Marx in Bengal

ıost a year ago the marxist-communists ꜝ voted to power in the state assembly tions of the strategic Indian state of t Bengal, with an overwhelming maj- /. Their success was then attributed by e to the split in the anti-marxist vote veen the Congress Party and the Janata. last week they surprised everybody by ıing 60 per cent of the seats in state- ꜝ elections to the village councils, in face of united opposition by the Con- s and the Janata.

ıe major steps that have made the ıg marxist-communists more popular he rural areas are: passing a law that ires a landlord to give a receipt to a ecropper for the share of harvest taken ent on land (this bestows security of re on the sharecropper); introducing lation to replace the antiquated system and revenue, based on area, by agri- ıral income tax; instructing the police to side with the landlords in their dis- s with the peasants; and mobilising the gers against food grain hoarders, or kers of the law on land ceiling.

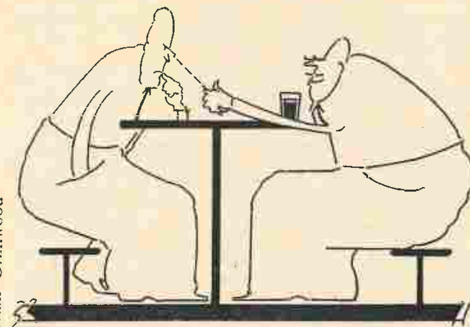
ıis was the main theme of a talk in don last week on the marxist experi- t with the West Bengal government,)r Biplab Dasgupta, of the Institute of elopment Studies at the University of ex. The re-emergence of the marxist- munists as the leading political force Vest Bengal, after six years of repres- by the Congress governments in utta and Delhi, frightens plenty of ıle in India and Bangladesh. The party ers know this as well as anybody else. ce, their strategy—at least for the time g—is to do nothing more than provide n administration, attempt modest rm in land and property—and catch imagination of the voters presently d by the non-marxist ministries in the ous states.

Knobbling time

so very deep in the Devon countryside, he village pub at Goodleigh, gambling quietly "knobble" away their time rely unnoticed by innocent bystanders. ı are the rules of "knobbling" (the "k" ronounced emphatically) that only the ıiring eye will catch a glimpse of this ent art.

ıe four men huddled together, all with r right hands uniformly buried deep in r trouser pockets and you can be pretty they're about to knobble. In their kets, players each have three coins and, the commencement of a round, they ıltaneously withdraw their tightly ched fists containing either none, one, or three of their coins. Next, players to guess the total number of coins held all the players. (When there are four ving, this can be anything between ght and twelve.) Finally each man shows coins he is holding, the correct guesser is acclaimed and a post mortem follows.

The skilful player learns to estimate according to the coins in his hand and the bids made by the other players. But it's still a game dominated by chance. The winner of the round (if there is one, because everyone may guess wrongly) takes the kitty, into which all the players have contributed earlier. And the stakes can be as high or as low as the players decide. Knobbling is a game for the baggy-trousered: the fashion conscious, are largely precluded by the restrictions imposed by the levi-style pocket. If the game caught on in the south east, there would have to be some rapid re-tooling in the garment trade.



Brian Grimwood

His equals hers

To the government statistician, the most important thing about a married woman is still her husband's occupation, not her own. The latest General Household Survey (see Report, page 604) shows the farcical results this demeaning view of women produces.

The survey looks, for example, at the variable incidence of cigarette smoking between socio-economic groups. For a woman who works, her job may well influence whether she smokes or not. But the Central Statistical Office classifies married women according to their husband's job, so we shall never know from the General Household Survey how women's smoking habits vary with their own socio-economic group.

The survey finds acute sickness among women aged between 15 and 44 increasing: a good chance for the survey to show its worth by identifying which women are involved. Out come the tables of how their acute sickness varies with socio-economic group—that is, by their husbands' jobs. If there is an increase in job-related sickness among women, the survey can't help.

The survey comments unabashed: "The increase in acute sickness rates in particular social groups is difficult to interpret because existing tabulations . . . tend to reflect traditional methods of classifying married women. Regardless of whether they themselves are working or not, married women (who form about two thirds of the 15-44 age group in 1976) are classified by their husband's occupation."

Well, at least the authors have noticed. But will Sir Claus Moser manage to change the rules before he rounds off his distinguished period as Director of the Central Statistical Office?

Share pushers

The government's inner city programme is now a year old, but in the scramble to get capital projects under way and meet the tight deadlines for urban aid funds, the Department of the Environment and local authorities have both done little to encourage the public participation which was to have been an integral part of the new policy initiatives. The DOE has issued no formal guidance on the *processes* of community involvement and scarcely any distinction has been made between agency and residents' participation.

Typically, local authorities themselves have adopted widely varying structures—as soon became clear in Birmingham last weekend as people contributed their own experiences of participation in the inner city programme at an Association of Community Workers workshop. Lambeth seems to have been the most ambitious, with parallel official and voluntary subgroups working under a partnership committee. Islington has established a steering group drawn from voluntary organisations with representation on a partnership "panel"—but actual programmes are put through the usual committee structure. In Hackney, the council has set up advisory "economic" and "social" panels, with voluntary groups and trade unions represented, and the voluntary groups themselves have combined in a search for funds to pay a research staff.

But generally, few such structures exist and fewer still have yet been involved in the programme's hectic first year. Even so, there are signs of renewed interest among voluntary organisations in analysing council policies, planning and expenditure, and the way local services are delivered and managed.

For the future, the ACW has decided to set up an information exchange, and the Councils for Voluntary Service seem to be seeking the "intermediary" role in partnership which the Wolfenden report foresaw for them. Naturally, there were fears at the Birmingham conference that this CVS role might "block" direct representation of smaller organisations, residents and workers—and that local authorities might prefer negotiations with a few bodies rather than many.

Community workers were also sceptical about a programme which has a budget of only £25 million for 1978-79. What impact can such meagre expenditure—less than the NHS's chiropody services—have in inner urban areas with draining job prospects, reduced housing investment, closing hospitals and deteriorated schools? The hope was that local communities, through their local authorities, could use the programme as a political lobby for increased investment. For this to happen, more open government of the programme itself will be needed. For a start, why not open up the central partnership committees to trade union and voluntary representation—and hold their meetings in public?

West Indian clubland

Mike Phillips

The Russell Club is actually named the Afro West Indian Centre and is on the original site of Henry Royce's workshop in Hulme, Manchester. Although everyone in Hulme calls it the Russell, the management chose the official name carefully and deliberately: "We used to have the white kids coming round here every night, picking fights. Then we changed the name and they understood it was mainly for black kids, so they stopped coming." Even so, the management has no trouble filling the club. On an average weekend it's packed with hundreds of young West Indians and it's practically impossible to walk around on the main floor where the bar is situated.

The Russell is largely run by Rudy Clementsen, a Jamaican who used to own the largest and most notorious of Manchester's sheebeens, the Edinburgh, by Alex Park gates. When that got pulled down in the slum clearance programme, he went into partnership with a white man, Don Tonay, and went up market. The Russell is the distillation of their joint experience.

To appreciate the significance of the move, it's necessary to have seen the old Edinburgh in its heyday more than five years ago. It formed one end of a triangle which ran along Claremont Road into Princess Road and back along Alexandra Road into the park. Within that triangle there were literally dozens of clubs of every kind, legal and illegal—all of them with reputations ranging from vicious to unsavoury. Physically they were mostly dingy, sordid, uncomfortable places, haunted by police raids, pimping, the all-pervasive scent of weed and frequent knifings. All this reinforced by the nightly procession of girls and clients along the street. The Edinburgh was one of the places everyone passed through sooner or later.

The Russell is less than half a mile away, but the atmosphere of the place carries no hint of such experience. It's a large, clean, well-appointed place, with light shows, a huge bar stretching the length of the room, mirrors, carpets, padded seats, a DJ perched high above the crowd in a spotlighted booth, and a stage for the weekly soul or reggae band. It's similar to any number of discos in the country, except that nearly all the customers are young West Indians. There's a sprinkling of white girls, but they're with black boys, and are dressed just like the black girls. The style is different from the style you see in white discos. It doesn't follow the waves of white fashion. Long formal dresses. Backless. Strapped up high heels. Soft, clingy fabrics in bold colours. Plain black dresses. The boys dress as carefully in elegantly creased trousers.

On the upper storey of the club, overlooking the dance floor and the bar, is a restaurant. It serves Jamaican patties, fried fish. But you hardly ever see anyone eating. They're all boys up here, talking together, fairly quietly. Once in a while they break into a mock argument with voices and fists raised. It ends in a mock fight with the boys throwing punches and karate chops at each other, stopping within a hair's breadth of actual contact. This is a pattern which repeats itself again and again, as if they're rehearsing for the real thing. There's a difference, remarkably and immediately obvious, between these youths, about 16 to 20, and a similar group of older black men. As they tease each other and talk, the older men clasp hands, embrace, laugh a lot. These boys mimic the kick, the punch, the knee. Even in these circumstances, they interact with a fierce and nervous intensity, which hints at a violent undertone.

It is actually one of the safest and most orderly places in the entire district. "Under any other management they'd just rip the place to bits. We bar hundreds of people, if we don't like the look of them, if they have a reputation. It's the only chance you have to survive—keeping them out. When you bar them they end up pleading to come in, and it's surprising really, some of those are more well-behaved than the others once you do let them in."

It would be difficult to find a young West Indian in the city who didn't go about once a month, at least, to the Russell. On the night the Detroit Spinners played there, hundreds of kids were milling about for half the night unable to get in. The club frequently has to put up the full house sign.

None of that means that the other kinds of clubs have totally disappeared. Round about midnight, the flats begin to open up. At any given time, there'll be dozens of flats standing empty in the neighbourhood. And all that's needed to run a Saturday night sheebeen is an iron bar, a sound system, and something to drink, or not. The word goes round where the place is going to be; and the kids who turn up there either can't afford other places or just need somewhere to park themselves for the night. It's the extreme end of a shifting, uneasy spectrum, under constant police surveillance.

In one of these places, even on a Saturday night, the atmosphere is depressed and joyless. In one corner of the living room, two boys are lying, one is curled up on his side sleeping, another stretched out on his back staring at the ceiling. In another corner, a hastily assembled sound system is playing. The man standing in the hallway comes in and changes it from time to time. Upstairs in the bedroom, three boys are sitting on the floor. The sound is muted up here and they're talking quietly, falling silent when the door opens. The flat itself is obviously in the process of being vandalised. There is nothing social about what's happening. Along the corridor outside, a group of boys, with one girl, are loitering towards the flat. They're not dressed up, and they look furtive and low spirited.

"The absconders come to places like this, and it's pretty safe for them. Usually they can have a night out without anyone passing the word back. But sometimes there's a fight or something like that and a neighbour gets the police and that's it."

photographs of the Russell Club by Dennis Morris

The threat of violence and police activity is one element which, in recent years, has made it possible for a number of clubs like the Russell to spring up and prosper in London, Birmingham and Manchester. Their success is a testimony to the fact that young West Indians actively want a social environment that is different from the centres of reggae/weed.

A number of the boys and girls who go to the Russell do so because it is a place where they can keep out of trouble, and where they feel unharassed and more dignified than being in a club where the police are likely to burst in and line them up against the wall. "I come here because you get all the nice girls in the place. They don't go to them places you were talking

about, 'cos there might be trouble." Something of the same feeling will be found if you talk to young people at a club like the All Nations in Hackney or the Apollo in Willesden, or the Bouncing Ball in Peckham.

Most West Indian youths are voting with their cash for clubs like the Russell, despite their relative expensiveness and the restrictions they impose on their behaviour. The reverse is equally true. In Tottenham, the owner of Club Noreik had to close part of it while he struggled to change its image. "After a while nobody was going there except the same little crowd. Dressed how they like, coats and everything, behave how they like, so it got a bad name. And they don't spend money so he was having a hard time anyway." In Peckham, Mr Bee's went through extensive redecoration, upgraded its live shows, its clientele and its charges and reopened as the Bouncing Ball.

West Indian club owners have been swift to understand and capitalise on this trend. Dougie's Hideaway, at Archway, north London, is by the more expansive standards of the All Nations or the Apollo, a relatively small club. But Dougie caters for young people as well as for his primary clientele, who are the older and the rather more affluent West Indians.

"You'll find that on Friday we get mainly young people in here. By that I mean youth. But they have to reach a standard of behaviour which will make them acceptable. Of course, next morning you may see them in the street back in their full robes, but once they're in here I do not allow tams and wearing of overcoats and weapons and all such. This is the kind of place where we are very strong on protecting women and all the good clubs are like that. If a girl comes in here and feels that she may get her face slapped, well, she won't come back. So everything in a good club must give people that feeling of security. Back in the sixties we didn't have the chance. None of the clubs were places where you would take your wife or girlfriend."

Dougie's response is characteristic of the present generation of West Indian club owners. The formula seems to work very well. One of the by-products has been to expand the range of facilities available to groups within the black community. For instance, a dance and drama group operates at Dougie's on the nights when the club is closed. The Russell in Manchester runs a football team, a cricket team, weekly discussion forum, and is campaigning for a sports field for its members. It's also, like some of the other clubs, a venue for the national Domino League, a hot favourite among a wide range of West Indians.

The only West Indian owned club still in existence which was flourishing ten years ago is the Q. The Q's clientele at that time had a large element of black American servicemen. They were about the only black people in any numbers who had the leisure or the money to be good patrons. Nowadays, Americans are less numerous, and the ones who are here tend to have discos and entertainment provided on the base. At the Q, they've been replaced by a black showbiz/continental European mixture. For West Indians on an average income, it's too expensive. They can now often be found in the same places as their children. But it was a combination of increasing leisure, spending power and their own initiative which created these places.

An example of the process can be seen at the West Indian Sports and Social Club, in Manchester. The club began shortly after the second world war when a number of West Indians who had been in the forces settled in Manchester. The city was a logical and popular choice. Many of the men had been stationed in the region during the war.

The ex-servicemen remained a distinctive and self-conscious group. As they had done before, they fielded a cricket team. The Colonial Sports Club grew up around the cricketing fixtures. Its first premises were in a terraced house and it went through various changes of location—until a little over three years ago, when the present purpose-built premises were opened. It was a collective effort by about half a dozen elderly West Indians who had saved, borrowed and wheedled the money over a period of years: and the effort to pay it back is still going on. So the club is staffed and run by its owners and its managing committee.

At eight o'clock on Saturday evening, everyone's preparing for the night's work. Mr Campbell is already taking the members' entrance money at the door. In the bar itself there are about 20 people, mostly men. They've been there all afternoon playing snooker and dominoes. Big, hard men with big hard hands and slow, self-assured movements. Dark suits, leather hats, warm coats. Few of them are young, and the talk in the bar is argumentative but jovial. Personal too. Everyone knows everyone else. The owners themselves have had careers which are characteristic of the membership—a corporation bus driver, a factory foreman, a British Rail shop steward, a small builder, a small baker. Most of the building work was done by the members.

"Every member owns a piece of this club. We all put something into it, some much, some little. But everybody here is an owner. We had to have something of our own that was good. That is why we always had the club and that is why we put so much effort into this building. We have to be an example to the young ones and they have to see that we can run our own affairs."

The clientele of the Sports and Social Club is largely made up of older people. For the members, it is a demonstration to everyone that there are alternatives to the reggae/weed way of life. "Most of the kids who were brought up here don't see themselves like we did. They don't even know much about anything outside this area. So if they see everybody going in the same places and mixing in the same nasty behaviour, of course they must think that is the rightful place for them. Nowadays most of us, when we look at the youth, realise we have to do something."

The style of the newer clubs is very much to do with self image. One of the consequences of the status of West Indian immigrants in English society has been their own inability, as a group, to communicate an image of themselves to their children worthy of emulation. The result, as most West Indians see it, has been to leave their children in a psychological situation where they were obliged to accept the stereotype imposed upon them. So, not only do most white people in Britain have a stereotyped idea of black youth as criminal, unintelligent and violent, but young blacks themselves have been persuaded to accept this.

The West Indian clubs are part of an increasingly coherent drive to erect institutions which will serve to communicate the values which older West Indians regard as important. Their significance, at this moment, is that they are among the few public institutions which operate as a link between the generations.