacefully? *Arre baba*, why dig up the past? We are not the invaders who came and plundered this land. We may follow a certain faith but we are the same as you. In fact, most Muslims in India, me included, were lower-caste Hindus who converted so that we can live with some dignity that the Hindu caste system took away from us. Why punish us for that today?’

Is saying ‘Bharat Mata ki Jai’ a problem? A kind of forced nationalism for her? ‘Allah is shapeless. You cannot draw the Prophet. We are not allowed to worship any form. But I do not understand why a slogan is important to prove your loyalty to your country. Also, tell me, you are from Kolkata. All these years, when have you heard people say Bharat Mata ki Jai and Jai Shri Ram? These are all Hindi heartland imports being shoved down our throats. I feel most Hindu Bengalis are equally disgusted by this brand of politics.

‘Having said that, I do accept that Muslims are also rigid. They have not allowed their faith to be questioned. Not just Indian Muslims, but Muslims everywhere, which has led the Christian or the Hindu Right wing to establish an easy binary of modern and medieval. We need to look within. Perhaps it is too late now,’ she sighs.

Perhaps they could have raised their voice when writer Taslima Nasreen was banished from West Bengal? On 17 August 2007, Muslim leaders in Kolkata revived an old fatwa against her, ordering her to leave the country and offering an unlimited amount of money to anybody who would kill her. On 21 November, Kolkata saw huge protests against Nasreen. A protest organized by ‘All India Minority Forum’ forced the army’s deployment to restore order in the city. Nasreen had to leave Kolkata, go to Jaipur, and to New Delhi later. Shouldn’t secular Bengal have spoken up then? ‘We should have. We failed her. We failed us,’ says Sattar.

Whatever the stereotype, with a vote share of over 31 per cent in the state, Muslims are extremely crucial in all elections in West Bengal. Nearly 22 per cent of the state’s Muslims live in Kolkata while the majority, nearly 67 per cent, lives in Murshidabad district. The second and third highest Muslim populations by ratio in the state live in North Dinajpur (51 per cent) and Malda (52 per cent), respectively. In North Dinajpur and South Dinajpur, Muslims account for 49.92 per cent and 25 per

cent of the population, respectively, a news18.com report from 10 September 2020 says.

West Bengal accounts for the second highest Muslim population in India – nearly 2.47 crore – which forms around 27.5 per cent of the state’s population, the report says. ‘In the 2016 Assembly polls, TMC had won in almost all the 90 minority-dominated Assembly segments. In the densely Muslim populated areas comprising more than 40 per cent of the electorate – TMC had surged ahead in nearly 60 out of 65 Assembly constituencies,’ it says. Now, Asaduddin Owaisi of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen has spotted an opportunity in Bengal, and a minor swing in the Muslim vote share towards the AIMIM could turn the tables for TMC in 2021 and work in BJP’s favour, political watchers predict.

I take Sattar’s leave and drive towards Khidderpore, located in the central-west part of the city, famous for ‘Fancy Market’, once the hub of smuggled foreign goods. Now, Fancy Market and the five-star Shopping Complex keep all kinds of products from Bangkok, Singapore and Hong Kong, real and imitation, including electronic gadgets, clothes, perfumes, accessories, DVDs and food products.

It is difficult to find parking space in Khidderpore. The sea of skull caps, with hardly any protective masks in sight, the per capita density of shoppers and passersby, the names on the hoardings and the women in black burqas bring alive all the stereotypes of a ‘Muslim area’. I make my way to the tiny Hanuman temple that stands a little ahead of Fancy Market. It is late afternoon, and thirty-two-year-old Vinod Kumar Pandey is managing the temple as the priest, while his uncle has gone out.

How is it to look after a temple in a Muslim area? ‘All is good,’ Pandey tells me, somewhat suspicious. I introduce myself and he offers me a chatai.

Do you have a steady flow of visitors in the temple? ‘We do. This is a Muslim area, but there are Hindu bastis in between. Bengali Hindus as well as Hindus from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh stay here. They come to offer prayer.’

And the two communities are cordial with each other? ‘Are you going to write a newspaper report quoting me?’ No, I tell him, a book on Bengal elections. ‘Aah, the BJP will come this time.

Things will change.’ Maybe so, but are things cordial between Hindus and Muslims here? ‘Things are managed, you know.

Peace is forced down. Not that things don’t happen here. A Brahmin Banerjee girl suddenly becomes a biwi. The father has to accept. Peace prevails. You Bengalis are peace loving. But those of us who have settled here from UP and Bihar will not accept all this after 2021!’

Accept what? ‘Hindu girls becoming wives in Muslim homes, the population boom in their community, the disregard for our religion.’

But this is a Hanuman temple right in the middle of a Muslim area! A shining example of religious tolerance. ‘The temple is at least sixty years old and the premises extended to the end of the road. Gradually, the plot was encroached upon and all that stands now is the temple. And then there is beef being sold just around the corner!’ But beef is not banned in West Bengal. ‘Maybe not, but why don’t they care for our sentiments?’

Just around the corner, I ask the man selling beef how much the meat is per kg. ‘Two hundred. Very good meat. How much do I pack for you?’ I decline and ask him if things will change if there is a new government next year.

He looks me in the eye, smiles, says: ‘*Aaye koi bhi, theek se rahe* . (Let whoever has to come, come, but rule properly).’

7

Purbo, Paschim, Bankim or Rise of the Right

AUGUST 2020

As director of Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation, Dr Anirban Ganguly time-travels. With an office adjacent to the BJP national headquarters at 11, Ashoka Road, Delhi, Dr Ganguly digs Bengal's past as much as he engages himself with the 2021 Bengal elections and the future of his people, who he believes have long suffered as a result of bloody history and bad politics. Unlike many talk-circuit liberals today who believe the rise of the Right in Bengal is a recent phenomenon coinciding with the rise of Narendra Modi in national politics, this author, political activist and public policy analyst reminds me that the Bengali Hindu Homeland Movement in late 1946, led by Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee, among others, aimed to create a homeland, which is today West Bengal, for Bengali Hindus within the Indian Union. This was in the wake of the Muslim League's proposal and campaign to include the entire province of Bengal within Pakistan, which was to be the homeland for the Muslims of British India.

Over the years, I've met Dr Ganguly at some of his lecture sessions and I remember him for being the first person who recommended British conservative author and political commentator Douglas Murray's *The Strange Death of Europe* to me as essential reading.

'What is happening to Europe, the death of their civilization as they know it due to an influx of refugees from war-ravaged Islamic countries among other factors, is weirdly true for Bengal. It is easy to sit in

Kolkata and talk of secularism. One needs to travel in Bengal to know what goes on. It takes something as simple as a wish to celebrate Durga Pujo in a constituency that is Muslim majority and the idea of a secular Bengal falls apart. Take the Deganga riots as example,' Dr Ganguly tells me.

The 2010 riots in Deganga in North 24 Parganas district saw shops and houses burned and temples desecrated. DNA newspaper would list it under '6 worst communal riots under the UPA government'.

'The Deganga riots had begun on Monday, 6 September, and continued for several days. 24 people were hurt and several houses and properties destroyed when clashes broke out between Hindu and Muslim communities in the Basirhat sub-division of North 24 Parganas, about 150 km from Kolkata,' dnaindia.com had reported.

This was in September 2010, when the Left Front was still ruling West Bengal. Mamata Banerjee would come to power the next year.

'She did worse than the Left Front. In order to hold on to power in Bengal, Mamata Banerjee has given a tacit nod to Islamists in Bangladesh!' Dr Ganguly tells me.

Sensing my disbelief, Dr Ganguly says he takes full responsibility for his statement. 'The Left had managed to put a veneer of respectability around minority appeasement. They never tinkered with Hindu festivals or touched Bengal's pujo culture. But under Mamata Banerjee, there is naked appeasement and pandering to Muslims. Remember the jono sabha at Maidan in 2013?'

I do. It had made big news in the national media.

On 30 March 2013, sixteen Islamic organizations came together at the Maidan, one of the largest public grounds in Kolkata, in protest against the war crimes trial in Bangladesh and in support of the vice-president

of the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, one of the prime accused in the 1971 genocide in Bangladesh.

An article headlined ‘A rally for war criminals: Why are TMC, Left silent?’ published in rediff.com in 2013, described the gathering: ‘It was astounding to see a huge and belligerent crowd gather from all over the state to support one of the best known razakars and collaborators with the Pakistan Army in its genocide against Muslims and Hindus in East Pakistan. Speakers addressing the gathering attempted to whip up hysterical support for the Jamaat and its leaders and pledged that just as West Bengal’s Muslims prevented Salman Rushdie from the entering the state and hounded out Taslima Nasreen in 2007, they would generate a movement against the pro-war crime trial bloggers in Bangladesh and would take on their supporters with the same zeal. They even threatened to block any future visit of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India.’

‘It was Mamata Banerjee who allowed that jono sabha to take place,’ Dr Ganguly says. ‘The very next year, the Khagragarh blast in Bardhaman district took place on 2 October. Mamata, who owes a major part of her victory in the Assembly polls to Muslim votes, is opposed to even probe into the activities of the radicals.

‘The rise of the Right in Bengal has come as a reaction to this. With unchecked infiltration, the desecration and demolition of temples, molestation and forced marriage of Hindu girls, the village Hindu had no one to turn to except the Right-wing organizations that worked on the ground with them, the VHP and the RSS. They are here because there is no one else to turn to. The police here will not save Hindus, neither will the local press cover these incidents. I get to know of these incidents from my karyakartas every time I visit Bengal. Hence, from Sunderbans to Murshidabad, village Hindus turned to the Right in large numbers as Kolkata’s chattering classes looked the other way. And

this is why the BJP is all set to topple the Mamata government in 2021. That is largely where the votes will come from. Like they did in 2019 when BJP won eighteen of the forty-two Lok Sabha seats. And once that happens, take my word for it, Bengal will again reclaim its lost heroes, whether it is Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee or Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose or my great-great-grandfather Upendranath Bandyopadhyay or the great Bankim Chandra, whom Leftist historians have given the short shrift.’

A leading revolutionary of his time, Upendranath Bandyopadhyay was one of the prime accused in the Alipore bomb case, whose trial was held at Alipore Sessions Court in Calcutta, between May 1908 and May 1909. The trial followed the attempt on the life of Presidency Magistrate Douglas Kingsford in Muzaffarpur by Bengali nationalists Khudiram Bose and Prafulla Chaki in April 1908, which was recognized by the Bengal police as linked to attacks against the Raj in the preceding years, including attempts to derail the train carrying Lieutenant-Governor Sir Andrew Fraser in December 1907. ‘Bandyopadhyay was sent to the Cellular jail in the Andamans. But he would survive Kala Pani and become a writer in later life. His *Autobiography of Exile* would find mention in Veer Savarkar’s writings. He would also work closely with Syama Prasad Mookerjee as one of the founding members of the Bengal Partition League. But how much do you hear of him today?’ Dr Ganguly asks.

A week later I am at filmmaker Srijit Mukherji’s duplex apartment in south Kolkata’s Lake Gardens, looking at posters of his films on the walls of the spacious drawing room-cum-study. Among them is one of *Gumnaami*, his latest on the mystery of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose’s death, based on the Mukherjee Commission hearing. I have known Srijit for some years now, through friends who cover cinema in Bengal, and whenever time has permitted we have met to talk culture and politics, and Bengal’s obsession with both.

Thanks to Srijit's films, Bengali cinema has more to offer than crude imitations of Bollywood. Srijit has taken this task rather seriously by choosing to work on a diverse range of stories. *Gumnaami* is an interesting addition to his oeuvre as Bengalis across generations have steadfastly refused to relegate Bose to the dustbin of history, believing that the airplane crash in Taiwan on 18 August 1945 did not kill the freedom fighter. *Gumnaami* has helped keep that buzz alive by questioning whether Netaji had survived the crash and come back to India as the saint Gumnaami Baba. Many other revolutionary figures from Bengal from around Bose's time have not been so lucky, as Dr Ganguly had rightly said.

As Srijit and I turn back to the Bengal that was, yet to be partitioned, much to the amusement of his wife, the Bangladeshi actress-activist Rafiath Rashid Mithila, our time machine lands on the bloody streets of Bowbazar in central Calcutta on the morning of 16 August 1946.

The much-vaunted secular fabric of the city is being torn to shreds as Muslims and Hindus are attacking each other. An unlikely figure emerges as a saviour of his people, Gopal Mukerjee or Gopal Patha, as he is remembered by some, a Brahmin who sold meat in central Kolkata, a feeble-limbed Bengali who took on Muslim League rioters during the Week of the Long Knives after Jinnah announced Direct Action Day.

A year later, when Gandhi would appeal to him to lay down arms, Patha would say: 'I will not lay down even a nail if it has been used for defending Hindu honour.' The statement would become so popular that it would be remembered down the generations and land up in Wikipedia on the page on Gopal Patha! According to Wikipedia, a self-professed admirer of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Patha would dedicate his later life to social service. Forgotten by history, Patha's name would strike fear in the hearts of his opponents, yet, curiously, he harboured no ill feelings towards Muslims, insisting

that he took to arms only to save Hindus from Muslim rioters.

‘Even if you have to vilify him, you have to know him first,’ Srijit tells me. ‘Patha’s fascinating life makes for a good book and maybe even a film. Direct Action Day was a bloody chapter in Bengal’s Partition history and Gopal Patha a tall figure now dwarfed by history writers. You should write a book on Gopal Patha. His is an interesting life.’

The conversation with Srijit makes me wonder how Gopal Patha would be viewed by Bengalis today, now that religious identity is back on the table as the state readies for the Big Battle of 2021.

Next morning, I call up local reporters whom I know in the city and ask if they know anyone in Patha’s family. I get the contact details of Gopal Patha’s grandson Santanu Mukherjee, call him up and get an appointment to meet him that very day.

I set off for Bowbazar after lunch.

Time has stopped still at the tiny shop opposite Hind Cinema – the serpentine lane that leads to Santanu Mukherjee’s house, the same house where his legendary grandfather Gopal Patha lived and died, the houses around it, the shops and the tea stall. It looks like the Kolkata of the 1940s.

If Srijit were to make a film on the life of Gopal Patha, he wouldn’t need to make an elaborate set, this part of Kolkata is almost the way it was, precious little has changed.

Santanu Mukherjee himself is past continuous, present tense. He has his own businesses, but the grandfather’s old mutton shop is still there, as also the need to look out for the interests of ‘his people’.

‘Is it wrong to speak about Hindus? Communal flare-ups may not be that common now in Kolkata as they were during my grandfather’s time, but they are outside

the city. Trinamool Congress government has turned a blind eye to the reality of Bengal. Minority appeasement has reached its peak and you see the problems created by the porous border with Bangladesh, the rise in the Muslim population in the state and the crime rate. They are united, we Hindus are not. As Gopal Patha's grandson, I will never be anti-Muslim, but neither will I turn a blind eye to what is happening in Bengal.'

Steaming cups of tea have been offered and downed as we chat inside Santanu Mukherjee's tiny office where there is a bust of Gopal Patha, as also a largish sculpture of Netaji Subhas Bose, which Santanu says was made by Gopal Patha himself. 'This is not the Bengal my grandfather fought to save. The city has changed. The state has changed.'

What does he see as the solution? 'BJP should come to Bengal in 2021. That is the only hope for this state. No political party is without flaws. But the BJP does look out for Hindu interests. We have lived through three decades of Left rule and now two terms of Trinamool Congress, and in the name of secularism, one community has been given a free pass. Even within the city, do you see anyone wearing masks in the Muslim areas as Covid-19 rages? Do you see them wearing helmets when they ride bikes? No rule is applicable to them,' says Santanu Mukherjee.

I ask Santanu if that is enough reason to bring in the BJP. 'The prime minister talks about *sabka saath sabka vikas sabka vishwas*. He is yet to live up to his promise fully, but he is trying. His party is trying,' Santanu says.

The next day, I make my way to meet the grandson of another historical figure that history has forgotten. The double-storeyed green house in Sister Nivedita Sarani under Baruipur sub-division is home to the family of Jogendranath Mandal, one of the founding fathers of Pakistan, the country's first minister of law and labour and also the second minister of commonwealth and Kashmir affairs. Mandal, a Dalit Hindu, had believed in

Dalit-Muslim unity and opted for Jinnah's Muslim League instead of Nehru's Congress, and for undivided Pakistan instead of India. But in the new country, as time passed, he saw Dalit-Muslim unity turn into a sham, and riots, rapes and forced conversions become a daily reality. Betrayed, Mandal had come back to India where he died a broken man. I had researched Mandal while writing my book *Blood Island* on the Marichjhapi massacre of 1978-79, where thousands of Dalit Hindus from East Pakistan were raped, maimed and killed on a tiny island in the Sunderbans by the police allegedly under orders from the Left Front government. Beyond the sketchy details on Wikipedia, there are also books on Mandal in Bengali that I had read, which are now out of publication. If Mandal were alive it would have been interesting to know if he had lost faith in Hindu-Muslim unity in Bengal after what happened to him in East Pakistan.

Grandson Abhijit Mandal, though, insists on nuance over hyperbole in the matter of the Hindu-Muslim divide that he sees in Bengal today. As we sit on the bank of his fish pond where he rears fish such as catla, telepia and rui, Mandal tells me immigration is an economic issue and not a religious one. 'People cross over looking for a livelihood and not to create communal tension. A divide along religious lines is being forcibly created for political mileage. I don't want to name any political party, but you know who I am talking about. Yes, West Bengal today is getting divided again along religious lines and I find that deeply disturbing. My grandfather's experience in that side of Bengal, which is now Bangladesh, cannot become my experience today. I won't fall for the easy binary of us versus them. I feel we need to examine the sociopolitical reasons for the religious divide more deeply.'

So, what are those sociopolitical reasons that Mandal is talking about?

He won't say. 'I am really not comfortable discussing politics,' is all I can get from him.

Whatever the reasons may be, just how deep rooted the ecosystem of the Right is in Bengal is evident from Snigdhendu Bhattacharya's report in *The Caravan* magazine – 'How one-teacher Ekal schools helped the spread of Hindutva in rural West Bengal', published on 10 October 2020. And it is not just because of the alleged minority appeasement of the Left Front government before and of Mamata Banerjee now that Dr Ganguly was alluding to. Bhattacharya writes:

'Based on my travels in the state over the past year and a half and on conversations with several high ranking and ground-level functionaries of the Ekal Vidyalayas (free coaching centres backed by the RSS), the Friends of Tribal Society (a non-profit backed by the RSS), Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (the RSS wing that works in Adivasi areas), the Rashtriya Sewa Bharati (the Sangh's social service arm) and the Vidya Bharati Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Sansthan (the saffron organization's education wing), there are around five thousand and four hundred such coaching centres in West Bengal as of August 2020. These humble one-teacher, informal schools, running on temple or residential courtyards and unclaimed open spaces in nondescript and impoverished villages have quietly helped the Hindutva nationalists grow deep roots in Bengal. The schools are merely the starting point of the Sangh's aim of influencing every other major aspect of the entire village's life – education, health, economy, environment, self-empowerment, culture, sense of morality and the religion they follow.

'The Ekal Vidyalayas were the first such endeavour in West Bengal. But their genesis comes from a school-centric village-development programme by the RSS that first began in what is present day Jharkhand, in the mid-eighties. This was known as the Ekal Abhiyan, or the Ekal movement, and one-teacher schools formed the nucleus of this Ekal project. While the initial thrust of the Ekal project had been in Adivasi areas, over the years the movement extended its activities to villages

where people from the Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Communities dominate the demography. It is by far one of the biggest public-outreach programmes of the Sangh Parivar... .

‘The model was a simple one to begin with. It started with the setting up of a free coaching centre, following which guardians of the students and other villagers would slowly be involved in activities around religion and moral values – by the mid-nineties, organic farming, health awareness and economic self-reliance had been added as components. As the project expanded, other organizations were created to look after various aspects such as funding, ideology, logistics and religious indoctrination. So, organizations such as the Friends of Tribal Society, among others, would set up the informal educational institute, and other entities would be roped in for all the allied activities, creating a vast network of inter-connected organizations.’

This is something multicultural Kolkata would not be aware of, in the same way the talking heads of the city would not be aware of how caste has been a big reason for the surreptitious rise of the Right in Bengal.

Avishek Biswas, assistant professor of English literature at Vidyasagar College in Kolkata and a researcher of oral histories, has been working on subject of Dalits of Bengal for his just- submitted Ph. D. thesis with Jadavpur University, titled ‘Heard History, Unheard Voices: Oral History of Namasudra Partition Survivors’. I meet him at the Café Coffee Day Lounge in Park Street. This is the first time I am meeting the young professor, though we have been friends on Facebook for over a year and I have since admired Biswas’s academic rigour in pursuing the Dalit history of Bengal.

I tell him that with his buzz-cut hair, he looks more like a Srijit Mukherji hero than an academic. Biswas laughs out aloud. We order our coffees and sip into Partition caste politics 2.0.

‘Jogendranath Mandal believed in Dalit–Muslim unity, went with Jinnah and got betrayed. Before Partition, Dalits and Muslims could have been clubbed as subalterns suffering under upper-caste Hindus, most of whom were from the land-owning class. Post-Partition, however, Muslims in independent Pakistan looked at Dalits simply as Hindus and marginalized them. Which is why the CAA today becomes a game-changing legislation by the NDA government, as many Hindus in Bangladesh are Dalit Hindus who had stayed behind.’

What about West Bengal? Biswas says more than three decades of communist rule in Bengal had tried to erode caste as the Left parties spoke of a casteless, classless state. ‘The Left never played caste politics openly. It spoke of class enemies – the haves versus the have-nots. But now the Right Wing has, in a sense, identified the compulsion of the Dalit to be part of a larger social structure, because no matter what the Left would have you believe, caste exists in Bengal. The Right Wing has its focus on Dalits and OBCs, who are often on the receiving end of communal flare-ups in the villages.’

I remind Biswas that the current Bengal BJP chief, Dilip Ghosh, comes from the OBC community and this in itself sends out a powerful message to the backward castes who have seen only upper-caste chief ministers in Bengal till now. The large number of shakhas that the RSS has opened in rural Bengal, the homestay by RSS pracharaks at Dalit and OBC houses when they go about their work, and their attempts to mainstream Dalits and OBCs into a larger Hindu superstructure, led to a surge in the BJP’s votes in 2019. And that could well happen again.

Biswas says while that may well be true, the Dalit has to ask himself if he wants to be part of such a superstructure. ‘Would Ambedkar have approved of this?’ he asks me.

Does it matter to the ‘non-academic’ Bengali Dalit what Ambedkar would have thought of his political choice today? I ask Biswas.

‘Maybe not,’ he smiles.

Biswas does agree, though, that Hindu consciousness is firmly on the table in a land where Marx was once God.

Perhaps one needs a different prism through which to see how the Hindu identity has become a rallying point in the Bengal of today. Aroon Shah, whom I follow on Twitter, calls himself ‘more Bengali than a Bengali’. ‘We are Gujaratis who came to Bengal in the nineteenth century and made the state our home. Today my sister works for a bank in Switzerland and I am into event management, but my family has always been into business and managed to survive the Left Front rule when businesses fled from the state. My ancestors started the Ochhavalal Mathuradas and Co. in 1899, the only foreign exchange brokers in Kolkata who were Indian. Over time, we got culturally assimilated with the people of the state and I can read, write and speak Bangla like a Bengali. Unlike a Bengali, I do see clearly why there is rise of the Right in Bengal. It has been a long time coming,’ Shah tells me.

Shah says it is perhaps because of his Gujarati genes that growing up, he observed certain things that many Bengali girls and boys would not, even though they had similar experiences. ‘There was no communalism, but I had a sense of my Hindu identity. Maybe three decades of the Left had diluted that identity among city Hindus here in Kolkata. Simple things, for instance, that I would observe. Growing up in north Kolkata’s Ganesh Avenue, with its old houses and shops, rather unlike the newly developed south Kolkata, we would see the process of “othering” from very early on in life. At cricket matches, say, somebody would say Jai Bajrang Bali, not as a war cry or a communal statement, but just to express joy. Immediately, the Muslim boys in the group

would say “Ya Ali”, which was fine, by the way. But they would then attack us for saying Bajrang Bali in the first place. In the Muslim majority areas of Kolkata, not just Ganesh Avenue, but say Chitpur, Chandni, Rippon Street, if you happened to be a Hindu, you would know that “us versus them” has always existed. The BJP didn’t bring it with them.’

I tell Shah my childhood in the city was quite different. ‘That is because you are a south Kolkata boy. It is modern, more cosmopolitan. When I grew up and shifted to the south of the city, I realized it is a different world. But the problem is if such a stark communal divide exists right under our nose inside the city, imagine what happens outside Kolkata. As a Gujarati, I speak fluent Bangla today. I say “jol” for water, but many Bengali Muslims will say “paani”. It is small things like this that the Kolkata Bengali Hindu would fail to notice, as it is fashionable to be secular and avoid the obvious. Communism made Bengalis tone down their Hindu identity while throwing soft balls at Muslims. Suddenly, after the BJP won eighteen seats in Bengal in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, people are saying this is a paradigm shift in Bengal’s politics and asking how did this happen. Well, this was always happening!’

‘There is also renewed interest in Bengal’s political history,’ says Avik Sarkar, ‘and a crying need to change the discourse, both social and political.’ A graduate in political science from Kolkata’s St Xavier’s College, Sarkar has researched the history of Mathua leader Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, who successfully mobilized the Dalits of Bengal in favour of a Bengali Hindu homeland and talked about the betrayal of Gandhi and Nehru in resettling Scheduled Caste refugees in India.

Sarkar’s interest in reexamining Bengal’s political history peaked with the Dhulagarh riots, which happened on 13 and 14 December 2016. ‘Why do Muslims get away with such brazen disregard for law and order? Porous borders and the Left Front and now

Mamata Banerjee's political need to keep growing the Muslim votebank has resulted in Murshidabad becoming Muslim majority, with 66.2 per cent, Maldah with 51.3 per cent, Uttar Dinajpur with 50 per cent, as of 2011. When will this stop? From Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay to Syama Prasad Mookerjee, from literature to politics, Bengal had a robust Rightist past that has been deliberately kept out of our collective consciousness by Leftist historians. How many Bengalis today talk of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath* ? (Chattopadhyay's seminal work of fiction, based on the devastating Bengal famine of 1770 under the British Raj and the Sanyasi rebellion. Chattopadhyay imagined untrained but disciplined Sanyasi soldiers fighting and defeating experienced British soldiers.)

‘Or, if Syama Prasad Mookerjee was alive today, the Marichjhapi massacre would not have happened. He would have ensured that Hindus in West Bengal were safe. With RSS spreading across Bengal and the BJP's electoral rise from the ground, Bengal will see a new dawn in 2021.’

One of the things that stuck out during my interviews for this chapter was Aroon Shah's knowledge of the Marichjhapi massacre. Shah is barely thirty years old. The massacre happened during 1978-79, when he was not even born. And yet he tells me he observes Marichjhapi Day every year on the 31 January. (It was on this day in 1979 that police opened fire on unarmed refugees living on the island.) A young Gujarati man is aware of post-independent India's worst massacre, if you go by number of victims, but the average Bengali is not.

I knew of Marichjhapi and wrote a book on it as I happened to know a survivor who narrated those stories to me when I was a child. But even when the massacre was taking place Kolkata, its chattering classes were oblivious of it. It is not that nobody knew; there were some newspaper reports, and later, research articles

published in foreign universities. But, as Bibek Debroy, writer, economist, chairman of the prime minister's economic council, had said at the launch of my book *Blood Island*, Bhadrak Bengalies did not react to Marichjhapi because it happened to Dalit Bengalies. Despite their pretence to be otherwise, the Bhadrak is class biased and caste conscious and hides it all behind a secular, intellectual front – that was Debroy's contention. But even if that is not wholly true, is it a fact that secular Kolkata has been mostly oblivious of what is happening right under its nose? For instance, the riots that Dr Ganguly spoke to me about did happen and were forgotten.

The chattering classes didn't really care to examine the caste and communal faultlines that run deep in Bengal, choosing to talk instead of a secular ethos, which is perhaps to be found mostly in Kolkata. How many people in Kolkata know what Snigdhendu Bhattacharya found out about the spread of RSS in every nook and cranny of Bengal? Even political analysts in Kolkata talk of the rise of the Right after the BJP's spectacular performance in Bengal in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. Bengal is not Kolkata and Kolkata is not Bengal. Which is perhaps why the rise of the Right comes as such a surprise to some sections of Bengalies.

Chotolok versus Bhadralok

SEPTEMBER 2020

The crowd has thinned at the tea stall next to the Shiv Mandir near Santoshpur Lake in south Kolkata. Covid-19 must be the main reason why the number of people who turn up in the evenings here to chat with Manoranjan Byapari while sipping steaming lebu cha (lemon tea) has reduced; the other reason, the writer-activist tells me, is jealousy. ‘*Sojjho korte parche na, jaano dadabhai*, (They are not able to digest it, my brother),’ Byapari tells me, talking about his appointment as chairman of the just-formed Dalit Sahitya Academy by Mamata Banerjee.

Even without his current elevation, Byapari’s life is stuff for the movies, a desi Shantaram’s, if you will. Born in 1950 in East Pakistan in a Namsudra family, Byapari migrated to West Bengal with his parents when he was only three years old. Hunger drove him from place to place, from odd job to odd job, from shanty house to prison.

He was, at various times, a rickshaw puller, a refugee who was sodomized by a policeman, and a Naxal who survived the bullet and became a writer. A self-confessed ‘Chotolok’, he has cleaned Bhadralok toilets as well as written books that have won him awards and accolades at international literature festivals.

Byapari knows Bengal downside up. His book *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit* was the toast of the Jaipur Literature Festival in 2018. Byapari’s writings would have remained hidden

under the backseat of the cycle rickshaw he pulled had it not been for a chance encounter with activist-writer Mahasweta Devi. She helped his books get published, opening the gates for protest literature in the genteel world of Kolkata's culture keepers. That, though, did not do much for Byapari, who spent twenty-three long years after that as a cook in a state-run school.

I met Byapari first when I was writing *Blood Island* and he became the subject of a chapter. Standing near this same tea stall three years ago, Byapari and I had gone back to 1978, to a small island called Marichjhapi in the Sunderbans, where the Left Front government had carried out one of the worst massacres in the history of independent India. Byapari is one of the survivors of that massacre, a witness to the unspeakable horrors that were unleashed on the island.

‘Why do you think Jyoti Basu (then chief minister of West Bengal) could do what he did in Marichjhapi? Because he knew we were Chotolok (lower class/caste). We do not matter. If there were upper-caste refugees on that island, the Left Front could not have done what they did,’ Byapari had told me.’

Now, he fears worse is coming. ‘There was caste bias in the Left leaders. But they had learnt how to hide it well after Marichjhapi. Now it is all out in the open. Manu is walking around us, head held high,’ Byapari tells me.

His phone has not stopped ringing since 14 September, the day when Mamata Banerjee announced his chairmanship of the Academy, which the BJP sees as a sop to Bengal's Dalits in order to stop them from voting against her party in 2021. ‘Didi (Banerjee) wants to promote Dalit literature, set up a library and address issues related to my people. For the first time, such initiative is being taken in West Bengal. We will try to bring everyone working on Dalit literature under one umbrella. I plan to set up one such institute in all districts of the state with headquarters in Kolkata.’

Why did Mamata Banerjee elevate him to this post so late in her term? Elections are due next year and Bengal has population that is 23.5 per cent Dalit, which may make or mar Mamata's fortunes. Is it not natural for tongues to wag? 'Dadabhai, Mamata is a Banerjee, a Brahmin, a lady from the upper caste. Yet she has taken this revolutionary step. Why ascribe motive? Is this not a positive step for people like me? These Bhadrak (members of the genteel society) used to hide caste in their heart and speak about the upliftment of the Dalit. Now, thanks to the Manuvadi politics that is being practised openly, they are showing off their sacred thread. Yet, Mamata has shown the guts to open a Dalit Shaitya Academy.'

Who is practising Manuvadi politics? 'You know the answer very well. Why make me say it. The Chatterjee, the Banerjee and the Chakraborty will vote for the BJP. There, I said it!' Byapari winks. 'Where will the Dalit go?'

I tell Byapari the BJP has made considerable inroads among Bengal's Dalits. I tell him what I heard in Thakurnagar, about my interactions with Shantanu Thakur and the Matuas of the village.

'They are being fooled, Dadabhai. Imagine how deep caste is, even in Bengal. It pervaded Left politics in India. All the top leaders of the Left were upper castes. You know, I won so many awards for my books outside. Not a single newspaper in Kolkata reviewed my books. It is just that they won't abuse you for being a lower caste to your face. Now, think of the BJP. It is a Manuvadi party. It not only believes in the caste system, it perpetuates caste. They understand how important the Dalit vote is and so they are catering to five per cent of the Dalit population, hoping to win the votes of 100 per cent of us. But tell me this, why are Dalit activists in jail? You only need to look at the entire Bhima-Koregaon controversy to know how much hatred the BJP and the RSS have for the Dalit. Mamata Banerjee, on the other hand, speaks our tongue, feels our pain. She

defeated the Leftists, she will defeat the Manuvadi politicians too.’

So, will 2021 bring Mamata back? ‘She will be back. Have no doubt about that. Do not go by what the BJP is saying. The Chotolok, the man on the ground, knows the true nature of the BJP. He knows Mamata may have made some mistakes, but she is not here to turn Bengal into Cuba or Vietnam, she is here for the long haul, to change Bengal for the better gradually. The Chotolok vote is with Mamata and that is a large chunk. As is the Muslim vote. It is only the Bhadrlok, the hypocrite who spoke against caste before while being casteist within, who will vote for the BJP.’

Byapari rues the open casteism in Bengal society now. ‘That is the contribution of the Manuvadi BJP. At least, during thirty-four years of Left rule, the Bengali did not talk about caste so openly. Now, even old friends have started attacking me. Someone I dedicated one of my books to, a friend for years, recently asked why a Dalit Sahitya Academy is being opened. Why not a Brahmin Sahitya Academy! Imagine. *Arre bhai* , why do you need an academy for Brahmins? Brahmins are in all academies anyway! All these people are praying for the BJP to come to power, Dadabhai!’

Byapari may have his reasons for opposing the BJP in Bengal. But, a *Times of India* report of 25 May 2019 says five of the ten Lok Sabha seats reserved for Scheduled Castes in Bengal went to the BJP, showing that the party has made big dents in the community’s Trinamool support base:

‘Prime Minister Narendra Modi drove a wedge between the two communities by bringing in religion as part of the Dalit identity. PM Modi and Amit Shah used two tools – National Register of Citizens and Citizenship (Amendment) Bill – to distinguish between infiltrators and Hindu refugees. Modi assured citizenship to the Matuas and the NRC proposal consolidated the migrant Hindus from Bangladesh who

left their home complaining of religious persecution. Many of them have apathy, if not antipathy, towards Muslim infiltrators from Bangladesh.’

Byapari may be right about one thing though. Caste, so far visible only in newspaper advertisements for brides and grooms, is being talked about in Bengal.

In the first week of September 2020, Dr Maroona Murmu commented on a friend’s Facebook post, saying students’ lives were being put at risk by the central government’s decision to hold the NEET-JEE examinations during the Covid-19 pandemic. ‘All I had said was that life is long and that it did not matter if exams were not held for one year in view of Covid-19,’ she later told *The Hindu* .

A student of Bethune College, Paromita Ghosh, reminded Dr Murmu that she should not comment on the matter since she had benefited from reservation. (Dr Murmu belongs to a tribal community.) Soon afterwards, Ghosh put up a Facebook post of her own saying she had put a ‘Santhali Murmu’ in place. She wrote:

‘Maroona Murmu, what surprised me was the fact that Jadavpur University has professors with such mentality. I am astonished. Let me brief you a bit on the difference between “quota” and “unquota” (non-quota). To know that life is more important than an academic year, one doesn’t require to be a professor. It’s not about lagging one year but about how some unqualified and incompetent people take undue advantage of the reservation system and their caste is now helping them be successful, while the deserving lag behind for ever. Our parents are stepping out, taking a risk every day to get us food, while some are sitting at home and getting paid for doing nothing.’

Argumentative Bengalis jumped onto the bandwagon, either supporting or opposing Dr Murmu on social media. Among the first to come out in solidarity with Dr Murmu was the head of the Bengali Department of

Bethune College, but she also got trolled and deleted her post.

Dr Murmu's friend Subhas Saren Sipahi put up this post: 'Dr Murmu has repeatedly spoken up publicly about casteist and anti-Adivasi violence in bhadrolok society. For this she is often attacked publicly by bhadroloks ... We are looking for organizations and individuals who will publicly and legally move with the case as Dr Murmu is completely exhausted after fighting on so many fronts.'

So, will this binary play a decisive role in 2021? The binary of the essentially Manuvadi Bhadrlok and the Chotolok whom they despise? There is no easy answer to this. Firstly, who are the Bhadrlok? In Bengali society, one born to a higher caste doesn't automatically get to be a Bhadrlok. It is the books you have read, the films you have watched, the culture magazines you subscribe to, the cultural references you can drop in conversations, the universality of your moorings and much more that get you entry into the Bhadrlok club.

Born a Banerjee (Brahmin), Mamata, whose appeal had traditionally been with the rural masses, tried hard to step into this club ever since she became chief minister in 2011. The Bhadrlok Marxists, her arch rivals before the BJP entered the political fray in Bengal, had dubbed her a Chotolok, calling her everything from *thike jhi* (part-time house help) to prostitute. Perhaps to shake off that image, or maybe purely out of love for literature, she even took to writing poetry.

'Tomar naam ? Hello Hi (Your name? Hello Hi)

Baba r naam? See you bye (Dad's name? See you bye)

Ma er naam? Hi Fi (Mom's name? Hi fi)

Boner naam? Sweety Pie (Sister's name? Sweety Pie)

Jaccho kothay? Fest korte (Where are you going? To a fest)

Phirbe kokhon? Ghum ghumote (When will you be back? To sleep)

Khabar menu? Chili chilte (Dinner menu? Chilli chilte)

Pet bhorbe? Chips thandate (Will that suffice? There's cold chips also)

Shorir kemon? Ekebare slim (How's your health? Very slim)

Shorir chorcha koro? Ache toh gym (Do you take care of your health? I gym)

Eto roga? Otai toh dream (So slim? That is the dream)

Osuk korle? Ache mediclaim (What if you fall sick? There's mediclaim)

Titled 'Naam (Name)', this poem is part of *Ajob Chora* (Nonsense Poems) by Banerjee. Her verse quickly became fodder for memes and endless ridicule in WhatsApp chat groups and on social media. But the chief minister is undeterred; she also paints and sings, inviting the ire of Kolkata's culture-keepers every time she does so. She courts filmstars and directors, painters and poets, yet acceptance among the Bhadraklok eludes her.

Interestingly, her arch rival from the BJP, the saffron party's Bengal chief Dilip Ghosh, has never bothered to 'suck up to the Bhadraklok', in the words of a party member close to him. Call it political prudence that may pay off in the 2021 elections, Ghosh has never tried to shake off either his OBC caste or his rusticity. From claiming there is gold in cow's milk to declaring that the coronavirus pandemic is over even as the tally was sharply rising across the country, Ghosh has managed to keep the outrage brigade on social media rather busy.

When the BJP Bengal chief attacked Mamata Banerjee for not taking a cue from the BJP governments in UP and Assam to shoot anti-CAA protesters ‘like dogs’, even party colleague and Minister of State for Environment, Forest and Climate Change Babul Supriyo publicly distanced himself from the comments. Many thought Ghosh would be pulled up and later replaced from his post as Bengal chief. But Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah did not say a word on this, and Ghosh continues to be party chief.

Even when two FIRs were filed against him for his comments, Ghosh was unperturbed. ‘I stick to my comments. I am not bothered about the criticism. Whatever I have said is in favour of the country’ he told Republicworld.com on 16 January 2020.

A figure of ridicule among the Bhadrak, whose electoral significance is miniscule, Ghosh perhaps has the confidence of the BJP that the Chotok will rally behind him.

But the Trinamool Congress has been trying a new tactic.

Over mutton chelo kebabs at Park Street’s uppity joint Peter Cat, a senior journalist-friend who keeps a sharp eye on politics and culture in Bengal tells me that thanks to the BJP, the Bhadrak may finally be warming up to Banerjee. Not only that, the Bhadrak–Chotok divide may be diminishing in that face of a larger threat – the threat to Bengali identity itself.

How so?

‘See, there are of course those who want the BJP to come in because of their disdain for Muslims and opposition to minority appeasement and Manuvad, to hitch the Bengal wagon to a larger nationalistic narrative. But the Bhadrak is also acutely fearful of north Indian culture sweeping through Bengal and marginalizing the Bengali in his own land. And this is not something even the so-called Chotok will take

kindly to. Some of us Bhadraklok feel for the Bengali identity with the same fervour that the French do their identity. We hitch our wagon to the world and only geographically to India. And it is here that Mamata Banerjee can score over the BJP. Look at these Biswa Bangla storerooms that her government has promoted. They are essentially authentic handcrafted items from the state, from saris to sculptures to knick-knacks. But she has named it Biswa Bangla (Bengal in the world). This is in sharp contrast to the Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan narrative of the BJP.'

Does she think this strategy is working? 'Promise me you won't name me in your book and I shall tell you.' I nod. 'It is working. I don't know whether it is her idea or Prashant Kishor's, but Mamata Banerjee has appealed to the Bengali and Narendra Modi growing his beard like Tagore or Amit Shah learning Bengali won't change that. Most of us feel we are Bengalis first, Indians later. In fact, in our cultural superiority, we are Indian only in passport. But now, the rest of India, rather north India, warts and all, is being thrust on us by the BJP. The cow is being worshipped, Ram Nabami is being celebrated, the prime real estate of Kolkata anyway was being bought over by north Indians and Gujaratis.'

So, is it a sense of forced religiosity that the Bhadraklok fear? 'Many of us are religious. It is not as if Left rule had turned this state godless. Even during thirty-four years of the Left, we celebrated Durga Pujo with aplomb. Some of the Left leaders like Subhas Chakraborty also actively participated in Pujo. But we do it on our own terms. There are biriyani stalls outside Pujo pandals, a Durga Pujo pandal in Kolkata promoted communal harmony by playing the azaan, some of us do not even desist from eating beef during this time. We do not see a problem with that. But the BJP, which is so anal about religion, will restrict this spirit of Bengal. Mohammad Ali Park hosts one of the most popular Durga Pujo pandals in Kolkata. It is located near Calcutta University and is named after freedom fighter

Mohammad Ali Jauhar. It is secular Kolkata's shining example. Mohammad Ali Park Durga Pujo not only brings together people of divergent faiths, but has also made a mark over the years for its "theme pujos". We fear BJP coming to Bengal in 2021 will end all of this.

'Go to any restaurant, pub or disc, you will hear Hindi film music playing, you will hear people speaking in Hindi or Hinglish. Even the biggest producer of Bengali commercial cinema, SVF Entertainment Pvt. Ltd, is owned by non-Bengalis Shrikant Mohta and Mahendra Soni. All this has not happened due to the BJP. But the BJP will further marginalize the Bengali identity in Bengal. That is our fear.'

And so strong is this fear that a scientist from Harvard University came back to Kolkata to save Bengal from non-Bengalis, making statements to the effect that all of India's problems could be solved if people from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and Marwaris and Gujaratis were restricted to their own states for their livelihood.

Now under fire for spreading linguistic chauvinism in Bengal, Garga Chatterjee's organization, Bengali rights group Bangla Pokkho, targeted non-Bengalis living in Bengal for diluting the Bengali identity and taking away jobs from Bengalis. While his detractors blamed him for doing a Shiv Sena in Bengal, Chatterjee publicly made common cause with Tamil linguistic and cultural pride as a direct opposition to the dominance of the Hindi linguistic and cultural identity. In debates on national television, Chatterjee took on BJP spokespersons, defended Mamata Banerjee and ridiculed the imposition of Hindi language and culture. In television debates that were conducted in English, he would start speaking in Bangla if his opponent on the show used Hindi words. There were occasions when he began to speak in Bangla even when the debates were being conducted in Hindi.

On the streets, Chatterjee's 'boys' were accused of heckling Hindi-speaking shopkeepers in and around

Kolkata for having put up name boards in Hindi or for conducting their business in that language. I have myself seen Chatterjee put up such videos on his Facebook page, which he later took down.

He supported the Trinamool Congress on Twitter and on television, and there was speculation that Banerjee's party had given tacit support to Chatterjee's movement, while not publicly admitting so. After an FIR was registered against him in June for hurting Ahom sentiments with his comments on Sukaphaa, founder of the Ahom dynasty, Chatterjee has gone quiet. But the fact that such a movement could gain traction in Bengal shows that among a certain section of Bengalis the idea of 'outsiders' diluting their cultural identity has created much fear and loathing.

And it is this fear that filmmaker Mainak Bhaumik finds worrisome. Bhaumik, who divides his time between New York City and Kolkata, tells me that Bengalis feel they are liberal and culturally superior to other Indians because they have not seen the world. 'Being an Indian who had the privilege of being brought up globally, I have a better perspective of who a real Bengali is. The average Bengali seems to be well read, celebrates Tagore and Satyajit Ray, publicly proclaims that he is open minded. But scratch the surface and you will find him to be a stubborn, parochial racist, suffering from a deep-rooted sense of inferiority. We celebrate Tagore and Ray because the West acknowledged them. On our own, we are not confident of who we are and what we have to offer. Let me give you an example. We celebrate Ravi Shankar because George Harrison teamed up with him and the West courted him. Now, tell me, do Punjabis need the approval of the West to make Daler Mehndi famous?'

So, he doesn't find 'outsiders' from other states coming and diluting Bengali culture a problem? 'Why do we have to fear dilution of our culture if it is so strong? How can identifying with the country be a bad thing? How does stereotyping people from other states

and infantilizing other cultures make you culturally superior? In fact, I feel if Bengalis became more patriotic about the country they stay in, it will bring down their hypocrisy.’

At Sourav Sikdar’s spacious apartment in Alipore, one of Kolkata’s most affluent residential areas, the conversation moves from culture to food to politics. Sikdar, nephew and political heir of the late Tapan Sikdar, a minister of state in Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s National Democratic Alliance government, is now national secretary of BJP’s youth wing. Over mutton keema ghugni, Sikdar took me back in time to his college days when he sought out watering holes like Khalasitola, Boroduari and Chhota Bristol, bars once frequented by the ‘Chotolok’ before a new band of writers and filmmakers began to visit them and break the class divide. Legend has it that at one corner table of Chhota Bristol, filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak would drown his sorrows in whisky. ‘I used to frequent those places, not for the alcohol but for the food and to soak in the history of a Calcutta long gone. I learnt the recipe of this mutton keema ghugni you are having now from there. Later in life, when I started going to Kolkata’s elite clubs, I missed the cosy ambience of Khalasitola, Boroduari and Chhota Bristol. There are many Kolkatas in one Kolkata, many, many Bengals in one Bengal. So, when you talk about Bengali culture, let me ask you, which Bengal are you talking about?’

Which Bengal does the BJP know? After all, its adversaries call it an outside party. ‘Let me tell you, this “outside party” has been in Bengal since 1980. That’s forty years. Except for Vishnu Kant Shastri, none of our party chiefs in Bengal has been a non-Bengali. Even Vishnuji was a Sanskrit professor in Calcutta University and had soaked in the Bengali culture. The man who made BJP popular in Bengal, my late uncle, Tapan Sikdar, was a Bangladeshi refugee himself. He knew the pain of losing home and hearth, which so many refugees in Bengal today still feel and to whom the CAA has

come as a blessing. Take our later party presidents in Bengal, from Rahul Sinha to Satyabrata Mukherjee to Tathagata Roy ... all are Bangladeshi refugees. Our current president Dilip Ghosh is from Medinipur district and understands the pulse of rural Bengal. The BJP in Bengal has grown from the soil. Our detractors can say anything they like, the people of Bengal know who we are.'

But there is fear that the BJP is bringing in Ram to tear apart Bengal's secular fabric. 'Near Howrah city, there is this place Ram Raja Tala. It is very close to Kolkata. Go and visit that place. It is a cent per cent Bengali neighbourhood. There is a 250-year-old Ram mandir there. All these years, who have gone to pray at that temple? Non-Bengalis? A few people in Kolkata had so far decided what Bengalis should see, read, eat, hear. No more. Let Bengalis decide for themselves. As far as the BJP is concerned, we are not importing any culture from outside.'

Why then did an organization like Bangla Pokkho come up? There must be some fear on the ground. 'Beating up poor migrant workers, tea stall owners and small shopkeepers who may speak Hindi but have been in Bengal for ages is a fight for Bengali pride? Are Bengalis so shallow that they have to attack economic migrants from other states to feel important? And when has Garga Chatterjee ever spoken up for what Bengal needs? When Sanjiv Goenka-owned CESC Ltd which supplies power to Kolkata and its neighbourhood started sending in exorbitant bills to its consumers, it was me and my party colleagues who hit the streets in protest, even as Mamata Banerjee didn't utter a word against the non-Bengali industrialist, and neither did Garga Chatterjee.'

So, is the BJP eyeing the Chotolok vote or the Bhadrakok vote in 2021? 'Firstly, I find the word chotolok very problematic. Some Bhadrakok have for long derided those who are not like them. They are hypocrites and racists. From the cultured Bengali in the

city to the poorest farmer in the village, BJP stands for all of Bengal.'

Law and Disorder

SEPTEMBER 2020

My friend N owns a cinema hall in Kolkata. Specifying where in Kolkata would be a threat to his safety and detrimental for his business. ‘You know how things are,’ N tells me when we meet at the managing director’s plush cabin tucked away in a part of the old cinema hall building, hidden from the crowds of cinema lovers who troop in daily to watch movies. The business was run by N’s father before, but now he has left it in N’s able hands. We talk about this and that, about the emergence of middle-of-the-road cinema in Bengali and changing viewer tastes, before N talks about how difficult it is to do business in Bengal today.

Cut money? I ask.

‘That is there everywhere. No matter which state or which city you set up your business in, cut money is the passport to smooth operations. How difficult it is for businessmen like me to operate today even after paying “hafta” is what I am talking about.’

Is it worse than before? ‘I will tell you of an incident. I was around twenty years old, had not yet graduated from college, but Dad asked me to start looking after the business. It was both hard work and fun to learn the ropes of the family business. As a Marwari, business runs in my blood. Soon enough, I was making plans to modernize the hall. But I was not ready for one of the biggest challenges that was to come my way.’

The incident took place during an evening show. N was winding up for the day. An assistant came running to N. ‘He was so hassled he could hardly speak. “There is a crowd outside with drawn swords, wanting to get in.

We have closed the theatre's collapsible entry gate. But I fear they will break in," he told me.'

The next one hour was a nightmare for N. What he could gather was, the crowd was from the neighbouring Muslim shantytown led by a local Left toughie. They had got news that a political rival whom the toughie had a score to settle with was inside the hall, watching the movie that was running. The crowd had come to 'take action' in the cinema hall itself!

'I dialled the local police but I knew by the time they arrive it might be too late. I thought I should go up front and plead with them with folded hands to spare my cinema hall. And I did. By that time the gate was broken down, my boys and I were shoved aside and the crowd went inside the hall. They forced us to put the lights on, spotted the man they were searching for and put a sword through him,' N recalls.

'It was like a scene from Ram Gopal Verma's *Shiva*. The mob left, there were screams and wails from the viewers inside the hall. We managed to call an ambulance and send the poor sod to the hospital. The police never came. But I was called to the local police thana soon after to give my statement. The guy who was leading the mob and who had actually attacked the man inside the hall (the victim luckily survived after months in hospital) was sitting there coolly as if nothing had happened and the officer-in-charge asked me what had happened at my theatre.

'I broke into a cold sweat. The culprit was right there, next to me, what could I have said! Luckily for me, a mid-level CPM leader came in, told the officer-in-charge the whole incident was an internal matter of the party and that the party would handle it and no one else needed to be questioned! That was how the matter was resolved.'

And how has it become worse under Mamata Banerjee? I mean, it was incredulous, what N had just told me. 'The point I am trying to make is the hierarchy

in the Left was clearly established. There would be law and order issues from time to time, but the party knew how to handle it. For instance, we knew who we had to pay “hafta” to. This local leader who had come to the police station to save the day called for me a few years later. I knew what I was being called for. His daughter was getting married and as a businessman from his locality I was expected to make a handsome donation. I was ready with Rs 10 lakh (a big amount those days). When we met, he told me he needed only Rs 5 lakh and that I would not be invited to the marriage ceremony as it would be bad optics for a “pucca” Communist to have the owner of a cinema hall as a guest at his daughter’s wedding! But the thing is, I knew I was safe after making that payment. No one else from the party would ask me for money for anything. With Mamata Banerjee, what has happened, there are at least three leaders from a single area, all belonging to the same Trinamool Congress and one has to cater to the needs of all of them. We do not know who is more powerful than the other as equations within the party keep changing and we end up paying all of them.’

Frustrated, N sought out a friend’s friend who knew someone who had access to the chief minister’s office and sent in a request. ‘All I asked for was one name, one person whom I would have to pay every month to do my business peacefully. One person and a fixed amount. Luckily, I was given a name and number and told that in case of any problem I had to call this man. I am better off since then.’

But his is a businessman’s perspective. What about the man on the street?

‘Forget the man on the street! You think policemen are safe here? A few months ago, the officer-in-charge of a police station in south Kolkata conducted a raid on makeshift gambling dens that used to operate in an open park in the evening. He and his men put all the gamblers in a police van and were driving back to the police station. By that time news spread of the arrests and a

large crowd had gathered outside the police station. The cops were outnumbered, thrashed, the officer-in-charge was hit with chappals and the men who were arrested were forcibly taken away. Nothing happened. The local Trinamool Congress leader said he would look into the matter. Going through life in the state without a scratch is a big deal, trust me. When Mamata Banerjee came to power many of us had hoped for true poriborton. Look what we got.'

But by the time West Bengal Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar summoned Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee to brief him on the deteriorating law and order situation in West Bengal in July 2020, much water had flown under the Second Hooghly Bridge and many lives scratched out in Bengal. On social media, Dhankhar said Opposition leaders were hunted by 'partisan police acting as political workers'.

'Given enormity of decline in law and order have urged CM @MamataOfficial to urgently brief me. This as ...political leaders and opposition MPs and MLAs being virtually hunted out of public space by partisan police acting as political workers. This cannot be allowed in democracy,' Dhankhar tweeted on 23 July 2020.

The governor said it was a 'grim situation', an 'alarming decline' and a 'worrisome spectacle'. 'We cannot afford to have a police that does not act in accordance with law but acts in a partisan manner like a political worker of the ruling party,' he said. A report in *The Hindu* on 9 January 2020 said:

'West Bengal reported the maximum number of political murders in 2018, says a report by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). The number of murders due to "political reason" in West Bengal stood at 12, followed by nine in Bihar and seven in Maharashtra. In all, 54 political murders were reported in the country in 2018. In 2017, the number of such cases stood at 98. The data are not in consonance with

an advisory sent by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) to the West Bengal government last year. In an advisory sent on June 15, the MHA had said political violence in West Bengal had claimed 96 lives and that the “unabated violence” over the years was a matter of deep concern.’

But Bengal has had a history of political violence.

Has it become worse?

Kolkata-based journalist Jaideep Mazumdar says it has. ‘Political violence in Bengal has always been high. Violence against women has also been so. That is because of politicization of the police force, right since the reign of Siddhartha Shankar Ray (chief minister of West Bengal, 1972–77). The CPM, being a cadre-based party, managed it well. There would be horrific incidents but the party’s local committee secretaries would ensure that the chaos was somehow managed. The problem with Mamata Banerjee’s Trinamool Congress is, it is disorganized and faction ridden. Hence Bengal is worse off now.’

Mazumdar recalls an incident at the Bhowanipore police station soon after Mamata Banerjee came to power. Six months after taking charge as the chief minister on the back of campaign promises like establishing the rule of law, Banerjee had walked from her home to the Bhowanipore police station on 6 November 2011 and allegedly forced policemen to release two youths detained an hour earlier for hooliganism. TV news channels had covered the drama non-stop. *India Today* reported on the incident:

‘Tapas Saha and Sambhu Sau were part of a group of 300-odd youngsters from a local club indulging in high-decibel Jagaddhatri Puja celebrations in front of the Chittaranjan National Cancer Institute. The Bhowanipore police intervened, asked the revellers to stop bursting crackers and clear the busy S.P. Mukherjee Road which they had blocked. The youngsters went berserk and pelted stones at the policemen, who resorted

to lathi-charge. A pitched battle then ensued in which a number of vehicles were damaged and the police station ransacked.

‘ ... The Kalighat-based club, Sevak Sangha, whose members clashed with the police, is run, among others, by Mamata’s brother Baban. The Chief Minister arrived at Bhowanipore police station and shouted at senior policemen, including (then) Police Commissioner Ranjit Pachnanda, Deputy Commissioner (South) DP Singh and Indrajit Ghosh Dastidar, the officer-in-charge of the police station for failing to control the unruly mob. Saha and Sau were released immediately.’

Eyewitnesses said Banerjee had approached the crowd and promised action against the police. She had directed an assistant commissioner of police to investigate ‘police high-handedness’. And such was the fear among the police that when asked to comment on the matter, Ghosh Dastidar had told *India Today* : ‘I can’t comment. Please ask madam (Mamata Banerjee) about the developments (in the case).’

Mazumdar says a Jyoti Basu or a Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee would have simply asked a local leader to get something like this done and not have made the ‘mistake’ of going to the police station themselves. ‘In 2013, Banerjee fired Kolkata’s top cop Ranjit Kumar Pachanda for allegedly not toeing the TMC line.’

Banerjee had sacked the police commissioner after the murder of a sub-inspector in Garden Reach at the hands of a worker considered close to a local TMC councillor, an incident captured on television. ‘Such incidents have totally demoralized the police force. And what happens on the ground when the cops are demoralized is that the common man has no one to turn to,’ Mazumdar says. ‘Imagine, if there is a chain-snatching incident with me or someone picks my wallet, I am 200 per cent sure that if I go to the local thana the cops will be extremely reluctant to register an FIR. They will first want to know about me, my political

affiliations, try to find out about the political affiliations of the media house I work for. This is how the crime rate in Bengal is kept artificially low.’

Is the situation worse in the interiors of Bengal than in Kolkata in this respect?

Fifty-eight-year-old Rita Karmakar, resident of Purulia, 288 kilometres from Kolkata along National Highway-19, still shudders when she recalls what happened on 10 June 2017 in the town. That day not only left its imprint on Karmakar, but also indelible mark on the psyche of Purulia itself.

The date connected this sleepy town to the mainstream political violence of West Bengal. ‘I have spent almost fifty years of her life in this quiet town. Purulia is the place which stands resolutely far away from insidious, politically motivated communal tensions. We have witnessed political scuffles, sometimes fights, over college students’ union elections, but never something of this scale. As a busy housewife, my morning rituals sometimes include a visit to the vegetable market, and as it happened, on that very morning, I was in Chowk Bazar (the main marketplace in Purulia town). Suddenly I could hear shouting, which I thought emerged from a political rally but somehow sounded different. Things seemed unusual and eerie, and the shouting became rhythmic and threatening. It was coming from the other side of the road where the town thana was located.

‘The store owner told me, “*Didi, aapni beriye jaan* (Didi, you should leave immediately).” I did so without knowing what was happening. As I reached home my daughter ran out to meet me saying she had been trying to call me. Then she uttered something that was hitherto unthinkable in Purulia: “There’s a riot!” It took me some time before I could weigh the weight of those words. Our para (lane) is on the other side of Chowk Bazar and hence was not disturbed by what was going on in the very heart of this town. Then came those familiar

images, via WhatsApp, which you see in newspapers, of riot-hit places: people menacingly moving forward, fruit carts on fire, mobs brandishing arms. We watched all the Bengali news channels that evening and the next day, but there was no mention of any of it at all. Still, there is no mainstream media coverage here except for a few YouTube videos that show you mobs roaming through the main streets or gheraoing the town thana.

‘For the people of Purulia, including myself, this was surreal. It was not the same town where my children were born and raised, where my husband went to work every day knowing that he would come back home safe. We thought riots happened in other places; it could never tear through the fabric of a close-knit town like Purulia where you meet a known face after every hundred metres. Not only did that incident take away our sense of security but also made us aware of the hidden hatred swirling right under our nose that could erupt with the slightest incitement. You need to understand how that incident unnerved a person like me who was comfortably living in her two-storeyed house for decades without realizing things might take a turn for the worse any moment. We never knew what actually happened as it was all efficiently swept under the rug by the authorities. By evening the situation was under control and a few of the shops of Chowk Bazar were forced to open. Things came to normal by the next day.’

So, what had happened? ‘It was a Facebook post by a Muslim guy deriding a Hindu god. Someone filed an FIR and he was arrested for hurting Hindu sentiments. Then all hell broke loose as a mob ran amok to protest against the arrest. No one could say anything.’

Law and order has become a political issue for both the Trinamool Congress and the BJP for 2021.

On 1 October 2020, after a nineteen-year-old Dalit girl was brutalized by four upper-caste men in BJP-ruled Uttar Pradesh’s Hathras, Mamata Banerjee tweeted:

‘Have no words to condemn the barbaric & shameful incident at Hathras involving a young Dalit girl. My deepest condolences to the family. More shameful is the forceful cremation without the family’s presence or consent, exposing those who use slogans & lofty promises for votes.’

Later, a delegation of Trinamool Congress MPs was stopped by Uttar Pradesh Police from entering Hathras. Joint Magistrate Prem Prakash Meena was seen on TV pushing Rajya Sabha MP Derek O’Brien to the ground after a scuffle broke out between the police and the delegation.

The Trinamool MPs had travelled about 200 kilometres from Delhi to meet the family of the nineteen-year-old victim. According to the delegation, the Trinamool MPs were on their way to Boolgarhi village in Hathras, travelling separately, to express solidarity with the grieving family of the victim and to convey their condolences.

Shameful as the attack on the MPs was, it was what Mamata Banerjee said that brought to mind something which had happened in Bengal: ‘Those who lecture us about Bengal’s law & order must turn their attention to Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat... #Bengal is the most peaceful state in #India.’

On the evening of 6 February 2012, Suzette Jordan met five men (Kader Khan, Md. Ali, Nasir Khan, Ruman Khan and Sumit Bajaj) for the first time at a nightclub in Park Street. They offered to drop her home when she was leaving the club. She was gang-raped by the five in a moving car and later dumped near Exide Crossing, opposite the Calcutta Club. At around 3.30 a.m., she boarded a taxi to her residence in Behala. While the media and police initially ensured an information blackout of her name, she later publicly revealed her identity as a thirty-seven-year-old and a mother of two, in order to encourage other survivors to speak out.

‘*Shajano ghotona* (fabricated case),’ is what Mamata Banerjee had infamously said when the incident came to light as was reported in an article at *The Indian Express* on 3 March 2014. Banerjee would never apologize for the comment, even though she had been so vocal against the Hathras incident.

As Bengal readies for the mother of all elections in 2021, it is perhaps the slip of the tongue by state BJP chief Dilip Ghosh that best sums up the law and order situation in the state.

After Manish Shukla, a BJP councillor of Titagarh municipality was shot dead on 5 October 2020 by two bike-borne assailants, Ghosh said: ‘The way a councillor was shot dead in front of a police station by using a stengun is shameful. West Bengal is slipping into a mafia-raj like situation like in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.’

Somebody needed to remind Ghosh that at the time of his comment, it was the BJP that was in power in both the states!

Ground Zero Singur

SEPTEMBER 2020

It's a humid September Sunday in Singur. In front of me are vast swathes of green and a big factory for making a small car, the Nano, no longer being made. It was the dream of former chief minister of West Bengal Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee to get Tata to Bengal, produce the Nano from Singur and change Bengal's destiny. That dream is long lost. Taking my phone out, I take a picture of what I see in front of me and type out what I think is an innocuous tweet: 'Singur. Tata Nano factory was supposed to come up here. Instead, Mamata Banerjee came to power. Now there is a vast expanse of nothingness.'

In no time, the tweet went viral. Two comments to the tweet among the many praises and abuses that stood out were by Delhi journalist and commentator Shivam Vij ('Where you see nothing I see agricultural field') and a certain Jeet Roy ('Nano may have failed but there were enough supply chain and adjacent industries created in Gujarat at that period of time. Do you know West Bengal once had a higher GDP than Maharashtra during the 60s? Despite having adequate infrastructure from British time, socialism ruined us').

It is almost noon. It has taken me one and a half hours from my parents' house in south Kolkata to reach Singur. The morning was pleasant with a light drizzle, but now the sun is up in full glory and the day is turning humid in Hooghly district, around forty-five kilometres from Kolkata. The Singur farmland in front of me, which was earmarked for the Tata Nano project, stands alongside an arc of the Durgapur expressway near the Ratanpur crossing with NH-1. The six mouzas whose

land fell within the Tata project site are Gopalnagar, Beraberi, Bajemelia, Khaserbheri, Singherberi and Joymollarberi. They stand on the other side of the project site, completing the expressway's arc into a circle.

On 18 May 2006, at a joint press conference in Kolkata with then Bengal CM Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, Ratan Tata had said that Tata Motors had decided to locate its Rs 1 lakh small-car Nano project at Singur. Tata said the project was to be spread over 700 acres, with another 300 kept aside for ancillary production.

Singur was chosen by Tata Motors from among six sites offered by the Left Front government. Almost immediately after the presser, the project faced massive opposition from farmers who did not want to give away their land. Despite the strong-arm tactics of the state government, the protesting farmers were given political support by the state's principal opposition leader at that time, Mamata Banerjee.

Official records of the West Bengal government say that around 11,000 farmers willingly gave their land for the Nano project, and around 3,000 farmers and sharecroppers opposed the 'unlawful' acquisition.

Banerjee's 'Save Farmland' movement was supported by activists like Medha Patkar and Arundhati Roy. Kolkata's intellectuals, like Aparna Sen, Kaushik Sen, Shaonli Mitra and Suvapasanna, also threw their weight behind Banerjee. When all talks to bring about some sort of resolution failed, the Tatas decided to move out of Singur on 3 October 2008. Ratan Tata blamed the agitation by Banerjee and her supporters for the decision. On 7 October 2008, the Tatas announced they would be setting up the Tata Nano plant in Sanand, Gujarat.

The Singur agitation was the last nail in the coffin for Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, a career Communist who was branded as a betrayer of the farmers and a friend of the

capitalists. Bhattacharjee failed in his efforts to convince Bengal to accept Big Industry in the state and lost power less than two years later.

Mamata Banerjee was sworn in as the next chief minister of West Bengal on 20 May 2011.

A few men have gathered at a temple-like structure close to the Tata Nano project area. They are smoking bidis and sharing village gossip. One of them mentions fasci-baad (fascism), which he says has ruined the country. A middle-aged man in plain clothes, he has the attention of the group. Mahadeb Das is the Trinamool Congress Singur block president. I introduce myself, borrow a bidi from him, light it up and sit down on the boundary wall of a little verandah attached to the temple.

How did the Trinamool Congress lose Singur of all places to the BJP in the 2019 parliamentary polls? After all, Singur is Mamata's stronghold.

Das eyes me curiously, then says: 'Why just Singur? My party lost eighteen seats to that "outsider's party" in 2019. You know the reason. Modi would have lost that election had it not been for Pulwama. Such a wave of hyper-nationalism was created that all other issues got blown away. Also, in Bengal, some of our leaders had crossed over to the other side, to Modi's party. The BJP gained from that too. And the EVM controversy is not yet settled. Internally, within the Trinamool Congress, some of us still feel they "fixed" EVMs. Eighteen seats for the BJP in 2019 is too much for us to digest!'

So, has the party paid special attention to Singur after losing the Parliamentary seat? 'When did we not? The Mamata Banerjee government returned land to the farmers of Singur. It was Didi's first cabinet decision after she assumed office in 2011. We were embroiled in a five-year legal battle with the Tatas. Finally, our government got the farmers' land back. Around 14,000 farmers were given their land back by 2016. It was exactly ten years after the Singur agitation kicked off.

Almost 6,000 families, including agricultural labourers and small peasants, were on the verge of losing their land and livelihood. We stopped that.

‘Since then, this region has been developed, and how! Roads have been built that go into the interiors of villages. The government is doing its bit for the farmers during this Covid situation, including paying them a financial allowance of Rs 2,000 per month. Financial help is being given for building houses, and we are arranging work for returning migrants under MGNREGA. All the needs of a rural constituency have been fulfilled.’

So, would he say Trinamool Congress has nothing to worry about in 2021 as far as Singur is concerned? ‘Dada, BJP will lose steam after the Bihar polls. They may lose Bihar. If that happens, their spirit will be dampened.’

What if the reverse happens? They lose Bihar and decide to fight Bengal with more aggression? Or, say, they win Bihar and gain momentum to fight Bengal?

‘Singur will not vote for the BJP anymore. I am a grassroots leader. I can smell the ground. Singur made Locket Chatterjee MP from BJP, defeating our party’s Ratna De Nag. Now Chatterjee is nowhere to be seen. There are times when people in her constituency desperately need her, say, for financial help during medical emergencies. But she is too busy giving bytes to television channels.’

Unknown to Mahadeb Das and me, an hour has passed. He tells me his wife is waiting for him to join her for lunch. ‘You should meet Prosenjit Das, Trinamool’s Singur block general secretary. He will tell you more.’

Explaining to my driver Barun the route to Prosenjit Das’s house, Mahadeb Das gets on his cycle and rides away.

Barun suggests we lunch at Hotel Nabanna (incidentally, the tall tower that houses the state secretariat of West Bengal is also named Nabanna), the best highway eatery in this stretch. It's a large restaurant filled with families who have kept their Covid 19 masks on the tables to gorge on the fish-rice spread. We find an unoccupied table and order the Nabanna fish thali. 'Don't have to look at the menu. Our fish thali is world famous,' the young waiter tells us. Truly, the rice-daal-alu-phoolkofi torkari-alu posto-Catla curry with papad, curd and a sweet is to die for.

An old Akshay Kumar-Shilpa Shetty song is playing in the background. '*Chura ke dil mera goriya chali* ,' Kumar lip-syncs to Shetty on a TV screen above us, and I remember how, after winning Singur's dil, a day after she won the Hooghly Lok Sabha seat under which Singur falls, Locket Chatterjee had said: 'Farmers who had given land for setting up of the small car factory are demanding industries. Even a section of farmers who fought against the land acquisition for the small car factory are also demanding industries. I will talk to them.'

In a report on 17 January 2020, *The Print* said:

'Farmers of Singur have put up their lands for sale, three years after the Mamata Banerjee government returned it to them. Their agitation against land acquisition had forced Tata Motors to shift its Nano car project to Gujarat and also contributed to the end of the 34-year Left Front rule in West Bengal in 2011. Nearly a decade on, politicians have lost interest in Singur, and even the farmers are desperately looking for buyers for the same land. The farmers' desire to sell their land is driven by a combination of poor soil quality, remnants of Tata plant still on the land and prices rising nearly 10 folds due to the Durgapur Expressway that now runs through the stretch. The Durgapur Expressway is now providing a glimmer of hope. There has been a ten-fold price rise for a bigha of land here, due to the warehouse sector in the region showing a keen interest in the

farmers' holdings. But a catch remains, only land close to the Durgapur Expressway fetches the premium price while plots that are located even 200 to 300 metres from the highway fail to draw buyers. Real estate consultants said the warehouse market near highways is booming in the state.'

'Land is an emotion, Dada. Land is not commerce,' Prosenjit Das tells me. After a bellyful at Hotel Nabanna, we have entered Beraberi village through dusty roads leading to more dusty roads with small shops and potato storage huts on both sides. Baraberi was almost deserted on Sunday late noon. Bigger lanes gave way to smaller ones, pucca houses rubbed shoulders with small huts, paddy fields ended and ponds began, and Barun had to get down at every turn to ask for Das's house. At a kite shop with Trinamool Congress and Mamata Banerjee posters on its outer walls, a small boy pointed towards a three-storeyed blue house. We had reached.

Das is a businessman-farmer. And it shows. We sit on a white sofa facing Das, behind him is a framed painting, an imitation of the Mona Lisa. Das takes us back in time, when the agitation of the farmers against land acquisition by the government had started. 'On 2 December 2006, we ran away from Baraberi, me and other males of the village. There were so many cops who had been sent in by the Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee government to stop us from protesting against the Tata Nano factory. Becharam Manna was leading the protest. He too fled. We went in different directions to hoodwink the police. I hid at a friend's house in Dhonekhali village; he told me not to step out as the entire village was full of Left supporters. One day, on TV, I heard Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee say that Singur farmers had willingly given their land to Tata. The farmer agitation was being conducted by outsiders.'

Das could not take it. He came back to the village, aware of the risks involved. Over the next few days he gathered the women of the village, called some of the

men back, got everyone's signatures on a piece of paper saying they did not want to give their land to the Tatas. With copies of their PAN cards and land deeds, he called a press conference to bust the government's lie that farmers in Singur were willingly selling their land for the factory.

'It made front-page news in all the newspapers in West Bengal. TV reporters chased us for interviews. The government said signatures on a blank paper have no value. So we got a court paper, wrote the same thing again, got everyone to sign once more and went to Governor Gopal Krishna Gandhi to submit our written plea. He was amazed the government had lied so much about farmers willingly selling their land for the Nano factory.'

Now that he looks back, does he think that maybe, just maybe, the state would have benefited if the Tatas came in? 'No, I don't. Not even for a moment. If we had to do it all over again, we would do just what we did then. Land is everything for us. Singur was united in its opposition to Tata.'

Then why did the BJP win from Hooghly parliamentary constituency, under which Singur falls? 'Faction fights. In Beraberri village itself there are two Trinamool Congress offices belonging to rival factions led by Becharam Manna and Robin Bhattacharjee. Manna became the face of Singur. Every TV channel would show his face, every reporter would come to him for bytes, from policemen to partymen Manna became the go-to guy for everyone. On the ground though, villagers got increasingly wary of the nepotism and corruption that crept in. You see, villagers don't think "if not Modi who or if not Mamata who". They look at their candidates and vote accordingly. Like in Singur, there are now too many factions in the Trinamool Congress. BJP is gaining because of that.'

There is a larger question though that Singur's local politics perhaps cannot answer. It is: what next, for West

Bengal, in terms of growth? My friend Nilanjan Ghosh, eminent economist and director of the Kolkata chapter of the think-tank Observer Research Foundation believes Bengal has all the elements for growth. ‘Especially in terms of the four-capital theory: rich natural capital (forests, rivers, mountains, etc.), a massive pool of human capital (moreover, this is skilled, what with the state having institutes like the IIT, IIM, Jadavpur University, Indian Statistical Institute, Visva Bharati University, etc.), a rich cultural history delineating its deeply entrenched value systems that has created its rich social capital, and its physical capital that is improving but needs to be worked on.’

However, there are a few things Ghosh believes the state government needs to work on. ‘One, of, course is the political will to curb red-tapism and to control the transaction costs of doing business through control of anti-social elements at the grassroots level. The political dispensation from the late 1970s has projected itself as an “anti-business” force. Any dispensation coming after that therefore faces a huge challenge of changing this face,’ Ghosh says.

‘In fact, I don’t think the current dispensation is doing too badly in terms of investment flow. But the problem lies in the fact that two major movements over land-use change (e.g. Singur and Nandigram) go against its pro-investment projections to a large extent. However, it needs to be kept in mind that manufacturing cannot be West Bengal’s future. Rather, its growth potential lies in services. The previous dispensation has already punctured the potential for large-scale manufacturing to develop due to their land redistribution policies. This makes land acquisition problematic to the core. However, the adjoining states of Jharkhand and Odisha are growing. Kolkata, by itself, has the natural advantage of connectivity from the maritime, air, and inland waterways perspective. On the other hand, the state also aids connectivity with another zone of interest for investors, Bangladesh, and the north-east (also

consider the massive increase in traffic through Bagdogra airport).

‘As such, Kolkata is slated to emerge as the major growth centre of the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation). BIMSTEC is an international organization of seven nations of South Asia and Southeast Asia housing 1.5 billion people and having a combined gross domestic product of \$3.5 trillion (2018).

‘But a lot depends on political will, and the right advice from the right experts. Dispensations cannot keep seeking advice from only those who are close to them. While this has been an inherent weakness of the state so far, from the sixties and seventies, a bigger problem lies in the Centre-state relations over the last four decades. I won’t describe this as a phenomenon of merely ideological clash: it is an ego clash. Unfortunately, political masters have never kept in mind the bigger cause of the state and its people, but have put forward their own egos! The state has been deprived of what it deserves.

‘Axiomatically, financial capital flows to those destinations where all the four capital forces (natural, physical, social and human) are prevalent. But that happens under organic market forces, not under situations of Leftist rules and bad Centre-state relations! West Bengal still bears the brunt of history, whereas states like Odisha that had insurgency problems have been able to attract investments and have generated employment in those disturbed regions. This has ameliorated the law and order condition there largely!’

Will 2021 bring a new dawn?

Prosenjit Das tells me Mamata herself could have. If only she had listened to the people. ‘It’s not too late, yet.’

Postscript:

From the highway, I watch the sun set on the deserted Nano factory. Nano went to Sanand and Bengal got Mamata Banerjee. Much water has flown below the Second Hoogly Bridge since then, many dreams washed away, many arguments made from this side and that. Now it's all coming to a head. From my travels in and out of Kolkata, I heard a cry for Poriborton again, against what is. The sun has almost set now, and is it just me or is the sky a shade of saffron?

About the Book

On 20 May 2011, Mamata Banerjee was sworn in as the first female chief minister of West Bengal, bringing an end to thirty-four years of Left Front rule. ‘Poriborton!’ screamed the morning papers, echoing Trinamool Congress’s catchphrase for bringing in change. A decade later, amidst allegations against the TMC of political violence, syndicate rule and institutional corruption, the Bharatiya Janata Party has sent out a new war cry.

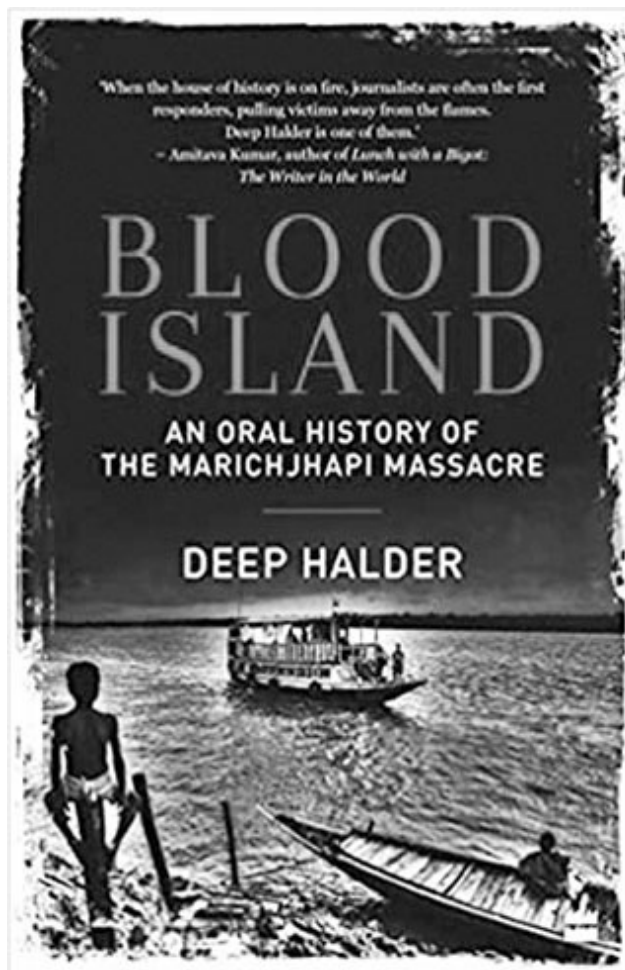
Ahead of what promises to be a historic state Legislative Assembly election. Deep Haider met and conducted exclusive interviews with Bengal’s biggest stars-turned-politicians, refugees who want to become permanent citizens, and travelled as far as the Bangladesh border to gauge the mood of the people. *Bengal 2021* looks at an electrifying election, unfolding in the times of Covid-19.

About the Author

Deep Halder is the author of *Blood Island: An Oral History of the Marichjhapi Massacre*. He has been a journalist for almost two decades, writing on issues of development at the intersection of religion, caste and politics. Currently, he is executive editor at India Today Group.

ALSO BY DEEP HALDER

‘When the house of history is on fire, journalists are often the first-responders, pulling victims away from the flames. Deep Halder is one of them.’ – Amitava Kumar



In 1978, around 1.5 lakh Hindu refugees from Bangladesh settled in Marichjhapi, an island in the Sundarbans, to start their lives anew. However, by May 1979, the island was cleared by Jyoti Basu's Left Front government in West Bengal. An economic blockade was imposed and there were many deaths resulting from the diseases and malnutrition that followed, as well as from violence unleashed by the police on government orders. Survivors of the massacre say that the number of those who lost their lives in Marichjhapi could be as high as 10,000, while the government officials of the time maintain that there were less than ten victims. Deep

Halder reconstructs the buried history of the 1979 massacre through his interviews with survivors, erstwhile reporters, government officials and activists with a rare combination of courage, conscientiousness and empathy.

Praise for *Blood Island* by Deep Halder

‘By loudly ending a long-enforced quietness, in *Blood Island*, Halder is able to put together a tale that is at once epic and intimate, to create something rare, beautiful. One truth among many other truths that are brought together in a story that unfolds like a precisely-plotted thriller. ... This is an oral history with a battle scene – set in the strange beauty of the Sundarbans – that begs to be filmed.’

– DURBA CHATTARAJ, *Scroll.in*

‘*Blood Island*’s urgency emerges from the immediate parallels the reader draws to the death of immigrants in the Mediterranean Sea, to tales of human trafficking, to the sordid stories emerging from detention camps on the borders of the most powerful country in the world, and also how immigrants who cannot establish their “Indianness” in the northeast are now being treated by the Indian state.’

– PRERNA MADAN, *Hindustan Times*

‘*Blood Island* digs deep to exhume facts - even though some skeletons will never speak. ... The tragedy is documented through these gripping commentaries, which are punctuated with Halder’s subtle observations and taut remarks.’

– TIRTHO BANERJEE, *Khaleej Times*

‘Deep’s book has tarnished the very argument that “Communists are friends of the poor”. The author has also laid bare the extraordinary silence of Bengali intellectuals over Marichjhapi.’

– SASWAT PANIGRAHI, *Outlook India*

‘Halder weaves personal tales of fortitude in the face of the suffering of dislocation and all that is abruptly cut short by the leviathan state machinery. ... Halder’s book is a significant contribution to retrieving a less-talked-about phase of state-orchestrated violence against

persecuted refugees from the fringes of historical memory.'

– ANAND VARDHAN , *Newslaundry*

'Of the recent books I read, *Blood Island* is one of my favourites.'

– AMISH TRIPATHI , author of [*Raavan: Enemy of Aryavart*](#)

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