Books vs bulldozers: Calcuttans take to the streets against stall demolition during Durga Puja

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Rabindranath, Ambedkar, Saratchandra, Satyajit Ray, Arundhati Roy, Umar Khalid... the list went on.

Thousands of Calcuttans marched on Saturday, books in hand, to “bulldoze” attempts to demolish bookstalls and undermine reading.

Many carried banners reading “Books versus Bulldozer”. Another played on the Bengali words porun (read) and poran (burn): “Boi porun” (read books), it urged, calling for books not to be burnt.

Many participants identified themselves as “Dimagi Naxals”. They said the sight of young people joined by their seniors was “bound to strike fear among the powers-that-be”.

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“Today was some show. You have lost control of the country’s youths. The seniors are also leaving you. […] Half the participants at today’s assembly are above 50. So far, they have attacked the country’s youth. Now that the seniors have also dumpedthem, what will the government do?” a woman participant said on her live Instagram account.

The state’s new BJP government sought to demolish Left bookstalls during Durga Puja. While senior leaders justified the attack on books, lower-level functionaries allegedly carried out the campaign.

The resistance was unmistakable. Hundreds stood in the way of an earthmover in Jadavpur to prevent it from demolishing a bookstall. Many who would not normally visit Left bookstalls during Durga Puja did so this time. The CPM said it recorded unprecedented book sales.

A Jadavpur University research scholar at the march blamed chief minister Suvendu Adhikari’s “destructive call” ahead of Puja for the attacks. “As a research scholar, books have always been close to my heart. It was not uppermost in my mind that a book stall set up by the CPM or SUCI or CPIML was destroyed. What mattered to me was that books were desecrated and the state allowed that,” he said.

On a night when 19 visitors were killed in a stampede at a north Calcutta Puja pandal, police deployed a bulldozer to dismantle a bookstall in Jadavpur. The standoff with those defending the books continued through the night.

“That was one of the saddest nights for Calcutta. But the police were busy targeting books. If we do not challenge this now, we will end up losing everything,” another student said.

The spontaneous participation of hundreds bridged divides of age, language and political affiliation. Many spoke of “the threat of a greater danger”.

Retired bureaucrat Jawhar Sircar, 75, joined the march weeks after knee-replacement surgery.

The rally began at the Vidyasagar statue in College Square, circled the square.

“This destruction of bookstalls during Durga Puja reminds us of what Hitler had done in Germany. This cannot be allowed. Bengal has an inextricable link with books for over 200 years. With books we challenged orthodoxy and embraced rationality,” Sircar said.

Former Rabindra Bharati University vice-chancellor Pabitra Sarkar, 90, said: “I cannot walk any more. But I thought I should still protest this regressive culture. This protest is not about party politics. We cannot let Bengal become Nazi Germany.”

Political scientist Maidu Islam said the attack on bookstalls violated citizens’ fundamental rights.

The protest, he added, was “against the cowardly attacks on citizens who wanted to restrain the lumpens massacring books and bookstalls”.

Jadavpur University student Anubhab Gupta said Bengal had never seen anything like it.

“This is unheard of in Calcutta, a city known for its book lovers; for its ability to protest, express dissent. We cannot allow this,” he said.