

Kolkata's vibrant theatre protests Singur through Orwell

On the first floor of a cacophonous south [Kolkata](#) market, a spartan room is abuzz with histrionic people discussing animatedly what they can do to protest a controversial land acquisition for a Tata car project.

A young woman dances with fierce expression to the rhythm of a revolutionary poem. A student from Presidency College narrates her experience of combating men in uniform first hand in the disputed territory at Singur, 40 km from here.

A sudden power outage plunges the room into darkness. But the woman dances ceaselessly while the others instantly light up their mobile phone screens till someone brings a candle of hope.

In one corner of the room, Saoli Mitra is huddled with some other women from various walks of life. Daughter of the late legendary theatre couple Sambhu Mitra and Tripti Mitra, whose black and white moments of their illustrious theatre careers embellish the walls of the room, Saoli is one of the leading theatre personalities of India.

For soft-spoken Saoli, whose solo stage portrayal of Draupadi had infused new life to the Mahabharat character, it is time to protest beyond the stage.

To begin with it would be their recent play 'Pashukhamar' or Bengali adaptation of the famous George Orwell play 'Animal Farm' which would be a vehicle of protest against the takeover of fertile farmlands in Singur.

The scene could well be one of the 1970s when left-leaning cultural protests against the bourgeoisie were the order of the day. In today's flyover-streaked, shopping mall-dotted Kolkata ruled by a reformed Left, this seems an evening straight out of those turbulent times. It is yesterday once more.

'I don't know what I should do or how to protest. I don't know what we would do in the coming days. We only know that we have to protest and that Singur is synonymous with protest,' Mitra said, breaking her silence of the past months.

Even as Singur incidents unfolded, prominent Bengali intellectuals from the world of art and culture chose to stay silent, especially with many either sharing a cosy rapport with the culturally inclined Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya. Some like Saoli Mitra are choosing not to be fence sitters.

So Pancham Baidik, her theatre group, took the initiative and started with the Orwell play.

'When we decided to stage the Orwell play we never thought that it would be so relevant,' she says, a restlessness betraying the composure of her face in a candle-lit room.

The Trinamool Congress has vowed not to let the car project come up at Singur, come what may.

But why did she remain silent till Singur reached a flashpoint?

Ignorance, answers Saoli, the recipient of Norway's Ibsen Centennial Award this year along with the likes of British actress Vanessa Redgrave and Norwegian Liv Ullman.

'After the events of Dec 2 (when police committed atrocities on farmers and their women and children to stem their protest against fencing for Tata Motors) we sent people to Singur and got the true picture,' she adds.

'We even raised small funds for Medha Patkar. We are raising more money to fight the battle.

'We had called people from cultural world to join us. I do not see many faces of big names in the room but then the young people joined us in large number.

'We are not getting the support of elders but that does not bother us. I am at least not attached with any political group. I don't even vote,' she says.

According to Arpita Ghosh of her theatre group, in many places Pancham Baidik was asked to come with theatres other than 'Pashukhamar' (Animal Farm). 'But we made it clear that we would enact only this play now.'

As the cultural workers discussed their course of action inside, plainclothes policemen outside keep vigil. That too was a scene straight out of the 1970s, an era when protests were synonymous with life.

Sujoy Dhar (© IANS / India eNews)