

TRINAMOOL MUST CHECK ITS OWN INTOLERANCE TO COUNTER THE RISE OF BJP IN BENGAL

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I have no love lost for any of the four major political parties that I have interacted with in Bengal in the last half-century. I joined the Indian Administrative Service in 1975 during the Emergency, and I have seen at close quarters how democracy was trampled by the Congress in Bengal – with the Maintenance of Internal Security Act, arbitrary arrests and detentions by the police and widespread clampdown on free speech and political rights.

I worked under the Left Front for 23 of its 34 years and witnessed firsthand the growth of a one-party state and how the opposition was ostracised and hounded at every level.

Our initial enthusiasm for the land reforms introduced by the Left for establishing socioeconomic justice dampened when we saw the devastating effects of their depredations at the village level. Every opponent was crushed by ruthless party cadres on motorbikes and the emerging mafias. Their extra-cosy relation with dubious businessmen was an open secret.

I was in Delhi when the tragedies at Nandigram and Singur happened and Mamata Banerjee swept the polls in 2011, but I kept very close track of my home state and its happenings. By the time I returned to Kolkata in 2016, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) had been in power for over five years and already a veritable terror. It had not only mastered the art of crushing all opposition from the Leftists, but had even bettered all in this game. Naturally, my conscience did not permit me to join their government in any advisory position in spite of hints and offers.

I say all this because I fear for my state and my country more now than ever before. Has Bengal really and decisively voted for communalism like the rest of India, except perhaps Kerala and Punjab? Has it finally succumbed to the lure of Hindutva and right-wing intimidation?

The rise of BJP

Many have been trying to understand what really happened in the Lok Sabha polls of April-May 2019, where the Bharatiya Janata Party secured 18 of the 42

Lok Sabha seats, going up from its 2014 performance of just two seats. This gave the TMC chills, as its seat count went down drastically from 34 to 22. Had it not managed to claw an additional 3.5% vote share this time (its earlier share was 40.3%), the BJP may have overtaken it. After all, the BJP caught up with the TMC's vote share, going up from its 22.2% of 2014 to 40.2% this time around.

The Left was wiped out, losing both the seats it held in 2014. Its vote share went down to a miserable 6.3%. The Congress lost two of its earlier seats but managed to win two.

However, before we declare that the BJP is surely going to drive Banerjee out in the next assembly polls two years from now – if not earlier – we need to understand that it is not a Hindu communal wave that is sweeping Bengal at present, as the yes-sir media is making it out to be. The BJP is winning not solely because of the Modi factor but because of some terrible mistakes that Banerjee has made.

In Bengal, the BJP is now, in fact, a conglomerate of desperate Leftists, Congress and even ex-Trinamool supporters who have regrouped under its protection, on the comfort of immunity that they figure they will get because of the party controlling the Central government and the para-military forces. TMC's hitherto-unchallenged muscle power everywhere is facing an equally violent challenge – for the first time.

The sheer belligerence of the sword-wielding goons on motorbikes carrying saffron flags and fearsome blood-red *tilaks* on their forehead may gladden many, because finally, some group is giving the ruffians of the Trinamool Congress a run for their money. But we must also realise the long-term implications.

TMC versus BJP

How on earth can Banerjee blame the Congress of dynastic politics when she herself foists her own nephew as her successor and the most powerful man in Bengal? She is single and lives in humble circumstances, making the poor man's *hawai chappal* her trademark, but if half the stories one hears about the other person are true, well, he sure lives it up.

Her government is certainly no less autocratic than Modi's, so many voters prefer one over the other. At least the BJP puts up an attitude of zero tolerance to corruption. The TMC, however, has no such pretensions. The Saradha and Rose Valley scandals are just two glaring examples, and the timely exposé by some Machiavelli's Narada channel sting operation revealed

that the TMC leaders who were caught on camera took raw cash quite nonchalantly. Instead of taking action against them – many of them have been sent to jail thanks to the unrelenting pursuit of the Central Bureau of Investigation and the Enforcement Directorate – Mamata defended them tooth and nail. They win elections anyway, but the party's image is bruised.

The BJP also manages its funding with more finesse and does not make a fetish of picking up petty lakhs from shady businessmen, because the real big fat cats come to it, laden with booty. It was recently reported that the BJP received nearly Rs 600 crore in six years from DLF, a controversial realty behemoth (derogatorily called a 'promoter' in Bengal), and a Bharti-backed trust of the Airtel-Mittals.

Other RTI-based reports indicate that nearly 95% of the highly opaque donations under the controversial electoral bonds scheme went to the BJP from 2016 onwards, and the remaining crumbs were thrown at all other parties put together. A fresh report by the Association for Democratic Reforms suggests that in the last two years, the BJP has received a maximum donation of Rs 915.6 crore, which forms 94% of the total donations to political parties in the last two financial years.

TMC's high-handedness

One can have absolutely no objection to a democratic rightist government like Atal Bihari Vajpayee's, but it is frightening to see how dangerous communal forces are actually being propelled to power in Bengal by the TMC's high-handedness. In spite of all odds, my first submission is that there is still hope left for a tolerant, secular state. But tolerance must first come from the ruling party as, on the one hand, it professes this where religious communities are concerned and practices complete intolerance where democratic politics is concerned.

The manner in which the ruling party hounded every political worker from the opposition parties over the last eight years is quite unparalleled. We must remember that while the Congress's excesses brought in the Left and the Left's 'terror' brought in the TMC, all of them were – or are – steadfast believers in pluralism and secularism.

It is a different matter altogether that the cult of political violence never seems to leave this state, once bombs and pistols were taken up by nationalist radicals called the 'Bengal Terrorists,' and then against the British – more than a century ago. All said and done, none of the three secular parties has ever threatened to split this nation down the middle – with swords and *trishuls* – as the BJP-RSS combine does, and drive us to a permanent state of emergency and terror.

The four decades that my generation of administrators worked for the nation were those that began with Naga and Mizo insurgencies, which are quite fearsome to recall; through the upheavals when Assam and Punjab were determined to secede from India (we faced “Indian dogs, get out!” in both states), while Kashmir and Naxalite areas were always on the boil – but state repression was less.

We had to tackle many other threats to the Indian union, in our own different ways. Quite a few in my batch of IAS officers died in service, mainly from stress and suicide, while some paid the price with other breakdowns. This happens with other civil servants and more with policemen as well, especially those who follow the constitution and their conscience. It is now incumbent on us to hold India together.

How TMC is digging its own grave

The TMC has to realise it is digging its grave with its political intolerance. The same police that currently does its every bidding – including filing false cases against opponents – will be the first one to hound them if the government changes. Only an immediate relief from concocted police cases to its political opponents, including the BJP, would allow thousands of Left and Congress workers to return home.

Many political workers who left their own parties to take shelter under the BJP banner may even return to their natural political inclinations. Unless the secular parties reach some sort of understanding, the saffron wave looks unstoppable. And no one will heed Banerjee’s appeal to the non-BJP parties to come together unless she gives up her policy to exterminate all opposition, including parties wedded to secularism long before she arrived.

The chief minister must also stop going overboard in her attempt to appear pro-Muslim as this is being misunderstood by the majority Hindu community. The BJP pounces on her as being anti-Hindu and this impression is being systematically encouraged and amplified by a ruthless social media and whisper campaign. As the last election proved, and she is almost powerless against this new tsunami.

Many a time, her party and government have been accused of sheltering Muslim terrorists and extremists – which is unforgivable, if true. Some news items reported that even Bangladesh had asked India to investigate links between the Muslim radical Jamaat-e-Islami and the Trinamool Congress.

In the greater interest of Muslims and all others, she must stop being so tolerant of the ‘excesses’ and criminal activities of a handful of Muslims, who find no

support in their own community and only give the TMC a bad name. This powerful charge against her is damaging the cause of secularism in Bengal and will ultimately harm the same Muslims she walks that extra mile to protect. She may also like to cut down on her optics of wearing a 'hijab' and plastering this visual everywhere, as no one is challenging her secularism. Only this will save the Muslims of Bengal from sure doom. Other visible measures like covering beef and pork meat that are openly on sale from public view may actually help the state retain its sanity.

TMC's fragmented structure

Besides, the TMC is badly, and perhaps deliberately, fragmented into dangerous rival camps. At the level of an assembly constituency or the Panchayat Samiti (erstwhile block), the party has at least eight to ten rival leaders and camps that are at daggers drawn position. It is only the 'high command' that is holding the peace and it allocates to each warlord which section of voters' support they must procure during different elections, or quit.

Many feel that the chief reason for making a dreadful mockery of the *panchayat* elections last year was the TMC's fear of losing even a single grassroots vote bank, because that would mean that money from schemes and muscle-power would move away. Banerjee has to find a way out of this and she appears to have taken the first step with her 'cut money' announcement. She has recently directed her supporters to return the 'cut money' that they squeezed from beneficiaries of the welfare schemes, which is, indeed a bold but desperate step.

But this may take care of only a part of the problem. Political observers say that the very political structure of the TMC depends on local satraps, many of who extort money from businessmen and even common citizens, while her party's panchayat leaders defraud her much-publicised government schemes.

Unlike the Congress, the Trinamool (as its name 'grassroots' suggests) could build up grassroots support through local clubs and by procuring the backing of most organisers of community *pujas* – to challenge the all-powerful 'local committees' of the Left Front. This helped her finally remove the invincible Marxists who ruled Bengal for 34 long years.

She had to encourage some puja or the other every month so that these clubs and the various factions of her local base could raise 'donations' and please their voters with gala evenings of songs and feasting. Though she pampered these clubs with more than Rs 600 crores of doles and permitted their excesses, this solid support base may switch to the Hindu party if they enrich and

empower them more. While she extended her single-party rule more and more every month, with assured grassroots support of the party and police.

When I go to villages, I am told of well-organised rackets of siphoning money from the NREGA scheme that ensures a hundred days' employment to the poorest, through false or dubious 'job cards' of beneficiaries. Many spoke of corruption in possibly all anti-poverty schemes. The illegal mining of coal in western Bengal and sand from river beds everywhere is done in broad daylight. Officers look the other way, as they have no choice – no one wants to be a 'martyr' by standing up to the government. Many are wondering how to get out of this mess, as this habit of making money appears to be unstoppable.

The richest party in the history of India is adding fuel to the fire by throwing money all around in this do-or-die battle in Bengal. It is common knowledge that local businessmen and those from the 'up-country states' sponsor Ram-Hanuman pujas and will do anything for the Hindu cause. There is proof of more electoral bonds being sold in Kolkata than elsewhere, obviously to finance this operation in Bengal.

Even so, Banerjee has to give up her recent temptation to arouse Bengali nationalism to counter the BJP's Hindu-Hindi image. Bengal is one of the very few states where parochial movements were never encouraged or popular, and the respect that its people have for plurality and secularism should remain unsullied and non-negotiable.

The BJP in Bengal is basically a conglomerate of all disgruntled political leaders, workers and local toughs of all shades who are against the TMC for their own reasons – rife with internal tensions and quarrels. The only way to tackle the terror and counter-terror that rocks the state every day is to realise what is the 'primary contradiction' and what is really secondary.

Only if democracy is restored in Bengal can all healthy secular parties fight communalism as a joint campaign. That campaign must be won, to save Bengal and India.