

Where The Left Turns Right

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The CPM machinery has gone into overdrive in Singur to secure the Tata deal; it has left the peasantry, its constituency, totally in the cold.

In the interests of informed debate on issues of prime importance, one should welcome the CPM campaign in the media with its 'truths' stating official CPM position on the Singur issue. However, there is much that compels the concerned people to differentiate between 'facts' and party propaganda.

First: Why Singur? On December 7, Rajya Sabha mp Nilotpal Basu told a delegation that the Tatas had been shown five different plots for the car project. He also said that the company did not want any other plot than the Singur one. Now, is it for a company to decide whether it should get agricultural land or barren land for a factory? Why should any state government allow itself to be blackmailed by a private company?

Second: Why do the Tatas need 1,000 acres for an automobile factory? According to the CPM version, they are buying this land only for a car manufacturing unit. A car unit needs less than a fourth of that area. No one talks about the need to give so much land to a private company for just one project. Or about how the colonial Land Acquisition Act, 1894 — meant to allow the government to acquire land for public purpose — is now being used to forcibly acquire land for a private company. In Orissa (where the Tatas were embroiled in a similar controversy in Kalinganagar), the Tatas have acquired huge tracts of land that they hold but do not use. One sometimes wonders whether they are industrialists or real estate speculators. In the case of Singur, neither the CPM nor the Tatas have tried to justify the demand for so much agricultural land. While CPM leaders like Brinda Karat discuss land acquisition and rehabilitation, they say nothing on the Tata Motors project itself, neither its economics nor the mou agreements and process of finalisation. For all the talk about facts, there is a deep secrecy surrounding the project.

How is it that a party that favoured comprehensive rehabilitation (as against mere compensation) in other projects decided to unilaterally give cash compensation for agricultural land and houses?

There are several petitions under the Right To Information (rti) Act pending before the local authorities since early 2006 (months before either Medha Patkar or Mamata Banerjee were involved) demanding transparency in the land deals between the Tatas and the state government, especially regarding the farm lands in Singur. The government has not responded to a single one — a clear violation of the rti Act, 2005, which the CPM has supported very vehemently. Unfortunately, till the time the active resistance started, the state government was not willing to give even the people directly

affected any information regarding the land acquisition or negotiate rehabilitation proposals.

Regarding the consent of the people, all the nine meetings held were with party representatives and panchayat members but not with any gram sabha or with the project affected. Why? It is required under the 74th Amendment of the Constitution and must happen, even at this late stage. It is clear that no project details were provided to the gram panchayat nor was its consent sought, as reported to a panel for public hearing on October 27, 2006, by Dhud Kumar Dhara, a member of the gram panchayat. At a press conference in Delhi, Bharati Das of Khaser Beri village said that they did not know about the land acquisition till the police pushed them back from harvesting their fields. Bharati owns only 1.5 acres in Singur, but demands the right to be informed about the project and to be negotiated with on rehabilitation and the benefits to the affected population. The CPM would do well to remember that democracy is not about majority or minority alone and that each member of society has the right to demand transparency, justice and the right to live with dignity.

Bharati's statement along with the injuries on her body will also disprove the cruel joke about the police reacting to the bomb-throwing mobs of the Trinamool Congress. Third: Of a total 997.11 acres, the government got prior consent from farmers for 586 acres only on the day it fenced the land (before passing the Compensation Award). This data is as per a status report on land acquisition in Singur by the state government. Even this much cannot be accepted as given till those documents are made public. In any case, it's not a question of 100 percent or 99 percent families' consent. There are 347 affidavits submitted by farmers who have not wanted and do not want to give away land. From the very first argument of the majority being in favour of the compensation, the CPM official stance is fixed to one guideline, that of majoritarianism, completely moving away from its past positions.

The number of landholders has also been challenged. The state CPM report itself shows the number of landholders across 635 acres to be 9,020. This shows the small size of the landholdings. Those who defend the project must understand that post-award consent means consent under duress, and that it is not 'Free Prior Informed Consent', a precondition that is recommended for large dams and development projects. The fact not mentioned is that most of those dissenting have not even accepted the land acquisition notice under Section 4 of the Land Acquisition Act, 1894. Hence acquisition in their case is ex-parte, on paper.

Fourth: How is it that a party that took a position favouring comprehensive rehabilitation (as against mere compensation) in other projects decided to unilaterally give cash compensation for agricultural land and houses? What happened to the party's position on 'land for land' rehabilitation? Who authorised the state government to decide that the people should take the cash compensation and be satisfied? The CPM should remember that swearing by the two-third majority in the Assembly will do no good as the party was not seeking votes over the Tata factory in Singur.

Fifth: The issue of compensation to share-croppers and landless people has not been remotely resolved. Training for any vocation does not guarantee employment. To offer such training as a complementary economic development activity is appreciable, but to

destroy existing agricultural employment and offer 'training' is nothing but a scam. What would the families do with cash? Absentee landlords may invest in some trade but will cultivators be able to purchase land of the same quality, of what area, where and when? The state that the CPM claims is a people's state, does not even have a rehabilitation policy. West Bengal should instead opt for a state-level Rehabilitation Act for the minimum displacement that may occur for projects that would be justified and conceded to by the affected people.

Its vicious response to its critics has exposed the CPM more than anything else. To call activists like Medha "the leaders of what are nowadays called social movements", and dismiss critics as "fascists" does not suit a party which till last month was busy organising the India Social Forum with the same 'civil society groups'. Until recently, senior party members were on the pavement with the same Medha Patkar when she was on a fast over the Narmada issue. At the time, they seemed to enjoy the attention of TV cameras and made the most fiery of speeches. Why should those ousted from Singur not have the same rights as the displaced of the Narmada Valley? What does this do to the party's claim to be fighting neo-imperialism? Are some oppressors better than others, even if the brutality they unleash is the same?

Singur, as far as the CPM-led West Bengal government is concerned, is only the start. The Haripur nuclear plant, for which about 18 sq km of land is to be acquired from traditional fishworkers, is next in line. It will not be surprising to find Brinda Karat and Sitaram Yechury opposing the nuclear plant at Koodamkulam while shouting the opposition down in favour of the Haripur plant. Are people to look forward to the day when the state government will accept an offer by Dow Chemicals to start a unit in West Bengal? Will the, CPM, then delegate its Politburo members to disseminate state propaganda to persuade the people that it is right for them to accept the offer of this successor of Union Carbide, which killed more than 20,000 people in Bhopal?

CPM activists can ignore the fact that black flags were flying outside most houses in Singur prior to the night of December 6 when party cadres removed them. They are free to believe that the local people were so excited about giving up their land for such a great development project that they went to the extent of organising pro-Tata and pro-Buddhadeb rallies in Singur and Kolkata. Like the West Bengal chief minister, leaders like Brinda Karat are free to believe that Medha Patkar's visiting Singur would have created a serious law and order problem, which is why she was denied permission and later detained. The party is also free to believe that the 'facts' they have produced about Singur are the absolute truth and not propaganda. But none will have the freedom or right to differ from what the CPM believes —and if they do they will be arguing against industrialisation. The CPM's Singur fact-sheet reminds one of a similar campaign released by the Gujarat government when the nba, with the Left's support, was opposing the Sardar Sarovar dam; and also of a 'fact-sheet' that has now been issued by the Chhattisgarh government defending the violence by the Salwa Judum.

The CPM and its party bosses should remember the words of James Bovard : "Democracy must be something more than two wolves and a sheep voting on what to have for dinner." However, the actions of party leaders suggest that the era of enlightened despots is back. The CPM is not just right, the CPM is THE right, and

since they are the arbiters of ‘the good of the people’—because they are agitating on the streets as well as sitting in government—there’s no place for any real criticism.

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