

Enemy's enemy is my friend

BJP, CPM Target Mamata

ON the eve of the May 2016, West Bengal Assembly elections, Arun Jaitley shared his campaign experiences with some editors. When he

attacked Mamata Banerjee and the Left-Congress Front in equal measure, the crowd's response was tepid. When he attacked the Trinamool Congress (TMC) for 60 percent of his speech, there was some applause. But when his speech was 75 percent invective against the TMC, the applause was thunderous.

The editor who passed on these "findings" to me was then a key figure in the Kolkata establishment. He was amplifying something he liked to believe. So opposed to Mamata was he that he claimed some credit for helping stitch together what was patently an absurd arrangement: Congress and The Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) would hold hands in Bengal, but fight each other in Kerala. They were trounced.

Jaitley's unflattering report about Mamata's electoral fortunes can be easily explained. His meetings, obviously organised by RSS cadres consisted of crowds who were presumably anti-Mamata. His narrative also revealed that, in charting out a future in Bengal, the BJP saw Mamata as a much more



formidable obstacle than the Congress-Left combine.

That outcome is precisely what the BJP is up against, now that Amit Shah is preparing the turf for the 2019 elections.

In this framework, how does the communal violence following Basirhat play itself out? First, it must be registered that there have been a dozen or so clashes in the state after Mamata's re-election. It must be said to the credit of CPM's 36-year rule: Communal riots were almost non-

existent. Some of what is happening now is clearly part of the BJP's effort to create an atmosphere conducive to communal polarisation.

It is difficult to see how the BJP can profit from efforts at Hindu consolidation in a state with anywhere between 30 to 35 percent Muslim population. In the absence of a reliable census, these are the figures most parties privately cite. Promoting communalism would leave this bloc's vote consolidated exactly where it is: behind Mamata.

Considering that this very same vote stood four-square behind the CPM for 34 years, mostly under the charismatic Chief Minister of Jyoti Basu, its support for Mamata need not theoretically be seen as permanent.

This probably is the desperate hope the CPM nurses. To enhance Mamata's vulnerabilities it has thrown in its lot with the BJP: an enemy's enemy is my friend.

Just as the self defeating formula, the CPM + Congress, for May, 2016

elections, was credited to the CPM secretary General Sitaram Yechury, the strategy of attacking the TMC, just when it is in the RSS-BJP line of fire, is widely believed to be the line enunciated by former party Secretary General Prakash Karat.

Quite clearly the party has not yet digested the harsh reality that it was trounced by TMC, that Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee was West Bengal's Gorbachev. In the rush to reform both had lost control.

The Marxist government's conflict with peasants in Nandigram in March, 2007, set a series of events into motion which ultimately dethroned the CPM. Karat's diagnosis was that the anger of Muslim peasants had been stoked by a combination of Jamiat, TMC and Naxalites.

Muslim peasants, fearful of losing their lands for a Special Economic Zone, were the basis on which CPM groups worked hard to mobilize a powerful movement. Jamiat may have played a role since the peasants were Muslim. The only party in the fray to take electoral advantage was the TMC.

It was a masterstroke of political opportunism by Mamata. Having lost the 2006 assembly election, she turned her fortunes around using Singur and Nandigram as fulcrums.

A leader's political durability in Kolkata can sometimes be measured by political currents in neighbouring states – Tripura for instance.

Possibly inspired by Mamata's

rise, the President of the Congress in Tripura, Sudip Roy Burman switched to the TMC. But when he saw the Modi wave sweeping across Uttar Pradesh (UP) and the TV channels, he turned up in Guwahati to promise support the BJP's Presidential candidate Ram Nath Kovind.

Now, Agartala is ripe with rumours that six TMC MLAs are likely to join the BJP in the coming weeks. In other words, the BJP, which had no member in the Assembly, will suddenly have six.

This sudden inflation of BJP legislators will have ample moral support from the rabidly anti-Muslim Governor Tathagata Roy. His recommendation on how Muslim terrorists should be punished borders on the Macabre: "Wrap them in pigskin and bury them face down in Pig's excreta."

Tripura has been under the CPM rule for the past 32 years. But the anti-CPM vote mostly rallied around the Congress in the past. As elsewhere in the country (West Bengal, too) the Congress has reduced itself to a virtual non-entity in the state. At the grassroots, this space is being occupied by the energetic BJP cadres. Taking a holistic view, these must be seen as some of the chinks in the TMC armour.

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We need activism more than ever

RECENTLY, I watched a TV news clip of protesters in the United States demonstrating against the Health Care Bill that, if passed by the Senate, would deprive millions of basic medical benefits. What struck me most was the image of a young protester in a wheelchair struggling with the security guards trying to forcefully evict her. The image filled me with a sense of guilt and shame. I have always been acutely conscious of issues that adversely affect the less privileged. But in the last 46 years—since I actively participated in the Bangladesh Liberation War—I have not been in the front line to promote a worthy cause or a common good!

True, not all of us are destined to be game changers. But we can, and must command the many unsung heroes who walk that extra mile to challenge social and political injustices. These agents of change are labelled as "activists" in common parlance—but let us take a closer look at who these people are and what kind of mindset they bring to social issues. One thing is obvious—they are not necessarily people who are directly affected by adversity. Many are individuals who feel a sense of moral imperative to step out of their comfort zones and join the struggle for the rights of the less fortunate. Whether it is marching for equal pay for women in the United States or rallying against the unsafe working conditions of garment employees in Bangladesh—activists leave their footprints by challenging the many injustices and inequities of our world. In the process, they raise public awareness and reshape our

social and political consciousness. One might ask: What is that special characteristic which makes some people confront danger and take grave risks to fight for a just cause? The most common trait among activists is their readiness to react and resist when they witness unfairness, inequity and exploitation of the disempowered. The catalyst for activism could be either personal experience or a shared social concern. For example, Gloria Steinem, while writing about the harsh conditions and unfair wages and treatment endured by women in a Playboy Club, discovered that the "Playboy Bunnies" were in fact used as sex objects. The revelation transformed her into a leading champion of women's rights. Martin Luther King Jr., on the other hand, directly encountered racial segregation and discrimination as a black American. He decided to "act" rather than accept the status quo. Mahatma Gandhi turned to protests and activism after facing abuse and persecution as a coloured person in apartheid South Africa.

Some artists, too, promote a cause by creating music, writing books or painting canvases that contain strong social or political messages. In a recent interview published in The Washington Post Magazine, Harry Belafonte described this experience beautifully: "In the arts I found a platform where people were saying things that needed to be said, defiantly, poetically and with reward." The great advantage artists have is that even if they are censored by the establishment, they can connect to their audiences through social media or in a different location or country.

Just as activism needs leadership, it also requires mass support. We cannot underestimate the contribution of the numerous unknown people who join a struggle or a cause and turn it into a political



or social movement. A case in point is the Language Movement that ultimately morphed into an independence struggle. The oppressive policies of the Pakistani regime and the subsequent brutalities of the army toward civilians impelled hundreds of thousands to join the struggle. This is also an example where the inspirational guidance of a leader, Bangabandhu, galvanised the population by making them aware of the need to preserve their

freedom and dignity. Unfortunately, not all activist movements yield success. But they do something else that is important: they allow the voices of the disempowered "other" to be heard. Whether it's through a protest march, or a Facebook call or a Twitter cry, activists expose the unpalatable realities of the society or country we live in. They give voice to the voiceless and visibility to the invisible. People like the brave young woman in the wheelchair are the

ones that make a difference to our world and inspire many to "act" rather than remain passive dissenters.

Activism has gained a critical status in today's fragmented and unfair world. Fortunately, internet connectivity has given a fillip to the power of social protests and is positively impacting public interest causes by providing a level playing field for disempowered groups. In a world where the richest 1 percent owns 50 percent of the total wealth and consequently enjoys enormous

power, we, ordinary folks, no longer have the option to sit at home and do nothing. It's not about political or social vendetta, but about safeguarding the rights of the majority—the other 99 percent. To achieve this we need to rely on collective action. We must act as agents of change, because "change is brought about because ordinary people do extraordinary things."

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A WORD A DAY



ALACRITY
noun

Brisk and cheerful readiness.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 30 Fragrance
- 32 Key
- 33 European peak
- 34 Boat parts
- 38 Do a trainer's job
- 41 Quite uncommon
- 42 "Understood"
- 43 Harrow rival
- 44 Scooter's cousins
- 45 Ordeal
- 1 Upper limits
- 2 Heaps
- 3 Annual sports
- 4 Chef Lagasse
- 5 Indonesian island
- 6 Wears down
- 7 Acknowledges, in a
- way
- 8 Clasp
- 9 Employ
- 10 Spectrum end
- 16 Lyric poem
- 19 Diamond feature
- 20 Heaps
- 21 Russian refusal
- 22 Leslie Caron film
- 23 Fusses
- 28 Make void
- 29 Moronic
- 30 Spotted
- 31 Dinner wine
- 35 Brooklyn team
- 36 Aphrodite's son
- 37 Dispatched
- 38 Crater part
- 39 Freud topic
- 40 Kid's spinner

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

A	P	P	S	A	M	A	Z	E	D
C	O	U	P	B	O	L	E	R	O
H	O	L	Y	O	U	E	A	T	
S	P	O	R	E	S	C	U	B	A
L	A	V	A	L	E	A	C		
O	P	E	S	F	I	L			
W	A	R	C	O	N	S			
Z	A	N	Y	O	F				
G	A	T	O	R	V				
P	R	A	C	P	E				
S	T	R	E	T	T				

BEETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT