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FEATURE ARTICLE: Mamata's khamota or the backlash of the bhadraloks

April 27, 2012

Posted by southasiamasala in : Features, India, Lahiri-Dutt, Kuntala , [trackback](#)

Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt

In 1990 after Lalu Prasad Yadav, the lower caste charismatic political leader of Bihar, became the Chief Minister of the state, the young, English-speaking, suave journalists flocked from metropolitan cities like New Delhi and Bombay to catch his sound bites on tape and camera. Their interest in Lalu was not only because of the man himself, but also his illiterate wife, his large family and his domesticated cows that apparently enjoyed chewing the grass of the palatial Chief Ministerial Bungalow built during the colonial raj. It has now become almost a myth amongst these journalists how Lalu chewed his *paan* (betel leaf) and spat the red spit out into a bowl, and how when asked one of those airy-fairy questions by an urbane young man from New Delhi, he raised one of his profuse buttocks to let out a loud fart before responding.

The story has become a journalistic legend because if there is one thing that India definitely respects, it is behavioural polish, whether in its businessmen or its politicians. Lalu's lack of sophistication was deemed as crude and lower class, and he was made fun of in English-language dailies and weeklies, turning this story into a myth. There is however, an irony in the story; one might see the fart as the ultimate finger-up - bugger off as we say Down Under - to those who matter very little to Lalu. I am saying this in context of the recent rush of allegations against the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Bannerjee, by the regional, national and even international press. The didicule-ing and 'lampooning' of Didi, apparently in response to her mercurial temperament and unpredictable outbursts, her dictatorial style, her preference for the colour blue, her summary dismissal of the country's railway minister for raising ticket prices without consulting her (she herself was the previous railway minister and didn't get a good report card), and her ultimatum to the Prime Minister for revoking the strict yearly repayment of debt by the state. Even *The Economist* called her the 'Mischief Minister of West Bengal' and made fun of her effort to change the name of West Bengal to Paschim Banga. Within a year of her election, the entire world appears to be against her, projecting her as unfit to run the country as Lalu was presented by the bemused media then.

This is amazing; something very suspicious must be working here; let us take a deeper look at what is going on. Are we not conveniently forgetting some bitter truths? For example, the fact that the phallic top of the Ochterlony Monument (now Shahid Minar) was painted an obscene red by the victorious CPI(M)? Why have we forgotten that just recently the Australian Labour Party

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withdrew its support for Kevin Rudd, forcing him to resign from his position as Foreign Minister of the country because it had the right to do so? Isn't a Minister just representing his party, and must consult it before making a major decision? Why must we conveniently forget the strange game of name change that is being played by everyone and all over India and blame just Mamata? Just to offer one example, it is still not clear why the Census of India began the avalanche of name-change en masse of villages, blocks and districts. Did the Shiv Sena receive this level of rebuke for turning Bombay into Mumbai? Who, above all, did the CPI(M) consult before changing Calcutta to Kolkata? Did they not despise the criticisms made by the newspaper *Anandabazar Patrika*, and needed to start their own political mouthpiece, *Ganashakti*? Quite clearly, Mamata followed exactly what those who held excessive power before her did. The message is loud and clear; Mamata is using CPI(M)'s old techniques to tell them that she is now in command of things. Instead of ridiculing her, one should praise her political astuteness.

I suspect the satire and didicule games are hiding a deeper issue; the bankruptcy of the state not in cultural sensibility but in actual money needed to run its affairs. Consider this. In 2003, the Indian government asked the states to sign the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act, which the West Bengal government refused to sign, saying it was part of the set of 'neo-liberal' economic strategies of the central government. But just before the elections, when they knew about the impending sure defeat, they signed it with 'scorched earth' mentality. This warfare means that the State of West Bengal has inherited a debt of Rs.2 lakh crores (~\$40 billion) to the centre as a result, largely a result of financial mismanagement by the CPI(M). Each year, the state is required to repay interest of Rs. 22,000 crores (\$4 billion). West Bengal, it doesn't matter if one calls it Paschim Banga, just cannot repay this amount. It doesn't have the money. It is not because she is temperamental, but because the Central leaders knows her ability to easily reach the masses as a leader and an elder sister, that straightforward Mamata was able to ask the Centre to seek a repayment holiday.

And satire? Just like financial undermining, satire is a very strong weapon; the timely use of this device can devastate, distract and even destroy an opponent. Make a joke of an enemy, (s)he loses ground, loses face, loses respect. These are values that Indians nurture. And who knows it better than the CPI(M)? They have used it, honed it to perfection, and sent these missiles to many during their long and authoritarian rule of West Bengal for 34 long years. What we are now experiencing is a major satirical offensive against a popularly elected party leader who has inherited a bankrupt state with no or little prospect of industrial development and a stagnating rural economy, lined with porous international borders and poorer states from which the poor are migrating in everyday into the old and decayed industrial areas of Calcutta-Howrah in search of jobs and cash incomes.

The question is, does it matter to those who voted her in? It would be utterly silly to think that the rural (and urban) poor in West Bengal are regretting electing her. Most landless illiterates in rural areas, the urban poor, and those who became tired and frustrated with walking in endless processions with the red flag of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) for its 34 years of rule, are paying very little attention to the primarily English-speaking media and getting on with the business of rebuilding lives. These are people who

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continue to provide the *khamota* (power) to Mamata, not the genteel and educated classes.

So, from our privileged position, how can we interpret this satirical offensive against Mamata? What do we make of it? In my view, with the election of Mamata, several old powerhouses in West Bengal are beginning to break down. Things that were seen as important, as valuable, as 'good', either did not remain so or no one cared about them enough to explain to people that things are changing. What we are seeing is a new kind of class struggle to finally disconnect from our colonial past, one in which class must not be confused solely with economic power, but seen more as a complex constellation of things that represented power in the past.

It is this 'class' – generally expressed most fully in one's ability to speak and write a sophisticated kind of English – but also other things such as the ability to drop names and a natural manner when recalling old pals and contacts, even family and relations in high places – that define the aspiring Indian middle classes. If Mamata (or, for that matter, Lalu) speaks in poor English, it becomes okay to make fun of her. The middle classes in India, one must remember, are not just an economic category, but comprise and fully manifest the gamut of social and cultural characteristics some of which may have been inherited directly from its colonial rulers. Most Indian politicians, including those who believe in and fight for the working classes and masses, display (or are expected to exhibit) these characteristics. Strangely, Mamata does not, which may be the reason why she is being used as the butt of jokes! Because the politicians know that being middle class is safe; showing one's middle-ness is a source of power. Similarly, many women politicians display their family connections along with their large bindis. Indeed, they are not outside of the society they live in, and if they do not flaunt, the journalists from New Delhi would tear them into pieces.

I was brought up with the middle class mentality of Indians because more than any other ethnic or language group of India, the Bengalis are the most affected by this middle-class syndrome. For most Bengalis, being middle-class is equated with the ultimate '*bhadra*' (genteel) existence; indeed most middle class men and women are known either as *bhadralok* or *bhadramahila*, categories that have been put under the microscope by sociologists and historians in order to write treatises which in turn gained them access to public respect and marked them most definitely as *bhadra*. If there is one definitive trait that mark the Bengalis, one must say is this *bhadrata*; the trait is usually a varied combination of a love for polite conversation, dislike for physical work, the assurance of a salary at the beginning of the month, a penchant for travel to the seaside temple town of Puri or the hill town of Darjeeling with a camera in the bag, a preference for an afternoon sleep on Sundays after a heavy meal of rice and fish-curry, and ahhhmm – of course! – a love for Tagore. Bengalis love to see themselves as politically more aware than our illiterate and uncultured Bihari or Oriya neighbours. The comment by one of my acquaintances exemplify this high-brow attitude: 'One wonders how this woman got voted in in the first place though, that too from the populace of West Bengal that is supposed to be politically savvy!' A sad thing, such a comment, because it reflects a tremendous gap in the understanding of the rural context of today's West Bengal. It also represents the typical urbane snobbishness that the dhoti-clad babus of the CPI(M) party had come to represent in their remarkable disdain

of the poor as also illiterate and uncultured, and hence the subject of ridicule. Such an ahistorical, apolitical perspective of Mamata sits uncomfortably with the complex social-cultural milieu within which West Bengal's politicians and the voters exist. I had, in the past, observed that one cannot understand West Bengal politics without understanding its history and society. This was precisely the way in which the ruling nationalist Congress Party viewed the communists in 1950s when the latter expanded their support base amongst the rural farmers, industrial proletarians and, above all, the refugees from East Bengal.

A new power structure emerged in rural West Bengal when the CPI(M) consolidated its powerbase after the 1993 elections. In villages, older landlords lost their support base and new, panchayat-based power groups rose to take control of village social and economic lives. Following on from that experience, one can say that a new class identity is beginning to emerge with the rise of Mamata; a class identity that might, at last, cut itself loose from colonial hangover and recreate understandings of what it means to be a Bengali in West Bengal in the year of 2012. Like the rise of Lalu, Mamata's rise to political power would not be silent; this is a major change and what we are hearing could be the creaking of the old and decayed power structures that are breaking up now. One certainly hopes that Mamata will survive the fiscal trauma, which is the real problem at hand; the satire onslaught and the backlash of the *bhadraloks* would not be very difficult to tide over until the Left is able to review, reorganise and mutate itself.



Tags: bhadralok, Communists, government, India, Kolkata, Lalu Prasad Yadav, Mamata Banerjee, middle class, politics, West Bengal

Comments

1. Anjai Prakash – April 28, 2012

Interesting piece and analysis of West Bengal politics indeed. No wonder Mamata Banerjee is named by Time magazine as one of the 100 most influential people of the world, has been invited by the publication to a gala dinner with the who's who in New York this April! However, i differ from Kuntala on part of the analysis. This may come from my poor knowledge of west Bengal and its polity. First, there are small incidences which have been reported which show Mamata Banerjee in bad light. These reports are verbatim and recorded by TV camera so its not something which could have been min-interpreted by the 'upper class' Indian media. Mamata should have avoided raising controversy over her cartoons which had led to the arrest of a university professor. This is something very bizarre. Trinamool congress workers should not marry CPI workers – another bizarre and absurd thinking.. her defence for the girl who was raped midnight on Kolkata and didi defended that she 'asked' for it.. one- two- three- cases after cases, Mamata Banerjee doesn't look into her senses. A bad politics (hangover of CPI) can always be counteracted by good politics and with all the support and might that Mamata has, i dont think its impossible to show a different path. In fact, Mamata personifies this but i think politics and governance may be two

different things.. you can be a street fighter but to provide good governance you may have to travel a longer distance..
 And please dont put Laloo with Mamata.. not even to make a point on Lalu's class background. From a lower caste and lower class background, Lalu is one of the richest resident Bihari of recent times. And its only the politics that pays and increases one's class status in just three decades. His rise was on the demise of the transformative politics as conceived and idealised by Jayaprakash Narayan and Ram Manohar Lohia in Bihar and he doesn't deserve any credence, from any angle, in my opinion.
 Overall, a very interesting analysis which one has read in one breath... you should write more of these Kuntala...

2. Prasanta Roy Choudhury – April 28, 2012

Kuntaladi, the paradox of the so-called bhadrals of Dhobi- Panjabi of CPI(M) is exposed or exposing. Your indication of the liberation of new class and mass emancipation is astounding & fundamental. I now believe sociologically Communists, the incomplete concept & rather an utopia, are the greatest threat to World civilization and the advent of other race (M) is the ugly & cruel threat to Humanity. The nexus of 2M in Bengal is also worth noting, creating a breeding ground for honing the death sentence of the microscopic Bengali race. Yes Mamata after facing brutal & sarcastic blow from different corners of worthless critics of Bengal, had rather emancipated the race to breathe once again fresh air of life & spontaneity. She has amazing administrative, Managerial, Behavioral, power of Ice- breaking thoughts, fundamental never thought before & never tried before, sincere, devoted, integrated & patriotic heart & soul. So she has to blame to curb his motivation & still that to a women of high resolution in male dominated society.

Thanks a lot to penetrate in such a new way. This will be a worth to refer in discussions.

3. Sankar Chatterjee – April 28, 2012

Kuntala

It's a good article.

Electorates always want to see the "promises" made by the political parties delivered. During the time of Bidhan Chandra Roy Congress Party used to get only 5 seats out of 22. Urban people have always been against the ruling parties because their expectations are always more than their rural counterparts.

CPM extended their power base on the back of land reform. They returned to power on rural votes. But the electorates expectations grew and they gradually started to believe that the other side could deliver. It happens in every country. It has happened in UK, USA, and our Australia. Queensland's election is a case in point. Once almost extinct LNP has reduced LABOR PARTY to the dust. You can put all Labor MPs in a van. They won't need a caucus room.

As for West Bengal time will come when the electorates will turn against Trinamul Party. But when? I don't know.

Once again, it,s a good article.

With best wishes

Sankarda

4. Soumit Dutt – April 28, 2012

Well written and lucid. However, one fails to understand why two wrongs make a right.

What she is doing is exactly the same as what the CPI(M) had done.

Education is fast becoming a major casualty. The politics of violence and vendetta is getting out of hand. What kind of society will emerge from such a chaotic politico-social situation?

The economy can be revived if populism is given the go-by but social degradation cannot be revived.

5. Patrik Oskarsson – April 28, 2012

Thanks, this is a very interesting write-up. I have never been exposed much to Bengali politics and for me this is a really introduction. But whenever I come across the CPM in AP (which has been reasonably often) sophistication is one of the last words that come to mind. The CPM people I meet seem like pretty plain folks (even perhaps grey or dull!) who all look the same but have some sort of interest in the rural population however quickly this may be forgotten whenever the big Kolkata bosses come up with new ideas. Somehow you talk of the CPM elite as very different beings from what I think of the CPM. Perhaps the big party bosses and intellectuals like to think and even look like they are with the people but ensure that you can not qualify as part of the inner circle unless you are also cultured?

You might want to check some of your numbers, 22000 crore should be about 4 billion dollars and not 440 million.

6. tuhin k roy – April 29, 2012

This is an insight on WB politics and what its people deserve! All said and done our Didi is a disappointment. She just shoots off the mouth. Fact that, as borne out in the article, she is tacking the same way at that party before, smacks of duplicity – no original thinking. she could have done it differently. In 365 days of rule (nearly) she could have done something for the people of Singur – they are left high and dry – the dry ash swirls in the wind. Coal continues to be pilfered, albeit robbing the exchequer but at least an earning to the miners and haulers (yes – i see them, even women, holding the handle bars of cycles, bags of 50kg slung on the sides, doing a distance of 25 kms. / day to cover +100 kms. Coming back to Singur: bad decision to set up a plant where the land boasted 3 / 4 yield each year. But when the deed is done, the slag / fly ash dumped to level, plant buildings raised, machinery installed / near completion, it was just plain dumb to scrap the Plant. The patches of land, not handed over are no good. The soil is soiled – useless for cultivation. Those paid compensation – how long will it last? They had all hoped actually for long term benefits: jobs, health care, schools etc. All this come to a big zero. Then, a few hundred plants are sick / idle. No turnaround program except for making a minister to be Chairman of “a” company. Highways that are the lifeline of an economy are a major

cripple – imagine it feeds exports of a very significant number. You dont need the largess of NDelhi to do this – only the will. Oh! this exercise in coloring with blue; some months back it was orange & green – now recoloring. Where did the lolly come from if one is so darn broke. Shoving ultimatum to the Center is not the answer – a lot many states will follow. Enough for today

7. Ishika Ghose – April 29, 2012

An analysis, a comparison with the CPM and their methods. Fine. What Mamata Banerjee promised was “paribartan”. Change.

People, rural or urban voted for “change”. They did not vote for a replay with a change of cast. Two wrongs do not make a right.

This has nothing to do with the so-called middle class bhadrolok or bhadromahila. A dying breed in Kolkata if not extinct.

What is so wrong about this “analysis” is that it seems to justify the chief ministers methods simply because she cannot speak English well etc. For that matter, Pranab Mukherjee's English accent is not wonderful – it does not change respect for his knowledge or delivery.

The Chief Minister was well aware of what she was inheriting, fiscally and politically. How does she propose to “change” this fiscal state of affairs when she is out to antagonise every single industrialist and ridicule every donor country – including the Japanese and the Norwegians who invested in Bengal in spite of all that they saw was wrong? Wonderful that Hilary Clinton is coming to “endorse” Mamata Banerjee. Let us not forget the USA has contributed next to nothing to the State of West Bengal. Their “communist paranoia” is what has been temporarily put on hold and they are celebrating that!

Being able to get a payment holiday is as temporary and short-sighted as you can get.

We continue to refer to the “masses” in the villages who “chose”. Nothing could be further from the truth. The masses in our villages do not choose. They are made to choose. When we acknowledge that we may come somewhere nearer the truth

Governance requires something more than mere language skills. So far the Chief Minister's governance is under scrutiny. Not her language skills, not her clothes sense.

8. Anindya Roychowdhury – April 30, 2012

So, with all that talk about “badlaa noye badal chaai” (“Change, not “revenge”), we are now lauding her for paying them back with their own coin and, as always, at the cost of the hapless citizens.

It's the same bhadralok who joined hands with the so called non-urban folks to together throw out the CPM, in the (now fast receding) hope of a better tomorrow. We then conveniently used the Sumans and Mahashwetas to whip up intellectual sentiments, and suddenly we don't want them any more...since they do not make up the numbers? As long as we can keep the gullible rural folks at bay – why should we care, now, right?

No one has blamed Ms Banerjee for the ills of the CPM, or for the empty, debt-laden coffers or the completely lawless state that she inherited. And everyone was willing to give her a long rope But by constantly drawing reference to the earlier govt. for every mishap that happens, from a rape to a fire to babies dying in a hospital, or by outright denying them, or by starting this bizarre witch hunt based on some kind of paranoia ("anyone criticizing the govt. must be a CPM conspirator!") is she gaining in credibility?

Obama too inherited an economy that was not so pink in health, and he is arguably messing it up even more. But one thing he doesn't do is blame Dubiya for all the country's current shortcomings.

9. Kul Goswami Rahman – May 5, 2012

Very interesting article. Very well-written. But, like a few of the above comments have pointed out, two wrongs indeed do not make a right!

10. Babuji – May 6, 2012

Sorry Kuntala for late response ... dont look at my own FB Wall much ... am the sy, introvert type ☺ your last cople of paras, especially about the CPM masses finally turning to Trinamul, and why they will stay that way, whatever media and intellectuals fastidiousness, looks valid ... but Mamata must also remember, media and intellectuals had a big part in her being able to oust the CPM, after decades int he wilderness ... in my book she still will rate 6 or 7 out of 10 ... a good score, but not a score where you can ignore erstwhile well wishers ... the Laloo example is too much surface stuff ... Nitish Kumar out-did Laloo at his own game ... Mamata is trying the same, outflanking the Left, from the left, but poltical organisational logistics in Bengal is different from Bihar

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