



# Art of neighbourhood killing

Shombit Sengupta  
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West Bengal celebrates plurality, half of Kolkata speaks non-Bengali languages, in the hills it's Nepali, but to a large extent they all share the same respect for Bengali culture. Yet in small towns, villages or community where people went to school, college or social functions together, played as children of the same neighbourhood, how is there so much abhorrence amongst these same people in different political parties now? Hatred, enough to even kill? It's shocking that in the name of democratic Panchayat elections in West Bengal, death has become a ritual at nomination time, during the polls and when counting the votes. In this year's Panchayat election from nomination to the polling stage about 26 people died; in 2008 about 40 had died while in 2003 there were 107 deaths. I don't know how we consider such electioneering a democratic process.

Neighbours suddenly became enemies in Germany too when Nazism started to wrest power in 1933. History will never forget how Hitler targeted to exterminate the Jewish race, using both archaic to scientific methods. His disgraceful active approval made it free-for-all to humiliate, torture or kill Jews, who he said,

were inferior to German Aryans. Jews were made scapegoats for Germany losing World War I; denigrated as money lenders, "the nation's enemies responsible for the fall of the economy." The dark 1933-1945 Nazi diary cannot be forgotten.

Bengalis on the other hand have no professed religious hatred or racial complexities to tear people apart. Yet quinquennial Panchayat elections spell a death knell trend in West Bengal. About 74% of India's population lives under the 3-tiered village, block, and district level Panchayat system. Being a Panchayat Pradhan (Head) is the most coveted post in West Bengal for the power, patronage and money that comes into play. Riddled with violence, from vandalism, fiery inciting speeches, to killing opponent politicians, their kin, and police and security personnel, bloodshed and destruction of personal and public property has made living in rural West Bengal a veritable nightmare.

As it is, livelihood generation in rural India is very tough. In West Bengal, neglected since Independence and held back by turbulent politics, its worse. Farmers with 2 acres of land and 5-7 family members barely generate any money. Political leaders of different parties have not nurtured real peace and value for society. Left protectionism was symbolised in the combative slogan "*lorai, lorai, lorai chai*" meaning "fight, fight and fight needed," but "fight" had no defined purpose and objective. All political parties have had a hand in devastating Bengal, making it devoid of progressive industry.

Politicians took no big step even after 1991 economic reforms to change Bengal's fiscal condition. India meanwhile has had many non-traditional entrepreneur businesses emerge. But we've not seen many Bengalis living in Bengal create some new dimension in industry's new era, such as in digital technology or telecom.

Does it mean Bengali acumen is deficient somehow? Absolutely not. Plenty of Bengalis have excelled remarkably in exhibiting great competence outside Bengal, or outside India, in varied careers in business, education or medicine. Bengali politics sans business vision has forced people to exit to achieve personal success elsewhere. No political leader of Bengal has cared to understand and address this. The result has been that politics is the only source of income today. It's squarely evident in the blood-tainted election process. In rural areas, contestants use force and support of political parties to win an election at any cost, even killing first, before becoming their leaders. The Pradhan is an all pervading post, controlling villagers by giving them jobs, birth certificates to even measuring property.

Let me recount the epic story of Judas Ben Hur from the Bible in the perspective of West Bengal's Panchayat elections. In the famous horse chariot race sequence before the Roman Emperor and thousands of spectators, Hollywood film's Ben Hur had only one objective, to win as the only survivor. The rest could die. The opponent charioteer, his friend, stealthily used weapons as decorations in the chariot against gentle Jew, Judas Ben Hur, but he tragically died. People have similarly gambled unethically with human life in West Bengal Panchayat elections.

Unemployment, lack of industries and entrepreneurship form the crux of this extreme politicisation. Bengali society has always criticized businessmen, believing them to be up to no good. Our intellectuals have nurtured

this appalling culture. A government jobber or professor is respected, but businessmen are considered corrupt. That probably explains why, when I recently enquired of 20 to 40-year-old Bengalis about Biren Mookherjee's legacy, they'd never heard of him. This aptly illustrates how a great business tycoon who'd uplifted the state's economy has been obliterated. He brought in US investment, and was the first recipient of a World Bank loan to the private sector. But politically fanned labour trouble brought his IISCO steel business, second biggest after Tata Steel, down in 1960s. He'd sadly remarked, "I see before my eyes a vast industrial complex, with which I was associated for nearly 40 years, crumbling to dust." Later the Government took over IISCO which is now part of SAIL. Just to illustrate, here's Bengal's entrepreneurial businessman Biren Mookherjee, a role model lost to the state's next generation in the political battlefield.

West Bengal needs a political leader with the art of unifying different political parties as in a football team. Football team players have their different techniques of play, personal political opinion, positions in the field, but everyone in the match is unified with one objective, to strike a goal, to win. In a democracy, one-party dominance cannot exist. Bengal's problem is that political parties all hate one another. Only when they mutually understand that politics serves to develop a state, can they contribute to industrial development and people's entrepreneurship. There can be political differences, but 60% unification in ideology is important to deliver the state's betterment. West Bengal even now has the geographical advantage of developing to great heights as the country's Eastern port corridor.

**—Shombit Sengupta is an international Creative Business Strategy consultant to top managements.**

**Reach him at [www.shiningconsulting.com](http://www.shiningconsulting.com)** ■