

# **BENGAL TOPS IN TRAFFICKING & DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

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(English Version)

The recent report of the National Crime Records Bureau that Kolkata is the safest among all major cities of India is indeed very welcome news. Technically, Coimbatore is the safest, but it is hardly a major city. But what is more noteworthy is that the rate of crime here is less than one eighth of Delhi's, in spite of the fact that more money, manpower and resources are heaped on the nation's capital. Kolkata's crime rate is one fourth of that of Bengaluru which is a much desired destination and when compared to Mumbai, this city is far better off. The next part of the report, however, takes away the satisfaction and congratulatory mood because it says the State of West Bengal is first in both cruelty by husbands and in trafficking of women. It also tops in acid attacks. This is really a sharp drop because in the fifties, sixties and seventies this same state was known for the highest respect it gave to women. We remember how women never thought twice about returning home walking from cinema halls after midnight without any escort. These current statistics and others from national level bodies reveal that the land of Durga and Kali has indeed changed a lot.

We need to think seriously why this has happened. The first culprit was the dreaded Naxalite period and the political violence between the Congress and the Left parties that followed. These 7-8 years are a gash upon West Bengal whose internal scars can hardly ever heal. It put an end to many things, from vibrant night life in Park Street-Chowringhee to the late night fun in *paras*. The old relaxed, culture of Bengal that was symbolised by the slow but gentle tram was replaced by reckless mini buses and rude and rash private buses that personified the new age of pipe guns of the lumpen bourgeoisie. Over the next three decades, the unbridled competitive radicalism of left trade unions (that were joined by others as well) led to endless ghe-raos as power was unleashed by the angry lower middle class. While these state-sponsored anti-capitalist agitations were glorified on ideological grounds and romanticised through IPTA plays, Gana-sangeet and progressive films by Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen, the state's industrial base was destroyed beyond repair. In contrast, the sincerity with which Operation Barga and distribution of *pattas* was done by the same Left Front ensured considerable economic benefits in the rural areas. But this too reached a saturation by the late eighties and instead of coming up with the next lot of reforms through farm-based services and agro industries, with the same passion

as for the Barga movement, the regime revelled in self satisfaction with verbose politicaljargons and mindless expansion of its mass base. The “have nots” were soon outnumbered by the “must haves” who shattered all cultural myths and moral values. Globalisation and “bourgeois vices” were blamed but Subhas Chakraborty’s “Hope 86” legitimised the end of “Jalsa Ghar”. Those who began their journey into muscle raj by forcing builders to procure bricks, sand and gravel from them blossomed later into the powerful syndicates that can wreak havoc with political support.

Panchayat leaders under the Left regime degenerated into a new class of rich desperadoes who roamed the countryside on motorbikes or government jeeps and Ambassadors, terrorising and pulverising opponents, with novel tactics like “boycott”. Thus, the huge amounts of money that the state and central governments pumped into the villages, roads and irrigation *bandhs* gave birth to a “contracracy”, to use Benoy Choudhury’s phrase. The small benefits that accrued could hardly match the ever-growing population. We have to understand that West Bengal has finally caught up with Bihar as both have the highest density of population in India. This is around 1100 persons per square kilometre as compared to the all-India average of 382. Like Bihar, its agriculture sector and low industrial base just cannot absorb so many people and over the last twenty years, Bengali labourers and womenfolk have been migrating to far off states in north and western India for seasonal farm work or permanent jobs in the cities. In Delhi, where I spent the last eleven years, my hosts would invariably tell me that their maid servants, cooks or servants were from Bengal and introduce me to them. Menial jobs are what most Bengalis get in other towns where they compete against migrants from Bihar, Jharkhand, eastern U.P. and the ubiquitous Bangladeshis. So before we blow our chests and quiver with emotion about Bengal’s superiority, let us remember these cruel truths.

It is easy for Gujarat or Andhra to give large chunks of land to new industries as their population density is far less than even the Indian average. Our population density is three times theirs and land is an emotional issue as it is much more fertile. Land acquisition is viewed emotionally as it snatches away the existing means of livelihood and gives uneconomic compensation. Besides, there is no assurance of employment in the low-manpower, semi-automated industries that may come up, if at all. But without land, no big or medium industries are possible and without these, the state’s economy cannot grow big enough to gainfully employ the bottom of the pyramid. This is the “Catch 22” situation that the chief ministers have been trying to break in the last 15 years, but getting industries back is a Herculean task. The image of the aggressive Bengali labour who is over conscious about his rights and not about his duties is quite deeply imbedded in the minds of industrialists all over India. After

all, these anti-owner attitudes were drilled into the masses for over three decades. The present CM stands a better chance, as unlike her predecessor, her party and the trade unions are under her control. But while the Left matured in its last phase and presented industrialists with one 'union leader' to satisfy, the present regime has too many quarrelling leaders in each area, which leads to open conflicts that makes life difficult for industry.

[OPTIONAL: A one industry-one union approach could help in bringing entrepreneurs back. My eleven years in the Commerce and Industries departments of the State and Central governments taught me that industrialists value delivery at the field level much more than meetings in 5-star hotels, whether in Hyderabad or in Kolkata.]

With the breakdown of values, it is not a wonder why this state has the poorest record in trafficking of women and in maltreatment of wives. Does illiteracy lead to these evils? No, as West Bengal is placed above the all India average and is among the middle high performers in literacy and where school drop-outs are concerned. The Ministry of Women and Child Welfare itself reports that Bangladeshi and Nepali women are trafficked through West Bengal which adds to the figure, but that is no excuse. From March this year, the state has declared 'zero tolerance' and since the numbers involved run into just three thousand for a state where the female population is 4.5 crores, it can surely be tackled. Where child trafficking is concerned, the two major rackets that were busted this year in Jalpaiguri and North 24 Parganas reveal that if local authorities are vigilant, much of this crime can be curbed. Cruelty to wives needs more in depth study, and may be the increased consciousness here leads to more complaints than in those Indian states where tortured wives cannot even complain. But, it is time to wake up and realise that this Bengal is quite a different state, where society needs to cure, not endure.