

## SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

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Ironical as it may seem, on 21st June this year when the Left Front was celebrating its 30-year-long regime in West Bengal, a CBI team investigating the rape and murder of Tapasi Malik in Singur detained a CPI(M) cadre elsewhere and decided to take him to New Delhi for polygram (polygraph) test, commonly known as lie detector test. Newly acquired familiarity with this technical term, hitherto unknown to this writer, prompts him to think of an urgent need to put the ruling CPI(M) in West Bengal to the polygram/polygraph test, so far as the Singur issue is concerned.

It is too well known that since the beginning of the controversy over land acquisition, the state government has been wrapping up the kind of deal it has made with Tatas for setting up a small car plant at Singur. It is not only that the Chief Minister and Industry Minister refused several times to disclose the information relevant to the said project on the pretext that it was a 'trade secret'. The government has been systematically spreading lies and vague words about the amount of land acquired for the project and the number of farmers who had consented to part with their land for the sake of industrialisation.

Misinformation campaign, however, is not a new feature of the CPM-led LF Government. As for example, it has completely misled the public by furnishing cooked-up figures to prove its 'unprecedented' progress in the field of literacy and primary education. The present agricultural scenario has also deflated that pompous story of the government's exemplary success in land reforms and agricultural growth.

What makes Singur stand out is the lies and contradictory statements beset the official announcements on the land acquisition issue in Singur. In the middle of the last year, the government claimed that most of the owners of 997 acres of land to be acquired had agreed to the official proposal ; but that it was not true was borne out by the discontent strongly expressed by large section of agricultural population in Singur during the same time. Those who protested comprised not only the owner-farmers but also the sharecroppers (*bargadars*), unregistered, bargadars and the landless labourers. The last two sections, in fact, would be worst affected by land acquisition because they would lose their livelihood and would not be entitled to compensation of any kind. Resistance to acquisition was therefore expressed by all those agricultural people attached to the land earmarked for the Tata project. Their resistance snowballed into a peasant upsurge in September (2006) and later on December 2 when the police restored to lathicharge and indiscriminate arrest of people involved in the agitation. Women and children were not spared. Of those who fell victim to police violence on that day, one youth Rajkumar Bhul later succumbed to his injuries and emerged as the first martyr of the Singur movement.

In December, when the movement gained in momentum, the government brushed aside the allegation that land was being acquired without consent of the farmers and claimed that owners of around 900 acres had given their consent. At

the same time however, it clamped section 144 in the area to prevent the entry of 'external' elements, who according to the government, were trying to create trouble by misleading the farmers, If the government has already been armed with the support of the concerned farmers, why should it be so afraid of the alleged 'outsiders'? Can they be so powerful as to mislead the peasants who are so committed to the LF government that they have agreed to offer their land at the alter of industrialisation drive in the state? The movement took a new turn when the Trinamul Congress (TMC) leader Mamata Banerjee took to indefinite hunger strike as a mark of protest against forcible land acquisition in Singur.

As the hunger strike continued and attracted wide media attention and the honourable Governor met Ms Banerjee and requested her to end her fast, the govt. felt embarrassed and had to relent a bit. On 20 December, the Chief Minister sent a letter to inform Mamata Banerjee that 954 acres of land had been acquired with the consent of their owners. During the same time, the TMC submitted to the Governor affidavits of farmers owning 400 acres who stated that they had not given their consent. And earlier on 30 October when a fact-finding team represented by Medha Patkar and others which had earlier held a public tribunal on the land issue in Singur met the Industry Minister, he informed the members of the team that owners of 851 acres of land had given their consent and 468 acres had already been purchased by the WBIDC on behalf of the government.

As the game of claims and counter-claims continued, more discrepancies surfaced and the matter was finally taken to court. Meanwhile on January 2, the government released a status report announcing that about 9000 farmers owning 658 acres of land had accepted compensation and on the whole owners of a little over 954 acres had given their consent till 31 December, 2006 (*The Statesman*, 03.01.07). This was followed by an official affidavit produced on 27 March under the direction of the Calcutta High Court. This document submitted that compensation had already been paid for (287) acres of land. Almost the same figure appeared in reply to the query of Association for Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR). Under the Right to Information Act, APDR asked the government for exact information relating to the ongoing land acquisition process in Singur. On 16 April, the District Magistrate and Collector, Land Acquisition Section, Hoogly informed APDR in a letter (memo on 750/LA) that "Prior to publication of Award (*'Award' means an additional 10%*) consent of 287.51 acres was obtained. However after publication of Award, large numbers (sic) of consent were filed to WBIDC".

The matter being sub-judice, it would not be wise to make any further comment; and in fact contradiction between the earlier official claim and the information conveyed through the affidavit and the above letter is so obvious that it needs no further elucidation. What however cannot but surprise one is that the administration vaguely referred to 'large numbers' (sic) only and could not mention the exact number of farmers who had given their consent.

The LF Government's lying tactic was practised in Nandigram too. Now it is well known that Nandigram flared up over a notice issued on 2 January by Haldia Development Authority (HDA) indicating the number of mouzas in Nandigram and Khejuri to be acquired for the purpose of setting up a Chemical Hub and a

Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in the area. The government's first reaction was that it had not directed HDA to issue such a notice. Later, it indirectly admitted that the said notice had official approval and the Chief Minister (CM) in his characteristic autocratic style asked the people of Nandigram to "Tear Up" the notice which now stood invalid because the government had decided not to acquire land in Nandigram. In the case of Singur, the CM had defended himself by saying that he had no knowledge of the rate of fertility of the land in question. And on Nandigram he submitted that he never knew that the area was so densely populated. Well, West Bengal has now a Chief Minister who can recite poems, write plays but has no knowledge of the geography of the State he heads. Another relevant question is : the government can withdraw a notice with official sanction by way of an announcement or circular; but can anybody, even the CM, just tear it up?

In Singur and Nandigram, the government resorted to violent methods to repress public resistance to land acquisition. In Nandigram it resulted in a horrendous massacre on 14 March. Alongside, the government has also systematically tried to obfuscate the scenario by rattling off blatant lies and contradictory statements. After the abortive all-party peace meeting on 24 May, Shyamal Chakravarty, the representative of CPI(M) refused to accept that what had happened in Nandigram on 14 March was genocide and told the media that no case of rape had taken place there. The minister didn't care to remember that a few days after 14 March, two men were identified as rapists by the local people and handed over to the police; moreover, no other than the Superintendent of Police, Midnapur (East) admitted (*The Statesman*, 5.4.07) that two cops had raped a woman on that fateful day.

The most cruel face of the liar left came to light on the very day the LF Government celebrated the 30th anniversary. Debu Malik who was detained on that day by the CBI in connection with the Tapasi murder case later confessed in New Delhi during the interrogation that Tapasi was raped and murdered and the lower part of her body was burnt down to erase the proof of the crime and he himself was involved in the act, (*Dainik Statesman*, 26.6.07). This revelation bared the fact that the story of Tapasi's suicide, floated by the CPI(M), was absolutely concocted.

*PS : Clearly contradicting the earlier official claim, A Rezzak Mollah the land reforms minister told the assembly on 6 July, that consent for 628 acres in Singur had been obtained till date.*

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