

A bird flu over the commie nest

I was trying to think what I would do if I were a chicken-owner and it looked like the flu had arrived in the village. I would worry, of course, about money: how would we make ends meet? If I had an unfriendly neighbour, I would start to worry that he was going to blame us if his chicken were to die. If I were given to looking for someone to blame, I would start to wonder if, somehow, it had to do with the fact that some people keep their chicken in a horrible mess. If I were given to being messy, I might be worrying that someone else might be thinking the same about me. But most of all, I would worry about the fact that somewhere, some time probably not too far in the future, the virus will mutate into something that could kill me and my near and dear ones. And, of course, if this was really me, I would be panicking.

The one thing that would not have occurred to me is to try to spend more time with my chicken. But by all accounts this is what people are doing in West Bengal: hiding them inside homes,

driving them across the state border to sell, turning back the people sent to cull them. As a result, the epidemic has turned into a threat to poultry owners the state over and possibly beyond, and we seem to be flirting with what might be the first great public health crisis of this millennium.



The problem, in part, is that the people do not believe what the government says. They do not believe that the risks are as grave as the government makes them out to be and they do not believe they will get compensated. This is why a few health officials got manhandled when they tried to cull the chicken and others got turned back. This is why the chief minister of West Bengal had to announce that compensation would be paid on the spot. This is why he has been asking his party members to help with the culling.

A part of the problem is also that people do not entirely believe that the government will keep its word. Will the local CPI(M) leaders be made to part with their chicken? Or would they be given a special dispensation, as they so often have been? Would the government be willing to delay culling till it was clear that the chicken in a hamlet were actually sick? What if there were a lot of protests: would the government back down? Or raise compensation levels?

It all goes back to credibility. The right to define and represent public interest in situations such as the current bird flu episode, situations where being decisive is critical (because, for example, the bird flu virus allows no time for public debate and political negotiations), *without freshly seeking the mandate of the people*, is at the core of what constitutes the authority of any state. In the eyes of many people in West Bengal, the state no longer has an automatic claim to that authority: After thirty years of Left Front rule—thirty years of half-truths and

outright lies, thirty years of strategic compromises and elastic principles, thirty years of playing favourites and looking the other way—and thirty years of an opposition that has never let truth or the common good stand in the way of attacking the government—the average person treats any declaration of government policy, mostly correctly, not as a necessary, decisive move, but as the opening gambit in a long political game.

This erosion of authority was also central to the recent tragic events in Singur and, much more dramatically, in Nandigram. It's true that in both there was ample cause to disagree with the government's stance ("Who needs more cars?" "Who wants an SEZ?"). But the final decision on large-scale land use has always and everywhere been the state's domain, for the good and obvious reason that if the decision were to be left to the market, a few people who refuse to sell would be able to hold all willing sellers to ransom. Moreover, whatever people might say about the West Bengal government's policies today, it was elected (with a huge majority) on an explicit mandate of bringing industry to the state. Yet, curiously, the opposition in both places, was based on the essential illegitimacy of what the government was doing and had little to do with the specific causes that the government had decided to promote (cars, SEZs) or the way the compensation was paid (in cash, making it more likely that it would be spent on TVs and alcohol). And remarkably, the West Bengal government did not do much to defend itself, despite the fact that by the dismal standards of Indian state governments it had actually made a reasonable effort to compensate the losers (as the Kolkata High Court recently concluded). What the chief minister offered in those early days was bluster ("we will go ahead") rather than reasoned argument ("this is what the state does all over the country—indeed everywhere in the world—and we are trying to do it better") or strategic appeals to self-interest ("how can we let the intransigence of a selfish few hold up the future of your children?"). I suspect one reason he went that way was that he had already internalized this loss of credibility. He assumed, perhaps rightly, that many of the ordinary people who had thrown in their lot with the opposition had long stopped listening—bewildered, caught between a government that always insists that it is right and an opposition that never hesitates to assert the opposite.

In some ways what happened in Nandigram was a direct consequence of this loss in authority. The local goons of the CPI(M), sensing that the debate was not going anywhere, decided to preempt: guns were to do what words could not. The opposition responded in kind; the CPI(M) lay low for a few months and then came back with bigger guns; and so it goes on, because no one seems to believe that the matter can be settled under the agency of the state. After all this is a state where the chief minister could defend murderous brutality by his party members "as a party leader and not as the chief minister of West Bengal".

It is also probably no accident that just a week after this unfortunate admission by the Chief Minister, the Taslima Nasreen affair exploded. We do not like what she writes, the protestors said, we want her to go—are you for her or for us? The government, notably, did not, could not, say that we are for no one; we are for order and for hospitality, for the rule of law and the freedom of expression. Instead it tied itself into a thousand embarrassing knots.

Perhaps the one good thing that could come out of the lives of so many dead

chicken is a reminder to all sides in West Bengal—perhaps elsewhere in India as well— of what might be the first lesson of democratic theory: That winning an election does guarantee being able to govern, and nor does losing absolve one all responsibility towards making governance possible. Victory transfers to the winning party the *presumption* of authority, of being able to act on its judgment, but its ability to actually do so depends on the credibility it carries with it—especially among those who did not vote for it—and the willingness of the opposition to let it govern. And the problem is that as Indian politics becomes more and more competitive, all sides have to focus more on winning the next election, and this makes it harder and harder for the parties to rise above their partisan commitments and to acknowledge the authority of the state.

In the meanwhile in West Bengal, the chicken, as the expression goes, are coming home to roost—or more exactly, to die.