

WEST BENGAL

Shadow of Suharto?

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Nandigram, a block area of the district of east Medinipur of West Bengal has entered the all-India scenario. Here the resistance of the people to forcible take-over of land has been much bigger in terms of breadth as well as intensity, and it is also interesting that a large portion of the participants in the resistance consists of erstwhile CPI(M) supporters. All of the village panchayets of the area are dominated by the CPI(M) and its ally, the CPI. But such an apparently exclusive domination proved too weak in the face of popular resistance. In Singur, the police force of the Government unleashed a wave of repression with partial success, and owing to the non-cultivating owners having the proprietorship of a considerable part of the land, the movement did not gather the expected momentum, although the sharecroppers and the agricultural labourers were deprived.

Notwithstanding the persuasion of the local CPI(M) members who had been trying to convince them of the need for parting with their land for the sake of industrialization, the people were not as gullible as not to understand that the long-term interests of the notorious Salim group of Indonesia, an accomplice of the fascist and now overthrown Suharto regime, are going to be served at their expense. So, the simmering discontent broke into open resistance when notices were served, reportedly at the behest of the Chairman of the Haldia Development Authority, specifying the moujas to be taken over. The resistance, which amounted to a total defiance of the administration and the ruling party, caught both the administration and the local CPI(M) leaders unawares, and popular anger forced many of the latter to flee. But what followed later on was a clash following a provocative as well as highly suggestive statement of Binay Konar, the CPI(M) leader, in which he threatened to encircle the farmers of the Nandigram block and make a hell of their lives. It is intriguing that even the CPI(M) leaders who are hell-bent on serving the business interests of the Salims and the Tatas, of course in the name of industrialization, could not claim that others were offenders and their own men were innocent babes. The clash has taken quite a few human lives as its toll. The opposition has described it as an open attack by CPI(M) fascists on unwilling farmers who have refused to sacrifice their interests for the sake of the Salims.

Be whatever it may, one point is clear: the incident would never have happened had it not been for the brazen capitulation of the CPI(M)-led Left Front Government to the Salims, who, after the change of regime in Indonesia in the wake of the fall of the Suharto-led military dictatorship, have been looking for fresh pastures, because they cannot do it so well in their own country. The farmers of Nandigram have demonstrated that it is not possible for Buddhadeb Bhattacharya to be another Suharto even if he wishes to. The arrogance of Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, which in all probability rested on the strength of the police force and cadre brigade, seems to have been badly shaken and his voice is now a much feebler one. Neither his supposedly omnipotent police force, nor his invincible cadre army has been able to deliver the goods. This is one achievement of the people of Nandigram who have won in the first

round of the battle. The veteran party ideologue, Mr Biman Basu has, however, discovered imperialist interest behind the activities of Medha Patekar and others. It is tempting to suggest that he is willing to form an anti-imperialist front with their allies and friends, e.g. the Tatas, the Salims, Mr Manamohan Singh, the British Government etc. Of course, when one's own edifice crumbles, one is bound to lose one's balance of mind. That is perhaps the reason why the veteran ideologue is venting his spleen on Medha Patekar in a fashion that borders on insanity. Of course, it might be argued that since persons like Basu have been using the term 'imperialism' from their boyhood, it is natural for them to use it whenever they find any opposition.

Of course flimsy arguments and allusions about the so-called 'industrialization' theme are not lacking. One point of reference, uttered *ad nauseam*, is China's industrialization process. What is conveniently overlooked is that this process has widened income disparities and produced its anti-thesis in the shape of frequent workers' and peasants' revolts, and the Chinese Communist Party and Government are trying out ways and means to tackle them in ways other than the employment of the might of the state.

Some economists, whose brains have been affected by the liberal virus or alternatively, who perhaps consider this virus as beneficial to their self-interest, are frantic in their efforts to defend the moves of Buddhadeb Bhattachaya. An article published in *The Telegraph* on 8 January provides one such example. The pedagogue has argued that Bengal must take this course for her development and for catching up with the rest of India in terms of per capita income. He has also asserted that more employment will be created than the number of persons who will be displaced, while keeping silent on the possible links between income, employment and technology (One feels tempted to think that he is ignorant of the vast literature on the subject). Of course, he has not considered it his duty to specify the nature of employment that the displaced farmers and agricultural labourers are likely to get. One might conjecture that he has in mind the jobs of menial servants, sweepers, night watchmen etc, something which the CPI(M) leader Binay Konar prescribed for the displaced when the controversy over the proposed take over of land in the Bhangar area for the Salims was going on. This is one kind of 'Development with Dignity'; a caricature of what Professor Amit Bahduri dwelt on at length in his book.

It is sheer stupidity to think that development in the sense of enhancement of human capabilities consists of the rise in per capita income only. One need not be an economist in order to understand this simple truth. The pedagogue again has found it unnecessary to examine why the small and medium-scale industries have declined in this state, and whether it is necessary to encourage their development instead of wooing the Tatas and Salims, for the sake of employment generation. He has considered it insignificant that a large number of factories lie closed, and thousands of industrial workers are jobless, largely owing to the machinations of owners. The land - leased in by the factory owners from the government—on which these factories were built up now lies unused or is used for building housing complexes. But the pedagogue overlooks this fact, presumably because he sees no harm in that, because he is not ready to consider that this land can be used for industrialization. He is also incapable of understanding whether the type of development or maldevelopment, as one may like to call it, that Buddha Babu and his wise colleagues are contemplating will promote the

Americanization of a part of the economy, while reducing the rest to a position somewhat akin to that of sub-Saharan Africa. Of course, if somebody decides that he must defend this or that blindly, he will have to avoid questions that are not easily answerable, and to produce finely wrought pieces of sophistry, because he has to mislead. One of the consequences of the New Economic Policy, introduced by Manmohan Singh and now assiduously being followed by Buddhadeb Bhattacharya & co, is growing income disparity. The record of the economy over the last fifteen years or so have proved this beyond doubt, and this phenomenon is certain to be revealed more glaringly in the near future. Disparity leads to new contradictions, and they are manifested in social and political turmoil. Peasant resistance in Singur and Nandigram is one instance.

The peasantry of this country has fought many battles, with both wins and losses. The upshot of the battle of the farmers of Nandigram cannot be predicted in advance. But there is no doubt that this struggle is not a passing predicament for their opponents; it has opened the floodgate of a serious crisis from which the Bhattacharya-Yechuri-Karat elite club is unlikely to recover. Of course, the certificate from Manmohan Singh is there to cash on.

The certificate has proved, although in a roundabout way, that the talks made by Anil Biswas and Ashim Dasgupta about the 'alternative way to development' were meant simply to hoodwink the people. This masquerade has now given way to the slogan of 'there is no alternative.' But the time is not long when popular resistance will throw into the winds both the certificate and the certified, and all the pretensions of 'development'. The popular upsurge in Nandigram has above everything else, pointed to this future. ~~██████~~

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