

# NANDIGRAM : CONTEMPT FOR DEMOCRACY

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On 8 November when a mob of Communist Party of India (Marxist) supporters in West Bengal beat Medha Patkar, after dragging her out from a convoy headed to the troubled area of Nandigram, they bestowed a rare honour upon this brave woman.

In that instant, she achieved the distinction of becoming India's only well known social activist to be physically assaulted by thugs from both the right and left wing of the mainstream Indian political spectrum.

In April 2002 Medha, had been similarly attacked by the activists of the Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Ahmedabad while on a peace mission to the city, after the infamous pogrom carried out by the saffronites killing over 2500 Muslim men, women and children . Medha was a target of the right wing for long because of her opposition to the Narmada dam project, that has displaced thousands of tribal families.

The CPM men who hit Medha and her fellow activists in turn were angry with her attempt to highlight the despicable operation in Nandigram, where other party cadres were busy killing opponents, raping their women, torching homes and forcing thousands of ordinary villagers to flee for their lives. This was part of their operation to 'recapture' the 'lost' territory, that had come under control of opposition forces earlier this year, when locals- many of them long-time supporters of the Left- turned against the government's policy of forced land acquisition.

Since late 2006 the farmers of Nandigram have been fighting state plans to hand over their land to an Indonesian multinational for a 'Special Economic Zone'- that was to be used to set up a massive chemical hub. Their resistance had continued despite a massacre of 14 villagers, in mid-March earlier this year, by the West Bengal police and CPM party cadre, who also sexually assaulted women and left dozens injured and disabled.

The beating of Medha Patkar by both BJP and the CPM thugs, which underlines her unique status as a threat to establishments on both the right and the left, was no mere coincidence. The fact is these two parties, despite their vehement public opposition to each other, share a frightening similarity in their overall political culture- both within and outside their organizations.

Though, in the larger Indian context, the BJP and its allied organizations are far more dangerous because of their wider appeal and support, the CPM's behaviour exhibits the same ugly mix of fanaticism and contempt for democratic norms that characterizes the Indian right wing.

In West Bengal in particular, a province the CPM has ruled continuously for three decades along with its allies in the Left Front, the unholy troika of party cadre, police and local mafias wield power in away that is disturbingly reminiscent of the situation in Gujarat—where under a BJP regime - Hindu right

wing fanatics and goons work hand in glove with state officials to terrorize all those who oppose them, particularly religious minorities.

Almost all mainstream political organizations, which operate within the democratic spaces offered by the Indian polity, contest parliamentary elections and claim allegiance to the Indian Constitution, show little respect in actual practice for democratic rights, norms or processes. As far as they are concerned such spaces are to be merely exploited till such a time they are in complete command and the pretence of democracy itself can be cast off like a dispensable cover over their quest for raw power.

In the case of the BJP, its long term objectives are quite clearly stated and obviously authoritarian- the demolition of the secular Indian republic and the formation of a Hindu theological State where minority populations- Muslims, Christians, tribals and dalits will live as second class citizens. It is a different matter that these populations are already second-class citizens in many ways but under 'Hindutva' such discrimination will be enshrined in law and enforced by the might of the Indian State.

This is precisely what has been happening in Gujarat for the past nearly one decade where the regime of Chief Minister Narendra Modi systematically discriminates against and intimidates minorities using both the state administration and its well-oiled party machinery for the purpose.

The CPM, mercifully, has no such dire objectives and is in fact vehemently opposed to the fascist vision of the BJP. And though it occasionally complains of the Indian Constitution being an obstacle to achieving- what it calls a People's Democracy, it does not contemplate any drastic overturning of the Indian republic for this purpose- envisaging instead a peaceful capture of power through parliamentary means.

The convergence of the CPM with the BJP however lies in the way both use their formidable party organization, loyal army of cadres along with raw state power to browbeat political opponents and establish absolute control. And as in the case of the Nandigram episode the CPM has shown, its opponents could include even small farmers and sharecroppers who don't agree with its policies.

A report of the People's Tribunal on Nandigram, released in August, described the violent events of 14 March in Nandigram for instance- as nothing less than a 'state sponsored massacre'.

Describing the unsavoury collusion between the government agencies and the ruling CPM the report said: "The motive behind this massacre seems to be the ruling party's wish to 'teach a lesson' to poor villagers in Nandigram by terrorizing them for opposing the proposed Special Economic Zone (SEZ) project."

In a stinging indictment of the West Bengal government the Kolkata High Court on November 16 came to the same conclusion in its judgment on a public interest litigation filed against the police firing in March, which it called, "unjustified, unconstitutional and illegal'. The court has ordered compensation to the families of those who were killed in the firing, women who were raped and to all those injured.

Like during the Gujarat riots, when the police and administration actively assisted Hindu thugs carrying out attacks on Muslims, in the case of the March

and November attacks on the people of Nandigram the West Bengal police either joined in or looked on while CPM cadres and hired goons went on a rampage. The media, human rights activists and other independent observers were kept out of Nandigram through well planned and organized road blocks by CPM activists barring all entry points to the area.

CPM leaders, who have vehemently denied any of the atrocities its cadres are accused of in Nandigram as opposition 'propaganda', have not explained why the media—which in fact has been by and large supportive of the Left Front's recent economic policies was not allowed to do its basic job of even observing and reporting what was happening.

Again, as in the case of the Gujarat riots with the BJP, in the case of Nandigram too CPM leaders have shown no remorse at all for the gruesome atrocities perpetrated by their cadres. For example soon after the recent round of violence in Nandigram the West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharya told the press on November 13 that those who suffered were only being 'paid back in their own coin'.

The 'coin' referred to was supposed to be the way, in January this year, several hundred supporters of the CPM in Nandigram were driven out of their homes by anti-land acquisition activists and had to spend the last ten months as refugees in the neighbouring party stronghold of Khejuri.

Despicable as the forced displacement of CPM supporters surely was Buddhadev's claim that CPM cadres were 'morally justified' in taking revenge, while the state administration and police were ordered to stand aside was shocking indeed. It was in no way different from Narendra Modi's infamous statement that the massacre of innocent Muslims by Hindutva mobs in Gujarat, was only a natural 'reaction' to the alleged torching of the Sabarmati Express by Muslim protestors that resulted in the killing of 60 Hindus.

The merger of state and party, the willful violation of constitutional obligations and the active political support for the wanton killing of innocents shows that the rot of authoritarian thinking and approval of fascist methods goes to the highest levels of the CPM's echelons today.

The similarities between the attitudes of Buddhadev and Modi do not stop at their trampling over the Indian Constitution or violating basic notions of justice. Though the scale of violence in Nandigram was much lower than what happened in Gujarat in 2002 the fact is that in qualitative terms it was no different.

A disturbing aspect of the attacks on Nandigram in mid-March and early November by CPM cadres has been the reprehensible abduction and rape of women. A report in the *Indian Express* of November 16 has this to say :

"Perhaps, the comrades should listen to Sabina Begum. For, hers is the first officially confirmed case of gangrape allegedly by armed CPM cadres on November 6, during their "Operation Recapture" in Nandigram.

Her two daughters went missing soon after the gangrape that night. In chilling testimony to *the Indian Express*, Sabina has said that after she was raped, she saw her daughters, Fatima, 16, and Nasreen, 14, raped as well and then abducted by CPM cadres. All the three names have been changed to protect their identities.

This gruesome incident, according to the police complaint, occurred in Satengabari, one of the villages that bore the brunt of the CPM's terror."

Anyone familiar with the details of the Gujarat pogrom, with its systematic rape and humiliation of Muslim women, will shudder at the thought that the cadres of the largest Communist Party in India also behave the same way. Or will the party tell people that their cadres are 'secular' and when it comes to rape, don't discriminate between Muslim and Hindu women?

One of the most serious charges levelled against the police and CPI(M) cadres involved in the 14 March violence in Nandigram too was over widespread rape and sexual abuse of women.

More than 20 depositions from affected villagers in Nandigram before the Tribunal alleged sexual violence. A woman and her married daughter alleged rape, and also named CPM cadres as assailants. The youngest daughter, a minor, was also raped before them. There is another deponent who makes a clear accusation of rape, and 3 other depositions which do not use the term but whose experiences on 14 March clearly point to rape.

Other cases of sexual violence include insertion of rods into the sex organ, and scratching and biting in the breast and pelvic regions. The Report says: "Sexual violence and the threat thereof were used as intimidation by CPM cadres' who are quoted by Nandigram villagers as taunting them with 'Tell your women we are coming'."

Shamefully, no official body, like the West Bengal Commission for Women or even the National Human Rights or Women's Commissions, have so far taken any steps to record and investigate the charges voiced by the sexually abused women from the 14 March violence. Some of these agencies though have been compelled to launch an investigation following widespread reports of similar incidents during the attacks of early November attacks in Nandigram.

The CPM has blamed all the turmoil in Nandigram over the past year on the opposition Trinamul Congress workers who they allege have taken help from the underground Maoist groups to foment violence against their party supporters. Irrespective of the truth in these allegations, the fact is that before the announcement of government plans to forcibly acquire land from farmers for the Special Economic Zone this entire area was a traditional stronghold of the left.

Laxman Seth, member of parliament representing Nandigram, which falls under the Tamluk Lok Sabha constituency belongs to the CPM, Ilyas Mohammad, the member of the legislative assembly is from the Communist Party of India (CPI), a Left Front partner. Besides, 6 out of 7 panchayats that fall within the area were controlled by the CPM. Over the last three decades the people of this area have remained loyal to the ruling Left Front regime, voting repeatedly for their candidates in all elections.

Trouble started only towards the end of 2006 when CPM leaders announced the setting up of the Special Economic Zone in Nandigram and possible acquisition of land without consulting the local folk who naturally got agitated. According to West Bengal police intelligence records the first organized groups to mobilize people against the proposed project, in November last year, was none other than the Communist Party of India (CPI), a close ally of the CPM.

When the CPI cadres quieted down, probably under pressure from their leadership, opposition political groups like the Trinamul Congress, the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI), the Congress, Muslim cultural organizations like

the Jamait-e- Ulema-e-Hind joined hands to capitalize on the discontent among peasants against the land acquisition plans. Most of the people at the local level who joined the movement were in fact long time supporters or even activists of the Left parties. The Maoists, if at all they joined the fray certainly came last and did not have a significant role in the agitation that had already become quite militant by that time.

As Ashok Mitra, a former Finance Minister in the Left Front government and a life long party supporter wrote with much anguish in a recent newspaper article after the latest violent events in Nandigram, “Even the top leaders of the ruling party have been saying there was no existence of the opposition parties in Nandigram. The government itself provided them with the opportunity to grow. The loyal followers of the ruling party declared revolt and those who were not with them were driven out.”

Another area in which the Hindu right wing and the CPM are quite similar to each other is in the complete lack of democracy within their own organizations. While both parties hold regular elections to various posts the settlement of the outcome is done well prior to the actual voting by their party officials- leaving the election as a pretentious lip service to democratic procedure.

There is little debate or discussion and certainly no dissent allowed within the structures of these two parties and the only means by which differences manifest themselves is through factionalism or hasty exit from the party.

Through the process of stifling meaningful debate within their organizations both the BJP and the CPM have ensured their ranks are filled with only the most opportunist or the most ideologically fanatical political forces. Even worse the ranks of both parties, have been filled with criminals who help them intimidate their opponents and capture power, but who have over the course of time climbed the party hierarchy itself.

To quote Ashok Mitra again, “The party has turned into a wide open field of flatterers and court jesters. Moreover, there has been a rising dominance of 'anti-socials'. For different reasons, every political party has to lend patronage to 'anti-socials', they remain in the background and are called into duty at urgent times. In the seventies these anti-socials had reached the top rung of Congress party. I fear same fate is awaiting the communist party.”

In its initial years of coming to power the CPM government promoted the rights of share croppers, carried out land distribution and implemented similar progressive policies. Over the past half decade though- with the rise to power of Buddhadev Bhattacharya- the party’s ardent championing of neo-liberal economic policies have made it almost indistinguishable from the BJP on the economic front too.

Today Buddhadev Bhattacharya and Narendra Modi compete neck-to-neck in most opinion polls carried out by Indian industry as to whom they believe is the ‘best’ Chief Minister in India – a very simple but sure indicator of what their economic policies really represent. □□□