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editorials

Idle worshippers

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For the first time in the last 29 years, I spent Durga Pujo in Kolkata. And I must say, despite the suffocating crowds and the occasionally nauseating expressions of Bengali cultural narcissism, I felt quite elated by the experience. Bengal has gone through so much, from deindustrialisation to reindustrialisation to fears of a new deindustrialisation; from communist hope to communist betrayal; from capitalist makeover to capitalist mess; from leaders trapped in their own misguided logic to leaders who have 'the courage to make no sense at all' (to borrow a phrase from my favorite political cartoonist, Gary Trudeau), that it's tempting to imagine it to be a defeated place, full of people dreaming of being elsewhere. It is, of course, a cliché to talk about how vibrant Bengal remains despite everything. But the last few days convinced me that it is not just wishful thinking.

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Protector of All, or contrasts the slightly hysterical image of the goddess in brutal Mahishasur-mardini (killer) mode, with the calm of the giant owl that hovers over her.

And what about the cosmic cheek of trying to imagine what happens when the crowds are gone and the divine contingent gets to relax a bit? Lakshmi is cooking dinner, slightly dishevelled now, but make-up still on; Shiva lounges dissolutely on a nearby bench; Saraswati plays the veena; only the Mother and the demon are still rehearsing their roles, but her heart, quite apparently, isn't in it.

There is everything here — creativity, imagination, energy, humor, hard work, effective management — for the occasion one local team built a structure large enough to hold a 100 people (and the divine delegation) completely covered with living plants; another had faked an entire decrepit building, complete with defunct STD booths in brick and mortar. And they were all ready on time, ready to take the weight of the immense crowds that showed up (the entire population of several small countries walked through some of these structures over these few days without any major disasters).

What I kept wondering is when will all this talent and energy turn into something more — like for example, jobs for the semi-employed young men who are the mainstay of every Pujo. The prevailing impression seems to be that it is not exactly round the corner. The current government has a couple of years more to run but seems to be in a shell-shocked stupor. And the opposition, if and when (most people say when) they come to power, will not come with a lot of experience in making policy or running governments.

Moreover the Left, some might say with some justice, already feels that it got tripped up by pure oppositional politics just when it was trying to do something good; I fear that a lot of them may feel that it is time to pay the Trinamool Congress back in its own currency. And the fact that a lot of the money from government contracts that used go to Left Front supporters will now go to the other side, will do little to improve their tempers. A big fight, it seems, may be in the offing.

What is bizarre is that given that there is little disagreement about what is coming (but perhaps only among people I know) and how grim it all looks, that there is not more talk of what can be done. The Left Front, in particular, seems to have forgotten that two years is a long time in politics — a lot can change, but they need to wake up and try. This is not just a concern for the Left: the fact that many people want a change does not mean that they want the Left completely wiped out — a significant part of what is wrong with Bengal today has to do with the impunity CPI(M) cadres enjoyed for so many years. One thing we don't need is a reprise of that, with the party labels changed. Moreover, a Left Front that expects to be

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back in power soon is much less likely to set the state on fire than a Left Front that is hurt and hopeless. But who is going to bring them the smelling salts that they desperately need?

As for those not directly implicated on either side, this is the time to start thinking about the transition. Civil society movements have historically played an important role in transitions from dictatorship to democracy; we need something akin to that — to stand up for civility and order, for the primacy of the rule of law, to remind whoever wins that their goal needs to go beyond capturing all the local contractor's jobs for their party boys.

While that is easier said than done, let me offer one small thought on how to get started: How about a movement where groups of citizen commit to maintaining an impartial public history of every instance of serious political violence (say, involving murder or grievous hurt) in their neighbourhood-listing the party affiliations of those who got hurt and those, to the extent it is clear, who hurt them? Recording has a way of making things more salient, especially (but not only) for those involved in the recording, and might just pressurise the political parties to rethink the role of violence.

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