

BEYOND SINGUR

Bengal for Sale

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A block area of the district of Hoogly in West Bengal has been hitting the headlines for quite some time while attracting a nationwide attention. The area has received publicity owing to the decision by the Tatas to set up a motorcar factory there and the controversy raging over the attitude of the CPM-led leftist Government. It is interesting that the leading Bengali newspaper group is firm in its support to Mr Buddhadeb Bhattacharya and has been regularly writing in praise of the modernizing and industrializing (one might also call it globalizing and liberalizing) policies of Buddha Babu. It is worth recalling that the Bengali daily (it is the most widely circulating daily in India) run by this group made a headline on the Congress victory in the polls of 1972, terming the victory as a 'revolution through ballots'. Later it became clear that this election was characterized by large-scale rigging and booth capturing. History has turned full-circle. In the eyes of the daily, that was a revolution led by Siddhartha Sankar Ray, who acquired such notoriety within his five-year tenure as the Chief Minister that despite his best efforts in the next two decades, he could not rehabilitate himself in West Bengal. Now this daily is jubilant over the prospect of an industrial revolution led by the Marxist Chief Minister.

The CPI(M) ministers and ideologues have been telling *ad nauseam* that they would not acquire the land of Singur if somebody else could persuade the Tatas to choose any other place. One point is clear. The name of Singur as a possible place for the proposed car factory was put forward by the Government and the Tatas, who conceivably made a cost-benefit analysis in conformity with their profit-maximizing ambition, readily accepted it. It is also to be noted that the Tatas are producing motorcars, not any article for mass consumption. Satisfying this ambition in the name of industrialization is ostensibly first on the agenda of the Government. So, it is West Bengal for the Tatas, not the Tatas for West Bengal. Of course, there is no dearth of apologists for whom pelf, preferably accompanied by power, is the main consideration.

The principal issue that has figured in the movement is the Acquisition of agricultural land. At first, the CPI(M) leaders, both at the local and the higher levels, wanted to give the impression before the public that the agricultural land was mostly under mono-cropping, but it transpired that almost all of the land was under multiple-cropping. Takeover of this land for industrialization may not have much of an impact on the agricultural front immediately, but it will certainly aggravate the already existing dangerous trend of acquiring agricultural land for non-agricultural purposes that include not only the creation of manufacturing units but others also, e.g. residential complexes, parks etc. More important is the issue of livelihood of those who are dependent on this land. An interesting report was published in the front page of the same Bengali daily on 26 September. In the headlines, it was said that the Tatas would provide one job per family. In the main body of the report it was said that Buddhadeb Bhattacharya had secured the Tatas' promise for assisting in the process of finding alternative employment

for the land-losers. A discerning reader cannot fail to notice the difference. It's not that difficult to read what lies between the lines.

The urban affluent that own colour television sets, refrigerators, scooters etc, but do not consider themselves rich enough to purchase and maintain motorcars are in general on the side of Buddha Babu and his men. Their standard argument is that in this era of globalization, it is suicidal not to obey the conditions laid down by foreign capital and big domestic capital. Of course, most of them do not understand what globalization means, and they feel an instinctive attraction to the dazzles of shopping malls, satellite channels, costly dress etc. The distorted development of the economy, a structural retrogression that has bred inequality but has led to the enrichment of one section of the people has created a sizeable demand for such cars. The demand, although not very high for the Indian economy taken as a whole, is not very small when account is taken of the newly affluent. They are hoping to have their ambitions of owning cars fulfilled. Those who are not so affluent are in the hope that this new process of industrialization will create some jobs and at least partly mitigate the problem. Here one point should be made at the outset. The motor car industry is a highly capital-intensive industry with a low employment potential, A bi-cycle factory can be much more effective in this respect. Any unbiased observer of the life of the common masses would accept that in terms of enhancement of capability, which Prof Amartya Sen calls the core of development, cheaper bi-cycles have a far greater importance than cheaper motor-cars at the existing state of the economy. Why then so much emphasis on motorcars? Is it because they would satisfy the profit-hunger of the Tatas?

Now, let us come to another issue. Who are the forces that are resisting the plan of the Tatas and their 'leftist' collaborators? The official propaganda is that it is solely an affair engineered by the Trinamul Congress and its leader Mamata Banerjee. It is of course true that Trinamul Congress is a participant in the resistance movement. It is again ironical that Buddha Babu had to apply the lathis of the police, not his masses, to defeat Mamata and this cowardly act has further complicated things for him. But those who are familiar with the operation of this party in the countryside cannot fail to note that the social base on which this party functions is in general opposed to the upsurge of the lower echelons, i.e subalterns. But, all reports from Singur suggest that these subalterns constitute the main force of the movement. These subalterns first gheraoed the representatives of the Tatas and the Trinamul Congress joined later. Poor farmers, including landless leaseholders, came to realize that they would gain nothing from the proposed car factory and on the other hand, lose their means of livelihood. It is this sense that has triggered off the resistance and prodded them to declare publicly that they would not hesitate to give their blood should the need arises. This was not the result of any machination by the Trinamul Congress; rather this was the outcome of the spontaneous counter-reaction of the masses to the CPI(M)-Tata plan. The power-intoxicated CPI(M) leaders have deplorably failed to comprehend this. Now they are giving out the story that most of the landowners have taken their cheques of compensation money, while according to the reports made by serious investigators (this writer has had the opportunity to talk with them), their number would amount to a little more than a quarter.

Who are those that are ready to accept the crumbs offered by the Government? One can also note that the role of the Government is to act as the broker between the landowners and the Tatas. One section of landowners has multiple sources of income and this section does not supervise agricultural operations properly, let alone cultivate land with their own hands. Income from agriculture constitutes a relatively minor source of their earnings. Quite naturally, an apparently large sum of money comes handy for them. But this is not the case with those who directly participate in agricultural operations. They understand that the compensation money offered to them will lose in real value with every passing year and in the final analysis will reduce them to paupers. In dealing with them, the CPI(M) has established itself as the party of the rich. It is on the approval of the richer sections of the local population that this party is trying to create the environment of Tata-led industrialization.

In the proposed area, there are three small factories, among which one is under construction. These factories will have to be wound up. Besides, there is a multi-purpose cold storage. It has also to go. The signal is clear. Big monopoly houses will thrive at the expense of small entrepreneurs.

The path of capitalist 'development', development if it can be called at all, initiated by the Left Front Government of West Bengal is seemingly like a big stone. It seems to have been lifted by the Government to throw upon its own feet.

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