

'Crime & Punishment'

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Data for land relations in Nandigram are hard to come by. However, population data are available from the Census of India, 2001. While almost 46,000 people are agricultural labourers, bargadars, and small or marginal farmers in Nandigram Block I, out of a total population of about 1,74,665, the number of agricultural labourers is a little less than 20,000. Taking 55% of the total population to lie within the age group of 15-59, one can say that 48% of the working population are indigent agriculturists. There are also workers in the garments industry in Metiabruz, Kolkata, commuting between the metropolis and Nandigram. So, most of the people are hardworking and poor. But only 21% of the working population are agricultural labourers, while for West Bengal, as a whole, agricultural workers make up 33% of the main and marginal workers in rural areas.

So, landlessness and rural differentiation is less in Nandigram than elsewhere in West Bengal, with a consequent incidence of lower intra-peasantry tensions and a propensity of united action led by the better-off. However, this hasty conclusion may have to be reversed if the actual land relations speak differently. Also, 60% of the people are Muslims, 30% BC, mainly Namasudras (*India Together*, 29.10.07) (less precisely, it is said that 40% are Dalits, *All India Fact Finding Team*, March, 2007).

That this struggle was so united could further be explained by the threat observed to everybody's land and livelihood *a la* Singur. But, the social backdrop was conducive to unity.

As indicated already, rural unity usually means leadership of the gentry/rich peasants. Nandigram was no exception. However, the leaders, here, had their own electoral agenda.

The issue of land acquisition should have been resolved after the back-out of the government on the chemical hub proposal. That it did not was squarely due to the continuation of tension caused by refusal of the government to compensate the victims of the 14th March or seek out and punish the guilty, as well as the declared intent of the CPI(M) to re-occupy Nandigram with all that this re-occupation would mean. However, when the united resistance forced the government, especially after Khammam, to think aloud about compensation, the leaders could have given a proposal to the people for restoring displaced people on both sides and negotiating peace, from a position of strength, as they are now having to do from a position of weakness. Why did the leaders not do this? Did they dream of carrying on the resistance till the panchayet elections? If they did this, they underestimated the electoral compulsion of the CPI(M). That party could not tolerate a Nandigram defiant right to the panchayet elections, because this would embolden rural Bengal to resist its bullying all over the state. The success of a bully depends to a large extent on a reputation of invincibility.

The leaders of Nandigram, on the other hand, may be thought to have been using the peasants for their own agenda, at least to some extent.

Now, the lack of differentiation referred to above was a coarse phenomenon and, within it there have been repeated glimpses of fine fissures. Before the Bhumi Ucheed Pratirod Committee (BUPC) was formed many village committees had come up. The BUPC ignored these committees and constituted itself with representatives of political parties. Even this BUPC, as reported, has not met since the 14th March leave alone carrying on continuous consultation with the people.

This was the condition when the CPI(M) made its counter-attack on November 6-8, increasing in intensity day to day. The leaders made some attempts to defend Block II, and when they failed, quickly abandoned Block I and negotiated peace, on the ground, including a volte face on the issue of peace-keeping by the police, while the TMC leadership at the state (and national) level, called first for CRPF deployment, and, then, for declaration of Nandigram as a disturbed area with a military presence. This was an unfortunate stand, with less than adequate concern for the people who would face the terrible 'pacification' programme of these agencies. In fact, the stance of the leaders that the CPI(M) would be repulsed by the force of arms in frontal combat was never a viable one, and crumbling of this stance in the face of superior force was bound to occur one day. The leaders were less than responsible in maintaining a hollow belligerence which must have misled their followers, where the sagacious course would have been to consolidate the gains of the struggle to save the land from the chemical hub chimera.

The buckling of the leaders gave the CPI(M) its electoral desideratum – 'no-one can defy us, so, beware', and left the people naked before the vengeance of the Seths and Konars. Of course, the oppressor never wins in the long haul. That is the lesson of history, and the lion-hearted people of Nandigram will fight to win another day, in their own way, and, may be with leaders with the same interests as themselves. In the mean-time, as the CPI(M) relentlessly pursues its occupation, a desperate resistance does continue. Even today, according to unsupported news leaking out through the blockade, 20-30 thousand people are marching against the occupiers of their land, and Harnad bullets are finding their targets. In this terrible situation, whatever be the differences with the erstwhile leaders, it is not the time to turn away from any political force. The force amassed by the CPI(M), backed by the might of the state, requires a united opposition of all who oppose the occupation, whatever be their motivation for doing so.

Another dimension of the problem has uncovered itself. According to the *Indian Express* of 3.11.07, 'Biplabi Yug', a Maoist paper, has claimed Maoist presence in Block I. 'The Economic Times' of 7.11.07, reports a similar claim. The CPI(M) has immediately taken the position that a Maoist presence justifies all repressive measures, although, technically, the Maoist party is not banned in this state. If the stories of such a presence are true, then, too, the CPI(M) has only itself to blame for creating such a terror that Maoists are welcomed.

Also, a low key presence must, then, have been there for some time, and the BUPC must have taken help from them whatever disclaimer they may now advance. The Maoists could not have dropped suddenly from the sky. Their high key emergence, if a fact, raises the question as to what is their programme here.

As people saw, class conflict is not likely to be intense. Will the Maoists be content, at this moment, to help in the resistance to CPI(M) terror and other immediate issues with the aim of a dignified and equitable peace, or, will they attempt to pursue a protracted policy of gaining political power locally and promoting a guerrilla zone in this area of one thana so completely surrounded by hostile CPI(M) bases? These are questions the people will raise in Nandigram.□