

Singur-Nandigram: An Open Letter to Tariq Ali

Thursday 22 November 2007, by [CHATTOPADHYAY Kunal](#) (Date first published: 21 October 2007).

Dear Tariq,

When I was a very young radical, still a Maoist rather than a Trotskyist, it was your name, rather than that of Ernest Mandel, or of anyone else, that we came across, here in our part of India. There are still older comrades in West Bengal, who talk about a certain period of Fourth International history, in terms of “in those days of Tariq Ali”. This is why, a statement, even though signed by Chomsky, Zinn and others, along with the man who seems to have carried out the coup, a gentleman named Vijay Prashad, becomes most painful because you are among the signatories. [1] As you once wrote in one of your wonderful books, about another comrade of yours, ‘there was fire in his belly in those days’. Perhaps we have all grown older, but some of us have refused to grow “wiser”.

I read, and re-read, with a growing sense of wonder, shame and above all anger, the statement that some of you have signed. If you are uninformed, what gave you the authority to issue a pompous statement based on that lack of information? I write to you, because I consider you a comrade who has committed a mistake in signing this statement.

Right at the beginning, you write:

News travels to us that events in West Bengal have overtaken the optimism that some of us have experienced during trips to the state. We are concerned about the rancor that has divided the public space, created what appear to be unbridgeable gaps between people who share similar values.

Who are these people who share similar values? Just what do you know about the values shared by those in governmental authority in West Bengal? You, and those others amongst you, who made trips here, met some of the CPI(M)’s intellectuals, who put on a special face for foreign delegations. But as someone who has known Marxism for longer than I have, you know well that it is never possible to judge people solely by what they say about themselves. When someone uses words like democracy, even socialism, anti-imperialism, unless you know the context, unless you know exactly what their political practice is, you cannot assume that they say those words in the same way that you, or someone else does.

So let us begin by looking at values. Just a small example of values. When the Singur-Nandigram issues began blowing up, Medha Patkar, who happens to be one of India’s most respected social movement activists, someone who has therefore been vilified by parties and governments across India, extended her solidarity for the militant people. CPI(M) leaders took umbrage. CPI(M) State Secretariat member (and Central Committee member) Benoy Konar, in a speech, called on women to show Medha Patkar their buttocks. When Medha tried to go to Nandigram, her car was blockaded, and some people, supporters of the CPI(M), indeed followed Konar’s advice and showed Medha their buttocks. I could quote dozens of newspaper and television reports, but most clippings I have are in Bengali, so I give you the url of Medha’s own report.

<http://www.kafila.org/2007/03/15/medha-patkar-on-civil-war-in-nandigram/>

I dare you, or any of your co-signatories, with the exception of Mr. Vijay Prashad, to come forward and assert that you share similar values as these people.

I am sure, that once this open letter is circulated, it will also be trivialized by the murders who are posing as leftists and persuading you to sign on behalf of them. So let me say that this is not the only issue I am talking about when we say values. I will be talking about political outlook and values in other ways. But Tariq, in the most extreme days of the IMT line, when talking about guerilla warfare, did you ever call on your comrades to do unto political opponents, that which Benoy Konar suggested and that which his followers obliged by doing?

If by values you mean left wing values, you would have to define more precisely what sort of leftism you are talking about. CPI(M) leaders and their government here in West Bengal are deeply wedded to a very authoritarian form of bourgeois democracy. I will be able to mention only a few cases below. But perhaps the clearest evidence is this – despite the fact that in the period 1971-1977, the Congress in power used utmost brutality, had people illegally arrested, tortured, many actually killed, in three decades in power, the CPI(M) led government has failed to carry through the prosecution of a single police officer of that era.

In your statement, you present a euphemistic comment, saying that you are concerned about the rancor that has divided the public space. The “rancor” that you talk about is the result of a long period of violation of civil liberties, of brutal repression of political opposition and massive use of party cadres as thugs. The most respected Civil Liberties organization in West Bengal, the Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights, has recently been targeted by the chief minister, who claimed that the APDR is a Maoist outfit.

The crime of the APDR was that it has consistently argued that everyone has political and civil rights, and these cannot be circumscribed without threatening all of us. Let me again give some illustration. Attacks on the Maoists, especially the organizations CPI(ML) Peoples’ War, the Maoist Communist Centre, and after they merged, the CPI(Maoist) have been massive. Anyone suspected of being a Maoist has been arrested, even without real charges. And why is someone suspected? In Medinipur district, an activist of the APDR was arrested as a suspected Maoist, on the strength of material found in his possession. Such material included a copy of George Thompson’s *From Marx to Mao-tse Tung*. I still have a copy at home, and I am wondering when it will be my turn to be arrested. In Kolkata, a man was arrested on suspicion of being a Maoist, and he was so traumatized by police action, that he committed suicide. (*Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 9.7.2002). Four days after *Ananda Bazar Patrika* wrote about this, the CPI(M) daily newspaper, *Ganashakti*, reported that Benoy Konar told journalists, in reply to a question on whether the police had overstepped the boundaries of human rights, that it is difficult to determine the boundaries of human rights. In addition, Konar treated the media to the homily that the baton of the police is used as a repressive apparatus. (*Ganashakti*, 11.7.02). In 2002, the Chief Minister said that the KLO in North Bengal or the Maoists elsewhere were holding up development. So the priority for development was used to justify violence on them. The Home Minister’s budget speech for 2002-2003 seeking additional funds for the police highlighted the commitment of the state to modernisation of the police for counter-insurgency; at a time when the government’s debt burden had risen to 7500 billion rupees. (Amit Bhattacharya, ‘Duhsomoy: Ganatantra, Manabadhikar O Paschimbanger ‘Sangbedanshil’ Sarkar’, in *Bartaman Lokayatik*, 2002-2003, Nos. 3-4 and 1-2, pp. 238-270 . See especially pp. 245-7; and also *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 7.8.2002).

There has been a long, very long trail of state and party sponsored violence. The APDR has regularly listed cases. Two comrades, members of the Nari Nirjatan Pratirodh Mancha (Forum Against Oppression of Women, Kolkata), Mira Roy and Soma Marik, have written a booklet, *Women Under the left Front rule: Expectations Betrayed*, where violence on women have been discussed

extensively. Not all are cases of political violence. In many cases, we have seen how rapists have been defended by leaders of the ruling party. For example, in August 1991, a young woman had been arrested from a hotel in Kanthi, where she had registered with a male friend. She was then raped by the police. Virtually defending the police, Acting Chief Minister Benoy Chowdhury told the West Bengal Assembly that she had registered under an assumed name with a male friend. In other words, since she was a presumably unmarried woman “gone bad” it was fair enough if the police had a little fun with her. Values I share with them? No thanks.

Violence over Singur and Nandigram are not unrelated to the foregoing. At one level, they reflect the culture of violence supported by the ruling party. At another level, they reflect the submission to neo-liberal globalization, even while a huge rhetoric is floated abroad for the consumption of international left-wing intellectuals. After all, we boast of an intellectual chief minister capable of quoting noted poets as part of his political spiels. So he needs the endorsement of intellectuals.

You write, “*We continue to trust that the people of Bengal will not allow their differences on some issues to tear apart the important experiments undertaken in the state (land reforms, local self-government).*” Since the signature is mostly of leftwing persons, and since in particular I am writing to you, a well-known Marxist, I trust the signatories, and especially you, know that there is no unified and homogeneous people. I am sorry if I have to spell out such truisms. But in these days of triumph of neo-liberalism, this kind of woolly-woolly, non-class language is being resorted to, even by those whom I have always treated as charter members of the class struggle camp. West Bengal is part of India, and India is a bourgeois state with an economy where extremes coexist. From the latest in Information Technology in Sector V of Salt Lake, it will take you just about two and a half hours by car to get to Nandigram, where you have plenty of poor peasants eking out a living much as their grandparents did. Not that there has been no change, no development, but that has been limited development in a backward capitalist economy. Since the current conflicts seem minor to you, compared to the “important experiments”, let us look at those experiments briefly. As I am not writing a treatise, I do not intend to write for long pages, nor to provide extensive footnotes. It is however necessary to question fundamentally the false claims of the West Bengal Government, that you seem to have swallowed hook, line and sinker.

Some years back, when the PRC had just started its trek back to class collaborationist politics, a comrade in the PRC named Franco Grisolia wrote to two of us, asking for a note on the CPI(M) led government, as well as CPI(M)’s support to the UPA at the center, because this model was being held up by supporters of Bertinotti to justify their turn to the right. So Soma Marik and I wrote a longish essay, *The Left Front and the United Progressive Alliance*, one version of which was published in Italian, and another version, in English, was put up in the website of our comrades of Socialist Democracy, Irish supporters of the Fourth International.

Just one paragraph from that essay will reveal an interesting story: “*The key issue of land distribution, in fact, tells an interesting story. In 1967, and again in 1969, two short-lived United Front governments had been formed. There had been a mass upsurge, and huge land seizures and distribution. OF ALL the ceiling-surplus land vested with the state since 1953 (when the West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act was passed) and the year 2000, as much as 44 per cent of this land (6 lakh acres) was obtained in the five-year period between 1967 and 1972, thanks to the energetic initiatives of the two United Fronts; another 26% (3.5 lakh acres) had been acquired earlier. In the last 20 years of Left Front rule only 1.53 lakh acres were acquired, which amounts to almost a quarter of what was achieved during the very short UF regime and almost a half of what was obtained during the 14 years (1953-1967) of Congress rule.*” The two United Front governments saw an active left, and one moreover facing a serious challenge from the emerging Maoist forces who eventually became the CPI (ML). Land reform at that time was based on popular initiative, not bureaucratic measures. The collapse of the governments clearly taught the CPI (M) a lesson – to wit,

do not rock the boat of the bourgeoisie and their partners if you want a long stint.

As for the important local self government experiments that you talk about, what, really, is significant? The three tier *panchayat* system has been in operation in other provinces as well. Digvijay Singh, the Congress chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, took measures to extend it to the level of the individual village. Despite much talk about *panchayats* being organs of self-rule of peasants, rich peasants and teachers formed the bulk. And given the fact that the poorer classes seldom were able to let their children finish secondary education, let alone college, teachers came from rich peasant families, or from non-agricultural families. A survey in one of the districts, Purulia, further showed that real help was received from the government's developmental projects by a significant part of the rural rich, using their positions in the *panchayats*. (Prabir Bhattacharyya, ed, *Anva Artha 19: Bamfront Sarkar—Ekta Mulyayan*, Calcutta, May 1985, pp.11-14.)

You next write: "We send our fullest solidarity to the peasants who have been forcibly dispossessed. We understand that the government has promised not to build a chemical hub in the area around Nandigram. We understand that those who had been dispossessed by the violence are now being allowed back to their homes, without recrimination. We understand that there is now talk of reconciliation. This is what we favor."

This paragraph was drafted by/ is based on arguments by someone who is a dab hand at creating confusions that eventually aid exploiters, but is at the same time able to pull the wool over the eyes of leftists who are a little away from the scene. "We send our fullest solidarity to the peasants who have been forcibly dispossessed." Exactly which groups are you talking about? Evidently not those of Singur, since the next sentence clearly talks about Nandigram. In Singur, a colonial era law was used to dispossess peasants, to hand over land to one of India's major capitalist concerns, the Tatas. Even if we accept, (as I do not, as I hope you still do not), the logic of the "free market", why should a supposedly progressive government use a colonial law to dispossess peasants for the benefit of a capitalist group that is so rich that it can bid for and win in a battle to control a First World company? Why did the government not tell the Tatas to go and negotiate directly with the peasants so that they could get whatever benefits they were able to wrest? Moreover, perhaps your informants forgot to tell you, that there were vast numbers of share croppers, agricultural labourers, as well as people in various industries and transportation sectors in and around Singur, for whom the rich agricultural land of singur mattered. Thus, people in the potato industry (for Singur grows potato) lost out. People transporting potato lost out. Wage labourers lost out. And these, the proletarian sections, have received what compensation? The answer, dear Tariq, is zilch.

So let us pass on to Nandigram. There, your statement is extraordinarily damaging. If it had come from comparable intellectuals in India, I would have used stronger language. I suppose that ignorance lets you partially off the hook. What is sad is that you think it perfectly legitimate to issue a statement even though you are ignorant about the details.

There have been two charges of being dispossessed. On 6th January, 2007, CPI(M) thugs attacked peasants, and the retaliatory violence drove out a number of them. A further lot left of their own, fearful of the situation. They all stayed in a place called Khejuri. The CVPI(M) has claimed high figures - sometimes mentioning 1500, sometimes 3000. No independent investigation has proved this. Several of us went to Nandigram after the CPI(M) attack of 14 March, when 14 persons, at least, were murdered, and at least four women were raped. At that time, our investigations suggested that the total number of CPI(M) supporters forced to leave Nandigram were around 300. The APDR twice sent teams to Khejuri, and suggested a figure of around 350. Out of these, some 35 had clearly been identified by peasants in Nandigram as active elements in the so-called cadre force of CPI(M) , i.e., the gun toting criminals who eventually carried out the November attacks to

“reconquer” Nandigram. Now, in the first days, tens of thousands fled. Over the last few days they have trickled back, after having pledged loyalty to the CPI(M). So there is no recrimination, provided you have the 100% support for the CPI(M).

You write that you understand that the government has promised not to build a chemical hub around Nandigram. This specific reference comes as a surprise. Because it is actually once again a case of your walking into a trap. First, the chemical hub, and a number of similar proposals, are all of the same type – calls to build SEZs. If SEZs are built, who will they benefit? They will not follow even India’s far from excellent labour laws. Secondly, the chemical hub, wherever built, is going to be an environmental disaster. Finally, and most crucially, the West Bengal government never formally promised not to build the chemical hub in Nandigram. What they said was that it will not be built in Nandigram if the people do not want it. Now, after the CPI(M) conquest, (for that is what it was, it was not even the state apparatus going in, but armed forces of the major party of the Left Front), what if people are compelled to say that yes, they do want the chemical hub? Let me remind you, that the CPI(M) is among the world’s largest surviving parties of Stalinist origin, and while the Moscow tie is long gone, the Moscow style has been retained — but in the service of capitalism. Today’s (21st November) newspapers already carry a news about how peasants have been forced to give written apologies to the CPI(M) in order to go and work in their fields.

You talk of reconciliation. Between whom do you wish for reconciliation? Now that the CPI(M) has actually conquered the territory by force, would a humble acquiescence, given the inability to do anything else, be treated as reconciliation? Perhaps a little more detail about who the cadres were and how they fought the peasants would come in handy. Cadres — local criminals mostly involved in robbery cases — for the operation were drawn from Chandrakona and Garbeta zonal committees. Also, cadres were sent from Narayangarh and Keshiary areas. Another group of around 250 armed CPM supporters and criminals came from the villages of Punishol at Onda and Rajpur, Taldangra in Bankura.

Sources said criminals were given money in advance and given a free-hand to bring whatever they could from the empty homes once the operation is complete. Sources said one such group that has returned to Onda came with motorcycles.

The Bankura group reached Nandigram after travelling by train and then road. The group boarded trains and allegedly got off at Balichak, four stations after Kharagpur, and then headed towards Nandigram via Khejuri in the guise of daily wage earners. They take the same disguise when they go to Bihar and Jharkhand to collect arms, sources said.

Most of these people are suspected to be running arms smuggling rackets. The arms used in the recapture operation are believed to have been supplied from these suppliers.

Another cache of arms came from Purulia where party workers had received arms to combat Maoists. It is also suspected that the arms gone missing after the Purulia arms drop are with CPM supporters and were smuggled to Nandigram.

The coal mafia from Burdwan is also believed to have played a key role in the operation. The money from the mafia is believed to have supplied funds for the operation, helped in procuring ammunition and hire vehicles that carried the armed men to the interior areas as the attack progressed.

In your final paragraph, written in bold type in the version I received, you write:

“The balance of forces in the world is such that it would be impetuous to split the left. We are faced with a world power that has demolished one

state (Iraq) and is now threatening another (Iran). This is not the time for division when the basis of division no longer appears to exist."

So here we get the motivation that led you to write the letter. You do not wish for a split in the left in the face of resurgent US imperialism. Let me go back several years. As you are aware, the Fourth International had been great supporters of the Nicaraguan Revolution, and we, here in locally, tried our best to campaign for Nicaragua. At one stage, when Halima Lopez Sarkar was appointed the Nicaraguan ambassador to India, the CPI(M) decided to take up the campaign for Nicaragua. Of course, with their incomparably bigger force, they could do much more. But when I had a talk with a Sandinista comrade who came here, he accused us of being sectarian to the CPI(M). I pointed out that our problem was simple – the CPI(M) would not even let us do any united front work while retaining our independent political stance. So even if we accept, as you obviously do, that the CPI(M) is a legitimate part of the left, how would we be able to avoid a split? In emails where what passes for debates, CPI(M) supporters are not only abusive towards us, but even to RSP or forward Bloc, partners of the CPI(M) in the Left Front who have been critical about Nandigram as well as the CPI(M)'s sudden volte face over the Nuclear Deal.

Yet you are confident, that it is we who are impetuously causing the split. Tariq, the split is decades old. The CPI(M)'s idea of political hegemony is simple – bash everyone on the left till they genuflect before you. But according to you and your fellow signatories, the basis of divisions no longer appears to exist. If by this you mean that Nandigram's resistance has been smashed, that armed terrorists of the CPI(M) have silenced the peasants, you are of course right. The basis however exists, because we have been unable to accept what was done.

Your argument, that in the face of the US, we must not fight the CPI(M), can be extended to every tin pot dictator who takes a formal anti-US stand. Meanwhile, the CPI(M) led government constantly strives to welcome multinationals, it fights tooth and nail in defence of globalization. In lieu of several more pages of details, I offer you the URL of Sanhati (Solidarity), an anti-globalization website — <http://www.sanhati.com/> . here you will find plenty of discussions about the Left front government and globalization.

Nonetheless, you will say, what about the Left and its ability to influence the Government of India, or its ability to bring out millions in demonstrations? Once more, even accepting your premise that when you say CPI(M) you still say Left (would you make the same concession for the right wing of the old Italian CP?), why can we not oppose the CPI(M) on other issues? Or are you saying, that in the face of the US war threat, all class questions inside India disappear? Are you saying that those who are in government and are implementing World Bank-IMF dictated economic policies are such valiant fighters against imperialism that we must accept the loving pats they give us, even through their guns? Would demobilizing militant fighters be then the best road to militant anti-imperialism? I never learnt that from Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg or Mandel.

Long years of defeat and retreat have made many of us cautious. I agree that the power of US imperialism is greater than it was. But I firmly believe that we can best contribute to the anti-imperialist struggles by consistent anti-capitalism at the point of our existence. When I joined the Trotskyist movement, nearly three decades back, this was clear to me. This was clear to me even before that, when I understood the meaning of Che's call to create two, three, many Vietnams. And yes, on 14th November, despite attempts to turn the protest demonstration into an "apolitical" show by some high profile figures, there were banners and posters, like the one that said, Nandigram is Bengal's Vietnam, or the poster where Marx says, "Not in My name." Don't, please, call for a cession of the struggles of toilers in Marx's name, and don't claim that bourgeois reformism, like some land distribution, some registration of sharecroppers, or *panchayat* elections, make West Bengal a planet

apart. Stand by those who have been murdered, and their comrades, and don't call for a reconciliation between defenders of the ruling class who use sophisticated Marxist sounding jargon, and the crude, unsophisticated, but militant fighters who resist them.

With comradely greetings

Kunal Chattopadhyay

Footnotes

[1] See the statement: [To Our Friends in Bengal](#)