

# Not Nandigram Alone By Kamal Mitra Chenoy

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Events in Nandigram have shocked the nation. But as these events have occurred in a Left bastion of 30 years, in the context of economic reform, most comment has reflected media or political party or ideological biases. Passions run high. A dominant thread indicts the Left Front government of maldevelopment and even massacre of innocents. Intellectuals have even compared Nandigram to the Gujarat carnage of 2002. While the public interest in Nandigram is justified and welcome, inflamed political rhetoric will not help anyone learn the real lessons of the tragedy of Nandigram.

Nandigram cannot be understood without analyzing the issue of development induced displacement and popular reaction to the same. From the time Singur peasants were being displaced to accommodate a Tata motors project there, public debate arose about the terms of rehabilitation and the fate of the displaced peasantry. In fact, a lot of these concerns led to politically backed peasant resistance in Nandigram. In relative terms land compensation was substantial. But the landless tenants were not eligible for such compensation. Further, employment was not guaranteed and the displaced were only entitled to vocational training. This became an issue in Singur when the first protests including by independent Left scholars arose, and this enabled a quick protest reaction in Nandigram later.

The majority of Nandigram's population was virulently opposed to the proposed chemical hub there. In the internecine conflict there hundreds of CPI(M) cadres were forced out and became internal refugees. Nandigram became a virtual 'liberated zone' with no administration, police or dissent. But even at that stage a peaceful negotiated solution was possible. Instead Buddhadeb Bhattacharya's government chose to intervene with armed police. The massive police deployment failed in its purpose to cow the villagers who were prepared to resist. In the police firing at least 14 villagers were killed and many were injured. In retrospect it appears that this armed action was avoidable. Other processes of dialogue should have been pursued. Only recently compensation of Rs. 2 lakhs was announced for the dead, none for the injured. No action was initiated against any police person for the use of excessive force.

After this tragedy, unprecedented in 30 years of Left rule, the Left Front government withdrew the plan to build the chemical hub in Nandigram and assured the villagers that no displacement would take place. But matters did not end here. Reportedly Maoists intervened as did the Trinamul Congress and independent peasant organizations. When CPI(M) cadres tried to 'recapture' Nandigram there was violent and even armed resistance. Some observers and media persons have claimed that the Left cadres were also armed. TV footage claimed to show footage both of armed Bhoomi Uchched Pratirodh Committee[BUPC] members including Maoists, and the CPI(M). Eventually, even before the CRPF battalion arrived in response to a much earlier appeal, the CPI(M) cadres 'recaptured' the area and the CPI(M) families that had fled were able to return. If the TV footage is accurate a mini civil war was going on in Nandigram between the Maoists and the BUPC on the one hand and the CPI(M) on the other. Since the Left Front had the state machinery in their hands, they should have intervened through the administration and the police. Civilian violence should have had no place. This civilian violence is not only flagrantly illegal but cuts at the roots of parliamentary democracy and the rule of law.

Some major questions arise. Why wasn't there a wideranging discussion in Nandigram before the construction of a chemical hub was announced there, unlike in Singur? Along with this dialogue, provisions for compensation and rehabilitation, including possible alternative employment should have been negotiated. But a lot of this criticism appears selective if not motivated. Interestingly, in similar cases in Orissa, in the POSCO plant area and in Kalinganagar, there has been no proper compensation or rehabilitation, much less dialogue with the affected communities. There has been violence though not on the Nandigram scale, but there is massive resistance.

Why has Nandigram been highlighted and blown up by the media, while POSCO and Kalinganagar have been scarcely reported in recent weeks? It would appear that political biases especially anti-communism are rampant, as also political hysteria. A prominent Marxist historian has compared Nandigram to the Gujarat genocide of February-March 2002 in which more than 1000 Muslims were butchered in communal slaughter, which is a staggeringly baseless comparison. This is not to say that Nandigram did not merit detailed coverage and criticism. More than that has already been done. But compensation for those rendered homeless in the conflict, and the injured is due, and should be distributed on an urgent basis.

But the experiences of Nandigram, POSCO and Kalinganagar raise vital questions. Are SEZs necessary? Aren't alternative forms of reforms superior, especially as SEZs are also used for real estate speculation? What has happened to the long promised national rehabilitation policy? Unless there is just and humane rehabilitation, Nandigrams, POSCO's and Kalinganagars will continue to erupt. To pose a larger question it has been claimed that neo-liberal reforms have a human face. But Nandigram and Orissa have emphatically proved that false, and indicated that threat these forms of industrialization pose to Indian democracy. If our policy makers realize this, then much suffering and tragedy in the days to come will be avoided.