

Red Alert

The West Bengal state-wise consternation over Singur has not died down and some other developments have taken place. They have put the so-called industrialising policy of the Chief Minister into a crisis, the scale and magnitude of which he could hardly anticipate. The standard argument paraded by the Chief Minister and his party colleagues remains, however, the same; the dependence on agriculture for livelihood must be reduced. This is nothing new and at an abstract level, there is little to dispute it, but it fails to carry conviction because of the common knowledge that neither the automobile factory of the Tatas nor the proposed Special Economic Zones, rather 'Slave Economic Zones' are going to create much employment, and the number of people who are going to lose their traditional means of livelihood will in all probability be greater than that of the new employments created. In the wake of the event of Nandigram—a block area of the district of East Medinipur—which amounted to no less than a people's uprising against the marxist government, the latter has been forced to accept a go-slow attitude, because the seemingly omnipotent police force can no longer be regarded as capable of doing what the Chief Minister wants them to do. Buddha Babu and his fellow travellers have been trying, ever since the beginning of the disturbances in Singur, to project the resistance of peasants as the handiwork of outsiders. This has been severely condemned by many, including a large number of artists, academics, writers etc. A joint statement signed by about eighty such personalities has provided one example of this condemnation. The signatories have declared, "We, the artists, literary writers and intellectuals of West Bengal, are certainly not against the construction of industries in public interest, but we are against the forcible seizure of land from unwilling peasants in the name of industrialisation, land which they either inherited or acquired through past struggles... We are astonished at the repetition of the methods of torture and repression hitherto followed by the state power against legitimate popular struggles, as well as the repetition of the language used by those in power. We also consider that the use of the slanderous epithet of 'outsider' against the allies of the peasants' struggle for land is an insult to the tradition of the glorious Tebhaga Movement." The signatories have also demanded punishment for all those responsible for state repression and forcible acquisition of land in Singur. It is obviously not possible, except through brazen lies, to paint this statement as engineered by Mamata Banerjee, because most of the signatories are known to be leftists of some variety, and reference has been made to the Tebhaga movement led by the undivided Communist Party of India. It is also intriguing that Buddha Babu and his party colleagues have paid no heed to the opinion of these intellectuals. He has in possibly a queer conception of the meaning of the term 'outsider'. The Tatas and Salims are sons of the soil, while persons like Medha Patekar are outsiders! He has in the upshot been forced to a position of damage control exercise by the upheaval at Nandigram, which dealt a severe and unexpected blow to his bloated ego by serving him the hotter curry. The peasantry of Nandigram has registered a first round of victory against the policy of globalisation, forcing the Government to retreat. Buddha Babu and his acolytes now find their confidence as well as their arrogance badly shaken.

The Government has so long kept the people in the dark about many of the details of the agreement with the Tatas, particularly why a fertile area was shown to the Tatas. Besides, the people are kept in the dark as to the terms or conditions on which the acquired land is to be sold or leased out to the Tatas, what types of tax concessions are going to be granted to them, and whether one thousand acres of land are really required for the factory (the biggest automobile factory of the Tatas, situated in Pimpri at the outskirts of Pune has 510 acres of land). Despite repeated demands, no answer to these vital questions has been given, hinting at the possibility of some sort of unholy alliance. With the disclosure of a shady deal between the left government and the Tatas in a Kolkata-based national daily, some political parties are now demanding a CBI enquiry into what they call "small car scam". In truth people now know more about the deal that is totally against the interests of the state. Meanwhile the villagers of Singur set ablaze a portion of the fence delineating the acquired area at Beraberai when Tata officials performed a ceremonial bhumi-puja to begin the construction. The burning of fence at Singur only illustrates among other things that the government is in a hurry to silence Singur even by perpetually clamping Section 144 so that the Tatas can make their way easily. But it won't be that easy. So it seems.

Besides, the deployment of the police in large numbers and the reckless arrests and intimidations has exploded the myth of 'popular support' behind the automobile factory of the Tatas. But nothing has been able to bring the Buddha Babu and his colleagues to their senses, until the break out of the virtual rebellion in Nandigram.

About the deal on the price of land for the automobile factory, one intriguing fact has come out. The Government has, according to their own announcement, is going to give Rupees 1300 millions as compensation money. But the Tatas will reportedly give Rupees 200 millions only as the price of the land, thus gaining Rupees 1100 millions. This is patently a loot of the public exchequer. It is interesting that in a recent interview with a Bengali weekly, Debabrata Bandopadhyay, the former Director of Land Reforms, West Bengal has expressed the opinion that for this offence, the concerned people may be put behind bars under Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988.

Unless it can be proved that the proposed and much-flaunted course of 'industrialisation' will be able to raise significantly the proportion of industrially employed labour force in the total labour force, the claims of the Government about industrialisation will not at all be saleable. Some blind followers belonging to the Chief Minister's own party may of course be willing to buy it, but things are not so smooth with others who have enough common sense to see through the character of industrialisation masqueraded by him. forcible seizure of land with the help of the police will make matters worse for the Government. It is curious that some partners of the Left Front have raised mild voices of protest against the policy of their dominant big brother. But they are not in a position to revolt, owing to their own 'survival' considerations. True, for the first time some so-called junior partners of the CPM-led left front government seem to be making occasional voices about their dissatisfaction with what big brother is doing in the name of development and industrialisation, without consulting them. In all fairness their murmur translates into demanding more attention from the big brother. That's all.

Nandigram has strengthened the morale of those inhabitants of various other places in the state who are afraid of losing their land and traditional occupations in the wake of the official march towards 'industrialisation', or pseudo-industrilisation as one may like to call it. It is unlikely that Buddha Babu and his party will abandon their policy of wooing big capital, domestic and foreign. But whether they can succeed in satisfying the profit-hunger of their new class allies in the face of stiffening people's resistance remains to be seen. *☞☞☞ [contributed]*