

RED TERROR

HYPOCRISY UNLIMITED

Sankar Ray

[This article presents the sordid tale of land acquisitions for the New Rajarhat Township and the involvement of important CPI(M) personnel in this game. One of them, the key protagonist of the story below, was referred by Pranab Mukherjee in parliament recently, taunting the CPI(M) over its claims to be a crusader against corruption, arousing the ire of its MPs.]

Calling it a “shocking experience”, after visiting a segment of oustees in the Narmada Valley in mid-August 2002, Sarla Maheswari, then CPI(M) member of Rajya Sabha told the media—as if her heart bled, and with revolutionary conscience ablaze: “How can a development project create a disaster in the lives of the most downtrodden tribal people and also thousands of farmers of a huge area? How can it ravage their lives without any protest by mainstream political parties?” Truth indeed is stranger than fiction as the same fire-eating communist MP’s demagoguery is now in a hot soup as I-T sleuths raided at her residence, as a sequel to detection of an unaccounted sum of Rs 31 crores and 26 benami companies, belonging to the Canopy Group whose chairman is her husband Arun Maheswari. And the CPI(M) brass at the Muzaffar Ahmed Bhavan, Bengal CPI(M)’s state headquarters keep up their recalcitrance, not even demanding a ‘show cause’ of the cash-rich ‘comrade’. Former MP and CPI(M) CC member Mohd Selim, a spokesman of state party leadership too, ruled out any punitive step until specific indictment by the I-T department, leave alone criticizing the shady land transactions in the controversial New Town project at Rajarhat fully with the knowledge of ‘comrade Sarla Maheswari’ and her family.

The nouveau riche that flourished with the patronage of ‘M A Bhavan’, like the Maheswaris, do not come under the media-hyped ‘rectification programme’. Rather they treat the LF regime as their milch cow. The All Bengal Electricity Consumers Association divulged another scandal of tête-à-tête between the CPI(M) minister and the Maheswaris. Son-in-law of the Maheswaris got a Rs 26 crore order for installation of electric meters to the West Bengal State Electricity Distribution Ltd, a state government undertaking, but most of the meters are of inferior quality. ABECA general secretary Sanjit Biswas cited numerous abnormally inflated bills of consumers in Asansol-Durgapur region. WBSEDCL authorities too admitted anomalies in the floating of the tender, although no action has been taken against the company.

Last year, when a series of scandals around the Vedic village, part of the aforesaid project, with one Rajkishore Modi at the helm, came to light, the involvement of several CPI(M) ministers and state committee members was clearly evident. Several hundred crores of rupees reportedly enriched the coffers of Maheswaris minus cut monies to goons, middle men and of course, senior comrades, but ‘M A Bhavan’ Mandarins didn’t touch the Maheswaris and their filial associates.

The late Subhas Chakraborty, minister in the LF government until his death in 2009, told a few officers of West Bengal Civil Service in 1984 pointing out at the Bhangar-Rajarhat area with standing crops : “Wait for a few years. You will have an urban sprawl”. In the mid-1980s Kamal Gandhi, close relative of the Maheswaris and Gandhi-Maheswari filial contacts started buying up acres and acres of farm lands paying higher prices than the prevailing market rates—between Rs 30,000-40,000 per acre when market rate was between Rs 15,000-20,000. They had advance information about a large township project. Gandhi “could easily get access to the various plans relating to the township project and related documents from the Alipore treasury,” and proceeded “with a definite plan of land procurement” in

collaboration with the biggies of “M A Bhavan”, not just the concerned district, zonal and local committees. Catalysts were anti-social elements—*harmads* and the police who “used to isolate and encircle the unwilling farmers and blockade and threaten them, forcing them to finally come to a settlement by selling off their land to him”. Chakraborty, probably shocked at the manner small and middle peasants were dispossessed through shady land deals sensed an omen in the late 1990s : “I am not for any new township”.

A booklet, published by the CPI(ML) Liberation—*Cries of distressed people beneath Rajarhat Satellite Town*, vividly chronicled the bonhomie between “M A Bhavan” brass and anti-social gangs in tandem with the Maheswaris. “With the construction of the satellite township by evicting lakhs of peasants at Rajarhat New Town, controversial industrialist Rajkishore Modi and company built up a sex tourism-cum-country club named ‘Vedic Village’ at Shikharpur just outside the satellite township area under the *Bhangar Rajarhat Area Development Authority* between 1997-2002. Call girls from across the world began to gather at Vedic Village to entertain the high profile customers. As the resort flourished, the requirement of land increased and a new land grab drive was unleashed at gun point with the help of Gaffar Molla (a comrade too), adept in manipulation of voting in favour of CPI (M) and his goons. Although the original project was developed on 44 acres of vested land taken on lease from the state government, the area of land presently under occupation of the resort is around 150 acres..... Resorts like Vedic Village, Olive Garden, and other sex tourism centres came up within the second township. Rajkishore Modi initially purchased 10 acres of land at Shikharpur with the active help of ex-RS member of CPI (M) Sarla Maheswari, her near relative, land-shark Kamal Gandhi, Pijush Bhagat et al by launching a fake company named Sanjibani Project and similar other companies.” Maheswari, owner of Olive Garden and Gandhi, the kingpin of the land grab had allegedly very close rapport with Jyoti Basu and his side-kicks.

The unseemly hurry in okaying mutation for the Sanjibani Project stupefied many, thanks to the overactive CPI(M) central committee member and West Bengal’s Housing and Public Health Engineering minister Gautam Deb who spearheads the polemics against the union railway minister and All India Trinamool Congress chairperson, Mamata Banerjee, to prevent the end of the 34-year LF rule. Pranab De, ex-general secretary, West Bengal Land Reform Officers’ Association, made a startling revelation on highly questionable deals by Deb’s department in a booklet, published by Kolkata-based social action forum *Nagarik Mancha*. Minister Deb appears as one of unabashed collaborator of the state-sponsored plunderers who pushed hundreds of tillers to agonizing uncertainty. On 19 June 1997, additional district magistrate and head of land and land reform matters, North 24 Parganas district, refused to endorse mutation of 94 acres of land in favour of 11 companies in a letter to the joint secretary, PHE department. “Initially the companies could not be served notice as their offices do not appear to exist. Thereafter, it was seen that all the companies have appointed one Sri Anil Maheswari to deal with all the matters relating to mutation/conversion....The concerned plots are to be in cultivating possession of RS recorded raiyats as seen by the revenue officer”. De who worked for three decades in land-related matters laments, “The West Bengal Housing Board recommended mutation for some persons and companies that never existed but occupied huge tracts of land under the New Township project through fictitious documents”. Identification particulars of Anil Maheswari are easy to conjecture. □

Tailpiece: CPI(M) recently shifted the district party headquarters from the residence of Maheswaris. A strange feat of rectification!