

"Where Is Nandigram Going?"

Bibekananda Ray

So, it was the third State terrorism on the hap-less people of Nandigram in less than a year. On 3rd January and 14th March, last year, it was perpetrated on the people of block-I but from 5th November, it was extended to half a dozen villages of block-II also and climaxed on 9th and 10th November. The Chief Minister told the media on 13th November'07 that 'our men', i.e., cadres etc. of the CPI(M), retaliated against 'them', i.e., the activists of the *Bhumi Uchhed Pratirodh Committee* (BUPC) and the *Trinamul Congress* (TMC) and that 'they' were "paid back in their own coins (sic)". It is a pity that a Chief Minister should make such a division of people on party basis.

There was also an element of propaganda in his admission. The villagers of block-I, who united to repulse imminent acquisition of their land, never took and wielded arms; their leaders did to resist and retaliate against attacks by local CPM activists and cadres. On 3rd January, 2007 women of three villages in block-I did come out with brooms, kitchen knives and men with sickles and sticks but on 14th March, they were completely unarmed. Villagers united after 3rd January when they came to know of the notice for land acquisition, issued by the Haldia Development Authority, headed by the local CPI(M) MP Lakshman Seth. Gradually, a number of absolutely non-political anti-acquisition groups were formed but only the *Bhumi Uchhed Pratirodh Committee* gathered strength and much later, allied with the TMC because of identical aims. After the formal declaration by the Chief Minister a week after 14th March pogrom that no land would be acquired in Nandigram for industrial purposes (although he made the same promise to a TV channel around 4th March), the BUPC should have disbanded. It did not, because Mr Seth in several public meetings outside Nandigram went on repeating that farmland would indeed be acquired in Nandigram after the agitations subsided. In distrust of the Chief Minister's promise and because of Mr Seth's contrary declarations, the BUPC did not wind up but gathered strength, day by day, with villagers coming under its banner to protect their lives and property. They cut and blocked roads, damaged bridges and culverts and later amassed arms not so much to hinder the police from entering the area as to debar the armed cadres and later the *harmads* (origin : Portuguese Militia) of the CPI(M), coming on motorbikes to torture them.

In nine months, last year, from January to November members of both the BUPC and the CPI(M) did procure and manufacture firearms, bombs and grenades. In fact, as during Naxalite disturbances in Kolkata in early 1970s, bomb-making became a cottage industry in Nandigram block-I and Khejuri villages. Firearms came from various other sources too; the BUPC procured them from Kolkata through their local supporters, living and working in Kolkata and the *Harmads* and CPI CM) toughs from smugglers and the police whose fired bullets and teargas shells were recovered from the conflict area. After the 14th March 'Operation Nandigram' skirmishes with bullets and bombs continued between them with, occasionally, small tolls of dead and wounded. As the two communist parties became unpopular and the BUPC got people's support, some CPI(M) leaders and cadres fled homes with their families, fearing persecution by

the BUPC activists who killed a few of them in retaliation of their torture of non-CPI(M) villagers. Thousands of outraged villagers who came under the protection of the BUPC, isolated CPI(M) and CPI families, fearing further bids of acquisition and when they fled homes, resolved not to let some *three dozen* notorious among them return. After the threats of reprisal by the CPI(M) peasants' leader, Benoy Konar and Mr Seth, not only the cadres began to arm to their teeth but the party reportedly hired professional killers and dacoits from its stronghold areas like Garbeta, Pataspur, Bhaja Cbauli and Keshpur etc. too on hefty fees. Some of them, captured from Janani brick-kiln in Khejuri confessed this to CBI officials. It is strange that the Chief Minister, or any other top leader of the party, from Jyoti Basu to Benoy Konar- never mentioned, or admitted, the presence of these killers in Nandigram. When the Chief Minister told newsmen that his men retaliated on 9th and 10th November '07, he meant these harmads. The local CPI(M) toughs, howsoever combative, could not have achieved what the killers did on that day. That they actually did this has been proved by capture of 13 of them on 10-11 November midnight by TMC supporters, led by local MLA, Sisir Adhikari in Egra and their admission in Contai SDJM court on 12th. Among them were two long-absconding accused of Chhoto Angaria killings—Sukur Ali and Tapan Ghosh of Garbeta, whom the CBI was looking for. The explanation by the CITU leader, Shyamal Chakravorti that they were not involved in Nandigram 'recapture' but were returning after holidaying in Digha is a plain lie.

FOUR DISHONEST MOVES

The Chief Minister told the media that he approved of this 'just' retaliation. This means, he knew of it beforehand and even approved, the four dishonest moves that facilitated the heavily-armed killers and CPI(M) toughs storm from Khejuri into block-I villages and open random fire on a long peaceful procession on the 10th November. These were (a) withdrawal of police from the camps in Khejuri, (b) keeping Nandigram out of bound for media personnel, social activists and even para-medical staff (of the SSKM hospital in Kolkata, who wanted to visit the affected areas to treat the wounded), (c) deferring the arrival and deployment of five CRPF companies in Nandigram by two days and (d) abducting some men, women and girls (at least two of whom were raped), the previous day, to form a human shield, behind which the column of Harmads and party's rowdies marched and sprayed bombs and bullets on the procession. All these moves paid off and inevitably, and a yet unknown number of people of four villages—Gokulnagar, Adhikari-para, Kamalpur and Sonachura—fell to their rain of arsenal.

For some days before the savage, recapture on 9th and 10th November, a 24-hour TV channel, launched, and funded allegedly by the CPI(M), was harping on the presence of Maoists. It showed an unexploded land mine in a block-II village and movement of apparent Maoists. Asked on 13th November, the State Home Secretary said, he had no reports of Maoist presence. Next day, he made a U-turn and said that the State and Central government were certain of the channel showed visuals of mines and Maoist movements from its file footages, shot in jungles of Jharkhand and even the route that Maoists took to reach Nandigram. There is no jungle or forest in two Nandigram blocks, where Maoists prefer to live, to avoid the police. No Maoist has ever been seen, or captured in Nandigram,

before 9th November. The mine found in Sonachura beside a pond on 13th November could have been planted by the *Harmads* to kill villagers. If Maoists had indeed infiltrated Nandigram, they had their own missions to carry out, certainly not those of the TMC. If somebody fishes in troubled water, the fishes are not to blame. As the CPI(ML) leader Kanu Sanyal said, the CPI(M) cadres and the *Harmads* were no less than Maoists in brutality on these two days. The channel has become so pro-government that it did not interview a single BUPC, or TMC leader, on the 9th and 10th November recapture.

It is still not clear, how many were killed or wounded from 5th to 10th November, because Nandigram was out of bound for the media, the State police and social activists for these six days. Eye-witnesses are still too scared to open their mouths, fearing CPI(M) reprisal. It is only when a neutral count is made of the missing from the processions and the neighbourhood on that day that an accurate toll will be known; meanwhile, the official toll of two is ludicrously low. Only time will tell, to what extent the Chief Minister and his party achieved their objectives, because violence can never be ended by violence. The Calcutta High Court which heard a PIL on 13th November has asked the government to restore law and order, send and facilitate movement of relief etc. until the next hearing but only a CBI probe into the killing orgies on 10th November can reveal their actual extent. The Kolkata High Court has directed the CBI to make a fuller probe into the police operation of 14th March but a CBI probe into 10th November mayhem is yet to be ordered- The Kolkata High Court has asked for an affidavit from the State government on the happenings of 5th to 10th November in eight weeks time, i.e., by 7th March '08.

It is curious that during and before this violent recapture of Nandigram, no senior Congress leader opened his or her mouth. P R Dasmunshi opposed deployment of the CRPF but was not seen or heard when jawans entered. Media reported the Prime Minister's concern and anxiety from Moscow but he was not seen doing so on any TV channel. Sonia Gandhi was neither seen nor heard on the media; Pranab Mukherjee remained discreetly silent. Another curious development is sudden mellowing of Marxists' stand on the US-India civil nuclear deal and permitting the UPA government to open negotiations with IAEA, to which they were stubborn before Nandigram recapture. Could it be a *quid pro quo* for the UPA's virtual inaction during the State terrorism on Nandigram on 3rd and 14th March as well as from 5th to 10th November?

Within five days of this recapture, on 14 November, the Chief Minister announced grant of one crore rupees from his Relief Fund and ten thousand and five thousand rupees ex-gratia for rebuilding and repair of damaged houses, respectively. State relief is pouring in but reaching only to the families of CPI(M) leaders and supporters who had returned home. Will this State relief eventually be given to thousands of families of TMC supporters in block-I and block-II whose houses were demolished and torched by the *Harmads* until the first week of this month, over a thousand of whom are still living in miserable condition in BMT HS School in Nandigram town? It took the government eight months to announce compensation to the families of the killed on 14th March but only five days to announce a much bigger relief for the affected and the homeless families loyal to his party.

After the 14th March mayhem, a cobweb of lies and propaganda is being woven around 9th and 10th November recapture, in familiar Marxist style. One of these is the reason for retaliation stated by the Chief Minister. Not a few thousand but only less than 500 CPI(M) families remained in Khejuri relief camps; others had returned, meanwhile. The actual reason, as the Governor correctly found, was the recapture of the political ground lost after 3rd January and 14th March operations. Whether it has been achieved or not, only the next poll, Panchayet or Assembly, will tell. The timing of the recapture, allegedly planned by Lakshman Seth, had another objective. It is widely believed, if a mid-term poll for Lok Sabha is held in the event of the UPA government falling by withdrawal of Marxists' support, Mr Seth will not be re-elected from Tamluk. The CPI(M) State Secretary, Biman Bose alleged that the Governor's press release on 10th, castigating the recapture as 'unlawful and unacceptable' and Politburo member, Sitaram Yechuri's accusation that the Union Minister, P R Dasmunshi's opposition to deployment of the CRPF could ignite further trouble in Nandigram were ludicrous and ironical. They overlook the real ignition switches put on by Mr Seth, Benoy Konar and Brinda Karat who in ugly words warned of retaliation by their party activists and *Harmads* against the TMC and the BUPC which the Chief Minister now admits and justifies. The pity is, an elected government, claiming to be democratic, is pursuing such a divisive policy, pushing the State to the brink of a civil war.

After the CRPF moved in on 12th November, a semblance of peace has returned. Nearly all CPI(M) supporter families who left home and lived in the party's camps in Khejuri, have returned and are receiving liberal relief and protection from the government. The BUPC leaders, who went underground from 5th November to escape the killers, are coming on ground and giving to the media the inside story.

The lesson that one can draw from this bloody recapture and the Chief Minister's defence is that the end justifies the means. Cine actor, Soumitra Chatterjee who is on the government's side on Nandigram issue, said on the media that he found nothing wrong if people returned to their homes after 11 months, even if by 'deceit, force and trickery", i.e., he would support them if they returned after hired killers gunned down a few hundred to facilitate their return.

Hypocrisy is always the hallmark of Marxists! Lastly, this historic savagery would not have occurred if Mr Seth did not circulate the acquisition notice in November 2006, which was the spark to this yearlong conflagration.

Every conscientious person should now ask this question : "Where is Nandigram going?" A semblance of peace has returned in the troubled areas. Ample private and international succour is reaching the affected who will take time to come out of the trauma and resume normal life. The local economy has been shattered and will return to its groove, gradually. The farming families will resume cultivation but an indelible scar will remain in their psyche which will never be healed. □