

Nandigram and the Response of CPI(M) Intellectuals

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For intellectuals loyal to the CPI(M), Nandigram has been a serious source of discomfort. This is for more than one reason. On the one hand, the sheer fact of a massacre of rural poor has been too much to rationalize while being consistent with Left sensitivity. On the other, the CPI(M)'s own oft-repeated defence – that SEZs and land acquisition from a reluctant peasantry is unavoidable if the state is to pursue employment and development – is plainly inconsistent with the long-held positions of Left intellectuals as they challenged neo-liberal economics and politics. Many on the Left have hailed the Nandigram resistance as a model of peasant resistance against neo-liberal policies. For intellectuals loyal to CPI(M), to take this position (amounting to a decisive break with the CPI(M)) is impossible. However, there is a real problem of how to explain Nandigram in ways that are consistent with the Left critique of neo-liberalism. We consider three articles that appeared in Economic and Political Weekly (EPW): former CPI(M) MP Malini Bhattacharya's 'Nandigram and the Question of Development', and economist Prabhat Patnaik's 'In the aftermath of Nandigram', EPW May 26, 2007; and 'Reflections in the aftermath of Nandigram', by 'A CPI(M) Supporter', EPW May 5 2007.

Malini Bhattacharya (henceforth MB) begins by arguing that violent displacement in the name of development is nothing new – it has been witnessed in states like Orissa, Maharashtra, Gujarat and MP, not just in CPI(M)-ruled West Bengal. She suggests that in Nandigram, "actual displacement has not taken place, but violent incidents have followed a mere proposal to set up a relatively small special economic zone (SEZ) in West Bengal." She seems to forget, of course, that "actual" violent displacement Singur had preceded Nandigram. However, MB categorically states that violence and loss of life due to police action in a state ruled by the Left Front since 30 years is "unprecedented and unwarranted", and that the police action cannot be condoned even if those resisting the police were armed. Certainly, the West Bengal Government and the CPI(M) itself, for all its admission of "mistakes", is yet to stop offering justifications for the police action, and continues to deny that any "massacre" took place at Nandigram.

MB then states that the "left parties have also perceived SEZs as an outcome of ... neo-liberal policies long before their political opponents in West Bengal raised a hue and cry over Nandigram." This, one must remark, is a half-truth. The CPI and CPI(M) may have recognised SEZs as an outcome of neo-liberal policies, but this did not stop them from being among the first in the country to introduce SEZs in West Bengal, well before the Central SEZ Act was passed. Neither did it stop their formidable contingent of MPs in Parliament from passing the SEZ Act 2005; without ever raising the slightest alarm over it or even subjecting it to any national debate.

MB, like Brinda Karat and other CPI(M) leaders, accuses the BUPC of attacking rural poor peasants of the CPI(M) and of manipulating and fanning up people's fears with rumours and exaggerated accounts of police brutality; but she goes a step further, suggesting that this manipulation was made possible because the rural poor in the area already had some "basic fears" – fears that MB says should be traced to the agrarian crisis all over the country.

Again, this is an important admission – but also a half-truth. A primal fear of a vaguely defined agrarian crisis combined with rumours by a discredited and weak Opposition is inadequate explanation for why, after all, the people of Nandigram turned overnight from staunch supporters of the CPI and CPI(M) to members of a militant resistance struggle. It must be recognised that the “basic fears” that are part of the broader insecurity of the peasantry across the country had certainly come forcefully closer home to West Bengal’s own peasantry – at Singur. MB spends some time spelling out the differences between the relatively well-off peasants of fertile Singur and those of Nandigram with its saline soil. Surely the peasants of Nandigram thought to themselves, “If the fertile and more agriculturally valuable land of Singur’s peasants was not spared, aren’t we even more vulnerable?” The terror unleashed on the people of Singur by police and CPI(M) cadre, the violent and ruthless displacement – wasn’t this the immediate basis of the fears of the people of Nandigram? MB makes no attempt to ask why CPI(M)’s compensation policy at Singur overturned its own principle of Operation Barga, allotting 25% to the sharecropper and the lion’s share to the absentee landlord. For the people of Nandigram, this was no doubt proof positive that CPI(M) could not be relied upon to defend their interests or address their fears. Be it the media or the CPI(M) organs, there were daily statements by CPI(M) central committee (CC) and polit bureau (PB) members branding peasants resisting land grab as the enemy; defending that police repression of these forces was in fact “democracy” (Benoy Konar, PD, 10/12/06); asking cadres to use the party flag as sticks to crush the resisters like snakes (Suryakanta Mishra, Anandabazar Patrika, 30/01/07); threatening to “surround (the people of Nandigram) and make life hell for them” (Konar, January 2007). Weren’t such threats and abuse far more effective confirmation of the Nandigram peasants’ fears and suspicions than any “false rumours” could ever be? The peasants could surely have coped with their “basic fears” had they felt confident that their own party, the ruling CPI(M) would stand by them and protect and prioritise their interests against corporate land grab. It was Singur and the CPI(M)’s arrogant and high-handed threats that shattered that confidence and galvanised their fears into a formidable movement.

What is significant in MB’s article is her observation that even the people at the CPI(M) camp at Nandigram who were prepared to part with land, did not know or imagine possible dislocation from the area. Rather, they assumed they would continue living in the same area, and hoped that some member of their family would get a job in the industry that came up. MB acknowledges that the problem faced by these people is not just that of “terror” at the hands of the BUPC. Even if the siege is lifted and they return home, the question remains whether “the possible displacement for future benefits that big industry may eventually bring would be acceptable to them or whether industrialisation through an SEZ would allay the uncertainty they feel about their livelihoods.”

MB questions the idea that SEZs might provide employment for displaced and unskilled peasants, or that cash compensation justifies forced land acquisition. She writes, “The whole question of the extent to which the setting up of big industries can compensate for the loss of livelihood caused by dispossession and dislocation and go on to provide a positive growth in jobs under the present circumstances, is a debated one. The question applies particularly to the poorer sections of job-seekers who do not possess the needed skills. ... the question of livelihood is a much more complex one which cannot be calculated simply in terms of ready cash. Alternative livelihood does not grow automatically out of compensation money; it has to evolve in coordination with local production relations.” Unfortunately, rather than accepting this self-evident fact, CPI(M)’s top leadership has gone on record to suggest that peasants can live off the interest from compensation money in better style than they would as tillers of the soil! (Konar, PD, 10/12/06)

Contrary to Buddhadeb Bhattacharya’s repeated contention that it was the inevitable way of history for agriculture to give way to industry and peasants to make the painful transition to becoming workers; MB stresses that “One cannot move forward in industry while leaving agriculture behind”,

and expects the Left Front Government to address the question of “thousands of small producers” even as it goes for industrialisation. She also expects the LF Government to allay the basic agrarian crisis in West Bengal’s peasantry by ensuring MSP, food security, availability of essential commodities and employment guarantee programmes for the rural poor. Again, when read against the backdrop of the fact of rampant starvation deaths in West Bengal, or the fact that more than half the money allotted by the centre to West Bengal for NREGA was returned unspent and merely 16 days employment was provided rather than the stipulated 100 days, MB’s piece sounds remarkably like a tacit admonition.

She ends by saying that “in Nandigram, the politics of the poor and the disempowered in the agrarian sector has to be put back in place with due priority to the question of development. It will necessitate not just even-handed administrative action, but clear political will. It is the responsibility of the left parties who are in power in the state to make this possible.” Surely this is an implicit admission by the former CPI(M) MP, that the CPI(M) and the LF Government have in fact not accorded due priority to the poor and disempowered? The fact is that the politics of the poor and disempowered is alive and well in W Bengal – in the resistance struggle of Nandigram, and it is in fact inspiring similar struggles all over the country. If one shies away from this conclusion, and looks expectantly for the ruling LF and CPI(M) to provide this politics, one is likely to be disappointed.

Prabhat Patnaik (henceforth PP) argues, quite correctly, that the process of churning sparked off by Nandigram within the Left makes the Left distinct from other political formations; however, what remains unsaid is that the movement at Nandigram, accompanied by the support to that movement by sections of the left intelligentsia, was the best manifestation of this process of churning within the Left ranks, and the official CPI(M) leadership has had nothing but arrogant contempt for this churning. As ‘A CPI(M) Supporter’ points out, “The point is not whether the Haldia Development Authority had the right to issue the notification for the proposed Chemical SEZ at Nandigram. The real question is why the LF Government failed to see the real problems with SEZs and why the Left did not oppose the SEZ Act when it was passed in Parliament, rather than go ahead with the implementation of the same.” There has not yet been any sign of rethink on this real and crucial question within the CPI(M) leadership.

PP takes on the neo-liberal intellectuals who were admirers of Brand Buddha’s lack of Marxist dogma, and yet were quick to attribute Nandigram to CPI(M)’s ‘Stalinism’. He points out that Nandigram (or for that matter Kalinganagar or POSCO) are the inevitable fallout of neo-liberal policies, and says that in fact, the W Bengal Government can be faulted for not protesting against the imposition of these policies, “as it would have done in an earlier period”. PP maintains a very loud silence on the Left intellectuals, long-term admirers and supporters of the CPI(M), who had in fact faulted CPI(M) as a party (and not just its WB Government) for its neo-liberal policy shift and not for its ‘Stalinism’.

‘Employment generation’ has been the greatest justification offered by political formations across the board – be it Congress, BJP or CPI(M) – for SEZs and corporate land grab. PP systematically demolishes this rationale, and points out that the neo-liberal policy regime and corporate industrialization is inevitably anti-people. Corporate industry and industry (manufacturing sector) in general, as PP shows, generate very little employment, and the promise of “indirect employment” created in the wake of industry is nothing but a “pie in the sky for the peasants”. PP unequivocally states the reluctance of peasants to part with land is not a result of their backwardness, but stems from the fact that the prospect of their getting jobs in industry is all too bleak. Let us recall that the Manmohans and the Monteks as well as the Buddhas, Konars and Karats argued that displacement of peasants to make way for industry is the way of history, and to resist this displacement would be a denial of history, an “end of history”. PP unceremoniously debunks this argument. He points out that advanced capitalist countries, it is true that industrialisation was accompanied by the shift of surplus

labour out of agriculture; but this was only because this labour could migrate to the “new world” and drive out the native American Indian population to occupy their lands! PP reiterates what many Left critics of the CPI(M) had said before him – that industrialisation must be promoted, but not at the cost of the peasantry; also that this was possible only if the model of industrial development was not corporate-led industrialisation. PP states forcefully that the “supreme irony”, and the “supreme triumph of neo-liberalism”, is that the entire issue is being debated as being between the needs of industrial development and the interests of the peasantry, with industrialisation being treated as synonymous with corporate industrialisation; he hopes that the Nandigram tragedy will “drum some dialectics” into the debate. Here again, one must add that for the corporate media to distort the debate in this way is hardly ironical. PP would probably agree that neoliberalism’s triumph lies not in the fact that it has got the media to reduce the debate in this way; but in the fact that editorials in People’s Democracy and statements by CPI(M) PB and CC members have done so. Long before March 14, a range of Left intellectuals had, from a firm Left position, and from concern for the CPI(M), had issued anguished and urgent appeals to the CPI(M) leadership, warning that corporate industrialisation should not be equated with industrial development, and that a Left Government at least should desist from the crime of dispossessing peasants to extend juicy subsidies to the Tatas and Salems. The CPI(M) arrogantly dismissed all such warnings out of hand, and contemptuously branded Left intellectuals offering it friendly advice as “anti-modern”. CPI(M) CCM Benoy Konar, for instance, had this comment to offer on Prof. Tanika and Sumit Sarkar’s appeals on Singur and Nandigram: “I can’t do anything if the historians decide to go back in time...Their views are anti-industry” (Indian Express, 31/01/07). And this was no stray comment by some irresponsible loose cannon; neither was it just the expression of some parliamentary deviation in a bunch of Bengal cadres. No less than an editorial in PD, from the pen of the CPI(M) General Secretary, had branded even the Left critics of CPI(M)’s policy of corporate industrialisation as equivalent to that of “Narodniks” who romanticised the peasantry. That the CPI(M) General Secretary should attempt to serve up Lenin in defence of SEZs and corporate land grab is indeed a supreme irony, a supreme triumph for neoliberalism! One can scarcely avoid concluding that PP, ostensibly taking on the neoliberals, is tacitly hoping to “drum some dialectics” into the discourse of his own party leadership!

PP suggests that state governments are being arm-twisted to embrace neoliberal policies, and while they are complicit in this process, they are also victims, as PP feels the West Bengal government is “belatedly recognising”. Where are the signs of this recognition, belated or otherwise? What has in fact caused the greatest distress to Left observers all over the country is the obscene enthusiasm with which the West Bengal Government has not just practised, but preached neoliberal principles! It is worth quoting from the piece by ‘A CPI(M) Supporter’: “Rather than fighting against the neo-liberal paradigm of attracting private investment by offering sops and reigning in the trade unions, the pronouncements made by the leaders of the LF Government seems to suggest that they agree with it. The pursuit of a loosely defined goal of “development” has acquired primacy at the cost of class struggle and raising the consciousness of the people against neo-liberal policies. It has been extremely demoralising for CPI(M) members and sympathisers all over the country to see their politburo member and chief minister of West Bengal repeatedly state in newspaper and television interviews that communists have to get rid of their “dogmas” or that strikes and demonstrations by workers are disruptive.”

Had the WB Government in fact been “arm-twisted” or victimised, they could and should have launched a public campaign, showing how their commitment for viable alternate policies was being thwarted by the neo-liberal regime. Instead, the CPI(M) took it upon itself to defend all the neo-liberal policies its WB Government was implementing. In the case of SEZs in particular, far from being ‘arm-twisted’, the CPI(M) pioneered the implementation of the WB SEZ Act in 2003, way before the Centre adopted this policy. Economists like CPI(M)’s own former West Bengal Finance

Minister Ashok Mitra have repeatedly suggested alternatives to the neoliberal model of industrialisation and 'development' – but the CPI(M) never paid the least attention to these alternatives. Instead, it chose to defend its implementation of neo-liberal policies in terms of the compulsions of running a state government in the context of a larger neo-liberal regime. As the 'CPI(M) Supporter' points out, however, if the CPI(M) could implement land reform when the centre's policies were hostile to it, it ought to be equally possible for it to implement a non-corporate-led alternatives industrialisation policy too. CPI(M)'s failure to do so amounts to supporting the contention that "There is no alternative", and this is eroding its mass base and its credibility as a Left party (whatever credibility it may be garnering among the corporate).

The CPI(M) intellectuals, in saying that industrialisation should not be pitted against the interests of peasantry; in linking Nandigram to the primitive accumulation of capital unleashed by neoliberalism in India, are finally breaking their silence to support some of the key contentions and concerns of many on the Left. But their recognition of these facts is no credit to the CPI(M) – rather, it is final proof that the West Bengal government's pro-corporate policies cannot possibly have any 'Left' justification. CPI(M)'s continued pursuit of these neo-liberal policies, its refusal to call for scrapping of the SEZ Act 2005 and to discard the WB Government's own SEZ Act inevitably show up CPI(M)'s refusal to correct its course or to stand by Left principles. Are the CPI(M) intellectuals ready to face this logical conclusion, which their own analyses inevitably lead to? Or will they satisfy their conscience by taking on the neo-liberal arguments, steadfastly turning a blind eye to the fact that it is not just the neo-liberal intellectuals but the CPI(M) as a party that is actually peddling these arguments?

P.S.

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