

Left debacle in West Bengal

Congratulations to Mamata

IT was not unexpected and the extent of the drubbing taken by the world's longest serving democratically-elected communist government in West Bengal may not have been a surprise either. The early signs of a growing disenchantment with the Left Front were manifest in the sizeable defeat in Panchayet polls followed by a rather poor showing in the Lok Sabha elections.

Thirty-four year long rule had lulled party leaders and activists in a complacency mode topped off by arrogance and a growing indifference to the popular mood and pent-up grievances. The party's meddling in the affairs of administration blurred the line between Front and the government. Once a leader became a member of the state party committee he was destined not to be replaced. So, hardly any infusion of new blood would have been possible.

Economically, the state was lagging behind Bihar and Assam with an employment crunch taking hold due to falling investment. Besides, to be employed, party label would be considered a pre-requisite.

Ironically, Left Front, a platform that traditionally enjoyed support among the farmers and the Muslim voters lost touch with them. The land acquisition drive in Singuar for Tata's Nano car industry, which though aborted, was to become a high-voltage political issue. At the same time, death of 14 farmers in Nandigram again, in the face of a forced land acquisition campaign, for a chemical factory gave Mamata Banerjee ammunition to launch a rights-based popular movement against the incumbent.

Here comes the second paradox in that the humanist-leftist characteristics of Left Front were co-opted by Trinamool Congress. Its alliance with the Congress also strengthened the electoral equations with a vote getting fibre.

In the overwhelming defeat of Left Front, some of its early good work got submerged. Buddhadeb Bhattacharya has lost his seat, a stunning verdict for a chief minister since Prafulla Sen's personal debacle years ago. Bhattacharya has promptly conceded defeat and resigned as chief minister. People have spoken and democracy triumphed.

Our hearty felicitations to Mamata Banerjee on her electoral victory as we look forward to continuation and enrichment of our neighbourly relations with the Indian state of West Bengal.

Factory within prisons

Plan should be followed through

THE plan to set up some kind of garment manufacturing unit in country's congested jails is really thinking out of the box. If seen through, it will help the convicts in a number of ways including their rehabilitation back in society. We welcome the idea being mooted by the prison authorities.

At this stage setting up of factories is envisaged in major prisons before expanding to all of Bangladesh's 68 jails. Bangladesh now has a prison population of 60,000 including nearly 1000 on death row. So a huge potential remains untapped for a creative utilization of the human resource.

The aim is to impart life skill training to the prisoners as the garment manufacturing work will keep them busy and safe from straying into morbidity. The money that they would earn at the end of the day would come in handy when they are released from jail.

We cannot think of any better use of the large number of young and middle aged inmates serving different terms in the prison than such a gainful involvement. As it is, they are used in some kind of productive work, so that they can be easily motivated and trained up to undertake the new project with a great possibility.

Moreover, this type of productive engagement will help reform wayward convicts to start a new life with positive outlook and commitment to a dignified existence after their release from jail.

Now we urge the prison authorities to work out the details of how the project can be turned into economically viable undertaking. Together with the government, the corporate sectors including the banks, could come forward to play out their CSR role.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

May 14

1643
Four-year-old Louis XIV becomes King of France upon the death of his father, Louis XIII.

1940
World War II: Rotterdam is bombed by the German Luftwaffe.

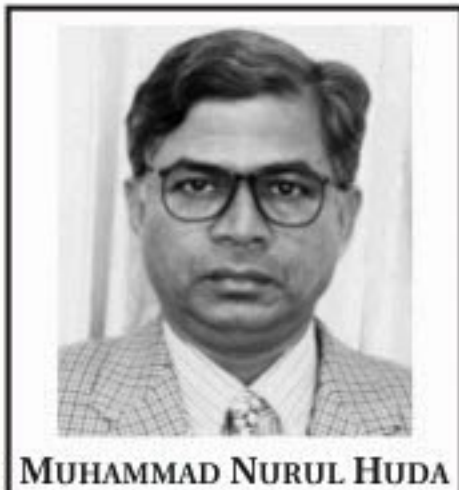
1940
World War II: The Battle of the Netherlands ends with the Netherlands surrendering to Germany.

1948
Israel is declared to be an independent state and a provisional government is established. Immediately after the declaration, Israel is attacked by the neighboring Arab states, triggering the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.

1955
Cold War: Eight communist bloc countries, including the Soviet Union, sign a mutual defense treaty called the Warsaw Pact.

1963
Kuwait joins the United Nations.

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

HE news of robbery allegedly committed by policemen in Dinajpur district recently must have been quite disquieting to all, specially to those serving in command positions in the police hierarchy. Apparently, there is prima-facie evidence of complicity of policemen in the criminal act that has prompted the authority to suspend seven personnel, in addition to other administrative measures. While such action would be appreciated, societal concern cannot remain restricted to penal actions and administrative measures only.

In the fitness of things, there is a pressing need to take a hard look into the causes of alarming police delinquency. Nobody would dispute that when protectors become violators the foundation of criminal justice administration gets shaken. Therefore, one needs to know if the standards of recruitment in the police have declined over the years and many undeserving candidates have managed to gain entry through unfair means.

The premonition is that undesirable appointees, once in uniform, let the lure of the lucre take its toll and never hesitate to deviate from the expected norms of behaviour. An additional query would relate to the suspected neglect of training, especially of the lower ranks. Has there been a distinct lack of emphasis on the various aspects of police behaviour?

In effect, we may have to appreciate that the responsibility for failure

to improve the standards of police recruitment and training must fall squarely on both the politicians and the police professionals. They have not risen to the occasion, but that does not mean that the unhealthy practice should continue to the detriment of a vital profession.

Under the circumstances, recruitment standards must be improved by strictly curbing corrupt practices at the time of recruitment. Officers with a record of commendable honesty and integrity should be entrusted with the responsibility of conducting police recruitment. This is important because the crux of good policing is the efficient and

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amiable presence of a well-qualified, trained and motivated constable. The need is to change training programmes from isolated, closed rigidities to integrated inter-disciplinary programmes for the preparation of sensitive enforcement professionals.

There should be a concentrated drive to make it difficult for a dishonest person to remain in focal position. Superior officers have to set examples by maintaining their private lives above board. Since maximum corruption is due to poor service conditions, it should improve commensurate with the nature of job a policeman performs.

At the same time, corruption should be dealt with an iron hand. All these are tall orders and there-

fore, in order to reach the objective of much needed attitudinal change, the proper environment has to be created so that policemen can perform with a sense of pride and fulfillment.

The political imperatives for creating a truly professional police force are of utmost importance and demand the attention of all segments of the society. It may be of interest to know that the French police do not act and behave like their English counterparts, largely because of historical reasons, although a channel geographically separates the two countries. Multiple revolutions in France had their

impact on all institutions there including the police and interestingly the French are not particularly fond of their policemen.

The English "Bobbies" still retain their composure and professional elan although their reputation too was tainted by the criminal conduct of some policemen in late '70s and early '80s. The "Blair Pitch incident" relating to the death of a teacher by police action in London and "Operation Countryman" conducted for detecting criminal policemen involved in bank robbery and other crimes may be recalled.

The above incidents are cited not to justify the malfeasance and misfeasance of our policemen but only to highlight the historical perspective in which our policemen's behav-

iour pattern has to be judged. The criminal action of our policemen cannot be treated lightly under any circumstances. However, the point to draw one's attention is whether, in a predominantly reactive culture characterised by large impropriety in public life, we can expect our policemen to behave in a conscientious manner.

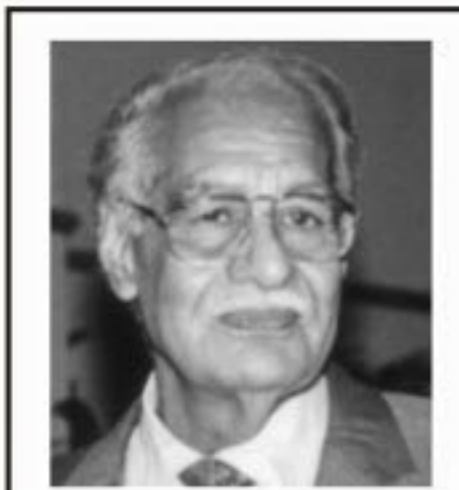
It also needs to be ascertained whether the aggressively acquisitive behaviour of the influential along with the criminalisation of our political process have encouraged the potential delinquency lurking in many hearts including those of policemen. Our policemen with hopelessly low pay enjoy wide ranging powers to curtail liberty. In these circumstances, it is difficult to keep them totally immune to the virus of get-rich-quick disease. This is a field reality with which conscientious police managers are grappling.

The deviation of policemen in the form of criminal acts and other illegal activities are always deplorable as they shake the foundation of the society by eroding faith and trust in the rule of law. The most visible symbol of authority can never escape criticism for malfunctioning of any description. They cannot ignore public opinion. This needs to be constantly impressed upon the rank and file. At the same time it needs to be seriously examined at the earliest whether the bulk of our police force should continue to be ludicrously equated with the unskilled workers and whether police modernisation schemes will remain an area of low priority.

The writer is a columnist for The Daily Star.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Green farms or killing fields?



KULDIP NAYAR

IT is the same story of a farmer and his land. The government acquired green fields at Greater Noida, in the suburbs of Delhi, for "public purpose" to develop the Yamuna Expressway for allotment to the highest bidder in the private sector. The payment was nowhere near the market price. In fact, it was one fourth of what the farmers got

Rs.800 per square metre against Rs.3,200. Developers are selling it at Rs.11,000 an acre.

The agitated farmers "detained" two officers to put pressure. This led to a clash between farmers and the police. Four people died, two from each side. UP Chief Minister Mayavati aggravated the situation by letting loose the police and driving out villagers from their homes.

The tragedy raises familiar policy question: how far the development can go to devour the fields which grow food grains and that too on a pittance of compensation? I thought that the government had changed its policy to allow a farmer to retain his land if he did not want to part with it. Apparently, this has not happened. Either the centre or the states have their own agenda which supercedes the assurances.

New Delhi seems to have woken up finally. Rural Development Minister Vilasrao Deshmuk has said that the 1894 acquisition act is being amended. I must say it's pretty soon. The public purpose will be redefined and the market price assured. While redrafting the bill, the government should also be providing/allotting shares to the land owners in some sort of partnership in the industrial unit for which the land is acquired.

The Greater Noida matter should not, however, end with an inquiry into the killings. The malady is deeper, relating not only to the

acquisition of land but to the depletion of income of farmers. Indeed, the performance in the agrarian sector is woeful. In other words, 70% of India's population living in the countryside is in miserable condition. New Delhi's statements on rural development are many but the scene has changed very little. Even Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's promise last October to amend the act would not have moved further if the farmers had not taken to agitation.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, as many as 17,368 farmers killed themselves in 2009. This is an increase of 1,172 over the

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2008 count. Further divided, it comes to roughly 50 people per day. I do not have to remind that the farmers were in the forefront of freedom movement. Today they commit suicide while toiling for their meager livelihood. They sacrificed their hearths and homes to oust the British so that the free India would attend to their plight. New Delhi should realise that the countryside is simmering with agitation and the lava beneath can erupt at any time.

Poignant is the comment of a farmer who committed suicide. On March 24, 2008, Shrikant Kalam, a 50-year-old farmer possessing five acres of land in Akola, Maharashtra, hanged himself to death leaving the following poem:

"My life is different/
My life will be like untimely rain/
The cotton in black soil is like a poem to me/
Its roots are sweet as sugarcane..."

fact, the agriculture growth in the country has now stagnated for more than 15 years. In the '80s, it was 3.3%, in the '90s it came down to 2% and now it has slipped down further to 0.4%. The steering committee on agriculture for the formulation of 11th Five Year Plan has admitted that after independence such a drop in the agriculture output has been "witnessed for the first time." Spurts of growth in the production of food grain should not delude either the Planning Commission or the government.

The result of decline is that per capita availability of food grains in 2011 is to the level attained in the '50s. Calories intake has gone down from 2,153 (1993-94) to 2,047 (2004-05) in rural India and from 2,071 (1993-94) to 2,026 (2004-05) in Urban India. The threatening magnitude of food insecurity manifests itself in starvation deaths, stunting

and wasting of our population.

The Indian economy is engulfed in a deep and intractable crisis. The government's response to the situation has been to introduce populist measures like debt waivers, the proposed food security bill etc., and continue with the neo-liberal thrust of opening up our agriculture to world market forces and to the corporate sector. This has exacerbated the crisis and created an impression that the agrarian crisis is the result of the policies of globalisation, and a reversal of these policies will correct the situation.

Of course, it is necessary to resist the neo-liberal policy frame and also to reverse it. However, the crisis has a much longer history. Its root is deep. Just reversing the policies of the past two decades cannot redress the injustice meted out to the majority of the agricultural population over the centuries. The roots of agrarian crisis have to be traced in the distorted capitalist development trajectory that we inherited from our colonial past. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, a socialist by conviction, could have done something since he ruled the country for 17 years. But he got enamoured by industrialisation.

I concede that industry is necessary to lessen dependence on agriculture because of vagaries of weather. But there has to be a balance. Nehru realised this but late. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the top economist, has not even now. One can see the consequences within the seven years of his rule. That farmers are committing suicide because they earn far less than they borrow should make every Indian hang his head in shame. Land reforms may be a revolutionary step for the type of economy Manmohan Singh is imposing on the country. But he can at least do something to overcome the stagnation in agrarian growth.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist. www.kuldipnayar.com