

A Report on the panel discussion entitled

**“Writing the Contemporary History of
Politics and Governance in West Bengal”**

organized by

Calcutta Research Group

at the Seminar Hall, Academy of Fine Arts; Kolkata, June 10, 2011

"plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose"

(the more it changes, more it remains the same)

- Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr

The legislative assembly election in 2011 has seen a change of guard. The Left Front, led by the CPI(M), governed West Bengal for 34 years, from 1977, riding on massive electoral successes and the governmental-social relations it built appropriate to its rule. After 2006, a turnaround could be sensed. Popular protests against land acquisition and neo-liberal policies, most notably in Singur and Nandigram, fanned the underlying discontent with the flawed governance of Left Front. When we think about contemporary history, these critical events are bound to influence our framing choices. And now that a new party has formed its government in West Bengal, the rhetoric of change is everywhere. The celebratory tone in official circles is matched by popular expectations of a new era, albeit with cynicism in many prominent circles. In this context Calcutta Research Group (CRG) decided to explore the possibility of writing a critical history of contemporary politics and governance in West Bengal, and examine as a backdrop if the convenient temporal setting of 1977-2011 stands the test of decoding long-term processual aspects of history. Accordingly, Calcutta Research Group (CRG) held a panel discussion on “Writing the Contemporary History of Politics and Governance in West Bengal” at Academy of Fine Arts, Conference Hall on June 10, 2011. Sociologist Pradip Bose moderated the discussion. The panelists chosen for this event were: retired senior

administrator Debabrata Bandyopadhyay; eminent educationist Sunanda Sanyal; journalist and social worker Bhaswati Chakravarti; well known civil rights campaigner Sujato Bhadro; and CRG director and social scientist Ranabir Samaddar. Samir Das, the CRG President, made the opening remarks.

Debabrata Bandyopadhyay touched various important issues. He talked about locating and developing an archive. Archive is a major issue when someone is attempting to write contemporary, or for that matter, any history. Contemporary government records are mostly classified documents, with a researcher having virtually no access to them. Hence is the importance of print media reports and electronic media coverage in recent years. Bandyopadhyay suggested that a project of digitizing the newspapers and organizing the electronic media footage should be undertaken. This new archive should provide the historian of the contemporary with vital and authentic source material. About the temporal marker he had a clear and bold position. He spoke briefly on the a history of the CPI (M) with regards to its leftist political and economic policies, also its compulsion of creating a viable social base in a parliamentary democratic set-up to garner votes continuously in elections. He said that the policy of Operation Barga, initially geared to erase intense inequality in rural areas through a very limited version of the 'land to the tiller' programme, saw in later years a return to power by the substantial farmers and rich people in the villages. There was a reversal of the land reforms. The party was satisfied with ensured parliamentary success. Then it began its policy of land acquisition and neo-liberal policies of industrialization, which alienated agrarian constituencies, and finally resulted in the massive electoral losses from 2009-2011. So, he argued, 1977 and 2011 are convenient markers when it comes to an analysis of the history and destiny of left politics, an integral part of Bengal's history and being. He said, one may begin with that, and then go into the particularities, details and continuities from the preceding era.

Sunanda Sanyal shared his experience as an activist in the field of education. He used examples to drive home his basic point that during the Left Front rule, the will of a party to entrench itself unprecedentedly in every area of public life, to strengthen itself at the cost of objective frameworks of governance resulted in intense competition in the garb of 'politics'; as a result the educational scenario

suffered greatly. Recruitment patterns in educational institutions were guided by party affiliations; students were deprived of the opportunity to learn objectively before being able to formulate a well thought out position on a theme, and were groomed as potential cadre of the party in power. This precipitated what Sanyal referred to as “assassination” of the ideal constructs of “teachers” and “students”, which a society should aspire for. There was a lot of violence in educational institutions during this era. Violence, in fact, was a key theme in the other three presentations, albeit in different ways.

Noted scribe Bhaswati Chakravorty talked about poverty, systemic exploitations and structural violence. Her basic contention was that poverty is a continuing feature in the South Asian rural matrix, and regime-changes matter little as there is a dearth of grass-root activism for social change. Moving beyond strictly logistical issues of development, she focused more on harnessing ‘experience’ to write a history of poverty in Bengal. This is one thing a historian of the contemporary must do, she felt. Using a mix of oral historical and ethnographic methods, one has to try to rescue the small voices outside the ambit of archival records. She used the example of a girl, who was one of those rare ones in a Bengal village belonging to a very poor family and yet being able to pass the state secondary examination. But poverty acts within a very complex mesh of subjugation, as this girl found out. Gender, a marriage market intertwined with facts of economic inequality, physical attributes and discrepancies, struggle for inheritance of property — various factors like these worked in conjuncture that resulted in the violent incident of the girl committing suicide with her daughter. But this educated girl had voiced her grievance to the local panchayat, a local self-governing structure developed during Left Front rule, but to no avail. Bhaswati said, thus we can see how situations of poverty and despair work within a composite apparatus of exploitation, where the local and supra-local power structures unite to stifle the marginalized subjects, and ensure an expandable future for poverty. This brought Chakraborty to a methodological issue. She stated that a workable method to write a history of the present is to pick up an event with some critical or emotive import, and then write a narrative that decodes the event in all its layers and connections with the meta-narratives of politics, political economy, and governance.

Sujato Bhadro began his presentation with a caveat. Although 1977 was for him a break in the temporal order of Bengal's history, and he was critical of the rule of Left Front, he acknowledged the contribution of CPI (M) to Bengal's political culture. The party had a role in developing popular consciousness among the disenfranchised, and had tried to form a vanguard section. But in Bhadro's contention, 1977 and whatever happened thereafter was a big betrayal. The promise of social justice and progress for subaltern classes took a backseat. It became obsessed with furthering party's interests at any cost. This unleashed a deluge of violence in Bengal, unprecedented in scale and consistency. In place of dismantling it strengthened the conservative ethos of earlier ruling factions. This finally resulted in the insensitive model and policy of industrialization at the cost of life and livelihood of the peasants, seen in Singur, Nandigram and other places, which hastened the fall seen from 2008 to 2011.

Ranabir Samaddar narrowed down the focus of the discussion by talking about the normalization of violence in Bengal's political culture and life in general. In recent years inter-party violence has resulted in more deaths in Bengal than insurgencies. That makes us question our assumptions about democracy and state in India in various ways. Is democracy embedded in violence and violent pacifications? Is there a public space for shared radical movements available in Bengal today? In this context, he referred to the old debate about the organizational and functional aspects of a leftist party, and the phenomenon of a rigid centralized structure stifling variegated mass movements and developing logic of its own survival. He also pointed out that while violence has become endemic in every sphere of life in the last few decades, a politics of multitude is also taking shape, initiating social dialogues, solidarities and networks of trust. The polyphonic movement that was seen in the last years of Left rule raises some hope. Samaddar did not want to make heavy weather of the choice of 1977 and the coming of the Left Front as a temporal marker of this particular attempt to write contemporary history. Any temporal framing or spatial framing would invite a certain amount of cynicism, given the long genealogies that any historical event possesses. But what is really necessary is to go ahead with a thorough research that brings out the continuities and the ruptures in modes of power. During the course

of the discussion, one indeed found that the coming of the Left Front and subsequent times do provide a rich ground for doing contemporary history.

During the subsequent discussion, participated by an audience that comprised about eighty scholars, activists and students, various important arguments came up. One strand was that since India's democratic experience and experience of political modernity has almost always and everywhere been troubled and violent, the emphasis on the flaws of the period of Left Front rule and decline, can slide into a merely anti-CPI(M) posture. But as the discussion often suggested, a framing device is necessary for exhaustive academic research, and an honest endeavor can produce balanced study from that. Barun De, the renowned historian, suggested 'truth and reconciliation' policy in the light of the experiences of South Africa and Central Asia, where victims of pervasive political violence speak out as a therapeutic act and the historian gathers information and insights from that. Another strand was that the writing of contemporary history can be done with the broader ambition of theorizing state, democracy, party, political movements and governmentality. It was also suggested that doing contemporary history can modify the dominant notions of objectivity and representational fantasies of an author/commentator/historian, in which self-reflexivity will simultaneously vocalize the texts, processes and people studied and create solidarities between the author and her object of study. It was clear that the concern was not merely which party goes and which party comes. The audience appreciated CRG's project to sympathetically study the fate of resistive and emancipatory movements within the context of changes in overarching, hegemonic, socio-political structures. Many things really change when it seems like "times they are a-changin'". Writing a history helps, this discussion demonstrated.