

A Prattler's Tale: Bengal, Marxism, Governance

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Extracts:

Sachinda [Sachin Chaudhuri] was widely respected because of his intellectual prowess and his innate dignity despite his lack of any formal academic distinction in economics in a society obsessed with qualifications. There was general recognition of his considerable erudition in economics, and the excellence of his English prose was highly acclaimed. Yet he remained an aimless wanderer till he reached his middle age, flitting from one profession to another, his income always uncertain. Suddenly his life took an almost unbelievable turn. Hitubabu [his younger brother Hitendra Narayan] went to the United States as a member of a business delegation whose sole purpose was to explore possibilities for Indian goods. My boss from the Bangkok days, the senior economist with whom I had had a rough time in New Delhi, was also a member of this delegation. Observing the gentleman who had earlier edited an economic weekly for the Birlas from close quarters, Hitubabu was aghast: how could this person with such banal views reach the pinnacle of success in his profession? Returning to India, Hitubabu began to pester Sachinda: 'Dada, economists of such mediocrity are getting uncalled for importance here and abroad, this is an intolerable situation! The point has to be proved that we are capable of doing better. You must bring out an economic journal that will smack of quality. I will get the necessary finance from my business friends.'

Hitubabu's persistence won the day. . . Sachinda had many friends and admirers among journalists who agreed to contribute to the new journal for a honorarium or even gratis. What was still more propitious for Sachinda and the *Economic Weekly*, a bevy of young economists in Bombay, either doing research at the university or in the first phase of a teaching career, or who had joined the newly started research department of the Reserve Bank of India, pledged their commitment to the endeavour. They helped out by writing editorials or editorial notes, 'subbed' copies, corrected proofs and even collected advertisements, bubbling with boundless enthusiasm. Both Hitubabu and Debuda [Debendra Narayan, a younger brother, older than Hitubabu] had connections with official and business circles, so a few advertisements started trickling in. Nevertheless, the *Weekly*, which had its first issue on the first day of 1949, always remained a cottage industry par excellence. [153]

Once I asked a wealthy Punjabi farmer why the cost of farm production as presented by him was so high despite the amount of subsidy and other benefits he received. He replied without batting an eye. 'Of course my production cost will be high. I am a progressive

farmer.' I had to remain silent. The assumption that they were feeding the nation had gone to their heads. There was apparently no power on earth to explain to this category of farmers that, in the given context, the implication of 'progress' lay in bringing down the cost of production through the use of modern technology. [219]

What particularly disturbed me during my tenure as finance minister was unconscionable delays in the execution of various development projects due to administrative snafus. We Marxists might talk of revolution, yet we accept the rules of the existing system and often stay away from making decisions that could upset traditional apple carts. Much worse, some ministers were slaves to retrograde superstitions. Perhaps it was in 1980, a total eclipse of the sun was to take place, and according to some people's beliefs the earth would come to an end that day. The minister from a party purporting to swear by revolutionary socialism persuaded the cabinet to declare a holiday that day. Parimal Mitra, understandably peeved beyond endurance, insisted on recording his dissent on the decision. I joined him.

Samar Sen had once commented in the editorial columns of *Now* on the rate at which the number of gods and goddesses were increasing, and the increasing quantum of land that was gifted to these deities, thereby leading to a progressive shrinkage of surplus land for distribution among the landless. What is called for in the circumstances, he said with a straight face, is family planning for deities. [p 345]

There is no point in airing one's private prejudices. Even minimum research will prove that the financial scams that have rocked the Union government have been masterminded by persons belonging to the 'superior' classes. Those who already have too much are more inclined to increase their assets through fraudulent acts. Even if we were to accept the proposition that those from the backward classes, or castes who were elected to Parliament over the last tern to twelve years, are not terribly sophisticated in their diction or manners, it is equally true that they lack the flair for habitual fraudulence. Many of them are able to express themselves well in their mother tongue which we are unable to follow. Why must our limitation stand in the way of ascribing credit to individuals who richly deserve such credit? [p 440]