

Bengal's Violent Politics of Area Domination

As smoke from houses set on fire continues to rise, villagers are confronted with uncomfortable questions. How will people who have lost family members come to terms with their loss? Will they return? What will they return to? The answers are up in the air as Bogtui village in West Bengal's Birbhum district witnessed an unprecedented violence on March 21. Eight persons – six women, one child and one man – were burnt to death.

The violence at Bogtui, located more than 220 km from Kolkata, was in retaliation to the murder of the Trinamool Congress deputy pradhan Bhadu Sheikh, who was killed on the evening of March 21. In less than an hour, his supporters went on a rampage in the village picking and choosing houses belonging to rival Trinamool Congress camps in the village. It was at the house of Sona Sheikh, once an associate of Bhadu, that seven charred bodies were recovered on March 22. Even though people had assembled in two groups (relatives of victims of the fire and Bhadu Sheikh's family) at two different locations when the Chief Minister arrived, a majority of the villagers owe their allegiance to the State's ruling party. The violence was the result of a factional feud brewing between supporters of the ruling Trinamool Congress, but this is not the only kind of violence which West Bengal has witnessed in the past few months.

Days before the Bogtui horror, on March 13, two elected municipal representatives were shot dead within hours of each other. Video grab from a CCTV showed Anupam Dutta, a Trinamool Congress councillor of Panihati municipality, riding pillion on a motorbike when an assailant emerged from nowhere and shot him in the head. The Trinamool Congress leader slumped to the ground. Hours before that Congress councillor Tapan Kandu was shot dead at Jhalda municipality in Purulia district. The municipality had thrown up a hung mandate in the civic polls and Kandu was allegedly under pressure to shift allegiance to the Trinamool Congress so that the ruling party could have a board at the civic body located in one of the most backward districts of the State about 300 km from Kolkata. The death of student leader Anish Khan in Howrah, where police personnel barged into his house in the early hours of February 19 and allegedly pushed him to death from the second floor, had exposed the link between local leaders and the police.

Over the past few years, there have been several incidents of violence, a similar thread running through each. The use of violence for area domination has been normalised, and it is linked to money and muscle-power, contends Anuradha Talwar, a social activist. Together with this, the thwarting of dissent helps the party in power during elections, at all levels, to sway votes in its favour. However, the politics of area domination creates bitter feuds and

rivalries, sometimes in the same party, among leaders who are always competing with one other for a share of resources from the State-run panchayat and other government funds.

Taking note of the nature of violence, on March 25, the Calcutta High Court directed a probe by the Central Bureau of Investigation in the Bogtui massacre. The court has taken suo motu cognizance of the “brutal incident” at Bogtui village and in its order described the incident “one such exceptional case where requisite direction is required”. “We are of the opinion that facts and circumstances of the case demand that in the interest of justice and to instill confidence in the society and to have a fair investigation to dig out the truth it is necessary to hand over the investigation to the CBI,” the order by a division Bench of Chief Justice Prakash Shrivastava and Justice Rajarshi Bharadwaj said. The court observed that the “shocking incident of burning of at least eight persons including a child and as many as six women has shaken the conscience of society” and had a “nationwide ramification”.

As the BJP raised a strong Hindutva pitch to capture the State, Bengal also began to witness communal violence. After the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, communal riots broke out in the Barrackpur subdivision; in May 2020, there were riots in Telinipara. On March 13 this year, a Trinamool Congress councillor Anupam Dutta was killed at Panihati in Barrackpore. The recently concluded civic polls were also marred by allegations of electoral malpractices and intimidation by the Opposition.

So many incidents of crude bomb attack in villages across the State is indicative of how organised crime has spread over almost all districts of rural Bengal. Not only have a number of people died while assembling crude bombs, but on several occasions children have been injured in explosions as they have stumbled across these bombs while playing in their neighbourhood. On March 25, several crude bombs were recovered in Birbhum district after a search was launched by the district administration, not far from Bogtui. As the debate over the Birbhum violence rages, the Trinamool Congress leadership keeps referring to similar incidents in the Left regime. There is no denying that the last years of the Left Front government were violent – there was the movement for creation of a separate State of Gorkhaland and a Maoist uprising in the State’s Jangalmahal region (forests of Bankura, Purulia and West Midnapore). But, according to observers, what the Bogtui massacre shows is that the reasons for the violence have shifted from being overtly political to economic and to some extent social.

Experts like Prof. Maitra emphasise that the Trinamool Congress model of governance is to give money in the hands of the people and the party has been successful to a certain extent but that the State has not been able to attract any major investment in the past few decades. Giving doles through cash- incentive schemes is not leading to development, he pointed out, and West Bengal is witnessing migration of people who are ending up in other States working as labourers in low-end jobs. “There are at least 5 to 6 crore people residing in rural parts of the state. The leaders representing them, rather than being committed to an ideology, are adept at area domination and can get votes for the party. In every pocket of the state we find such leaders,” he said. From Canning in the south to Cooch Behar in the north, the presence of strongman leaders who can get votes and ensure that the opposition does not create problems have emerged as a new phenomenon in the State’s politics. The rags-to-riches

stories of leaders like Bhadu Sheikh and Anarul Hossain cannot be overlooked, villagers pointed out.

Even though the Bogtui violence has come as a major embarrassment to the Trinamool Congress government, the people who bore the brunt of violence have expressed their faith in the Trinamool Congress leadership. The Chief Minister announced a compensation of Rs. 5 lakh per affected family and Rs.2 lakh to each family for reconstructing their houses which were burned down. She also promised jobs to a member of each affected family. But affected people said: "We don't want money, we want the perpetrators to be brought to justice".

Within hours of the court announcing the probe, a group of forensic experts visited the house of Sona Sheikh. Heaps of ashes and broken window panes are strewn around the one-storeyed house. The forensic team took 15 minutes to gather evidence. The villagers who are still on tenterhooks have not returned home. Meanwhile, the spiral of violence continues elsewhere. On March 23, a Trinamool Congress leader Sahadeb Mondal was shot at in Nadia district allegedly by political opponents. Mondal, husband of Trinamool Congress gram panchayat member Anima Mondal, is battling for his life at a city hospital. With each passing day, politics gets bloodier in the State.

(Summary of an article written by Shiv Sahay Singh in 'The Hindu')