

Rajarhat: Accumulation by Dispossession?

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The Rajarhat story is fundamentally a story of displacement, loss of livelihoods and ecological degradation brought about by the Left Front government in cahoots with a real estate mafia allied with business interests. So what's new? There is something new about the story of the building of a new township in Rajarhat and that is what this piece will focus on.

Some background would help sharpen the contours of my argument. It would be fair to say that there has been an intensification of struggles over land in the past five years or so – or to be more exact, struggles of a particular kind. Over this period, in public debates, centred on the media or not, the land question has come to mean the rights of ‘peasants’ to their land as against the claims of the state exercising its right of ‘eminent domain’. This has mainly been the case since the enactment of the special economic zone (SEZ) law and consequently the clearance of huge industrial projects for which oftentimes the agencies of the state have stepped in to acquire land under the guise of ‘public purpose’ only to hand it over to private entrepreneurs. That is to say, when land has been acquired for ‘public purpose’ to facilitate the pursuit of private profit. This is in contradistinction to earlier understandings of the land question, when it signified the contending claims of various social classes – landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants, small and marginal peasants, sharecroppers, agricultural labourers – over the land and its produce.

In the wake of this development, there have been a spate of popular movements against such land acquisition countrywide and even the judiciary, which played a conservative role in the protection of private property in the first two decades or so after independence to frustrate state policy designed to redistribute land and other agrarian resources, has stepped in to define the notion of public purpose more rigorously. The Supreme Court ruled, for instance, in one case that land acquired in the name of public purpose could not be given away to private players for the pursuit of private profit. A string of anti-acquisition, anti-SEZ movements have been mobilized countrywide in the past few years – against POSCO, the Tata project in Kalinganagar, the Vedanta project in the Niyamgiri hills, all in Orissa; against the Reliance SEZ in Maharashtra; and the Adani project in Gujarat.

I would argue, in the Bengal context, that it was this countrywide ferment that provided the charge which made the Singur and Nandigram agitations so successful. But that is not the major point. What is germane is that over a decade before this wave of anti-acquisition movements had galvanized significant sections of the peasantry as well as activists and political groups, the conceptualization of the new town in Rajarhat had started, as well as notification and acquisition of land – in terms of intent about eight times more in extent than in Singur – and there was barely a murmur of protest in the public arena. It was only activists on the ground and those who stood to lose their lands and livelihoods who waged a losing battle against the forced acquisition of land. By now we have a rough idea why this happened: briefly the opposition was co-opted, the media complaisant and elite opinion ignorant of what was going on. These need not detain us here for now.

What we do need to begin with when we look at the Rajarhat story is something curious. At no point during the conceptualization of the new township project was it considered to be primarily an

industrial/commercial hub. On the contrary, it was clearly conceived of as a residential space that would take the pressure of habitation off Kolkata – more than 50 per cent of the land that was to make up the new town was allocated for residential use; just over 10 per cent was for industrial/commercial use. There was no rhetoric about creating employment opportunities in the early days; it was much later, in fact well after the SEZ Act was passed, that some noises were made about employment-generation and skill-impartation for the dispossessed and, as we know, that was mostly pie in the sky. In other words, implicit in the design of the new town project was the unashamed proposition that one group of people were to be deracinated, denied access to the resources they had earlier enjoyed, stripped off their livelihoods, so that another, mostly affluent, set of people could be provided habitation in a ‘green’ and sylvan setting, in well-appointed gated settings with access to a luxurious, hi-tech lifestyle. That this utopia was to turn into a dystopian, shambolic nightmare is another matter.

In its own defence, the Left Front government, of course, argued that the area – well over 3,000 hectares – that had been acquired was low-lying, low-yield land, much of which was not under cultivation, the not-so-subtle implication being, of course, that the loss caused was minimal by way of gainful livelihoods. We shall for the moment not go at any length into the implications of this argument, which, briefly, is that there is nothing much wrong with depriving people of their livelihoods merely because they yield meagre returns, without making sure that they are rehabilitated with livelihoods that yield plentiful returns. In point of fact, the area acquired, and its environs supported a large number of people with a variety of agricultural or agriculture-related activities – paddy and vegetable cultivation, horticulture and pisciculture, or fishing in general, not to speak of household industry or trade and other services related to agriculture. I shall not go into statistics related to yields and extent of cultivation, apart from pointing out that claims made by local cultivators and activists, corroborated by independent studies (one, for instance, conducted by the Indian Statistical Institute) bear out the fact that yields were much higher than claimed by the government – I am implying that this was in no way an agricultural economy in total decline.

It must be admitted, however, that from the data relating to agrarian stratification it does appear that the vast majority of the people were agricultural labourers and a vast majority of owner-cultivators were small and marginal farmers, with a smattering of middle peasants and almost no big peasants in the picture (we shall revert to this point). In other words, this seemed to have been a broad-based agricultural economy that operated mostly at a subsistence level, but was meshed with the market in that it supplied some amount of vegetables and fish to Kolkata. This also implies, logically, that the Rajarhat area contained a sustainable agrarian economy that provided livelihoods to a large number of people and that the new township project destroyed it depriving over 100,000 people of livelihoods and access to resources. The government’s claims were patently false.

The new township project didn’t just destroy livelihoods; it also destroyed the environment. Replying to accusations that it had indeed destroyed a wetland area, made in several forums, including the Calcutta High Court, the state government iterated and reiterated that area acquired was not notified as a wetland. Simultaneously, it claimed that it was going to create more water bodies than it would fill, on its way to creating an environmental-friendly city with vast areas of open, leafy swathes of territory, apart from the increased water bodies of course. To begin with, however, it has to be pointed out that whether it was notified as a wetland or not, it is abundantly clear that it did partake of the character of a wetland in no uncertain manner. If it was not notified, that must be put down as an act of criminal irresponsibility on the part of the government in the first place. That being as it might, whatever the government’s claims, it is quite clear that the environment in the Rajarhat area has been despoiled on a massive scale, with the unconscionable filling up of huge amounts of water bodies and low-lying areas and the felling of a large number of trees. It is quite clear that the Left Front government consistently failed to understand a simple point that in these

days of heightened environmental consciousness even school children appreciate: that Kolkata and its environs is located in a terrain that slopes downwards from the Hooghly in the west to the East Kolkata wetlands in the east and that the indiscriminate urbanization of the wetlands will not only destroy a fragile ecosystem and the biodiversity it supports – which has happened – but also destroy the natural drainage of the area leading ultimately to phenomena like water logging and suchlike, which too has already happened. It is a matter of the greatest irony that the new town itself, in the absence of a proper sewerage and drainage system is inundated every monsoon along with other northeastern suburbs of Kolkata.

I would like to end this piece with two questions – one specific and one of a more general nature. First, why did the state government find it so easy to steamroller resistance on its way to building the new town? Was the reason purely conjunctural in the sense that there was no political opposition, little media coverage and public awareness, or were there some deeper structural reasons? The answer one suspects is a bit of both. But then what were the structural causes for the relative failure of resistance. One can only conjecture. But it probably would not be too far-fetched to advance the following hypothesis. As we have seen, Rajarhat's agrarian population consisted largely of agricultural workers, who obviously had a stake in the local economy but no formal claim to the most important resource – land. Of the rest of the population, most people involved in agriculture were small and marginal farmers. At a political economy level, this seems to suggest that this would give them a greater stake in resisting because the amount of money they would get for their land would hardly sustain them for any length of time. At another level, it could well be the case that since there were a large number of small and marginal farmers to organize, who had limited wherewithal to survive the combined attack of the state and its mafia allies, the resistance could not be cogently organized.

Second, in what larger political theoretic frame should we try to locate Rajarhat? Two influential frameworks have been proposed for looking at Bengal politics, especially under Left Front rule. One is Partha Chatterjee's idea of political society, which looks at the negotiations outside the formal political process through which rights and entitlements are distributed or garnered by social groups. The second is Dwaipayan Bhattacharya's idea of party society, which proposes that resources, including social and political power, are distributed through party channels as parties insinuate themselves into society and society itself becomes polarized along party lines generating a competitive scramble for these resources. Neither of these, clearly, applies to the Rajarhat case in which there was, in fact, a polar opposite of negotiation and where a cross-party consensus in part killed any scope for resistance (or negotiation, for that matter). A third model has been proposed, which suggests that we try to look at Rajarhat as a case of 'primitive accumulation' where extra-economic power wielded by the state in conjunction with business interests and their paid thugs pulled off the expropriation of the peasants and the appropriation of their land by private entrepreneurs through the good offices of the state. This framework explains the Rajarhat more cogently, with a caveat. I am uncomfortable with the use of the idea of 'primitive accumulation' because in my reading it has connotations that go beyond the mere use of extra-economic muscle to make accumulation possible. If we substitute it with the idea of accumulation by dispossession, which has more limited ramifications, I think we have a frame of reference, at least to begin with.

P.S.

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