

Election in West Bengal: Left Front hopes to retain its hold

Interview of Jyoti Basu by the Daily Star Kolkata correspondent Sakyasen Mitra

EVEN though, he is not contesting the elections this time, the former Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mr. Jyoti Basu is under constant fire from the opposition. The Opposition's slogan "Down with 24 years of misrule" has been targetted towards him. The last 15 days has been a period of heavy campaigning for the party. Here, he takes time off from one of his campaigns to answer a few pertinent questions.

The Daily Star (DS): An election without Jyoti Basu! Doesn't it sound a bit strange?

Jyoti Basu (JB): The elections are with Jyoti Basu. I am participating actively in campaigning for the candidates. The only difference is that this time I am not in the fray. But then I had announced it a long time back. The voters have grown accustomed to it. I had informed everybody earlier that because of my health I will not be able to hold any portfolio.

DS: This is probably the toughest election that the Left Front is facing in the 24 years that it has been in power.

JB: The notion is such. But then, we will be able to retain our hold on the Government. This time, we are not thinking about winning. That is a foregone conclusion. Our aim is to convince more and more people to our line of thought. There are people who still vote for the Trinamul Congress and the BJP. Our target is to make these voters understand the futility of voting for these parties.

DS: The organizational aspect of the CPIM must have suffered. Otherwise the Trinamul Congress couldn't have made such headway in the last three years.

JB: That is what has surprised me. How can people vote for a party that does not have an ideology, a fixed plan and is communal. The Trinamul Congress by their support to the BJP have proved themselves to be a communal party. Now, they have joined hands with the Congress. But that does not take away the tag of communalism from them. But, the observation that you made was right. Our organization has suffered. We are now trying to rectify



Sitting with Jyoti Basu is Gukul Bairagi, the man who had been Basu's election agent for the last 20 years. The last five times, Basu has been elected from the Santagachia constituency in West Bengal. This time, Mr. Bairagi is contesting from the same place.

the mistake. Weekly classes in the rural areas have once more been started.

DS: Even though you are not in the fray most of the criticism has been targeted against you. How do you feel?

JB: In politics, there is no question of feeling. You just go on and try to reply to your critics. Most of the comments that are being made about me are false. I have been the Chief Minister for 24 years. So naturally, the opposition is bound to attack me. But then they do not have any credibility.

DS: Industrialization in the state of West Bengal has suffered. In spite of your repeated appeals, investments have not come into the state. The work culture has deteriorated. How do you account for that?

JB: Look, the word 'red' always seems to put off industry. But then

we have developed the Haldia Petrochemicals. The Centre delayed the project, but we managed to accomplish it. The power situation has improved tremendously. Most of our rural areas enjoy electricity. But when we came to power our priorities were agriculture and education. We are now the highest rice-producing state in the country. We have managed to spread literacy. Now our emphasis will be on industry and we will also achieve it.

DS: There have been allegations regarding your son also. The opposition is threatening investigation against your son, should they come to power.

JB: Let them prove the allegations. It is easy to make a statement and difficult to prove it. Mamata Banerjee says that she is a doctorate. Can you go and ask her the

name of the University from which she has obtained it?

DS: What is your assessment of the Congress after analyzing the recent developments and their pact with the Trinamul Congress?

JB: The CPIM strongly feels that the time has come to do a rethinking on the Congress. Some of their recent steps show that to accomplish power they are going to even become allies of communal parties. We cannot really apprehend the gain of the Congress in forming an alliance with the Trinamul Congress. Do you mean to say that by doing this they have a chance of coming to power?

DS: But the percentage of Congress-Trinamul votes will always be more than the Trinamul-BJP combine. It should be a worrying factor for the Left.

JB: A large number of Congress-Trinamul votes will shift as people are feeling let down by both the parties. But then that is not our concern. We are sure that the percentage of Left Front votes will increase this time.

DS: Will you advice the new Government, if the Left Front comes to power?

JB: There is no question of advice. There is a Left Front Committee that lends a helping hand regarding the administration of the state. I am also a member of that Committee. I will do whatever that the party asks me to do.

DS: There have been a lot of problems between India and Bangladesh lately. Your opinions?

JB: I have been too busy with the elections. So would not like to comment.

What a time to be dumb!

M.J.AKBAR

NOTHING comforts the Establishment more than a holiday in the name of the working class. May Day came on Tuesday; not quite as convenient as Monday, which would have meant a long weekend, but at least it did not coincide with a regular holiday. Give Calcutta a holiday and the price of fish goes up. Calcuttans are relaxed. Even politics is invisible in the city. The tension began to rise, slowly but perceptibly, on the second, with only eight days to go before a contest that promises to be pivotal in the history of Bengal.

There are suggestions, a few streaky signs in the air, that the pivot could swing. The crowds at Mamata Banerjee's rallies are phenomenally higher than those at Communist meetings, and this is not because of novelty value, I can assure you. The young have found a nickname for the Communists: *Kamiye Neesh*, or Make Your Money in Bengali. This is unfair; the level of corruption in Calcutta would invite a sneeze of disdain from a peon in Delhi. But the judgment of the electorate is a tough kind of justice. The Communist answer to crowds is party muscle. How much of this support will alchemize into votes? Senior and highly experienced as well as much-respected cynics say that the party machine has the ability to cover as much as a twenty to twenty-five per cent gap.

The Left's real worry may in fact have very little to do with the specific situation in Bengal. There is a perceptible and growing anger against all governments, against any Establishment, that is going to make re-election difficult even for the best organized political force in the country. The conviction that all politicians are on the take (*Kamiye Neesh*) has topped the prevalent frustration, particularly of the young, who see the gap between their expectations and reality continue to grow. The young are now the most decisive fact of elections. Their anger will defeat the Left in Kerala, EDMK in Tamil Nadu and the AGP in Assam but there is an attendant paradox. The credibility of the parties that are seeking to replace the DMK and the AGP and the Left is not particularly high. The anger could well travel into a myriad rivulets in a state like Assam, where each constituency seems to have a favourite party of its own.

The novelty of the election is the sight of two middle aged ladies campaigning together. Sonia Gandhi has learnt to walk like Indira Gandhi, but she still talks like Sonia Gandhi. If anyone could become Indira Gandhi by imitation, Ben Kingsley would be a better Mahatma Gandhi than the original.

Compared with this artifice, the Left is a portrait of sanity. Its only problem is that it has been around too long, and there is a price to be paid forage.

Bengal has a reputation for violence. That reputation has outlived reality. The real violence is further east.

The grey had lifted from the skies of Guwahati but it had enveloped the mood of the city. There was a bandh on Wednesday, called by All Assam Students Union to protest the murder of an AGP-BJP alliance candidate by ULFA, a militant organization that, well, controls the shots. Everyday the news from Assam is written in the colours of death. The targets are political; the only party that is safe from ULFA is the Congress, because the Congress has made a deal with ULFA in order to insure a victory. The death of opponents is a strange kind of life insurance. The only argument that the Congress has, in private, is that Prafulla Mahanta made exactly the

There will be no victors in these Assembly elections, because all political parties are on a losing streak. Someone will get more votes than someone else, but that is arithmetic, not politics. A victory in politics represents hope; at the very least the hope of some change for the better. No matter who wins the elections in the four states, no one will represent any hope. The Left can only be more of the same. Assam shudders even while it prepares to vote against the government. The Tamil voter has been there, seen everything about Jayalalitha: she is a cyclical necessity rather than a revolution. Kerala has elected and defeated A.K.Antony before, more than once. Mamata Banerjee promises change, and offers confusion.

The regions are an image of the nation. The same situation prevails at the Centre and therefore nationally. The government has lost its commanding popularity, but no one has gained from the government's

Singh's unilateral declaration of dependence to George Bush's nuclear shield has converted doubt into conviction. The foreign minister's decision is without parallel and precedence. Apparently he consulted no one in Delhi before committing India to a place at the head of an obedient queue. I can only assume that the foreign minister thought he was serving his country, although he might have checked back with his country. The most charitable explanation is that he wanted to get brownie points from a reluctant superpower on a dream which is unlikely to become substantial, and therefore means very little. As I noted, such an explanation can only be described as charitable.

The government could take comfort from the absence of a serious adversary on the national battlefield. Such complacency would be unwise. The true adversary of any government is not a political party but the people. Atal Behari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani should have powerful memories of the Emergency: political parties did not remove Mrs Indira Gandhi from power, the voter did. The Janata Party was actually formed after it had won the elections. Some formation will rise that will catch the spirit of the next moment.

The BJP will do badly in these elections, losing vote shares in all states (in Assam, the true comparison would be with what it was expected to get). If the Prime Minister does not reinvent his government, that slippage will enter freefall...The horrifying thought is that the vacant center-space of Indian politics could be claimed by a gaggle of confused competitors. People realize this, even if they will not admit it. Congress leaders will agree, on condition their view is not reported to Sonia Gandhi. They are in terror of her disfavour.

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same kind of deal before the elections he won five years ago. Cynicism then, cynicism now. ULFA has not forgiven AGP for reneging on the deal the moment the elections were won. Prafulla Mahanta chased the ULFA with a determination that surprised his friends and unsettled the terrorists. What will the Congress do after using ULFA to achieve power? The realist view is that Congress ministers and MLAs will be too busy recovering what they spent on the elections (in many cases, starting with purchase of the nomination) to worry about ULFA or anyone else. That of course is the point. The anger against future betrayal will be far more intense. Assam has become a beautiful graveyard. No politician moves without a phalanx of guns protecting him. The less privileged must remain at the mercy of God who at the moment has other things to do.

The Congress has learnt nothing from its past. Punjab paid such a heavy price in the Eighties for the party's deals with Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale.

loss. There is no stream into which this anger can flow; it keeps breaking up in search of a destination. Sonia Gandhi can barely lead the Congress let alone lead a coalition that can offer a sensible alternative, either in this Parliament or during the next elections. We have heard of speechwriters in public life; Sonia Gandhi is the first speechreader. Whenever she speaks she also confirms that she is a foreigner. India is not ready to accept a foreigner as Prime Minister. In fact, one of the reasons for growing popular anger against the BJP is that it is selling out repeatedly to foreign interests.

There is immense resentment against the BJP-led coalition at the Centre. Individually, the BJP is tainted as corrupt; and the government has acquired the dubious distinction of ultra loyalty to American interests and policy. Allegations, some spurious, some with substance. About Yashwant Sinha's economic policy, not least by the RSS, opened the gates of doubt. His colleague Jaswant

The horrifying thought is that the vacant center-space of Indian politics could be claimed by a gaggle of confused competitors. People realize this, even if they will not admit it. Congress leaders will agree, on condition their view is not reported to Sonia Gandhi. They are in terror of her disfavour. She exercises draconian control over her party without having genuinely won anything, even applause. She will be tempted to advertise a victory in Assam as vindication of her leadership; that would be self-delusion. The Congress is in a position to provide stability in the vacuum: it has the structure, the history, the institutional credibility and the national presence. But it cannot move forward because it has cut off its tongue and shackled its limbs.

What a time to be dumb!

Another historic judgement

ARDESHIR COWASJEE writes from Karachi

DO your judges still cover their heads with horse-hair? Invited or not, they visit us. Some dump on us copies of what they proclaim to be historic judgements they have written. Others tell us they are in Washington for medical treatment for themselves or their wives."

This was said by a US Supreme Court judge to a man who had identified himself as a national of Pakistan, and who could only grunt and groan in response and do his best to uphold the honour of the country's judges.

The horsehair referred to was the wig worn by the former Chief Justice of Pakistan, Nasim Hassan Shah in his photograph printed on the cover of a booklet containing his 'historic' judgement restoring Nawaz Sharif and his corrupt government dismissed by the then president in 1993.

The medical treatment referred to was that of the wife of the present Chief Justice of Pakistan, Irtash Hassan Khan.

We now have another 'historic' judgement handed down recently by a bench of seven, headed by Justice Bashir Jahangiri, in the appeal against their conviction for corruption of the former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, and her husband Asif Zardari.

Their guilt is doubted by none, not even their own defenders. But

How can any sane man who lives abroad, have dealings with Pakistan and hope to safely invest his money here and prosper, bereft as we are of law and order? Anybody surfing the net, seeking information on this country, will come across a well read publication, the Information Times, published in Washington DC <http://www.InformationTimes.com>. On April 18, the Information Times carried an article on "44 wanted men, fugitives, crooks, criminals, thugs, smugglers, robbers and thieves of Pakistan who are wanted by NAB."

would the duo have been able to do what they did, robbing and destroying this country, without the aid and abetment of others? Dismissed for the first time, their re-entry into the government was expedited by none other than President Ghulam Ishaq Khan, the man who in 1990 had sacked Benazir's first government on charges of corruption, vociferously citing her husband Asif as being the most corrupt of the corrupt lot. After he had dismissed her successor, Nawaz Sharif, and his government on the same charge in 1993, Ghulam Ishaq sent for Benazir and Asif from London where they were biding their time, and himself swore in Asif as one of his caretaker ministers. Has anybody been able to calculate the loss to the country caused by the two rounds of Benazir's governments?

Now to the latest historic judgement,

which records the taped version of a conversation which took place "between Saifur Rahman and Qayyum J." I can swear on oath that I was present in Saifur Rahman's office one day when he received a telephone call from the then Chief Justice of the Lahore High Court, Rashid Aziz Khan, reporting on the good work his court had done. Saif told him that he had done well and that he would convey the good news (whatever it was) to Mian Sahib.

The judgment makes it crystal clear what the honourable judges of our Supreme Court had in mind. Paragraph 36 reads: "The record reveals the glaring injustice meted out to Asif Ali Zardari, appellant, when the Court [Ehtesab Bench of the Lahore High Court] declined to grant him permission to recall certain witnesses for the purpose of cross-examination.... It may be pointed out that because of freezing of assets and funds, the appellant, Asif Ali Zardari, had expressed his inability to engage a counsel of his choice to cross-examine those witnesses...."

The question that arises is, do their Lordships really believe that Benazir and Asif are living below the poverty line and surviving on food ladled out in soup kitchens? Perhaps the judges were not made aware of the fact that their lawyers in Karachi have been handsomely paid, and that, knowing their clients as they did, they took their money in advance. As far as their law suits in England are concerned, it is a well known fact that the duo engaged senior counsel Lord Lester and a string of other leading counsel to plead for them, and various firms of solicitors, all of whose fees ranged up to £600 per hour, or, roughly speaking, some 1,000 rupees per minute.

The last paragraph of the judgement states, "Before parting with the judgement we are inclined to dispose of the plea of Mr Abdul Hafiz Pirzada, learned Sr. ASC, to the effect that Asif Ali Zardari, appellant, had already served out a substantive sentence of imprisonment, and therefore, he is entitled to be released from jail. As we have already sent the case to a court of competent jurisdiction, it would be more appropriate if this matter is agitated before the court aforesaid."

We must be thankful for small mercies.

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Excerpts from the 'declassified' main report of Hamoodur Rahman Commission INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS-I

THE political crisis in East Pakistan and the consequent military action attracted world-wide attention. A large number of foreign correspondents present in Dacca on the eve of the military action were unceremoniously thrown out by the Martial Law authorities, with the result that the entire foreign press was fed on information sent across from the Indian side of the border. Grossest stories alleging mass-killing, rape, loot and arson by the Pakistan army were reported prominently in the world press, particularly in Britain and United States. The large-scale exodus of refugees from East Pakistan to India, and the Indian propaganda drive heavily tarnished the image of Pakistan in the eyes of the international community.

It is hardly necessary to quote extensively from the stories published in various leading newspapers and journals of the world, and it would suffice to give here only a few typical extracts. The sum and substance of the criticism of the world press was that under pressure from the West Pakistan Army and politicians, President Yahya Khan had struck unsuspecting East Pakistan population after lulling them into a sense of false security through negotiations, and had unleashed a war of extermination in a bid to repress the majority of Pakistanis demanding provincial autonomy, and that he had done so in order to preserve the interests of a powerful minority.

The British newspaper 'Daily Sketch' reported in its issue of March 29, 1971, that:

"When flood and famine devastated the people of Ganges, Delta, Yahya Khan was reluctant to throw his planes and military personnel into the rescue operation. When the same people dared to give overwhelming democratic backing to their own leader, Sheikh Mujib, now President Yahya Khan has been quick enough to use his tanks and troops."

The Times of London published in its issue of 29th March, 1971, a news report by Paul Martin saying that:

"The Pakistan military regime's attempt to crush Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his Awami League, and so regain control of East Pakistan may prove disastrous. For, in East Pakistan eyes it has served to justify the arguments of the

extremists that co-existence with the West-dominated Central government is impossible and that the only solution is an independent Bangladesh achieved by any means."

The Daily Telegraph, London, published in its issue of March 29, 1971, a news report sent from New Delhi by David Loshau to the following effect:-

"Killing on a mass scale is under way in East Pakistan, caught in the grip of a vicious civil war, according to all available indications from the province, which is now virtually sealed off from the outside world. "Diplomatic sources which still have tenuous radio links with their missions in Dacca, as well as foreign observers who have left the province since fighting began on Friday, say the 70,000 West Pakistan soldiers are showing no mercy in their bid to suppress the Bangladesh independence movement.

Estimates of the number of Bengalis who have been killed range from 10,000 to 100,000.

Whatever the true figure there can be no doubt only of the Army's determination to impose its will on the province but of the relish and ruthlessness with which it will do so."

New York Times reported on April 1, 1971, that:-

"United States administration has charged that it was receiving but not making public reports of heavy bloodshed in East Pakistan and that one cablegram with the State Department from outside Pakistan had used the expression selective genocide."

Nothing effective was done by the Government of Pakistan to counter-act these stories. It appears that the reason for our ineffectiveness in this field was not only the inadequacy or incompetence of our information agencies, but the magnitude of the crisis and its prolongation for several months on end. Another reason was the anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim bias of the world press, a major portion of which is controlled by Jewish interests. Still another factor was the universal

suspicion and dislike of the military regime by democratic societies. It is significant that even the White Paper, explaining the events in East Pakistan, was not issued by the government until five months later in August 1971. By that time the stories circulated in the world press had taken such root that no one was prepared to believe Yahya Khan's version as given in the White Paper.

Of course, there were some favourable comments as well, particularly in the brotherly Muslim countries, which condemned the secessionist tendencies of the Awami League and justified President Yahya Khan's military action in the interest of national integrity and sovereignty. However, these favourable comments could not prevent the East Pakistan crisis from becoming an international issue, especially on the humanitarian side.

Belated attempts were made by President Yahya Khan to repair the damage by permitting foreign correspondents to visit East Pakistan, and by inviting parliamentary dele-

gations from other countries. The Foreign Office also sent out several circulars and publicity material to our missions abroad for the purpose of projecting the Pakistan point of view, but it was only when the government of India embarked upon its calculated aggression against East Pakistan that world opinion veered round to condemn efforts aimed at dismemberment of Pakistan.

One important fact which clearly emerges from the treatment of the East Pakistan situation or crisis by the world press is that no government can hope to tide over such situations by ignoring the world opinion, nor can it afford to black out authentic news and information regarding important events happening within its frontiers. Civilized communities can no longer exist in isolation.

TOMORROW: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS-II



All health information to keep you up to date

Around the world

Rehab after heart attack reduces hostility

In addition to lowering high cholesterol and other heart disease risk factors, exercise training and cardiac rehabilitation programmes also may help heart patients reduce hostility a known risk factor for heart disease, according to new study findings. In a study of 500 heart patients, hostility scores went down by 45% after rehabilitation in 65 of those with high levels of hostility and unexpressed anger following a heart attack or other cardiac events. These patients also experienced marked reduction in cholesterol levels and other heart-disease risk factors following rehabilitation, reported Dr. Carl J. Lavie Jr. from New Orleans. Compared with the 435 patients with lower levels of hostility before rehabilitation, the more hostile patients were more likely to be anxious and depressed, have more heart-disease risk factors and a lower quality of life before rehabilitation. But following rehabilitation, highly hostile patients showed a 5% reduction in total cholesterol levels, and a 7% increase in levels of high density lipoprotein. In addition, depression scores went down by 48%, compared with their scores before the rehabilitation program, Lavie reported. Overall, highly hostile patients showed greater improvements in energy levels, better mental health and quality of life following rehabilitation than patients reporting lower hostility levels.

Source : IJCP's Mednews

Tomorrow : Before the doctor comes

