

Learning Nandigram lessons

Monday 26 March 2007, by [BIDWAI Praful](#) (Date first published: 24 March 2007).

WEST Bengal's Left Front, led by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM), has barely pulled back from a potentially self-destructive disaster following the Nandigram carnage by adopting an 8-point agreement.

This acknowledges that the March 14 Nandigram incident, in which 14 people were gunned down, "was tragic" and won't be repeated; the government "will not acquire any land in Nandigram for any industry" and the police "will be withdrawn in phases".

The agreement says the Front's partners will "meet more frequently" to take "all important political decisions... after discussion."

The agreement became possible primarily because of the public outrage Nandigram caused and the tough stand taken by the CPM's main partners-Communist Party of India, Forward Bloc, and Revolutionary Socialist Party. They condemned the police firing as undemocratic and "brutal and barbaric", and threatened to withdraw from the government.

Critical here was the role of the Grand Old Man of Bengal politics, former Chief Minister Jyoti Basu. He said the CPM is running "one-party rule in this state. It doesn't look like a coalition government at all..." He reprimanded Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, and told the Front's non-CPM leaders to quit if the CPM doesn't change course.

The agreement represents a victory for the people - and forces of sanity. The victory was costly. And yet, it doesn't settle all issues: Will the Front completely abandon its Special Economic Zones (SEZs) policy? Will it refuse any truck with Indonesia's Salim group - a front for the super-corrupt Suharto family-for whom 10,000 acres was to be acquired in Nandigram?

Will it revise Bhattacharjee's "industrialisation-at-any-cost" orientation, with total disregard for social and environmental consequences? And will the CPM consult its allies on policy issues in advance, rather than throw the weight of its 176 seats in the 294-member Assembly, against their 51 seats?

It's necessary to place Nandigram in context. The immediate cause of the violence there wasn't land acquisition, put on hold after popular protests in January. It was the CPM's attempt to regain control of the area for its "cadres". The "cadres" brook no challenge to their power. But on January 7, they faced the people's anger. Many were driven out. They were itching to come back.

Nandigram wasn't solely a fight between the CPM and assorted Opposition groups, including the Right-wing, thuggish Trinamool Congress, backed by the Jamiat-Ulema-e-Hind and other factions, which had collected arms and blockaded the area. Like the TMC, the CPM too employed strong-arm methods, revealed by the arrest of 10 of its cadres. The blockade was a spontaneous people's initiative. As CPM general secretary Prakash Karat admitted, the local "people turned against us."

The plain truth is, CPM apparatchiks instigated Black Wednesday's operation to settle scores in the "cadres'" favour by using the state's might. They imposed collective punishment, an obnoxious method, on the residents.

The 4,000-strong police didn't use non-lethal anti-riot water cannons, rubber bullets and smoke grenades until their utility was exhausted-as mandated by police manuals.

The police shot to kill. Most bullet injuries were above the waist level. Many people were shot in the back. At Bhangabera Bridge, the police pumped 500 bullets into 2,000 people.

The Central Bureau of Investigation has gathered evidence that CPM "cadres" also fired into the crowd, many disguised in police uniform. It recovered 500 bullets from them. It also found a 657 metre-long "blood trail", which suggests "a gunny-bag holding a body was being dragged".

It will take long to heal the wounds of Nandigram. It's worst outrage to have occurred under Left Front rule in West Bengal. Even Karat concedes that the firing was "disapproved by the people of West Bengal... [who] have a high democratic consciousness."

The pivotal question is whether the CPM will learn the right lessons from Nandigram. Or else, it'll forfeit its greatest gains, which have ensured its victory in election after consecutive election for three decades - a record unmatched in any democracy.

Sadly, Bhattacharjee hasn't lost any of his zeal for "industrialisation-at-any-cost". Bhattacharjee has a crude, dogmatic view of history, which sees industrialisation of any kind as progress. He fails to understand that corporate-led neoliberal industrialisation doesn't produce the collective Blue-collar worker (Marx's proletariat) and that it lacks the employment and social potential of classical capitalism. Rather, it bases itself upon Whiter-collar workers, is extremely capital-intensive, and creates enclave-based growth.

Neoliberal industrialisation involves capital accumulation through expropriation of livelihoods. A progressive state must not condone it; rather, it should discipline and regulate capitalism in the interests of society.

But for Bhattacharjee, the Tata car plant at Singur, being built on a neoliberal pattern, is the model. In reality, it's a stark case of crony capitalism, with subsidies equalling a fourth of its capital costs! It's also an instance of elitist, socially inappropriate, high-pollution industrialisation.

Bhattacharjee is also an unreconstructed believer in "stages" of historical development. For him, semi-feudal India must first achieve capitalism and then attempt socialist reform. He says he's working strictly within "a capitalist framework".

This view severely underestimates the possibilities for social transformation available within India's backward capitalism and for progress towards a more just society free of

social bondage and economic serfdom.

For Bhattacharjee, the ideal model to follow is China, with its giant SEZs like Shenzhen, unfettered freedom for multinational capital, and legalisation of private property. He should know better.

Shenzhen is a workers' nightmare, where no labour rights exist. The mere loss of an identity card can reduce workers to destitution. Chinese vice-minister Chen Changzhi has just revealed that 80 per cent of the 1.84 million hectares of farmland earmarked for industrial development was illegally acquired.

The Left, especially the CPM, must decide whether it wants to fight for socialism, or merely manage capitalism Chinese-style, however honestly. If it chooses the second option, it will go into historic decline. It must also make a decisive break with the undemocratic organisational culture it has inherited, which punishes dissidence and encourages a "my-party-right-or-wrong" attitude.

Unless the Left undertakes ruthless self-criticism, it can't effect course correction.

P.S.

* From Khaleej Times, 24 March 2007. Circulated by South Asia Citizens Wire | March 24-25, 2007 | Dispatch No. 2382 - Year 9.