

BACK FROM SINGUR

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A recent visit to the Singur area and witnessing the Public Hearings conducted by Ms Medha Patkar of Narmada Bachao Andolan and Mahasweta Devi and others which included Sunanda Sanyal, Dipankar Chakrabarty (of Aneek) and hundreds of others both regional and outsiders from 10 A.M. to 2.30 P.M. at Gopalnagar, Madhyapara Durgabedi, many questions of fundamental importance automatically arose which became more relevant at the public meeting at 3.30 P.M. at Bajemelia Hospital Maidan, where Mahasweta Devi and Medha Patkar spoke eloquently, that inspired the morale and fighting spirit of the aggrieved people of the region. The meeting and public hearings were organized by the Singur Agricultural Land Protection Committee and Consolidation Initiative (**“Samhati Udyog”**) whose convenor is Becharam Manna, a local popular activist. The Singur issue raises many basic questions like —

Can the people’s rights to earn a livelihood and rights to agricultural land inherited from forefathers be taken away by the Government? What constitutes Public Interest and Sustainable Development? Does the Tatas’ profit really constitute people’s gains? When so much of land is available in Purulia, Bankura, Birbhum and other places why then such multicropped fertile agricultural land with developed irrigation systems in Singur area is being permanently sacrificed under concrete jungles? Who profits at whose cost? Does the real value of a land get reflected in its market price when the value of the Social and Eco-system services from the land is also taken into account? What is being done with the earlier acquired *1,20,000 acres of land* and also with those remaining unused and locked up in closed factories in and around Kolkata? Will this further acquisition of more fertile land lead to food shortages in this small state of West Bengal having the highest population density in the world? Incidentally West Bengal is still a net importer of many a food item from other states.

The facts in the Singur conflict are summarized as follows :

The ruling CPM with Buddhadeb Bhattacharya as CM and Nirupam Sen, as Industry Minister are driven with a desire to industrialize West Bengal with literally jet-age speed and signing MoUs with big companies to set up industries and business enterprises to “develop” WB, as they understand it. For this they have entered into agreements with the Tata Company, the details of which they are keeping a closed secret and are willing to concede their various demands of securing undue advantages like concessional power-rates, stamp duty exemption etc. The Tatas intend to ‘manufacture’/assemble small cars, made of plastics, by

the year 2008 at a price of rupees one lakh or so, less than the price of an autorickshaw. For this the Left Front Government is using an archaic British Act (Land Acquisition Act, 1894) renewing and amending still further to assume more power. They are hell-bent to acquire even if the land is multicropped with irrigation system developed even before the Left Front came to power in 1977. The Tatas have threatened that they will move away from this state if the State Government fails to give the land they have chosen within this year and hence this hurry. And for such hurry the government is keeping details of the agreement secret and has avoided consultations even with the Panchayats, which is part of the government and looks after the regional matters. The diminishing water resources in the regional rivers, tanks and other water bodies will inevitably be polluted. Growth of slums and squalor and antisocial activities will come up vitiating the peace and social life of the populace. To hurry through the land acquisition no Environmental Impact Assessment has even been done. The Left Front is trying to be popular with the Capitalists, foreign investors and urban affluent when their rural support base is eroding.

Alignments

The Tatas' choice is the land adjoining the Mouzas Beraberi, Bajemelia, Khaserbheri, Singerbheri around which pass three small rivers named Kanakunti, Daiba Khal and Julke Nadi. Many small farmers, sharecroppers, landless agricultural laborers and some people who tend cattle and goats and eke out an existence would be affected. The majority of the people cutting across political affiliations, caste and religious lines have forged a splendid unity. The high morale and fighting spirit of the resisting people stems from the fact that sustenance of most of the people of the region comes directly or indirectly from that one thousand acres of land planned to be acquired. Most of the people here are not absolutely poor or lumpen proletariat and education of the populace is fairly good and many young men and women from this area are service holders in Kolkata and other cities of India who send monies to their families. As a result economic conditions of the people in this area is fairly good and pucca buildings with modern amenities are fairly common. These give them a sense of dignity and confidence and their political consciousness is quite high.

Only a few landlords who do not till the lands themselves with their own hands or are absentee landlords and were earlier opposed to the CPI(M) for their *Operation Barga*, now giving away their lands to receive ready money and have become CPM supporters overnight. Hence the Tatas, the State Government, the Police are on one side, while others, barring the nouveau CPMs, the rest of the populace are on the other side. Some political parties, namely the SUCI, the TMC, a CPI(ML) faction, Congress, Janata Dal (Secular) are supporting the resistance movement and the CPI, the Forward Bloc, showing tendency to give lip service to the movement.

People's Rights

The people of the Singur area like agricultural areas elsewhere love their land intimately and the social atmosphere is not vitiated by the bitter memories of earlier struggles during the *Tevaga Andolan* period some six decades ago. Religious and Caste divides are not noticeable here. The affected people feel that they would be rootless if their land is taken away. Some 100 years ago Rabindranath Tagore realized this and wrote beautifully what still inspires people :

*The land where my seven generations
thrived is more precious than gold.
Can I be that wretched as to sell that land, my Mother !*

Once an industry comes up the land will be lost forever for agriculture. The bait of jobs in the upcoming automobile factory is scornfully rejected by everybody as a hoax and also because they feel that disrespectful. In such automated motor car factory some engineers or technical persons from urban affluent classes may get some jobs for sometime. Again technical experts may come from other states the local men folk may be offered some casual or menial jobs and the women some housemaids' jobs, which all people, the women folk in particular, feel undignified and unacceptable. This writer was given an advertisement issued by the WB Industrial Development Corporation which invites applications for training in House Wiring and Electrical Gadget Repair, Welding and Fabrication, Machinist and Auto-mechanic from male persons who are permanent residents of Gopalnagar, Khaserbheri, Singher-bheri, Beraberi, Bajemelia where lands are being acquired. The course is for 6 months and minimum educational qualifications is Madhyamik. 20 seats would be available for each course, the course is free and some stipends would also be provided. Employment is not guaranteed. This is a joint venture of the Ramakrishna Mission Silpa Mandir and WB Industrial Development Corporation Ltd. The intentions and government's promise of providing what types of jobs for how many is transparent through this advertisement.

The Singurians are self-reliant and self-respecting people with good family and social ties. They are determined not to give away their lands. On July 14 and 17, 2006 more than one thousand people from the region went in procession to the District Magistrate's office at Chinsurah and submitted applications expressing their resolve not to give away their lands. The Indian constitution guarantees the right to earn a livelihood, right to life and live by the articles 13, 21, 19 (G), 39. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) also upholds these Rights, (Article 17), together with the right to property. The American Bill of Rights (1789-91) following the American War of Independence (1776) and the Declarations of the French Revolution (1789) enshrines these rights. And now West Bengal's Communists run over all these rights and forcibly trying to give away the lands to the capitalist Tatas, who understands nothing but profit. The moot-question is : for whom the Left Front ("*Sangramer Hatiar*", Instrument for Fight) is working and at whose cost? They have failed to harness the indigenous

resources and improve human conditions of living and improve technologies and revive sick or closed industries and inject hopes and inspirations among the people and unleash their creative energies. Instead they are inviting and giving undue advantages to the big capitalists without any regard to the suitability or appropriateness of the products and services to be available from them. And that too at the cost of a stable self respecting rural community. Gandhiji used to say India lives in her villages. And today one sees India dies in her villages. If the villages die, the peasants suffer, agricultural production suffers, can the state survive in the long run? As mentioned earlier West Bengal has the highest population density in the world and the available fertile agricultural land is quite limited. Food shortages, even famines, are not entirely ruled out. Even at this stage of good transport and improved communications food import is not always easy and assured. Then the Buddhadebs and Nirupams may be out and the Tatas may move out like so many closed factories of West Bengal. It may also be mentioned here that despite the 100 years' extensive industrial activities at Jamshedpur, the Tatas' greatest showpiece on Earth, the Jharkhand area still remains not only underdeveloped, but conditions in the rural areas, of the Adivasis in particular, have deteriorated still further and the environment degraded through extensive deforestation and mining and allied activities. Jamshedpur has provided employments and benefits to some urban elites from all over India.

CPM Juggernaut

Although there are lots of land available in other areas of WB where the Tatas and the Salims are welcome. It is reported that during the last few years about 1,20,000 acres of land have been acquired, still further 1000 acres of fertile Singur land is being acquired to suit the desires and advantages of the Tata Company. Reasons are not far to see. Here is a nice 4-laned road and rail facilities are also good because Howrah-Burdwan chord line and Howrah-Tarkeswar rail line cross at Kamarkundu near which the factory is slated. All the information and agreements with the Tatas have so far been kept a secret. It is to be noted that Tatas and Singur were little mentioned before this year's elections. The land acquisition started and the information of Signing a MoU was disclosed after Buddhadeb Babu assumed office on 18 May, 2006. Persistent demands about the details of the agreement have been rejected by the Buddhadebs till date. It has already been stated that there were no previous consultations with the people of the area, nor even with the elected Panchayats. No public hearing for environmental clearance was conducted.

In the public hearing conducted by Medha Patkar many people including elderly women, mothers openly said how they have been beaten, abused, manhandled by the police and other goons on the night of Sept. 25, 2006. Police torture killed a young man Rajkumar Bhool. Here government administration, police, and goons have unleashed terror and oppression. This brings to mind the ways of classical fascism witnessed in Mussolini's Italy and in Hitler's Germany where industry was privately owned, but authoritarianism and antidemocratic

political philosophy placing the state above the individual ruled, at least for some years. West Bengal, where the second generation Marxist leaders are now in command may add another chapter to political philosophy, demonstrating that fascism and democratic centralism are co-terminus. In popular Bengali usage these second generation Marxist leaders are called “Baburams” or “Bhogirmns”, that is, they are enjoying power but have not taken the pains of spade work for building up the party, but inherited a party machinery built up by the sweat and blood of the founders. Such transformation of the CPI(M) who came to power through peoples’ votes is not at all unnatural, but inevitable and follows also from Materialistic Philosophy of Karl Marx, which shows that the material conditions of existence and the nature of work, life styles, affluence and power inevitably corrupt. It is to be noted that Hitler also came to power through peoples’ votes who ultimately became world’s most ruthless and hated dictator.

Foreseeable Transformation

The world changes every day. Every man, every party changes. The change may be for the better or the worse. The CPM type of transformation has been elegantly foreseen and beautifully narrated albeit allegorically, by George Orwell in his famous *Animal Farm* (1945). A cartoon picture based upon a passage from *Animal Farm* with the caption “The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which.” That appeared in the *Statesman* some three decades ago. The music of Hemango Biswas in his celebrated “Mountbatten Mongal Kavya” still rings : “*Tata Birla Mere Naam, Sabko Sumati De Bhagawan*”. This correspondent found Buddhadeb Bhattacharya’s name so much hated in the Singur area that many people will not even like to read, to say nothing of reciting, Sukanto Bhatta-charya’s poems. Even the local CPM supporters and activists have realized these things and they have joined the Agricultural Land Protection movements.

Land Value and Eco-system Services

The existing market value of a land does not reflect the real value of the land, nor it can be measured by the value of its agricultural productivity. A host of ecosystem services come from the grass, weeds and other vegetation; from the worms, insects, frogs, earthworms, animals, birds, fish and other aquatic animals which may or may not have market economic values, but have enormous eco-values. In the developing new science of “Environmental Economics” competent economists and other scientists have calculated in monetary terms the values of various ecosystem services like nutrient cycling, water conservation, habitat for life, genetic resources, pollination, pollution mitigation etc. It has been estimated that the total value of 17 different ecosystem services from 16 different ecosystems of the world is 33.3 trillion US \$, while the total GNP of the whole world is 18 trillion. The proposed Singur car factory will also inevitably adversely affect the health and productivity of the neighbouring fields.

Can industrialization per se be always welcome? A N-plant, a polluting chemical plant cannot be welcome upon or near human habitations or agricultural lands. Acquiring lands for a factory means taking away the basis of human sustenance and survival and destruction of human bondage, culture and ecosystem services which do not find due importance in conventional "Formal Economics" which sees development mainly in terms of gain in GNP and go by official records and data collected from surveys and statistical analyses. Such newer concepts like the "Quality of Life", "Informal Economies" are yet to come into the thinking and mindsets of the politicians and their advisers.

Alternative Development

Instead of putting emphasis on building so many multi-lane highways, flyovers, shopping malls in the city of Kolkata and its neighbouring areas, let the emphasis be shifted to the development of the villages. Let education and public health be bettered in the rural areas in improved environment and uninterrupted power supplies ensured. The roads in the countryside should be improved. Setting up modern hospitals, educational institutions both technical and pedagogic be improved and established and these will improve human resources and people helped to do productive works in their own villages. In this age of better communication like automobiles, internet and mobile phones many people remaining even in their villages can produce valuable services in their computers and assemble/manufacture small instruments, agro-based chemicals, packaged food items and a host of other things and enrich the country and earn a decent living. City based companies' jobs should be outsourced to rural areas. Talented rural people may not then migrate to the cities and the rural-urban contradiction will be resolved to a large extent.

Learn to Dream

It is heartening to see the nice human and social roles Medha Patkar, Mahasweta Devi and others are playing at this critical juncture when the traditional left plays the role of the right. The largest selling Bengali daily's 28 Oct. 2006 issue became conspicuous by the total omission of the previous day's Singur Public Hearing news, which the electronic media and most other newspapers did not. In her inaugural address at the recent Frankfurt Book Fair (vide the *Statesman Daily*, 8th Day Supplement, 29 Oct. 2006) Mahasweta Devi beautifully said :

"Nothing happens unless you know how to dream. The establishment is out to destroy, by remote control, all the brain cells that induce dreams. But some dreams manage to escape. I am after those dreams that have escaped from jail. The right to dream is what allows mankind to survive. If you end the right to dream-which the entire world and everyone is doing - you destroy the world. The right to dream should be the first fundamental right".

Dreams transform into thoughts and thoughts into actions. Actions advance human civilization and ensure better quality of life. Here comes the great

importance of the freedom of the press and the right to information. The present Singur type situations have already happened elsewhere in WB and will not end here, but will recur, if not checked here and now. Here the people of other regions, the young people in particular, have an important role to play.

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