

The Nayachar Nightmare

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THE CREED OF ANY LEFTist party is 'Anti-Establishment'. On assuming the powers of governance, it gradually loses its heart and soul! This tenet has been proven across the global spectrum. Falling into the deadly trap set by USA led league of exploiting nations, most of the socialist republics, notably USSR, got mired in affluence-bred corruption—to lose its Leftist identity. In fact, these are now involved in deadly factional wars. Infested with vice dens, China exists, merely as a commercial partner of the Western nations! Nurtured by the Castro brothers Cuba alone has preserved its socialist identity, despite US imperialist assaults!

The immortal diktats of Frederick Engel's in 'Dialectics of Nature' in 1925 that Nature which will strike back if Man transgresses its laws, have been conveniently forgotten by leftist parties in power. In fact, the collapse of mighty USSR was also partly triggered by its wanton violation of natural laws! The CPI(M) dominated Left Front in power in the Indian State of West Bengal since 1977, has mutated into an autocratic regime! Most dangerously, the Front has thrown the Man-Nature empathy of Engels to the winds, as repeated actions have shown!

The NAYACHAR misadventure launched by the CPM-led Left Front provides a superb example. Ever since it was mooted, the selection of this alternative island site has been a subject of controversy in view of its natural and environmental ambience. This small and flat island—made up of unconsolidated alluvial material—rose just three metres above the sea in the early nineteen thirties. Located near the confluence of the Haldi river and the Bay, it is virtually within the offshore zone. Drilling has revealed that unconsolidated material exists down to 30 metres below mean sea level. After intensive scientific investigations Geological Survey of India declared Nayachar to be the utterly unsuitable a location. Any industrial infrastructure will require substantial land raising and consolidation by dumping colossal quantities of imported material to tackle the load of industrial installations and infrastructure - consequent collapse (or implosion) within the foreseeable future is inevitable.

Firstly, the island can provide no safe haven for the hazardous wastes – carcinogenic, mutagenic and toxic - generated from such a hub. Inexorably dumped into the sea, it will wreak havoc on the offshore marine life and planktons. Most ominously, the seasonal offshore currents will transport the pollutants along the coast into the Sunderbans delta, with tidal currents pushing them inland through the massive Indo-Bangladesh Sundarbans deltaic network. Secondly, the processes of natural erosion shall act as an aggravator.

Thirdly, the greatest threat relates to global warming, with the Sundarbans deltaic and Kolkata metropolitan area already marked by the Inter-Governmental Panel for Climate Change(IPCC) as one of the global regions facing imminent threat. While monitoring the zone, some Jadavpur University researchers—while monitoring global warming—recorded the submergence of islands close to Nayachar, including Lohacchhara, Suparibhaga, Kapasgadi and Bedford, even during the winter months. The rapid melting of Himalayan glaciers that is well underway, will hasten the eclipse of this island. Yet the

report by the “hand-picked” Jadavpur University academics accepted by the State and forwarded to the Centre formed the basis for the chemical hub clearance.

Fourthly, Jurong Consultants (linked to Indonesia’s Salim Group) has endorsed the Nayachar location, citing comparable examples of islands off Singapore. Those islands, however, form part of the Himalayan arc itself, while Nayachar is an end-product of eroded Himalayan material—the sediments being transported over thousands of millennia—forming one of the thickest alluvial basins on earth. Singapore has no such vulnerable alluvial basin or river network that can pollute vast tracts.

This fully government owned char island, was handed over to the State Fisheries Department about thirty years ago. Several fishing cooperatives were formed, with more than three hundred ponds leased out to local fishermen and small ferry commuting Haldia based entrepreneurs. A few hundred squatter-families do eke out a meagre livelihood as labourers in the ponds for fishing. The state government should organise and support fisheries to be developed and run by local dwellers. Obviously, with moderate investment, losses will be minimum compared to industrial development even if the island is submerged after a few decades. This would be an optimum utilisation package for such a chunk of ephemeral land. Andhra Pradesh and other states are satisfying the huge demands of a fish-hungry West Bengal. The east Kolkata wetlands fisheries have been decimated by planned and relentless state sponsored urbanisation to pamper major realtors. Thereby, Nayachar may provide a minuscule example to emulate in such a warped development scenario. The Government admits that West Bengal has started facing shortfalls in food production—and fish is a major nourishing food item.

If launched, Nayachar shall be another decisive and irreversible step in the Government’s mission to devastate the invaluable natural resources. Yet, the government is hell bent on transforming the state into an environmental inferno basically for the benefit of a small affluent urban minority. Instead, by forsaking the globalisation highway, it could choose the country roads of a resurgence that would include small agro-based industries. This would be sustainable and endow benefits on the overwhelming rural majority.

Despite major political differences, both the Central and State Governments seem to be hand in gloves for launching this project to pursue the goals of a malignant paradigm of inequitable and unsustainable development for the benefit of urban affluent classes; which remain cloistered in the nooks with the false security of unsustainable and extravagant consumerism. The process has been ever widening the gap between the Urban Diaspora and the hundreds of millions of rural dwellers! □