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"My address is to be found among all freedom-fighters"

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Bengal, more than any other state in India, has passed through several political uprisings which attest to the deeply rooted revolutionary fervour of Bengali lower classes and also of middle-class intellectuals. The political upsurge might be traced back to peasant rebellions, to the sustained nationalist and leftist risings during the British rule, the famine of '43 which destroyed millions and the subsequent Tebhaga (share croppers) movement. Even after independence the Bengali mind questioned the quality of freedom granted, protested against the feudal-capitalistic structure which in India passes by the name of nationalism or democratic socialism, and often revolted in a manner not exactly peaceful or patriotic. One of our esteemed political leaders called Calcutta "The City of Nightmares", and perhaps it was so from the point of view of the ruling class. In fact, termination of the colonial rule did not usher in days of milk and honey. Ruthless class-exploitation gathered momentum and as an inevitable reaction Bengal witnessed a series of leftist movements. We recall proudly the 1966 food-movement and we recollect with mixed feelings the coming to power of a left-wing government in Bengal in the late sixties and the consequent rebirth of armed revolutionary movement after two decades. This tide has ebbed, for the present, and many fair-weather revolutionaries have chosen an easier path. But the present generation of radical poets have passed through hope and despair, illusion and disillusion, and today they retain their convictions, while dispensing with rose-tinted glasses.

The above suggestion might seem strange to those acquainted only with the romantic-lyrical image of Bengali poetry. However, it would be even criminal to suggest that modern Bengali poets (I am not excluding Tagore who has been grossly misinterpreted as a saint, ascetic and what not) buried themselves under jasmines and scented spring breeze. Understandably, the degree of commitment varied from one poet to another, yet all the major poets worth mentioning often rejected their rose-gardens in order to feel the pulse of life around them. They could not but respond to the stifling socio-economic pressures that were weighing down the majority of the population, could not but protest against the increasing economic disparity and some of them — especially the Marxist poets — even decided to come down to the streets to combine poetry with effective resistance. Again, this laudable effort to strike rapport with the impoverished masses is sanctioned by the past. Mukunda Das, one might recall, travelled from one village to another during the days of colonial rule reciting and singing his verses in order to rouse the people against British oppression. And Tagore (he was not that much of a mystic) led the popular opposition against Lord Curzon when the latter attempted to divide Bengal into two. In other words, modern Bengali poets are only reinforcing a strongly

established tradition of social poetry by writing socialist poetry, for in the contemporary reality socialism appears to be the only desirable goal. A random list would demonstrate how the more significant poets have painstakingly strengthened a definite trend, thereby pointing out to the justifiably violent poets of the sixties and seventies the way they should follow. Tagore is remembered not only for his lyrics, but also for his inspiring poem "They work"; Nazrul Islam is intimately connected with his "Songs for the Peasants and Workers"; Amiya Chakravorty crystallizes in his poem "Give me food" the agony of unquenched hunger; Sudhindranath Datta pays homage to the sickle, the symbol of liberation, in a poem which bears the same title; Bishnu Dey in his more intricate poem "I want that darkness" openly denounces bourgeois exploitation; Samar Sen (at present the editor of an extreme-left weekly) in his poem "Open letter" is even more straightforward in his call for the destruction of the existing order; Subhas Mukherjee, eminently a political poet and a Marxist, sums up his decade's aspiration in a single line "Comrade, wont you bring the new era?" and Sukanta Bhattacharyya's impassioned utterances in "Passport" have become almost a password amongst revolutionaries. Some sort of a retreat into ivory-tower was staged by the poets who came after them, but the mounting class-struggle, Naxalite movement and ultimately the liberation struggle in Bangladesh broke once and for all the barriers between private and social existence. The boudoir was demolished and a deluge of political poetry overwhelmed the readers. Indeed if an honest reader would like to recall the most stirring lines written by modern Bengali poets, he would be compelled to repeat Nazrul Islam's "They great revolutionary war-tired / I shall rest on that day / When the wailings of the exploited will not echo in the wind and sky", Sudhindranath Datt's "The moon like a sickle has risen in the sky / Sickle is this age's hope", Subhas Mukherjee's "Dear love, this is not the time to play with flowers", Sukanta Bhattacharyya's "As long as this heart beats / I shall remove the rubbish of this earth" and Sankha Ghose's "Mother stir up the furnace / I live these days for the joy of surviving / And wolf-heavy death comes / Sing the song of wolves"

The poetry which has been created out of the last turbulent years echoes, perhaps more stridently, the same revolutionary urge. Despite the variation in themes and individual differences in approach, all the young poets are convinced that the blatant irrationality and injustice of the present regime calls for one remedy—revolution. Spreading from a particular rebellion — strike or demonstration — the call extends to nationwide revolt. Amitava Chakravorty in his poem "Strike at the Dock" concentrates on an isolated uprising, but he expects the spark to lead to a prairie-fire. In the simplest diction, that is at the same time vibrant, he quotes the exploited workers' utterances which harp on the same irreversible truth:

"Osman Ali has said, Let the heavens break
Yet this fight will persist
Dinu Majhi has said, Let the earth crack into bits
Yet we shall win this fight."

The traditional image of fire and the obvious symbol red are reinforced by the common setting:

"A bidi in the lips of a starving sailor
Who knows when it has turned into red fire!"

This determined working-up leads to the vision of a total conflagration, a vision shared by all committed poets of Bengal:
"Fire in the sea, fire in the breast, fire in phosphorous
The cleaner-boy of the ship sings – the song of life."
Such a poem about a strike would no doubt unnerve the conservative and economist trade-union leader, yet Amitava at least hopes that it will rouse an echo amongst the militant workers.
The very name oft he next poem, "Rhyme of Feelings", by Sushil Saha would seem to indicate a switch from action to introspection. However, the actual course of the poem is in the reverse direction, from a stage of futile introspection the poet passes into the phase of violent commitment and a pleasure in meeting the very uncertainties that once had daunted him.
But the questionings that follow are only an indirect expression of the poet's determination to begin the struggle, which by its very nature is self-sufficient –
"Revolution is the road
The Chariot of the masses
What else do I need?"
One gains the idea that the intolerableness of the present state makes revolution inevitable.
A fervent poet like Pulak Chanda cherishes the firm and quiet conviction that
"Now the fight will start in every village
in every courtyard."
Pulak, by no means a romantic, is aware of the terrible cost (for if the last few years have given any lesson, they have taught the armchair revolutionaries certain bitter realities):
"Soil and shelter will be burned,
Our accumulated treasure
Pleasure and Pain."
His determination springs from the realization that the exploited have nothing to lose but their chains (and their lives of course), but that is a part of the game. Indeed what distinguishes Pulak is his remarkable composure. Whereas the others are moved by hatred, bitterness or fervour, Pulak projects the cool resolution of a revolutionary:
"In every hand rest mouths of steady rifles
Even the child's voice echoes no personal tone",
and the refrain in this poem,
"Now the fight will start in every village
In every courtyard",
almost sounds like a programme-notice.
Compared to all these clarion-calls and denunciations, one is struck by a new poetic note in Subhoranjan Das Gupta's "Only Surrender" The young poet admits that he is still vacillating between his intellectual conviction and conformist background. To him the accepted revolutionary symbols are now nothing more than playthings:
"Now these are merely excuses
Lenin's portrait, Lenin's books",
and a Santali woman is a dual symbol of peasant rebellion and rustic lust. The

pathetic contradiction lies in his awareness that when the Santali woman raises her weapon, he tries to capture an erotic note in her 'madol' (a Santali instrument which is beaten to the tune of both love and war).

"When you flashed your weapon
My Jhumria
What did I play
On your rustic madol."

No matter what the poets explore – retreat or advance, hesitation or conviction – radical Bengali poetry cannot but flourish in a state renowned for its revolutionary heritage and present conditions of nightmarish exploitation. We might add that this is no isolated phenomenon, but part of a worldwide "Culture of Revolt". Bengali revolutionary poets find their counterparts in the Paris streets of '68, in the fields of Indo-China, and battle-ground of Ceylon. As Sukanta Bhattacharyya declared in a poem, "My address is to be found among all freedom fighters".