

NANDIGRAM—A BIRD'S EYE-VIEW

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It is now more than one year since Nandigram witnessed the first outburst of popular anger in January 2007. This period has been one of conflict between destruction and annihilation on one side, and protest and resistance on the other, the like of which is very few in post-independence West Bengal. In fact it is the people of Nandigram who could have produced the best report of this episode, if they had the opportunity to do so.

The term 'opportunity' is very important because it largely acts upon the movements of the society, economy and polity. The relation between opportunity and class status is very close. The powerful not only enjoys the privileges handed over to them by their predecessors, they also appropriate the opportunities created by the collective efforts of the weak. This point is important in understanding the course of events in Nandigram.

The events of Nandigram can be divided into three phases, preparation, resistance and retreat. In the various reports and commentaries that have appeared for months, the phase of preparation has not received its due attention. The work done during the preparatory phase of the movement is very much instructive to mass movement and mass politics in general. In the preparatory phase, door-to-door investigations were carried out followed by village level meetings and discussions, and formation of village committees. From direct experience, this correspondent can assert that instances of such an application of democratic politics are not too many in the recent political history of West Bengal. In every meeting, women and men participated in large numbers and voiced their opinions. Women were represented widely on every village committees. At every step of the movement these village committee took the decision. This was perhaps for the first time that the people of Nandigram too developed a form of real decentralization and implemented it with all sincerity. The strength of the movement lay in the democratic root of this preparatory phase. The weaknesses of the movement that were revealed subsequently attributable as much to the attacks by the police and the CPI(M) as to the erosion of the strength of this democratic root. It can be argued that the democratic unity formed during the preparatory phase was not entirely unassailable. Some undemocratic trends were there, and they could not be wholly eliminated. Yet it cannot be gainsaid that during the initial preparatory phase, there was a big assertion of democratic norms, and it might be that this covered up the weaknesses. The wave of the movement created a spontaneity that deprived the necessity of theoretical appraisal of its due attention.

The democratic unity formed during the preparatory phase enabled the people to resist the police and the CPI(M) with success in early January, 2007. Till that barbaric episode of 14 March, 2007, which drew nationwide condemnation and exposed the patently fascist character of the CPI(M), this root was continuously strengthened. The people, cutting across all barriers of caste and religion came forward with a specific objective and without any political banner. In fact, it was

this unity that was dreaded by the CPI(M), which wanted the movement to be confined within the limits of a particular political identity and to be dominated by undemocratic elements, because that would make it easy for the CPI(M) to crush it. Till 14 March 2007, the CPI(M) failed to achieve this target, and on the other hand, sectarian organizations like the Trinamul Congress could not dominate the movement despite their relentless efforts. What was formed was a real popular front. The strength gathered by this front was enough to campaign within two days of the massacre of 14 March and to set at naught the might of the CPI(M) and the police. This created consternation not only in the CPI(M) but also among the opportunist power-hungry politicians of all hues. Here it should be said that this popular front contained many different party elements, which had lain low during the initial phase of the movement because the wave of struggle had overshadowed political sectarianism. But these elements later reared their heads, and they could not be effectively resisted. For power hungry politicians, what was most dangerous was the independent popular strength that created for the people themselves the condition for some sort of self-rule. For the politics of the power-hungry politicians, nothing mattered except vote and hence they are prone to negate the role of the people in the process of decision-making in every sphere of the society. The terror produced in the minds of the politicians created a *de facto* informal alliance. Although this anti-people initiative was first taken by the CPI(M), an initiative that made armed resistance inevitable, it was strengthened by the activities of the Trinamul Congress and many others. They blocked the mass initiative in the struggle of resistance and forcibly transformed it to be dictated by some heroes. It can be argued in passing that whatever the talks about decentralization of power through the *panchayets* people have virtually been robbed of the opportunity to decide matters for them. This politics of deprivation has been practised not only by the CPI(M), but also by the parties like the Trinamul Congress. What, was repugnant to these parties was to allow the people to be carefully preplanned to divide the people by the wall of guns and bombs.

This clever tactic succeeded in the sense that in the wake of the successful resistance of 16 March, one kind of weakness arising from the gradual contraction of the atmosphere of democracy came to plague the movement. There was continuous bullet throwing from the side of the neighbouring Khejuri block, and on the part of the other side of the battle, replying bullets with bullets came to be the principal practice. The upshot was that the leadership of the resistance struggle became concentrated in the hands of some who had guns and bullets at their disposal. Aims and ammunitions may be necessary to resist the onslaught of the enemy, but if some persons gain special status because they possess firearms, they can usurp the power of decision-making and stifle the initiative of the people. In Nandigram, this led to a series of wrong steps that in the final analysis went to strengthen the hand of the CPI(M).

Forcing, in a manner characteristic of the CPI(M), the people to join processions and to enter new areas by the force of arms were two of these steps. The village committees that had been instrumental in mobilizing the people for struggle gradually became non-entities. It should be pointed out that most of the CPI(M) supporters who fled their homes were from the new areas. In many cases, the new masters of the Bhoomi Uchhed Pratirodh Committee tortured the people

in a more or less CPI(M) manner. There was no knowing why these new masters decided to storm these areas; and the general people who had participated in the resistance movement, were kept in the dark. Had the opinion of the people been given its due weight, the decisions could well have been different and many new CPI(M) supporters could have been rallied to the cause of the resistance struggle. The process had been in operation in the beginning but it was terminated for the sake of party interests. This led to a gradual eclipse of spontaneous popular initiative, and the CPI (M) had been lying in wait for it. It is worth noting that as long as active popular participation was visible, the CPI(M) refrained from entering the area. They waited for the weakening of the movement, and struck with their private army when the hour seemed opportune. Should it then be concluded that the people of Nandigram have been defeated. The answer is, 'No'. It is a struggle of a new type, a new experience in the practice of democracy. The people in general continue to nurse a strong sense of opposition to the CPI(M), and at the same time, they are expressing their resentment at the use of the movement for sectarian party interests. Yet they feel some sort of helplessness, which can be overcome only by reviving the popular front and popular initiative. Nandigram is slowly and steadily moving in that direction by drawing lessons acquired from the experiences. □

[The correspondent is one of the organizers of the resistance movement in Nandigram against the forcible acquisition of land]