

India: The Politics of Industrialisation, Singur, Nandigram and the left

Friday 12 January 2007, by [BANERJEE Sumanta](#), [SARKAR Sumit](#) (Date first published: 9 January 2007).

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A question marked in red

Indian Express, January 09, 2007

by Sumit Sarkar

This is a critique from the Left of the CPM's industrialisation policy in Bengal. Is the violence, cadre brutality and lack of consent that runs through this strategy the only way to develop? How do Singur and Nandigram serve the people?

As a lifelong Leftist, I am deeply shocked by recent events in the countryside of West Bengal. On December 31, a group of us went to Singur, spent the whole day there, visited 4 out of the 5 most affected villages which border the land that has been taken over. We had conversations with at least 50-60 villagers. Almost all rushed to us and told us their complaints.

From this brief but not necessarily unrepresentative sample, three things became very clear, because of which the West Bengal government's version cannot be accepted. One, the land, far from being infertile or mono-cropped, as has been stated repeatedly, is extremely fertile and multi-cropped. We saw potatoes and vegetables already growing after the aman rice has been harvested, some of them actually planted behind the now fenced-in area which the peasants had lost. Two, there is no doubt that the vast bulk of the villagers we met are opposed to the take-over of land and most are refusing

compensation. It should also be kept in mind that at best the consent of the registered landholders as well as sharecroppers is being taken. But agricultural production also involves sharecroppers who are not covered by Operation Barga since they have come in later, as well as agricultural labour. Under the government-announced scheme for compensation, such people are not being remembered.

Three, we found much evidence of force being employed, particularly on the nights of September 25 and December 2. We met many people - men and also a large number of women - who had been beaten up, their injuries still visible, including an 80 year old woman.

What the villagers repeatedly alleged was that along with the police, and it seems more than the police, party activists, whom the villagers call 'cadres' - which has sadly become a term of abuse - did the major part of the beating up. Clearly, the whole thing had been done without consultation, with very little transparency, and in a very undemocratic manner.

As for the official claims of land being mono-cropped, the Economic and Political Weekly in an editorial of December 23 has pointed out that the last land survey of the area was done in the 1970s which means that the records with the government are backdated. Surely there must be much more investigation on the ground and consultation with panchayats and other local bodies. No one, not even the government, has actually claimed that such consultation has taken place. It was done entirely from the top.

These mistakes, to put it mildly, are being repeated on a much bigger scale in the Nandigram region. This has become far more serious because a much greater area of land is being taken - with the same lack of transparency, absence of consent and massive brutality. Once again, one is hearing reports of CPM cadres engaged in an offensive against peasants. What is happening at Nandigram is a near civil war situation.

The West Bengal government seems determined to follow a particular path of development involving major concessions both to big capitalists like the Tatas and multinationals operating in SEZs.

Yet the strange thing is that these, particularly the latter, are things which Left parties and groups as well as many others have been repeatedly and vehemently opposing. No less a person than the CPM General Secretary in the course of last week made 2-3 statements attacking SEZs. The CPM has been at the forefront of the struggles against such developments in other parts of the country.

Surely there must be a search, at least, for paths of development that could balance necessary industrial development with social concerns and transparency and democratic values. Is this SEZ model that implies massive displacement and distress really the only way? If the West Bengal government thinks so, then it also has to accept that the inevitable consequences are going to be a repetition of Nandigram across the state.

This is the price that will be paid by government, ordinary people as well as investors for this model of development.

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Peasant Hares and Capitalist Hounds of Singur

Economic and Political Weekly, December 30, 2006

by Sumanta Banerjee

Singur is a test of sorts: For the Left Front government that is very ardently pursuing industrialisation as the only pathway to progress and also for its opponents, who are speaking up for the unregistered sharecroppers and landless labourers, who stand to gain little from the project. The wide nature of opposition also offers an opportunity to diverse groups to explore an alternative path to development.

A hitherto obscure rural cluster called Singur, some 40 kms away from Kolkata in West Bengal, has all of a sudden been thrust into the national limelight, capturing headlines in the mainstream media and disrupting proceedings in the Lok

Sabha. It is symptomatic of both the drastic changes that are taking place in rural India forced by the pace of neoliberal reforms, as well as of the challenges that the Left has to face while walking the tight rope of resisting and adjusting to them.

The dispute, as it is well known by now, revolves around the decision of the Left Front government to acquire some 997 acres of agricultural land at Singur for the setting up of a plant by Tata Motors to manufacture cheap (priced at Rs one lakh) motor cars. It has led to a triangular contest of sorts. The state government and its leading partner, the CPI(M), claim that the majority of those who own the land have submitted letters giving consent to the sale of their plots and, along with their registered sharecroppers have already collected compensation. The unregistered sharecroppers and agricultural labourers, for their part, are being offered opportunities of training to enable them for employment in the upcoming Tata Motors factory, and other ancillary industries that will follow almost as a matter of course. These claims are being contested from two different angles. It is essential to distinguish between the two, and necessary for the Left Front government to fine-tune its approach to the critique that it is facing from the flank of its own support base. One angle is dominated by the scheming rabble-rouser Mamata Banerjee, whose party Trinamool Congress was literally wiped out from West Bengal by the last electoral verdict. Looking for a chance to bounce back in state politics, she swooped down on the cause of the "oustees" of Singur. In a bid for national support, she invited Rajnath Singh, the leader of the BJP her ally in NDA, which with its hitherto marginal presence in West Bengal, has jumped onto the bandwagon so as to carve out a new space for itself. The Trinamool-BJP combine, true to its nature, indulged in histrionics such as vandalising the West Bengal legislative assembly and a hunger-strike performance (sustained till the time of writing) by Mamata Banerjee. Repeated requests by the state's chief minister, Buddhadev Bhattacharya, for a dialogue were stonewalled by Mamata who seems determined to make a nuisance of herself simply to redraw attention to her party and re-establish its populist image among the

Bengali electorate.

Nature of Opposition

The other oppositional angle is shared in common by a variety of individuals and organisations - ranging from social activists and human rights groups to some radical Left outfits like the CPI(M-L) and Maoists. They set up a panel consisting among others of the reputed writer Mahashweta Devi, and the well known activist Medha Patkar, which held a public hearing at Gopalnagar, one of the affected villages in Singur, on October 27, 2006, where they recorded evidence from a large number of villagers who alleged that they had been pressured to part with fertile, irrigated agricultural land and to accept the inadequate compensation offered. They also complained of police repression that had been unleashed following their protests. The panel invited the West Bengal chief minister and the ministers for industry, agriculture and land reforms, as well as the senior officials of their respective departments. The chairs reserved for them, however, remained vacant throughout the hearing. Their absence indicated the Left Front government's reluctance to face disgruntled sections belonging to its own constituency and to listen to civil society groups. But it also portended a vicious offensive against them marked by police assaults on protesting villagers and the arrest of Medha Patkar and others who tried to mobilise them. This ham-handed reaction betrayed a desperate need on the part of the CPI(M) to tackle a deeper crisis generated by chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya's new industrial policy that was summed up in the last assembly elections by his slogan - "Agriculture is our base, industry our future". Watching the developments following from this policy (the Singur motor car factory is only one in a long chain of controversial industrial and commercial enclaves that have been sanctioned by him), cynical old-timers in his party feel that the agricultural base is being relegated for the sake of an uncertain and dubious industrial future. Other critics are accusing the party of having come to power riding piggyback on the rural poor, but are now expropriating them to build industrial enclaves.

Bhattacharya however seems to favour the Fordist model, stressing the importance of domestic consumerist demand as the foundation for the development of industry. In the case of Singur, he expects that there will be a demand (for a cheap motor car) from large sections of the Bengali middle class (both urban professionals and rural privileged sections) whose economic status has improved in the last three decades of Left rule. It is to cater to their consumerist needs again that he signed a contract with an Indonesian industrialhouse to set up a huge commercial and entertainment complex on Kolkata's outskirts. The political rhetoric that lies behind the promise of rehabilitation and jobs for those ousted from their lands conceals the old rationale of capital accumulation by expropriating land that was earlier cultivated for a particular type of economic development.

Industry versus Agriculture

The West Bengal CPI(M) is caught in a cleft stick - however much Buddhadeb Bhattacharya might try to put up a brave face and live up to his image of a poster boy who satisfies both his party's rural constituency and the industrial magnates whom he wants to woo for investments in his state. The dispute over Singur actually harks back to the more fundamental problem of reconciling peasant interests with the demands of industrial growth. Prioritisation of the latter shaped the policies of both the capitalist states in 19th century Europe and their socialist successors in the USSR and China, and the uncomfortable relationship between agriculture and industry continues to pose a challenge to Left-ruled states in Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil and other parts of South America.

The Singur dispute also needs to be located in the particular context of the history of land reforms under the Left regime in West Bengal, their limited and interim benefits, the growing erosion in their utilitarian worth, and the consequential desperate need of the Left Front government to seek alternative avenues of growth and employment through industries in the private sector. Operation Barga the major land reform legislation of the Left Front government - did indeed allow sharecroppers to register themselves

and claim their share of harvest. But in some villages, individual sharecroppers decided not to register and preferred instead an unwritten arrangement (termed as “mu-tual” in local parlance) with landowners that allowed them extra-privileges like loans at times of need, etc, in lieu of their giving up the demand for their share of the harvest. In Singur, quite a number of the affected oustees belong to this category of sharecroppers who refused to register themselves and preferred a “mutual” deal with their employers. These non-registered sharecroppers along with the landless labourers (mainly migrants from neighbouring districts who used to work on the recently acquired plots as farm-hands) are the worst sufferers since they are not legally entitled to any compensation under the Singur land deal.

Incomplete land reforms and imperfect infrastructural facilities have led to a situation of economic and social stagnation in the West Bengal rural sector. The growth both in terms of agricultural production and socio-economic justice for the poor -that was witnessed in the 1980-90 period, has reached a plateau by the early years of the present century without holding out much prospects for further progress. In the stark terms of rural existence, income from agriculture alone for many farmers (beneficiaries of land reforms) in certain parts of West Bengal is no longer commensurate with the amount that they invest in high-yielding varieties and irrigation facilities, in the absence of adequate state subsidy. Further, a new generation has grown up in the last three decades - beneficiaries of Left rule (like sharecroppers, small and middle farmers, even sections of agricultural labour whose wages have gone up), who have become exposed to the alluring prospects of urbanisation, and are eager to further improve their economic status. To come back to Singur, from available reports it appears that its location (road connectivity with nearby railway stations and Kolkata) has allowed some among this new generation of sharecroppers and small farmers to supplement their meagre earnings from the increasingly unremunerative agricultural holdings, by working on neighbouring construction sites, or setting up small shops, or plying cycle-rickshaws to

transport urban entrepreneurs who are establishing small industrial manufacturing units around Singur - thanks to the Durgapur Expressway that runs near it. Singur, it seems, had already been moving towards mini-industrialisation and semi-urbanisation even before Tata Motors arrived on the scene.

The opponents of the Tata Motors scheme ... well-meaning as they are - should also delve into this other side of the story. How many among the landholders of Singur sold their plots under CPI(M) pressure, and how many out of their perceived need to escape from the stagnant pool of sagging agricultural production? The West Bengal state assembly speaker Hasim Abdul Halim, who was designated as the government emissary to negotiate with Trinamool leader Mamata Banerjee was reported to have proposed that those farmers refusing to part with their land in Singur could be given cultivable plots in agricultural tracts in adjoining areas. There has not been any taker till now from among the dispossessed farmers. Have they lost interest in farming (given its limited potentialities)? Are they looking for greener pastures in urban and industrial ventures, each seeking personal benefits, thus moving beyond the traditional collective peasant solidarity that bound them in the past?

This individualism has been reinforced by the ethics of neoliberalism that has invaded - among other sectors - the depths of India's agrarian economy. Neoliberal economics stresses the right of individual owners of property - whether agricultural land or industrial means of production - to deal with their property in whatever way that would suit their self-interest for their private profit. The individual accumulation of wealth that this encourages, and the production of selected goods of consumption that it leads to, are confined to a narrow privileged section of society. But these become the yardstick for measuring economic growth, as well as the model for the rest of that society. This false concept of growth ignores the economic stakes in land of the larger rural community (consisting of less unscrupulous, or the concerns of less privileged individuals who cannot join the rat race), as well as their social priorities (eg, housing, medical

facilities, education), which should be taken care of by the state. Instead these responsibilities are being increasingly conceded to profit-seeking private enterprises. The logic of unfettered neoliberalism dictates that land should be put to whatever use that can generate the maximum profit, encouraging farmers to sell their lands to developers and invest the amount received in compensation in other business ventures. TINA or Other Alternatives?

In the absence of a functional alternative egalitarian model of development (that was represented in a large part of the world -however flawed - by the socialist experiments in the period preceding the collapse of the USSR), the neoliberal economic order today claims to be the sole hegemonic model, giving rise to the term TINA - "there is no alternative". Quite predictably, in developing countries it re-enacts the 19th century paradigm of industrialisation by expropriation of agricultural land.

(Incidentally, to acquire the land in Singur, the Left Front government has invoked an old colonial law of that period - Land Acquisition Act of 1894.) The victims of this paradigm are the peasants who are increasingly sucked in by the expanding urban areas. As in the past, when spurts of industrialisation and urbanisation produced sheltered islands of the privileged (the White Town) amid a sea of public squalor and poverty (the Black Town) in a colonial India, the same pattern is being reproduced in a post-colonial India. The present Indian state, in its efforts to pursue the neoliberal model of industrialisation, is ending up with the same result of building small enclaves of private wealth (atrociously displayed in ostentatious consumption in five-star hotels and shopping malls) within a much bigger economy that remains backward and stagnant, where farmers commit suicide, where dalit and tribal peasants are forced to migrate to cities to earn a living and be exploited by the urban commercial predators.

Operating within the parameters of this given system, the West Bengal Left Front government is willy-nilly acquiescing in the implementation of the neoliberal model. The alternative being proposed by its opponents - fallow land in other parts of the state for the automobile factory -is

not acceptable to the Tatas, as the surroundings around Singur provide them with the required infrastructure that assures them connectivity with Kolkata. Since the conditions have been set by the Tatas in the framework of the model of industrialisation that has been accepted by the Left Front government, Buddhadev Bhattacharya has no option but to concede to the demands of the Tatas, as otherwise he will face the flight of capital by potential investors. It is an economic blackmail of sorts which the CPI(M)-led government needs to resist. Amartya Sen observed recently, while referring to the West Bengal government's industrial policies, it was necessary to "play the market economy, not kick it, yet not rely on it" (Indian Express, December 21, 2006). Is the CPI(M) chief minister paying heed to the last words?

Unlike the period spanning the post-second world war decades till the collapse of the USSR, there is no countervailing global socialist system today to challenge the monopoly of the neoliberal order and provide protection to today's few leftist regimes from the economic offensive launched by the hegemonist order - like trade sanctions, capital strikes, and even military invasion. In such a situation, the leftists in power - whether in a few states in Latin America or in three provinces in India - have to devise their own respective strategies and tactics to protect their workers and peasants from the global offensive. Encircled by a hostile economic and military order, leftist regimes in Latin America are engaged in different types of experiments in socialist reconstruction that may have lessons for the Left Front state governments in India as well as their op-ponents from the radical fringe of the Left. Both those leftists who are in power, and those who have opted out from power sharing and are engaged instead in armed revolutionary resistance, also need to have a fresh look at the pattern of a future socialist society that they want to build. The traditional model of development marked by accumulation of capital by indiscriminate expropriation of natural resources (e g, agricultural land, forestry, water resources) - which was shared by both capitalist societies and the USSR and China, at the cost of the marginalised sections like poor peasants, tribals and forest-dwellers -

cannot be replicated in any 21st century programme of socialist transformation. The Left in India has to listen to the newly emerging voices of the tribal communities, the demands of those still living in the darkly hidden forests, the environmentalist groups which are resisting depredations by industrial houses, the human rights organisations protesting the state repression in Singur. Party discipline should not prevent conscientious members of the CPI(M) from coming out openly with their misgivings and joining the debate over the future model of development. Similarly, the Maoist revolutionaries in West Bengal or elsewhere also need to participate in the debate. With due respect to their ideological honesty and ardent commitment to a future communist society, let us admit, they cannot offer any immediate revolutionary utopia to the poor farmers in Singur, who are working out their own devices to negotiate with the crisis that they are facing. Mao debunked Stalin's Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR by saying: "...it considers things, not people...". His followers in India should realise that while "things" (their political concepts) have remained frozen, the people are changing.

P.S.

* Circulayed by South Asia Citizens Wire | January 10-12, 2007 | Dispatch No. 2346 - Year 8.