Recent history has forced us in West Bengal to think after a long political sleep. Familiar answers are breeding new questions; unfamiliar bodies are getting mobilised for action. As domains of eruption jostle for recognition, people long living by an outworn political discourse are forced to notice the limits of their comprehension. Change is needed for this alone, if for nothing else.¹

The fun begins when specialists make blunders. We are witnessing this all over the land, but with the unique backdrop of having the same party in power for over three decades, the winds of chaos feel a bit different to us in Bengal. A shocking recent instance of specialist blunder was the Lok Sabha elections of 2009: among the all-round failure of predictions, Bengal was one of the more amusing cases. But things are hardly giving experts time to determine their substance. I would like to talk about one incident, picked from a spectacular sequence, but one that ultimately does not yet belong to a sequence. I shall try to address the self-contradiction of this statement in what follows.

The ‘sequence’ in question began with protests at the end of 2006 against the government attempt to acquire land for the Tata Nano factory in Singur, and ran in 2007 through the agitation against land acquisition for a chemical hub in Nandigram, demonstrations decrying the police involvement in the death of Rizwanur Rahman, the public distribution system (PDS) conflagration that saw a spate of attacks on ration dealers, and the great rally of 14 November in Kolkata, held to protest against the violent repression of the Nandigram resistance. In 2008 came the panchayat elections that dealt the ruling Left Front unprecedented reversals. In November that year, a grassroots agitation started in Lalgarh against police excesses. In 2009, the Lok Sabha elections returned 25 parliamentarians from the Trinamool Congress-
Indian National Congress coalition from a total of 42 seats in West Bengal. A clutch of smaller streams are tied to this current – the stalling of land acquisition in Asansol; girls’ school students in Jadavpur raising road barricades to condemn ruling party bullies; school committees long in the hands of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] suddenly changing political composition; or more visible eruptions – the auto-rickshaw protests in 2008 that looked like serious anarchy. Some of these streams flow directly into the sequence, deepening its reality; some lie at a remove, virtually connected. Somebody will write an account of the totality soon; others have to attempt part portrayals till that happens.

I would like to draw attention to one incident that took place on 21 November 2007. Only a week before that, a hundred thousand people marched in silence to protest the violent ruling-party attacks in Nandigram, creating a history of sorts. It was impossible to know from within the bounds of that expression that another society lying next door was internalising the impact of 2007 in a different way; outrage there was developing into serious unrest. It made us all aware of demarcations and unexpected affinities.

**Event**

The All India Minority Forum and an orphanage of the Furfura Sharif called a road blockade on 21 November. The three issues they raised were Taslima Nasrin’s ouster, Nandigram and the Rizwanur death. Groups of Muslim youths started the blockade on Ripon Street and on roads around Park Circus. Shortly afterwards, a vast Muslim populated area from the central to the eastern Kolkata turned into a war zone. Barricade after barricade came up on the streets; brickbats, glass bottles, burning tyres, petrol bombs started raining down on the police. Police vehicles, buses and some private cars were put on fire. Fear gripped the busy Wednesday morning, bringing the city to a halt. From Ripon Street to Entally, Moulali, Park Circus, Tiljala, Topsia to the Parama Island on the Eastern Bypass – a grid of fire sprawled as groups of youths went on a free rampage. The lanes showed combat readiness: crates of cold drink, inflammable glue and brickbats were in ample supply, as well as a good supply of young boys to stand as shield in front, and armies at the back to rain hand-made missiles. The police and the Rapid Action Force (RAF) looked on helplessly. The decision not to open fire had been taken at the top; it soon transpired that the use of water canons and rubber bullets did not have approval either. The army was called in after 3 p.m. The city saw a curfew for the first time after the December 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid. The boys retreated from thoroughfares to smaller streets, and then to the warren of lanes. The landscape of skirmishes with its scattered flames slowly became deserted after dusk.

Who was behind all this? Idris Ali, the leader of the All India Minority Forum, had lost control over the crowd early on; he had faced a brickbat attack and by evening had been suspended from the Congress party. The other convener, Furfura Sharif, issued a formal denouncement. Both organisations were expelled from the recently-formed Milli Ittehada Council, a forum of 12 Muslim organisations including the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind, led by its West Bengal president, the Nandigram activist, Siddiqullah Chowdhury. Five days earlier, violent slogans had been raised against Taslima Nasrin at the Council’s first convention on 16 November. Siddiqullah’s
criticism of the slogans showed that he didn’t have much control over the council. It is not unusual for popular agitation to run out of control of the initiators. Two days later, Ananda-bazar Patrika (ABP) reported possible SIMI and outsider involvement. They were apparently waiting for the police to open fire to start a full-fledged riot. From the experience of a city that had seen the surging humanity in the streets on 14 November, it all looked like a conspiracy. The opposition parties called it as much – a sabotage of the rulers.

But how to explain what happened? The community laying siege to the heart of the city nurses a sense of deprivation and insult deep enough to start a bloodbath. Thousands joined what obviously spiralled into a ‘riot’. But what kind of riot was it where citizens were not attacked, not a single casualty, and, leaving aside 35 policemen, not even cases of injury were reported. How was that possible? Was it an attempt to provoke communal riots, as a common conjecture went? One could have killed a couple of people in that case, set shops on fire. The idea that police restraint diffused a possible communal flare-up is hardly tenable either. From the following morning, the newspapers carried analyses saying the flare-up was hardly spontaneous, there was good planning behind it. But it is also obvious the leaders had lost all control. In whose hands was the plan then? Reports said: the chakka jam (blockade of vehicles) in the morning didn’t show any indication of the later aggression. It was only after the police baton-charged the road gathering that things changed from demonstration to battle. What plan would pull off an act where people from the ghettoes indulge in large-scale rampage, arson, street-fights, but don’t kill anyone, attack shops or houses? Where pedestrians walk through the chaos to safe zones, no one hurt?

Some secret thread ran between them, one can surmise that much. But it is difficult to believe the thread was meant to be visible to someone, that some individual or organisation was running the show according to a plan. If the outburst was real, one cannot explain how it controlled itself. The spark that should have blown into a wild fire was gone the next morning. One has seen many conspiracies of disorder, but rarely an eruption dousing itself. If we do not set the incident in the sequence of 2007, it will look even more senseless; but how can the sequence accommodate this aberration?

Taslima Nasrin was the reason? That’s what it would seem to be if we are to explain action by consequence. Taslima did leave the state immediately after this. But the cracks of this reasoning are clear. First, the crowd raised slogans on Nandigram and Rizwanur as well. Second, the complaint against Taslima was an old one; it had earlier never given rise to protests even remotely similar. Therefore, even if we read the incident as a sequel to the attack on Taslima in Hyderabad on 9 August, things do not fall into place. Even the ABP editorial on 23 November cautioned against reducing the incident to the Taslima issue, pointing to the groundswell of a sense of deprivation among Muslims. The problem is in mixing unacceptable terms with the ones already familiar from civil society protests – Taslima Nasrin with Nandigram and Rizwanur. A possible explanation is of course that fundamentalists were using the last two terms to hide the real one: Taslima. But for the people who want to convey something from the street, the words, the symbolic machinery they have, are their only reality. A hidden slogan does not serve any purpose.
The other line of reasoning – ‘people do not say what they seem to say, the real story is
told by ideology or economics’ – forecloses the possibility of anything ‘happening’. All that
takes place becomes the outcome of something else. The challenge of 21 November lies
in its visible body: the term ‘Taslima’ took its place alongside Nandigram and Rizwanur, not
behind them. The problem is of lying alongside; it is about the simultaneous affinity and
disjuncture between 21 November and the sequence of civil society protests.

The Muslim question should not be incomprehensible at a basic level. That Singur and
Nandigram had a large population of Muslim peasantry came up occasionally in the discourse
of protest. Not too often though, for there was apprehension about distracting the united
visage of the movement. From the chief minister’s damaging remarks about madrasas to
the Sachar Committee’s shameful revelations about Muslims in Bengal, moments of strong
disaffection had preceded 2007. The new sense of alienation among the community was
reflected in the 2009 elections. In the wake of Singur, Muslim grievance shared largely the
same space with mainstream protests. The Rizwanur protests began with a rare outburst
from the community living in the Tilaja, Darga Road area, but soon changed its form. On 22
September 2007, rumour arrived in the area about Rizwanur’s corpse going missing from
the morgue of the Nilratan Sircar hospital. About 1,500 people came out in the streets,
laying siege to the area around Park Circus; a police car was set on fire. The RAF was
called in in the afternoon. A civil protest of consensus took over immediately afterwards,
characterised by candlelight vigil, etc. That was the first instance of a quick assimilation of
a straying current.

Street Play
We don’t know about the inner workings of 21 November. Investigations could help us in
that direction, although it is hard to overlook the paradox of a situation where being inside
means holding information back. We are concerned here with a slightly different question
though. The reason for viewing 21 November as a blind point in the 2007 sequence lies
not in its origins, of which we know almost nothing, but in its elastic and furious body, its
indeterminate goals. To ask the question again – how could that anger stage itself before all
eyes and fold up so deftly? How did its traces all disappear without giving rise to a sequel?
How was it forgotten so fast? Something falls short in all this, which must be its content in
excess. It will be hard for the socio-economic explanations offered for 2007 to make sense
of this breach of economy.

The event differs from the moment of its beginning. What we call the body here unfolds
in duration. We are concerned with appearances for the moment, not the inner workings.
Saying something in public can be motivation enough to take to the streets, especially for
those who are forced to remain outside the boundary of representation. Action on the street
follows the aesthetics of spectacle, which has no contradiction with spontaneity. These
actions perform themselves; they are necessarily traversed by their own images.
Partha Chatterjee has recently written about the increasing “tactical” use of violence in the
Indian society. It helps articulate the disparate demands of what he calls the political society
into a coherent form. The intention of this violence is not to punish anyone, but “to display in public space, in spectacular fashion, the anger and moral outrage of ‘the people’. Violence here serves the rhetorical function of converting populations into people”. This variety of populist politics is the means for the majority to enter the domain of democracy. Politics and government policy constitute each other through such moves, and, at the same time, more and more people come within the purview of governmentality. The events of 21 November seem to fall within this logic of the spectacle to a large extent. But there is an anomaly. There was hardly any articulate demand; a confusion of demands was created instead. Why would a population wanting to be people stage an obscure festival, disappear without a repetition of the demands? It is hard to maintain a gaze on this from the two poles of motive and consequence. Was there something in that incident that points to an affinity between the civil and political societies behind the walls of separation? Wasn’t such affinity a characteristic of 2007?

Ernesto Laclau’s recent reflections on populism are close to Chatterjee’s observations. To relegate populism to the margins of politics, he would say, amounts to disavowing politics itself, since most politics is done today in that form. For him, the unit of a community is ‘demand’, not the individual. He studies the articulation and coordination of demands, and the way they find a place in society. Populist politics is heavily dependent on excess of representation, on empty rhetoric. How that rhetoric and its empty signifiers work in the process of group formation is something that concerns him. The late Freudian work, *Group Psychology* (1921), inspires him to bring the question of libido to the scene of bonding. The structure of attraction and identification in the group resembles the libidinal dynamic. The discipline of losing control that one saw on 21 November cannot be approached through the definite entities involved; the clue must lie somewhere in the relations. If we think of bonding on the street as having its own content we have to reflect on the inflation of rhetoric, paths of symbolic traffic. A space of circulation lies between the group that took to the streets to say something and the one that left the scene leaving their motives in the dark.

The newspapers talked about rumours. What were the new vehicles for rumour in 2007? Reports say the police jammed mobile phone networks. They knew those networks could do more damage than the weapons. During Nandigram, we saw front-page photographs of the proverbial Bengal peasant, clad in lungi and gamchcha, firing a country-made rifle with a wireless handset pressed to his ear. The Lalgarh People’s Committee against Police Atrocities, entrenched in the poorest territory of West Bengal, has raised funds to purchase a large number of mobile sets for its members. The role of new technology in mass movements is seen as an addition mostly, but it is not only speed and tactics that change with networks, the content undergoes change. Peasant consciousness itself must be changing.
Neighbourhood of Images
If one is to take the spectacle into account, it would be difficult to overlook the ground that politics shares with aesthetics. Not only political expression, the very content of politics would need the help of aesthetics to make sense. Jacques Rancière is among the few thinkers of our times to maintain such a double gaze. He argues that politics is a re-distribution of what enters the domain of the senses, what we see and hear. A society maintains the positions assigned to its members by sustaining a system of representation, by deciding what can enter the frame of representation and what cannot. He calls the stable form of this the ‘police’. Politics is not only a matter of instituting a new rule; more primarily, it is a struggle of re-drawing the boundaries of the sensible. Without that, politics cannot change the police.4 I would like to make a few observations about neighbouring lives and representations that are inspired by Rancière’s thought.

The historic rally of 14 November made a surprising revelation of numbers. It wasn't easy to grasp how many of us were waiting to come out on the street before that day. The events of 21 November made a second exposure. The circle of protest suddenly widened to take in a neighbourhood seeking to echo the outrage in its own language. It should prompt us to train our sights on the provisional objects of recognition around us.

It is hard to recognise the course of change brought about by 2007 from a neutral point of view. But the question of change in representation can be raised objectively, without immediate recourse to judgment. Is it possible to read the widening of the frame proposed by 21 November as a metaphor of larger processes under way? It is often said that the 32-year rule of the Left has been made possible through a stabilisation of cultural norms, and through the ruling party's success in establishing itself as the legitimate representative of those norms. The curious mixing of socialist and Bengali nationalist elements in the CPI (M) language is a good index of this process, from which an exceptional bricolage of political techniques has emerged. I would suggest that changes are visible in the representational reserve of the culture in question, a process that has direct political consequences. The work of politics is to seek entry to the domain of representation; but the real problem occurs when that domain itself undergoes change under the pressure. The new politics in West Bengal is underscored by such transformations at a deeper level.

Let us look at the convergence of politics with a kind of cultural production in Bengal that scholars never touch, the mainstream cinema of Tollygunge. At the height of the PDS (ration-shop) protests, on 2 November 2007, ABP reported an incident from Coochbehra. The Mithun Chakrabarty-starrer, Minister Fatakesto, was enjoying a great box-office success in the Tufanganj area. In the film, Mithun forces a corrupt kerosene dealer to pay large fines to the people he cheats. The local villagers were reported to have put that lesson into practice against the ration-shop dealers in the area. The interesting piece of information was how this act of ‘inspiration’ spread from village to village, from Maruganj to Bansraja, Shalbari, Mahishkuchi, Dholpol. A festival of people’s taxation began. The film, directed by the iconic Swapan Saha, may not yield much in terms of inspiration finally, but it is important to note how it was being used. The ABP report says:
Sensing trouble, the ration dealers’ body is saying people have to understand the difference between film and reality… The family members of the victimised ration dealers allege that Minister Fatakesto is responsible for the incitement. Biren babu, the brother of Niren babu, a ration dealer of Shalbari, says, "Minister Fatakesto is an influence behind the ration movement.” Mrinal Mian, the brother of Tasiruddin Mian, ration dealer of Bansraja, says, “The agitators are saying a Fatakesto beating will be meted out to those who do not listen to them." (Arindam Saha, ABP, 2 November 2007)

The film in its totality was not as important as what could be extracted from it. In MLA Fatakesto (2006) and its sequel, Minister Fatakesto, a slum goon appears in the role of a people’s saviour, meting out rough justice to politicians, bureaucrats and the police. His mentor and patron is the chief minister who shows physical resemblance to the current chief minister of the state. The second film was made after Singur, and is therefore ambiguous about the hero and chief minister coalition. The problem of land acquisition, effects of industrialisation, etc. enter the plot. But the axis of populism, which is anti-party and anti-politician in both the films, and which serves as the source of vigilante justice, remains the same. That the second film has an implausible antagonism – the chief minister and slum hero versus the minister’s party and administration – did not seem to bother its audience, not at least the agitators mentioned above. They use the film in a way that allows them to extract messages in the form of intensity and outrage; verbal definitions of characters and ideas become secondary to this axis of communication. The dialogue that made these films famous, “A fist flies here, your corpse flies to the crematorium”, was heard with all the echoes that it didn’t have.

Haranath Chakrabarty’s Tulkalam (2007) participates more directly in the contemporary political controversy. We see peasants struggling to save their land in the face of industrial aggressors (whose Sino-Asian features are a reference to the South East Asians involved in the Nandigram chemical hub). We see a bunch of villains who are called the ‘party’, which signifies only one entity in the party-society of West Bengal. The village in question looks much like Singur. Mithun Chakrabarty portrays an outsider who leads the rebellion. The interesting twist is his seeking of justice for the humiliation and murder of an old ‘party leader’ at the hands of the new bosses. In one scene, a comrade of the slain leader comes secretly to give his blessings to the rebel, whose struggle has made him believe Marx, ‘Lelin’ and Mao are still alive. The two raise their fists and chant, “Inquilab Zindabad” (Long live the struggle). We have a good example here of the cultural political reserve that has sustained the Left Front rule in the state. A certain content must be appropriated now by its Opposition through culture, a political content that has become a cultural-ethical reserve, and to which the ruling Left Front has lost claim. One should not be surprised by Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee’s sustained appropriation of Leftist rhetoric and cultural platforms. That the Left has lost its access to this reserve is the flip side of the coin. Being in no position to use the film’s positive reference to one of their own traditions, they tried to stop its screenings in some areas, further helping the film to become a major success.
The script and dialogue writer of these films, Salil Kumar Naskar (or NK Salil, as he calls himself, the name change erasing his caste signifier, but also indexing the new relationship Tollygunge has built with Telugu cinema), has become a star in the industry. Salil’s dialogue is an important vector of direct address as politics. Most of it is the empty rhetoric of populism, and it is hard to locate its target. But a very large audience has come to receive the declamations according to a logic of the cult,6 in discrete blocks both aligned to the plot and independent of it. The vigilante action with a diffused political address was reproduced through other Mithun Chakrabarty films like Tiger (Swapan Saha, 2007).

A rift had appeared between mainstream commercial Bengali cinema and the educated middle class in Bengal in the 1980s. Is a re-ordering of such locations under way? I think it is. The process has been on for some time, but its connection with politics is recent. A frequently asked question before the Lok Sabha elections was, “How could one accept Trinamool Congress as an alternative? The leadership of the Left is, after all, in the hands of the bhadralok (as Bengal calls its educated élite); Trinamool is a party of unruly trouble-mongers”. A common answer from those who favour change was that the ruling Left today best represents violence, misrule and corruption. But a larger question begs our attention: does the bhadra circle exist in the same form any more?

Today’s newspapers report a hospital foundation ceremony in Kolkata (8 January 2010) where Mamata Banerjee was seen singing “We shall overcome”. It all started in Nandigram when she made a public claim to the inheritance of the Tebhaga struggle, the 1946 armed peasant uprising to force a reduction in landlord appropriations of farm produce. On 21 July 2009, her gigantic rally in the heart of the city was accompanied by Salil Chowdhury songs composed for the leftwing Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA); seated on stage was the mother of the 1966 hunger march martyr, Nurul Islam. This is visible political appropriation of a representational reserve. The other direction of change, coming from the other end, is much more amorphous and perhaps much more important. The urban middle-class bhadralok taste is losing its hegemony. And more, that class itself as a custodian of a certain culture is undergoing dissolution. I can only make a few stray remarks on the process here.

It is possible to make an obtuse connection between the loosening of frames of representation and the actual screens that have played a major role in the process. Let us think of the screen that stands at the centre, that of television. A quick path to the dissolution of its identity has been proposed by the bhadralok class itself, in the way that it has cut itself off from the Bengali language. The privileged citizens who have grown up over the last two decades in West Bengal have, by and large, stopped reading or writing in Bengali. In one television programme after another, the young anchors and guests are found speaking a Bengali that moves very close to the patois of the so-called uneducated classes. NK Salil’s dialogue does not stand far from it. This would be television as evidence. It is possible to argue, nevertheless, that television is primarily an evidence of a pure unveiling of realities, and the proximity of lives that it itself helps bring about. It is a revelation to watch the song, dance and comic performance shows where contestants come in equal numbers from the city and outside, sometimes the balance tipping in favour of small towns. The urban culture
of taste can hold on to its cultural function when the outer limits of its territory are known. Television, in order to expand its penetration of territories, has blurred these limits. Also, it is no longer possible for television to perpetuate a situation where a large section of its clients are viewers without being participants — a non-profitable proposition in the age of interactive media. A large section of the distant addressee is entering the screen in critical numbers. The Hindi performance items, no longer considered culturally backward in an age of the global ascendancy of Bollywood and at a time of retreat of the vernacular, are learnt and presented in great competitive earnest by both the urban and non-urban contestants. The physical acts they indulge in, in full presence of family members, were hardly imaginable even a few years back in Bengali public contexts. Not only the ceding of verbal ground, but an attendant physical idiom, flying in the face of bhadralok taste, is receiving a ‘performative’ sanction from the family on screen. The comedy shows present a daily routine of a kind of laughter that belongs distinctively to the low humour of the street and fairground, even folk theatre. Television proves that fundamental components of cultural distinction like humour and music do not have a secure basis any more. As it removes the veil, the narrow and tenuous boundaries of a certain culture stand exposed. The ones supposed to remain outside have made a habit of trespassing. The same screen is assigned to all.

As long as the division between the bourgeois dramas of ‘relationships’ and the rustic romance of Tollygunge could be maintained things were a little simpler. Other, older divisions like that between the maudlin jatra and ‘group theatre’ could also sustain themselves. Mamata Banerjee, the queen of melodrama, could well be imagined occupying a jatra-like stage of politics, something that many believe she does. The trouble is, the Tollygunge tawdry is moving close to the middle-class Bengali film by an easy assimilation of extremely conventional signs of urbanity from middle-class cinema. And it has begun assimilating the social critical content of minority theatre and literature. The biggest commercial success of 2008, Chiradini tumi je amar (You are Mine for Ever, Raj Chakrabarty), was directed by a young TV show director and had a clear allusion to the Rizwanur incident. The obverse of this are the daily soaps on TV, made to expand the urban domestic entertainment base. The preponderance of extended family, feminine devotion, rituals, even shamans and gurus, shows the disappearance of the avowed distinction of educated middle-class culture. Urban families are no less avid consumers of this material. The discovery of the real expanse of a cultural preserve showed it to be in an advanced state of dissolution.

The bhadralok subject in question hardly has any scope for lament if it has decided to abandon its vernacular. It could be worthwhile to look for the shifts in communication, pedagogy and artistic production. Art, for example, might show unfamiliar and interesting developments. Over the last decade or so, the autumn festival of Durgapuja has taken on a new form, one in which academic fine arts, folk craft traditions, old bazaar art practices and new media elements have combined to create a highly competent public art. Loosening and mixing of practices and preferences, even their decline, might cause unexpected developments. One should not be surprised if the fyatarus, the abusive, anarchic angels of Kolkata created by one of the most innovative contemporary Bengali fiction writers, Nabarun Bhat-
tacharya, appear in a Tollygunge film a little more daring than Tulkalam some years from now. And if it becomes a major hit in Tufanganj. The lyrics of Bangla music band songs, a contemporary development in the vernacular, and newspaper features have come to a share an irreverent college canteen idiom that owes its origins partly to the decline in formal skills in the language. It is not a bhadralok idiom formally, but it is entirely urban. The kind of quasi-English Bengali films that Anjan Dutt makes for urban youth circuits owes a similar debt to the decline of the Bengali language. Authors like Nabarun Bhattacharya or Gautam Sengupta, on the other hand, write for a serious minority readership and use a hybrid street language to break free of fictional as well as moral conventions.

The territory of the image is giving in to unfamiliar people seeking entry. Those who find it wholly unacceptable are likely to turn away from all politics. But signs are clear that the minority culture of distinction has opened its doors to other semiotic neighbourhoods, and has even become dependent on the invasions for survival. We may not like it, but this might serve as an unexpected ground for political change. The crowd of 21 November has not yet crossed the neighbourhood borders to walk into the meaning of 2007, even though they owe their strength to the 2007 sequence. But there were signals that they wanted to enter the mainstream domain of secular protests. To see them as hooligans on a rampage and to find their action incomprehensible are part of the same representational blockage. A challenge before those seeking change is an intervention in the traffic across territories already under way.

Author’s Note
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Notes
1. “Change is needed” (“Paribartan chai”) is the slogan around which the broad coalition of opposition to Left Front rule in West Bengal is presently mobilised.
5. I borrow the term from Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya; see his “Of Control and Factions: The Changing ‘Party-Society’ in Rural West Bengal”, EPW, 28 February 2009.