

Singur, Kharagpur and Bengal Politicians

Abhijit Guha

Worse things had happened in Kharagpur during the early 1990s, a few years before the declaration of the New Industrial Policy (NEP) by the Left Front government in 1994. Kolkata-based scientists and intellectuals who have become vocal (and it is definitely a healthy sign for democracy), against the acquisition of fertile agricultural land for Tata Motors at Singur, did not pay any heed to the dispossession of thousands of small and marginal farmers and bargadars (including tribals) for the pig-iron companies of the Tatas and Birlas at Kharagpur in the West Midnapore district of West Bengal. The Opposition parties, too, were silent. No Opposition leader was found to storm the Assembly on the acquisition of farmland for private companies at Kharagpur. (Guha 2007)

The reasons behind the silence of Kolkata-based intellectuals and the Opposition parties over the land acquisition for the Tatas and Birlas by the CPM-led Left Front government at Kharagpur in the early 1990s are more than one.

First, anti-Left Front political parties and human rights groups were not much interested in the land acquisition issue during that period when the Left Front-driven industrialisation was at its nascent stage, with promises of huge industrial investments by private companies in the state. Second, though the farmlands acquired in Kharagpur provided food security to vegetable growers of Gokulpur (it is also the name of a railway station between Kharagpur and Midnapore) and the adjoining villages, they were monocrop (*jal soem* in the departmental classification) in nature. One still finds among those who are opposed to the acquisition of multicrop farmlands a notion that supports the acquisition of monocrop farmland. There is hardly anyone in the anti-Left Front lobby who is demanding the upgradation of monocrop land into multicrop ones, which is the government policy.

The land acquisition scenario in Kharagpur was far worse than that of Singur and the argument is based on government records and field research done over six years by the author of this article.

DISMAL FACTS

According to information revealed through the print media, a total of 997 acres of agricultural land have been acquired for the Tatas' small car factory at Singur and it took eight months for the West Bengal government to do it by bureaucratic machinery. The compensation rate, according to government sources, turned out to be a little more than Rs 7 lakh per acre (*The Statesman*, 14 December 2006). And in 1992, a pig-iron manufacturing plant named 'Tata Metaliks' was set up by the Tatas on the monocrop land of six mouzas under Kharagpur I block of the erstwhile Midnapore district, though non-arable land was available in the vicinity, having communication and other facilities. A total of 217.23 acres was acquired by the state government and the acquisition was complete within a year through the application of the more coercive West Bengal Land (Requisition and Acquisition) Act, 1948 which became defunct after 31 March, 1993. The compensation paid by the district land acquisition department was Rs 20,686 an acre for a landowner, while for a recorded bargadar, it was Rs 11,211.75 an acre.

On 1 June, 1992 in the West Bengal Assembly, Mr Manas Bhunia of the Congress wanted to know about the land acquisition for the establishment of the pig-iron industry by the Tatas at Kharagpur.

The land and land reforms minister in his reply informed about the amount of land given to the company and the rates of compensation. No question was asked about the rehabilitation of the displaced peasants by any member of the Assembly (West Bengal Assembly Proceedings Vol 99; 1992). An unpublished report of the Midnapore land acquisition department dated 27-3-92 revealed that the lack of irrigation facilities and the monocrop nature of the acquired land led to the calculation of its market price at such a low rate.

The department, too, did not explore the possibilities of rehabilitation of the affected families in terms of providing permanent jobs and/or land as compensation. The administration seemed to be concerned only with monetary compensation at the market price prevalent in the area. Three years later, people of the same area were served with notices by the district administration for the acquisition of their farmland in 10 mouzas covering about 525 acres for another pig-iron plant named Century Textiles and Industrial Limited (CTIL) owned by the Birlas.

The local people, being totally disillusioned and frustrated with the government's attitude towards rehabilitation and compensation in the Tata Metaliks case, began to protest against this decision of acquisition.

This time, the land acquisition department prepared rates of compensation, which ranged between Rs 50,000 and Rs 1,00,000 an acre and Rs 7,000 an acre for the bargadars. The farmers objected to these rates and mass deputations to the district authorities began, and on 10 January, 1996, the peasants prevented soil testing by the company and blocked the National Highway 6 for eight hours. The farmers' agitation continued for about five months and they also boycotted the parliamentary election in May, 1996.

The land acquisition episode for CTIL, however, took a horrible turn within a few years. After taking possession of 358.25 acres by April 1997 and fencing the land, the company decided not to deposit any money for payment of compensation. The company's managing director, Mr BK Birla, in an interview with the correspondent of *The Statesman*, said they would not proceed with the project since "the national market of pig-iron has become very competitive because of the entry of China and Australia in the field". The then state land and land reforms minister, Mr Surya Kanta Mishra, on the other hand told *The Statesman* : "We are not finding any takers for the land" (*The Statesman*, 18 November, 1999).

This huge chunk of fertile agricultural land, which provided subsistence to nearly 3,000 families, remained unutilized till 2003 after which some portion of it was given to a private company but the larger area still remains unutilized.

Kharagpur and Singur like incidents are not isolated ones; they will happen again. In West Bengal state of India which championed distribution of land to the landless, the acquisition of fertile land for private companies needs to be accompanied by a comprehensive rehabilitation law. The responsibility of the elected people's representatives should not be underestimated in this regard.

ASSEMBLY PROCEEDINGS

No systematic and comprehensive work on land acquisition in West Bengal exist till today. There is no baseline empirical survey on the nature and extent of land acquired in West Bengal for various development projects, nor is there any research on the specific problems of application of the Central and State Acts regarding land acquisition in West Bengal. Recently, Walter Fernandes and his team have undertaken a comprehensive macro-level empirical survey (sponsored by the Ministry of Rural Areas and Employment, Govt. of India and North-Eastern Social Research Council, a research oriented NGO) on the nature and extent of development induced displacement and rehabilitation in the then 16 districts of West Bengal for the period 1951-1995. Being one of the research supervisors in the aforesaid research project for the South Bengal districts (erstwhile Midnapore, Bankura, Purulia and Hughly), it is within the knowledge of the present author that the results of this survey may be published in future.

Since Independence, besides the colonial Land Acquisition Act of 1894, there existed another State Act entitled West Bengal Land (Requisition and Acquisition) Act, 1948. The latter Act is no more applicable in West Bengal since 31 March 1993 by a decision of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly. In fact, when this particular piece of legislation was first enacted in the State Assembly it was stipulated that the Act has to be renewed in the Assembly by a majority decision every five years since this is a very powerful and coercive law. The Government opinion was that the State of West Bengal, which had to receive millions of refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan just after Independence, needed huge amount of land for various developmental purposes. For this reason, the Government was in need of an Act, which was more powerful than the colonial Act in acquiring land from the private owners. By West Bengal Land (Requisition and Acquisition) Act the Government could first requisition a particular piece of land for which the payment of compensation may not be made before acquisition while in the earlier LA Act of 1894 the Government could not take possession of any land without payment of compensation. In the absence of any district by district published records on the amount of land acquired by West Bengal Government by the two Land Acquisition Acts it is not possible to make any assessment of the policy directions of the State Government in acquiring land by these two Acts which vary in their basic approach towards the payment of compensation to the project affected people. But the long period (1948 -1993), that is approximately 45 years, during which the West Bengal Government has kept this powerful Act alive is itself an evidence of its frequent application. In terms of political composition, it should be noted that during this long period both Congress and Left ruled Governments, who were in power, continuously renewed the Requisition and Acquisition Act of 1948 in the State Assembly.

For the present research, a good deal of information has been collected on the attitudes of the different Governments as well as the elected members of State Legislative Assembly from 1956 to 1994 belonging to various political parties of West Bengal by studying the published volumes of Assembly proceedings.

The debates and questions raised in the West Bengal Assembly in relation to land acquisition can be broadly classified into two sections, viz. (i) questions raised by the members on problems arising out of land acquisition in specific areas of West Bengal and the replies given by the concerned ministers and (ii) the

debates which took place at the time of placing the West Bengal Land (Requisition and Acquisition) Act, 1948 in the Assembly for its renewal. The debates, as discussed below, reflect the stance of those involved in the decision making process towards the problem at the highest political level in a democratic system.

Since the promulgation of the 1948 Act on land acquisition (popularly known in administrative circles as Act-II while the colonial one as Act-I), debates and discussion on this legislation took place in the Assembly a number of times for amendments. In order to make amendments in the Act, it was placed in the form of a bill and after the debate the bill with the necessary changes and approval of the Assembly was sent to the President of India for his assent. From the records kept in the Assembly Library it has been found that the Act was placed 17 times in the house and got the assent of the President well within a period of 2 months. Another important fact in this regard is that voting on the amendment of the Act had taken place only twice-once when the Congress party was in power (on 20 February, 1973) and at another time when the left parties were in the Government (on 28 March 1967). On both the occasions, the parties which were in power won by a majority vote (Assembly Proceedings Vol. 54; 1973 and Vol. XLIV; 1967).

With this general background, the salient points which were raised in the debates at the time of placing the bill in some of the sessions have been described below :

THE YEAR 1956

The Minister Mr Sankar Prasad Mitra (Congress Party), who was in charge of Land and Land Revenue as well as Judicial and Legislative Departments, placed the West Bengal (Requisition and Acquisition) Amendment Bill [hereafter W.B. (Req. and Acq.)], 1956 in the 15th session of the Assembly on 12 July, 1956. The Minister reported that large scale acquisition of land was going on in Burdwan district for dam building by the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC) and a total of 12,449.44 acres of land had been acquired through Act-II.

The Minister also stated that most of the areas in Burdwan district contained underground mines and minerals and the acquisition of these entailed heavy amount of compensation. Accordingly, in the bill it was proposed that the Government might in appropriate cases exclude mines and minerals from acquisition.

The bill with necessary changes was then passed without any debate (Assembly Proceedings Vol.XV 1956).

THE YEAR 1957

The Minister Mr Bimal Chandra Sinha, who was in charge of the Land and Land Revenue Department, placed the W.B. (Req. and Acq.) Act, 1948 for its continuance on 3 July, 1957 in the 17th session of the Assembly. A debate followed wherein one member, Mr Basanta Kumar Panda of the Socialist Party (SP) said that this Act was no more required. Mr Subodh Banerjee of the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI) expressed his anxiety over the passing of this bill. He apprehended that poor slum dwellers of Calcutta might be evicted by this Act. Mr Banerjee also stated that for the development of the rural areas of the State there are other legislations which could be employed by the Government. A

member of the Communist Party of India (undivided CPI), Mr Hare-krishna Konar, who joined the Communist Party of India (Marxist) after the division of the CPI in 1964 and became the Land and Land Reforms Minister in 1967, when the left parties came to power in West Bengal for the first time, delivered a long speech. In his speech Mr Konar opposed the bill by saying that the Government should not pauperize lakhs of people in the name of development. He cited examples where the Government had used bulldozers over the standing crops of the farmers and made big holes on the fields by the side of Khonnen railway station in Burdwan, as a result of which the farmers could not cultivate in those lands. Mr Konar raised another point in which he said that the acquisition of the same amount of agricultural land from a rich and poor farmer had different implications; land acquisition always hit the poor farmer more severely than the rich (Assembly Proceedings Vol. XVII, 1957). The bill, however, was passed in the Assembly without any voting.

THE YEAR 1963

The Minister Mr Shymadas Bhatta-charya of the Congress party, who was in charge of the Land and Land Revenue Department, placed the WB Land Acquisition (Amendment) Bill, 1963 in the 36th session of the Assembly on 19 August 1963 for discussion among the members. This bill was placed to amend the Land Acquisition Act 1894 for introducing a legal right for the sharecroppers (*bargadar*) to receive compensation for the acquisition of the land on which they had no ownership right. This bill can be called a landmark in the history of the amendments in Land Acquisition Act of India. In no state in India other than West Bengal an amendment like this had yet been introduced.

When the debate on this bill started one member, Mr Sanat Kumar Raha of the CPI argued painstakingly for raising the rate of compensation for the *bargadars* from three times to five times so that the *bargadar* could purchase some land of his own and rehabilitate himself. He also pointed out that there must be an arrangement for spot enquiry whenever there would be a dispute with regard to the identification of a *bargadar*. The Minister, however, did not agree with Mr Raha's proposal for a higher rate of compensation to the *bargadar* and succinctly replied by saying that he had listened to many speeches in the Assembly, but to his knowledge no member had yet tried to explain why there was no provision for paying compensation to the sharecroppers in the Land Acquisition Act of 1894. He further commented it would not be true to say that his Government had not done anything for the *bargadars*; earlier they did not get any compensation whatsoever (Assembly Proceedings Vol. XXXVI, 1963). The amendment was passed without any voting.

THE YEAR 1967

The Minister in charge of the Land and Land Revenue Department, Mr Harekrishna Konar of the CPI(M) placed the WB (Req. and Acq.) Amendment Bill for extending its tenure in the 44th session of the Assembly on 28 March 1967. During the debate, Mr Siddhartha Sankar Ray of the Congress Party who became Chief Minister of West Bengal later, strongly opposed the bill on legal grounds by saying that in many cases regarding land acquisition in West Bengal the High Court had passed judgements against this Act. He used a Bengali word in a sentence in English to give an added emphasis. To quote Mr Ray : "This Act

is an oppressive and *jabardast* (Bengali word meaning 'overbearing') piece of legislation. He also pointed out the arbitrary nature of the phrase "public purpose" in the Land Acquisition Act. After the speech of Mr Ray noise and shouting among the members supporting and opposing the bill started and ultimately voting had to be organised by the Speaker. The bill was passed by a majority vote with 131 members voting in favour of the amendment and 72 members against it (Assembly Proceedings Vol. XLIV, 1967).

THE YEAR 1970

The Minister Mr Harekrishna Konar of the CPI(M) introduced the bill for the extension of Act II and frankly admitted that he had nothing to say on it. He only stated that this Act is necessary for quicker work. No debate took place and the bill was passed in the 50th session of the State Assembly on 29 January 1970 when the United Front Government dominated by the left political parties was still in power for the second time in West Bengal (Assembly Proceedings Vol. 50; 1970)

THE YEAR 1972

The Minister, Mr Gurupada Khan (Cong. I) who was in charge of the Department of Land Utilisation and Reforms and Land & Land Revenue placed the WB, (Req. and Acq.) (Amendment) Bill 1972 in the 52nd session of the Assembly on 10 April 1972. During the debate, the CPI member Mr Saroj Roy stated that for the sake of development land should be quickly acquired but at the same time the process of the payment of compensation to the affected persons should also be expedited. It may be noted in this connection that CPI at that time was a partner of the Government formed by the Congress Party, while CPI(M) was in the opposition. One member Mr Abdul Bari Biswas, however, did not oppose the bill but also supported the view of the CPI member by stating that the rules for the payment of compensation for the rich and poor landowners should be different. The Congress members supported the bill by saying that for the development of the country land should be acquired, but they at the same time admitted that delay in providing compensation very often harassed the landlosers.

The Minister also stated that the Government would give attention for quicker payment of compensation, but sharply reacted to the comments of CPI and CPI(M) members on their suggestions with regard to the payment of compensation to rich and poor farmers. He said that it was not possible to evolve different rules for different categories of landlosers since in the eyes of the law everyone was equal. The bill was passed without any voting (Assembly Proceedings Vol.52; 1972).

THE YEAR 1973

The Minister Mr Gurupada Khan introduced the bill on the same subject in the 54th session of the State Assembly on 20 February 1973 for expanding its scope. The opposition member Mr Timirbaran Bhaduri of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) gave a long speech to oppose the bill. He was against this legislation on the ground that it was being employed against the poor people. The member then personally attacked the Minister by asking him where the poor farmer would go whose land had been acquired for erecting a building for the entertainment of the factory owner who happened to be a friend of the Minister? Another RSP member, Mr Shis Muhammed stated from his "bitter experience" that the

Government was invariably acquiring the land of the small peasants, whereas the rich farmers were spared. One Congress member, Mr Jogilal Mondal supported the bill by saying that land must be acquired for the establishment of schools and the construction of roads, but the Act should never be applied to the poor and the payment of compensation should be made within three months from the date of acquisition. Another Congress member, Mr Rajani-kanta Dolui pointed out that thousands of bighas of land were being simply kept unutilised after acquisition. So land should not be acquired unless it was very urgently required.

The Minister in his reply could not avoid answering the personal attack made by Mr Timirbaran Bhaduri and said that none of his friends had any factory. He further informed the House about the formation of an Expert Committee consisting of Secretaries of the Land and Land Reforms Department, Commerce and Industries Department, Agriculture Department and three other nominated members. The bill was then passed through voting wherein 59 members voted in favour of the amendment of the bill while only three members (all belonged to RSP) voted against it and one member abstained from the process (Assembly proceedings, Vol. 54; 1973).

THE YEAR 1978

The year 1978 was significant in the political history of West Bengal since the Left Front Government came to power in 1977, winning the election by massive popular support. And since that year the LFG is ruling the state till today. The bill was placed by the Minister Mr Benoy Krishna Choudhury, himself a peasant leader belonging to CPI(M) from the Burdwan district. The Minister justified the extension of the Act-II for the completion of the unfinished development programmes and also for combating the devastation caused by the floods that ravaged the state recently. One member stated that it was an oppressive Act and extreme delays were being made in the payment of compensation. Another member criticised the Government for not being transparent in informing the house about the methods employed for the calculation of compensation.

The Minister assured the house by saying that Act II was not applied unless land was urgently needed and the value of the land was determined not by the old market price but at the current rate prevailing just before the time of acquisition. The bill was passed without voting (Assembly Proceedings Vol.69; 1978).

THE YEAR 1983

The bill was placed by Mr Benoy Krishna Choudhury for amending its 1(4) clause to continue the Act for another five years. No member of the opposition party was present in the house. The Minister justified the extension of the Act II by citing a number of tasks for which land was required viz.,

- (i) Maintenance of essential supplies of commodities,
- (ii) establishment of industrial townships for the creation of employment,
- (iii) construction of irrigation and drainage network,
- (iv) construction of houses in the urban and rural areas and
- (v) for various other developmental works.

All the members supported the bill but only one member pointed out about the delay in the payment of compensation but no member spoke about rehabilitation of the displaced persons. The bill was passed in the 80th session of the Assembly on 8 September 1983 (Assembly Proceedings Vol. 80; 1983).

THE YEAR 1989

The Minister Benoy Choudhury placed the bill for the extension of the Act for another five years. He justified the extension to expedite the programme related to public welfare. During the debate, the point on the delay towards the payment of compensation was raised as usual. A new issue was raised by one member belonging to the Left Front, who mentioned that the Congress party was trying to create disturbances by making use of the harassment of small landholders caused by acquisition. The member further pointed out that even the supporters of the Left Front, who were affected by the delay in the payment of compensation, were getting disgruntled. The Minister only commented that he was also aware of the difficulties in implementation of this Act.

The bill was passed without voting in the 92nd session of the Assembly on 14 March 1989 (Assembly Proceedings Vol. 92; 1989).

THE YEAR 1994

The Minister Mr Benoy Krishna Choudhury placed the WB (Req. and Acq.) (Amendment) Bill 1994 in the 103th session of the Assembly on 23 February 1994 for its extension only for the completion of the huge number of pending cases under Act-II. In his speech, the Minister narrated the historical background of this particular legislation. Mr Choudhury stated that since it was not possible for the Government to acquire land quickly on the basis of the colonial Land Acquisition Act of 1894, the Act-II was needed and was introduced after Independence. The Government originally decided to keep this Act in force upto 31 March 1951, but it had to be kept alive upto 31 March 1994 through successive amendments in the State Assembly. In 1993, the Government of India had communicated that it would not agree any more to extend Act-II, and the State Government too, in principle, was in agreement with this view of the Central Government. For this reason, the State Government, since April 1993, had almost stopped the application of this Act except in some special cases. Accordingly, orders have been sent to the districts to complete all the pending land acquisition cases started under the Act-II by 31 March 1993. The Minister then gave a huge figure of 15,000 unfinished land acquisition cases at different stages in the state. He admitted that the land requisitioned in these cases could neither be returned to the owner nor could those be transferred to the provisions of Act- I of 1894. During discussion three members supported the bill although they questioned about the delay in the payment of compensation. The bill was then passed without voting (Assembly Proceedings Vol. 103; 1994).

The debates and discussions that took place in the West Bengal Assembly around West Bengal Land (Requisition and Acquisition) Act 1948 revealed certain interesting points which are enumerated below:

1. Without any exception, the political party in power (Congress or Left) invariably justified the extension of Act-II for quicker acquisition of land for various development works.
2. Both the Congress and the Left Parties criticised the oppressive character of the West Bengal Land (Requisition and Acquisition) Act, 1948 whenever they were in opposition although representatives of the parties in the Legislative Assembly went for vote on the bill twice only. It seems that

whether the parties would go for vote depended on factors other than the immediate issue at hand.

3. The delay in the payment of compensation seemed to be the most commonly accepted issue which was raised in the Assembly and no substantial improvement seemed to have taken place with regard to the time taken for the payment of compensation.
4. No member ever raised the point that the Government has a moral responsibility for rehabilitation of the displaced persons due to the acquisition of land. It may be noted in this connection that the Report of the Expert Group on Land Acquisition formed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Govt. of India, which was published in 1967 categorically mentioned rehabilitation of displaced persons as a “moral responsibility” of the Government. (Guha 2005) Since 1967, no member of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly, irrespective of political affiliation, was found to have made use of the aforesaid report of the Expert Committee to demand rehabilitation of displaced persons during debate sessions on Act-II. Incidentally, the report was still available in the Library of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly in 2001.
5. It is only the Left Members who have suggested that the rates of compensation for the rich and the poor should also be different but they did not make any move towards the differential payment of compensation through amendments in either Act-I or Act-II since they are in power from 1977.
6. The speech delivered by the Land and Land Reforms Minister of the Left Front Government in the 103th session of the Assembly on 23 February 1994 revealed the pace at which the land acquisition process was in operation in West Bengal (15,000 pending cases under Act II). One could easily infer from this the kind of harassment caused to the displaced persons in the districts of West Bengal although no member (belonging to Left or Congress party) spoke on this issue in the Assembly. Every political party seemed to have taken the stand that this harassment of the people of West Bengal caused by land acquisition was an inevitable outcome which has to be shouldered by the poor farmers for the sake of development of the state.

The questions which were admitted by the Speaker of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly on land acquisition revealed a definite pattern. The concerned Ministers were asked to reply on a variety of subjects on land acquisition viz. rate of compensation, employment for displaced persons, non-utilisation of land acquired for a specific project and the like. After consulting the questions and answers in the Assembly Proceedings for the years 1956-57, 1963, 1967, 1972-74, 1978, 1983, 1991-94 and 1996, same observations may be made relating to their relevance on the actual problem.

A lengthy question-answer session was found to take place in the Assembly on 21 August 1963 regarding the acquisition of cultivable land for the construction of Haldia port in the erstwhile Midnapore district (admitted question No. 1050). The questions and their replies revealed that about 955 acres of fertile agricultural land had been acquired by Land Acquisition Act, 1894, but it

remained unutilised at the time when questions were raised in the Assembly. In course of the questioning by a number of members belonging to the ruling and opposition parties (e.g. Sushil Kumar Dhara of the Congress party and Birendra Narayan Roy (Independent supported by CPI), it was revealed that some of the farmers had started to cultivate paddy on their acquired lands and the elected members were trying to elicit some statement from the Minister in favour of these farmers. The Minister, however, tried to evade from making any kind of commitment on this particular issue and passed on the responsibility to the port authority for whom the said land was acquired. He, however, admitted that the Government would not have any objection if the farmers could make an unofficial arrangement with the port authority for the cultivation of acquired land where no construction work had yet been started. The Minister finally assured the House by saying that priority would be given to provide jobs to the persons whose lands had been acquired for the port (Assembly Proceedings Vol. XXXVI; 1963).

Ten years later, two Congress MLAs (Shri Sukumar Das and Shri Sougata Roy) asked (admitted question No. 1440) the Minister of Land and Land Revenue Department about the total area of land acquired for the Haldia Petro-Chemical project in erstwhile Midnapore and the rehabilitation measures taken for the displaced persons. The Minister replied that 906.035 acres had been acquired and Rs 4,47,91,437.14 had already been paid as compensation while arrangements were being made to rehabilitate about 517 displaced persons on 130.25 acres of land (Assembly Proceedings Vol. 54; 1973).

During the tenure of the LFG, questions by the members in the Assembly showed almost the same pattern as followed twenty years ago. Questions of the non-payment of compensation to project affected persons, however, constituted the central point of consideration. For example, on 22 August 1991 Congress MLA Shri Atish Chandra Sinha cited specific cases of land acquisition in his constituency in Murshidabad district where the landowners had not yet received any compensation. He also gave examples of cases in which land acquisition had taken place in 1977-78 but no compensation payment had been made. On 28 August 1991 Shri Natabar Bagdi of the Congress Party wanted to know whether compensation payment had been made against land acquisitions for irrigation schemes in Purulia district (admitted question No. 316). On the same date admitted under question number 1314, one member asked about the number of homeless persons who had been given jobs in the Kolaghat Thermal Power Project in erstwhile Midnapore district up to March 1991. The Minister reported that about 599 displaced persons were recruited in the various departments of West Bengal State Electricity Board up to March 1991 (Assembly Proceedings Vol. 98; 1991).

In 1992, from an admitted question no. 247 made on 23 March, 1992 one could know that about 17.19 acres of land had been acquired in Narendrapur in the South 24-Parganas for two proposed Wildlife Sanctuary (Assembly Proceedings vol. 99; 1992). From a question made by Shri Angad Bauri (question No. 1620) on June 1992, it was known that about 1156 persons had not been given compensation for land acquired in the two mouzas for a colliery in Burdwan district (Assembly Proceedings Vol. 99; 1992). On the same date under approved question number 2046, Shri Manas Bhuniya of the Congress Party

wanted to know about land acquisition scenario in the Gokulpur area of erstwhile Midnapore district for the establishment of the pig iron industry owned by the Tatas. The Minister in his reply stated that about 217.23 acres of land had been acquired for the Company and compensations had been given at the rates of Rs 22015.50 and Rs 26,891.00 respectively (Assembly Proceedings Vol. 99; 1992).

In 1996, from a question made by Shri Suniti Chattaraj (Congress MLA) it was revealed that only one person had been given a job from among the landlosers for the establishment of Bakreswar Thermal Power Project in the Birbhum district. In his reply, the Minister had also informed the House that in the same project 16 persons had been given casual employment (temporary) among whom there were *bargadars* and *pattaholders* (those landless persons who received land from the Government in the land reform programme).

QUEER SILENCE

The questions and replies on various aspects of land acquisition in West Bengal Assembly followed a pattern, which did not change much over the years. The questions revolved around compensation and rehabilitation. The elected members seemed to be more concerned with the deprivation of the landlosers owing to non-payment of compensation. With only one notable exception, there was no occasion when the members asked questions on the justification of acquiring agricultural land for non-agricultural purposes. Only in 1963, Mr Sushil Dhara made a general observation that the Government should not misuse agricultural land by keeping it unutilised after acquisition in these days of acute food shortage. Another interesting aspect revealed through these questions was related with the possible impact of land acquisition on land reforms. There was no debate or question raised on this subject in the State Legislative Assembly in West Bengal. In a state, which has made notable achievements in providing land to the poor, it was really surprising not to find any member of any political party saying anything on the subject. No elected people's representative of West Bengal, irrespective of political affiliation was found to raise the issue of the impoverishment of peasants by land acquisitions who were the direct beneficiaries of the land reform process. For the elected members of the Legislative Assembly, debates around land acquisition for development projects were a routinised ritual. The members in opposition invariably criticised the West Bengal Land (Requisition and Acquisition) Act, 1948 at the time of its extension although never in the history of West Bengal Legislative Assembly, had any political party placed a proposal of rehabilitation for project affected people for its incorporation in the Land Acquisition Act. The vibrant political culture of West Bengal maintained a queer silence on the issue of modifications and/or radical changes in the colonial Land Acquisition Act. □□□

References :

- Guha, A. 2007. *Land, Law and the Left: The Saga of Disempowerment of the Peasantry in the Era of Globalisation*. Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi.
- Proceedings of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly 1956 Vol. XI Govt. of West Bengal.*
- 1957 Vol. XVII Govt. of West Bengal.
 - 1963 Vol. XXXVI Govt. of West Bengal
 - 1967 Vol. XLIV Govt of West Bengal.
 - 1970 Vol. 50 Govt. of West Bengal.
 - 1972 Vol. 50 Govt. of West Bengal.

- 1973 *Vol. 54* Govt. of West Bengal.
- 1978 *Vol. 69* Govt. of West Bengal.
- 1983 *Vol. 80* Govt. of West Bengal.
- 1989 *Vol. 92* Govt. of West Bengal.
- 1991 *Vol. 98* Govt. of West Bengal.
- 1992 *Vol. 99* Govt. of West Bengal.
- 1994 *Vol. 103* Govt. of West Bengal.