

The Business Standard, Mumbai, 17 Nov 2007

## Birds of a feather

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So what is the difference between Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee and Narendra Modi, chief ministers of two industrialised states at the eastern and western ends of the country? It is not a question that either might have expected to be posed a year ago, given how they come from radically different political backgrounds and have entirely different worldviews? Indeed, it is a comparison that the supposedly cultured Mr Bhattacharjee might find personally offensive. But he must know that it is a question that *is* now being asked in all manner of circles, and not without reason. Not because both have been laying claim to attracting industry and improving the performance of their state governments (where Mr Modi has had more success than Mr Bhattacharjee), but because both now stand accused of getting the state machinery to stand by (or even assist) while party operatives take the law into their own hands and indulge in open murder and rape—without fear of retribution and with similar justification to boot. For sure, the scale of events in Gujarat was greater and so was the horror, but that makes scant difference to the thousands of Nandigram citizens now huddled in relief camps with little food or other essentials—reminiscent of images in Ahmedabad five years ago. Indeed, it could be argued that the Gujarat carnage was an instant response to Godhra. Whereas in Nandigram the CPI(M) has been planning a counter-attack for months.

If Mr Modi is accused of having incited the rioters with some of his public pronouncements, the public statements that leaders of the CPI(M) have been making over the past several months are extraordinary. Whether it is the usually urbane Sitaram Yechury or the usually strident Brinda Karat, the open talk of hitting back is reminiscent of the kind of things attributed to Mr Modi. But even that pales in comparison with what Mr Bhattacharjee has been saying. Asked a question by a newspaper reporter, the chief minister belts out that he and his newspaper are alive only because he (the chief minister) does

not want to dirty his hands by killing a bandicoot. And when the talk turns to compensation to the victims of the violence, Mr Bhattacharjee breaks new ground when he makes the staggeringly shameless statement that the state has no money! The Calcutta High Court has now ordered him to pay up, but it is fair to ask: is this a country with laws and some basic decencies, or no?

It is a coincidence that the majority of victims in both the Gujarat pogrom of 2002 and of the Nandigram outrage in 2007 happen to be Muslims. If there is a difference, it is in the public response to events in the two states. In Gujarat the pogrom seems to have had general sanction and even middle class citizens came out to loot deserted Muslim establishments; in West Bengal, civil society and the middle class have expressed shock and outrage at what has happened in Nandigram, and have even taken out mass rallies without any political party organising them. Indeed, in Kolkata, there is no strand of public opinion that has expressed any opposition to the marriage of a Muslim boy with a Hindu girl—which is the kind of issue that gets the Sangh Parivar all het up—and public opinion is entirely against the police and others who are seen as having been involved in various ways with the events that led to the tragic death of Rizwanur Rehman. If Gujarat raised questions about the general public's fealty to the values enshrined in the Constitution, West Bengal testifies to the strength of those very same values.

The people may swear by the Constitution, but do the political parties? Gujarat served to unmask a BJP that had been trying hard to present its more acceptable face to the country. Nandigram, similarly, has served to unmask the CPI(M), which many people had come to view as a party committed to Westminster-style democracy within a humanist framework. The truth seems to be that, when push comes to shove, the country's two leading cadre-based parties are really committed to worldviews that are incompatible with what the Constitution stands for.