

Pawn

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Bandh, bandh, bandh. Bandh will be observed tomorrow in Kalipur, a newly developed township in the outskirts of the city Kolkata. Formerly it was a semi-village with some vast stretches of water bodies but the spate of urbanisation has encroached this area, and now it is within the jurisdiction of municipal authority. Thanks to the realtors having patronage of the party-in-power in this venture since the beginning of the new millennium.

The bandh has been declared by the Radical party ruling the state for decades. A heavy-weight party comrade Mr. Nilesh Sen has been assassinated day before yesterday. A genuine gentleman and, at the same time, a devoted party leader at local level who apparently had no enemy, though he looked somewhat disgruntled over the activities of some of his party activists at local level in the recent past. Some sort of highhandedness and audacity seemed engulfing them which Mr. Sen could neither withstand nor could he stall. In fact, for a few months, it was being said that a tussle had started cropping up between Mr. Sen and Mr. Paltu Pal, another influential partyman who, better known as the friend of realtors in the locality, became the local

committee secretary two months back. It was by replacing Mr. Sen since his one year term was over. Mr. Pal, junior to Mr. Sen, wields enough command at present over the young party workers of the Kalipur local committee.

Sometimes death assumes prominence more political than personal, and invariably so, if it is a case of assassination as Mr. Sen's. Local newspapers have given due coverage to Mr. Nilesh Sen's murder as an ignoble act having been conspired by some unknown criminals from outside. But, as a practice, the accusing finger is always pointed at the opponent party. Mr. Pal has reached his party office today on time. Browsing over the newspaper headlines, he is now going through the directive that has come from the high command of the party.

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Raju steps in. The death of Mr. Sen has drowned Raju into a terribly dark mood. Paltu Pal could well read it looking him in the face. Raju, as it is admitted by all, is now the right hand of Paltu Pal. Showing the piece of paper, Paltu Pal utters Raju, hereby we've been directed to see that the Bandh is observed peacefully in our locality. And you have to see that no untoward incident takes place anywhere. Raju smiles, for he knows Paltu Pal very well. He also knows that Paltu Pal can't plead innocence to himself as far as the death of Nilesh Sen is concerned, for groupism within the party leading to the clandestine murder is almost an open secret now as much as Paltu Pal's rivalry with Nilesh Sen. Raju knows all this because of his long association with them he was drawn into the fold of the party by Paltu Pal

some eighteen years back. Since then, he has been used as a tool whenever required without any right to raise his voice or ask for the reason behind any political action whatsoever!

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Raju Seikh was just of two years when his father Sirajul Seikh was murdered in 1976. His mother, working as a maid in three to four houses, brought him up. She could somehow afford Raju's school fees upto class VI; but, ironically, misfortune overshadowed Raju's life with the demise of his mother at the time he was promoted to class VII. Despite his willingness, Raju had to discontinue studies and had to join a local tea stall as a boy.

Now that boy is a full time party worker of the ruling party. Having been assigned the charge of conducting auto service in that area, Raju was to control, at times, command over the autorickshawallas of the locality as a representative of the Parent Union to which the auto-drivers' union was affiliated. Raju's daily earning depended on their smooth service for every trip, the autowallas would have to deposit a portion of their earnings to the Goomty (mini office) wherefrom one after another autowalla was serially allowed to start. It was late night when his duty would be over and Raju would hand over the daily collection to party office. Raju did get 10 per cent, the rest 90% was equally allotted between local, state and central offices of the party. Fetching and allocating money in such a chain system could be possible only in their party Raju realised soon. Interestingly, nobody disobeyed the party ruling as

everybody was appeased whatever the extent. Notably, there was nobody to utter a single word against Raju even if he allowed one auto to supersede another whose turn had come. But Raju never did so. Raju had both muscle power and patronage of the party he was loyal to as a devoted cadre.

Still Raju was not happy. He couldn't forget her mother's wailing face, her caring, hugging and above all, her dream to see him a man one day. Raju, no doubt, is a man today but is it what her mother dreamt of? Certainly not, Raju too realised it. He also realised that it is power that matters. Raju has it today, though to a limited extent, which his father had not. Raju's mother often told him about the devotion of his father to the party till death. His father was a whole time worker of the Radical party. Whenever Raju asked more about his father, his mother consoled him saying He was assassinated by the opponent group. But why? asked Raju. She could not answer. And Raju a child then wept and only wept. His mother used to say Grow up, one day you will also realise.

Raju is grown up today, but surprisingly, he can't still realise why his mother often said opponent group and not just opponent or opponent party. Was it to mean intra-party groupism or rivalry? Raju often failed to make it clear. He still remembers the day his mother took him to a local party leader, and her earnest request for free-education of Raju at school fell through only because she vehemently protested against the party's inertness to take action against the murderer of her husband. And it is the same

Radical party Raju thinks that missed no chance to pick him up as soon as he grew young.

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And it was the same Raju who was engaged to deal with the auto-wallas by Nilesh Sen, the earlier secretary of the local party office. Raju had to accept it for he was left with no better way of living than this. Nilesh Sen was a leader of academic as also ideological embellishment he knew Marxism and the political ideology of his party to the core while Paltu Pal could only wield muscle power. His strength was the support of the hoodlums turned building promoters of the area who were enriching his coffers for baiting the uprising young men to stand by him at the time of action.

Unlike Nilesh Sen who seemed to have a soft corner for Raju, Paltu Pal, soon after taking up the charge of secretary, promoted Raju to the stature of a whole time worker of the party relieving him of the auto starter's job with a fixed amount of remuneration, and compelled Raju to accompany him whenever needed. Raju was initially unwilling but had no way to defy the so-called leader's diktat. Paltu Pal, shrewd and arrogant, was no less adept in organising group meetings, street gatherings along with mobilising partymen for some specific activities like mass rally at Kolkata *Maidan*. This is where Paltu Pal granted some amount of liberty to Raju to interfere in local issues as *dada*; to be more specific, a stooge of Mr. Pal who knew it very well that Raju would never be able to rise up to his level.

Dada, what a mystic four-letter word! Pawn of the party, *dada* of the locality! He is the person who has to be referred to whenever a dispute is needed to be mitigated. It is because party office has been transformed into a local administrative office with cadre their *dadagiri* reigning high. Mushrooming of well-furnished party offices at every focal point of a locality is meant for taking up and settling somehow all pretty and also tricky issues if required, by extorting money from both the parties at loggerheads. Who gives the verdict? *Dada*. Donning each local party office, *dada* is backed by party to poke his nose into issues ranging from kitchen politics to real estate business. *Dada's* word is the last word binding on both sides. If it is a squabble between father and son, husband and wife, landlord and tenant or even two brothers whatever the matter *dada* meddles in and pampers the one who can please him. If someone wants to construct a residential house, *dada* the man behind the syndicate will decide who will supply all the building materials. If someone wants to sell an old house or a flat, *dada* will pick up a relator or a purchaser and, ironically, the owner has to accept the deal even being disgruntled. For, incidentally, from supplier to realtor, from flatowner to landloser, from money-extractor (Tolabaj) to footpath hawker all are bound to come under the one and only umbrella of the ruling party. If anybody dares to lodge a complaint at the local thana, *dada* will be informed beforehand and the complainer's life will be hell. And the formidable presence of a *dada* is also in evidence in case of industrial or farm sector as well. Which is why no

other business has developed in the state in a time-span of over three decades than real estate business only.

Raju was drawn into the network of Paltu Pal with a view to branding him as *dada*. But that target was unlikely to be fulfilled. Though Raju knew he was being used as a tool in that hands of Paltu Pal, he could not adjust himself with what he was often asked to perform; he would threaten someone but could not wield a knife. He could show his red eyes to one of his age but not to a senior one. He could evict an affluent or unauthorised occupier but not a poor tenant. He was mentally not prepared for filling up water bodies of the area for raising multi-storeyed buildings, or forcible acquisition of houses in dilapidation or taking advantage of distress sale of house property. Since protesting against such operations would invite assassination in silence, so far Raju didn't express himself. Paltu Pal could well get track of his mindset his reluctance to take lead in such operations. Paltu Pal was cunning enough to discern that Raju was misfit as a *dada*. No matter. There were several in the queue. And, instead of being miffed with Raju for all his limitations, he preferred Himadri Mandal, a lottery ticket dealer, to act as his right hand.

Raju was then entrusted with some other responsibilities one being party collection. At the beginning of every month he, along with some other partymen, used to collect from the locality contribution towards their party fund, maintain contact with the people, distribute party paper and leaflets; when Raju was asked to mobilise people for donating blood, he felt very enthusiastic to do so, even to donate

blood himself as it meant for serving a noble purpose for the sake of ailing persons. But very soon Raju realised that it was more meant for gaining political mileage than serving a social purpose for all this was being organised under the banner of their party while no so called leader let alone one of Paltu Pal's stature ever turned up to donate blood himself! But at the time of public meetings, they boastfully claimed how many blood donation camps they arranged for in a year. It was a shame that the party hardly practised what it swore by. And Raju did not like such manoeuvring political tricks.

He could feel that injustice was being clamped on the weaker and inarticulate section in the name of party service. He faced this ground reality for the first time when he had to accompany Paltu Pal along with some others in settling scores between a landlord and a tenant the later known as close to Paltu Pal. The tenant had occupied the entire ground floor of a house comprising 3 bed rooms which was let out to his father some 22 years back. After the death of his parents, he alone had occupied it at the old rate of rent Rs. 800/- per month. The widow landlady whose husband retired from a private company in 1983 had no hefty bank balance. She could easily have Rs. 5000/- if the ground floor was let out to a new tenant. But every time she requested to increase the rent amount or leave the house, she was scared by the tenant go to court; while the tenant was a bank employee, the land lady's only son was spastic and there was nobody else to look after them.

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Raju can well recall the day Paltu Pal along with Raju and some others visited the widow at her request. But to Raju's utter dismay, the old widow's appeal fell flat. Paltu Pal gave in what the tenant opined: Either you go to court or sell the portion occupied by your tenant at the price fixed by him. But he's offering not even half the market price, reacted the widow. Then, you hand it over to Ramlal Shaw, you will get one flat and some amount of cash. I think you can't have a better choice, concluded Paltu Pal. Ironically, Ramlal the realtor was the winner.

This was just one instance. Building promoters like Ramlal were swelling in number at the behest of Paltu Pal who pampered them for money only. But the fact that all this was taking place by filling up waterbodies at random, shattering ecological balance only to cater to the greedy land sharks caused nobody's headache; though concern over the issue was often highlighted in newspapers and journals, it was never taken up for discussion in party meetings. Not only that the party that once claimed to be the sentinel of the interest of the poor and down-trodden was having air conditioned offices at several places but the partymen at the instruction of *dada* were extorting money from hawkers, rickshaw pullers, shopowners for being allowed to carry on. What more, party leaders who once publicly denounced rituals like worshipping or birthday celebration were performing the same pompously.

Raju was gradually getting disappointed with the activities of the party as he was completely let down by these

discomfitures but was compelled to abide by Paltu Pal. One day he asked Paltu babu, Mr. X was no doubt a great leader of our party but regarding celebration of his birthday, some people have started passing comment that we are deviating from..... Before Raju could conclude Mr. Pal snubbed him. To hell with some people, do what you are entrusted with. Raju realised he was so far being used, if not exploited, as desired for the benefit of a section acting in the name of the Radical party. Even then he could not leave the party on his own for that could bring about an untimely end of his life. At the same time, he could not protest openly in fear of being blacklisted by Paltu Pal. But his conscience moved him he had to bite enough dust and now time had come he should divulge everything to Nilesh Sen.

He did so expressed all the piled up grievances. Nilesh Sen, who looked a bit aggrieved, opined Raju, it is not permitted by our party ruling to interfere in the secretary s activities let alone making it public. Still he consoled Raju But we must discuss it in our meeting, if needed, refer it to higher echelons. Nilesh Sen, one of those who believed in party ideology, also had some reservations about Paltu Pal. He was aware of the fact that not only Raju but people from different walks of life were getting disillusioned with the mode of functioning of the local office of the so called regimented party. And complaints one after another specially relating to the realtors and the syndicates becoming Frankenstein s monsters beyond control were pouring in. But grabbing the area around an old school building irked Nilesh Sen most.

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In the internal party meeting, Nilesh Sen could not resist himself from accusing Paltu Pal of tarnishing party image Mr. Pal, when the Adarsha school building, along with adjacent land area of about one *bigha*, was being grabbed, our opponent party firmly opposed, demonstrated raising slogan against the construction of a multi-storeyed building there. There were wall writings and posters galore in protest against real estate business at the cost of school premises. True, the school building had fallen in dilapidation and the students were shifted elsewhere but it could be renovated. Instead, there was a silent deal overnight about which you remained silent why?

Nilesh Sen was confirmed from sources other than Raju that Paltu Pal was bribed to come to terms with the opponent party. Unable to calm Mr. Sen's frayed tempers, he just muttered that promoter has helped us a lot from time to time so I had no other option than to allow him.

How funny, a high rise in place of school premises! What the local committee resolved finally was beyond Raju's prediction but it came to light that Paltu Pal got a befitting verbal thrashing from the state committee. It was difficult for Paltu Pal to digest all this his revengeful eyes started revolving around Nilesh Sen.

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Nilesh Sen is no more. No clue is left but the fact is the murder is a planned one. Rivalry with Paltu Pal apart, Nilesh Sen has been murdered by his partymen to draw public

sympathy because election is ensuing and the party is hellbent to retain its political power regardless of its snags and short comings.

Bandh is being observed peacefully today nothing objectionable has yet been reported. Market closed, vehicles stranded at the terminus, urchins enjoying games on the thoroughfares. In a word, bandh is successful first because, the ruling party has called it and secondly, Nilesh Sen had a clean image. Amid some partymen assembled in party office, Ramesh Samanta, another local committee member was going through the party mouthpiece. Suddenly, he asked Paltu Pal Have you seen this news? Before the Loksabha Polls, we are joining hands with our arch rival to stop the rise of another regimented party in the state?

Paltu Pal replied Yes, we should because enemy s enemy is friend and we know some of their weakpoints also. Raju smilingly questioned Isn't it a political hypocrisy that we are trying to woo for electoral gains the same political party as we blame today for the murder of Mr. Sen?

Paltu Pal flared up What? How dare you ask this question? I know you have grumble against me also. But just a party worker and no committee member, how do you have the audacity to dig at party s decision?

Raju was stunned! Nobody except Nilesh Sen knew his point of view. How does Paltu Pal know about his grumble? How is it possible? Possible because of party network,

possible even to know what Raju eats everyday! Raju toned down I have asked only to know how far the decision is actually justified.

Stop it Paltu Pal cautioned Don't cross your limit. You should know that party s opinion is your opinion, party s line of action is yours you can't have another identity different from that of your party.

But Paltu babu

Don t argue, I pardon you as this is for the first time, but I warn if this audacity is repeated in future, you'll face dire consequences.

As Paltu Pal glared into Raju s eyes, all the allegations so far boiling within Raju for an outburst submerged at once into the silence of a threatened physical existence apprehensive of another gruesome murder without any trace. Raju realised he was so far, and he will be in future, used as a pawn in the hands of the hypocrites who play the game the powerful partymen; otherwise, his voice of protest can easily be gagged forever !

N.B.: The theme, characters and incidents narrated in the story are all imaginary and fictitious. Neither the editor nor the author is responsible anyway if any resemblance with reality whatsoever is found.

Dr. Manas Bakshi nearing sixty is imaginative and at times a visionary and a sufferer. So far he has published nine collections, and won accolades and encomiums for being an exponent of the value of Indian English poetry.

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