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GREAT BENGAL TRAGEDY

By Aditi Roy Ghatak

“Culture is what your butcher would have if he were a surgeon” Mary Pettibone Poole, A Glass Eye at a Keyhole (1938). Much of culture, one is told in this age of DNA mapping, is triggered by physiological characteristics determined within the human genetic code. What pinches where it hurts the most is the souring of my cultural affinity with that last bastion of Bengal’s independent spirit: the art and culture community. One has had the mortification of witnessing some of its leading lights going squealing to the chief minister because an artist who equated Indira Gandhi with Mother Durga during the height of the Emergency chose to be dismissive about contemporary Bengali artists. Men and women of commerce are known to sell their souls to a pursuit of mammon and keep the voice of their conscience under mufflers lest it distract them from their single-minded pursuit of Lakshmi. Artists, one thought, were the only hope, their pursuit of the other sibling, Saraswati, not imposing any curbs on the freedom of their spirit and their souls not hungering for lucre, capable of taking independent stands and holding their own, by the sheer dint of their talent. Whatever the former barefooted painter has to say about this community, is but the opinion of an octogenarian who, incidentally, received the greatest leg-up, as it were, from the 17th floor of a skyscraper on Kolkata’s Chowringhee Road. MF Husain, for all his talent to fill space with strong lines, may have been no better recognised than the immensely talented and lovable Sankar Nath Aich who teaches Indian painting at the Government College for Art and Craft, who may never even be comfortably well off by current inflationary standards. The question is: does what an individual, known to have made disparaging remarks about the greats of the Bengal School, say on the eve of his 88th birthday impact on artists of exceptional skill and imagination. Individually, not even lesser artists in Bengal would lend dignity to Husain’s comments with a response. Yet one is today confronted with the spectacle of Bengal’s proud artist community running for comfort when someone has called it names or whatever. The political leadership is cynically dragged into a matter, which these men with exceptional power of the palette should have been able to brush off, literally. Notwithstanding Mr Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee’s passion for art and culture and his ability to defend Bengal’s traditions. two thoughts torment the layman’s mind, especially in a land where standards of protest have been set by the poet-painter Rabindranath Tagore who gave up his knighthood in protest against the Jalianwalla Bagh massacre. If Husain’s one-line dismissal/condemnation of Bengal artists was inconsequential, it should have been ignored; if it was incorrect, the artists should have had the mental and verbal wherewithal to prove so; if it had to

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be given dignity with a response they could have chosen an appropriate forum to do so — even Husain's birthday bash; and it should have been strategically and intellectually mature and not confined to exerting pressure, even tangentially, on the Chief Minister to boycott the party (there was little question of the artists boycotting the event for hardly any artist was invited).

The chief minister has been known to handle criticism by, indeed, respecting the Prime Minister's right to decry the Marxists' performance and retaliating in a manner that bhadrals would do. (One is not commenting here on the quality or correctness of Mr AB Vajpayee's comments or the Mr Bhattacharjee's response though). Artists here do not even need to open their mouths, they can use their royal Bengal brushes and yet were contemplating using their fists on this occasion till saner counsel prevailed.

These are signs of serious afflictions in Bengali society owing to the acute absence of opportunity, which impels even artists to run after loaves and fishes like any other man on the street, creating such a deep sense of insecurity that they feel threatened even by adverse remarks of an inconsequential nature lest that make a further dent on their order books. The second misfortune is that the average Bengali is becoming unwanted in his own state and, therefore, having to resort to things alien to his own culture in a futile bid to own his state where Ganguram is being replaced by Haldiram. Third and worse, the individual seems to be getting isolated from his own surroundings and is happy to save his own skin. Thus even for a powerful community of the police force, a pothole death of a policeman does not inspire the entire force to put its weight behind those fighting for better civic amenities. The death is confined to the realms of a personal tragedy of the policeman's widow. Even the protest against the CESC's exorbitant rate hikes, which afflict every citizen of Kolkata, is not vehement or informed enough.

The bitter truth is that at one level Bengal's sensibilities have been bludgeoned into passivity with an absence of visible growth on the economic front, while a large segment of the earning population has been dispossessed. On the other, those desperately seeking opportunities have become shrunken souls and occasionally respond in a manner that does not befit the provocation. Behind the Bengali looms the shadow of a heritage he is set to lose, which he desperately tries to cling on to without anything solid to grip it with. There are few idols before him (save Sourav and Baichung) and the position of mayor, once held by Netaji Subhas Bose is now with Subrata Mukherjee who will have nothing better to be remembered by save his monumental folly in the shape of a water tank. These are, however, the stuff that the "lament of the ordinary Bengali" is written of. The artist is an extraordinary Bengali, the scratched out bits of Tagore's verses were an art form; the Bengali's music rules hearts and minds through Bollywood films; the Bengali scribe's writing wins the Booker prize and the Bengali economist's contribution wins the Nobel prize. Surely, if the Bengali belonging to this hallowed world fails to respect his own mettle, succumbing to every verbal assault, even the light at the end of the ordinary Bengali's tunnel will be blighted.

Returning to the comment about Bengali art, it may be worthwhile pausing to ponder why some of the most brilliant water colours by young Bengali artists are sold to New Delhi collectors for no more than Rs 200 a piece; why the plaque at Town Hall refurbished by selling some priceless paintings by Bikash Bhattacharya acknowledges the contribution of the corporates who bought the paintings but does not mention the great painter himself. Why have Bengali artists not cared to point out that slip to those who prepared the plaque? Liberalism, commitment to a cause, sense of fairplay and an innate dexterity with the fingers and voice are matters of Bengali culture. Its advancement is all about keeping the mind's window open. A closed mind like a closed parachute is a killer. An open mind, a sense of humour and a hospitable home are some of the Bengali's most cherished gifts.

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