

TRUTH, UNTRUTH & PROPAGANDA

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Even in over three months after the 14th march mayhem, life has not returned to normal in Nandigram block-I. Stray attacks by the CPI(M) cadres and goons continue from Khejuri side. Bombs and grenades are still hurled on Nandigram villages, day and night. Many families are still waiting for their members, missing since 14th, to return home, refusing to believe that they are dead. A woman, dumb-founded by terror and gunshots on the 14th and gone off her mind thereafter, hovers, hugging to her breasts blood-stained clothes, taking them to be of her slain kith and kin. Enquiries by the CBI, the State CID, which appears to have been abandoned, or amalgamated with the North Bengal Commissioner's administrative probe, have been held but as none of their reports has been made public, the truth about Nandigram is still obscure.

THE TRUTH

Hailing from Nandigram block-II and hearing some eye-witness accounts of the two mayhems on 7th January and 14th March, this year, this writer is in a better position to state the truth about the so-called 'Operation Nandigram' and the ground situation, as it prevailed before, during and after these mayhems. The CPI(M) top brass in West Bengal and the Politburo have cleverly knit a cobweb of untruth, half-truth, and propaganda to confuse the people. Months before the 3rd January uprising, rumours spread—following a Kolkata-based Bengali daily's scoops on 13th and 26th November '06 that some 20,000 acres in 38 moujas (groups of villages) of block-I would be acquired for the Salem Group's 'Chemical Hub' and a SEZ. Both these terms were incomprehensible to the villagers but they feared that if their meagre farm and homestead land were taken by the government, they would become paupers and homeless. With the compensation money they might get from the government, they would not be able to buy any land in densely populated blocks II and III, where land prices have shot up in recent years. Despite the local CPI(M) MP, Lakshman Seth's repeated appeals to villagers to willingly hand over their land in several public meetings, an oral campaign was run by farmers, displaced from Haldia, in 1970s who had bought some land across Haldi river in Nandigram block-I to resettle with the measly compensation they received- They feared that they would be cheated again, if the government acquired their land for the Salem projects and that like the Haldia Petro-Chemical and other factories in Haldia, across the river, whose fumes and ashes were already polluting the region, a chemical hub would render the region unlivable. They also realised that not many jobs would be available in these high-tech projects for them, or their wards, if they were displaced- The local Trinamul and Congress leaders also stoked the embers of these suspicions and anger in villagers. In the area, to be acquired, there were a number of temples, mosques, clubs, primary schools and health centres; this added to the animus against the

government. Incidentally, few among these villagers have legal rights over the land they occupied, as being either sharecroppers, or recipients of vested land, they did not have registered deeds. Even if the government succeeded, legal problems would have arisen in acquiring such a vast area. This simmering anger was gradually directed against the leaders and cadres of the two communist parties who, over the years, had dug roots in the political soil. The present MLA belonged to the CPI and the MP to the CPI(M).

3RD JANUARY UPRISING

On 3rd January, some villagers came across a Haldia Development Authority notice on acquisition and a few officer-like outsiders in a Panchayet office. As word spread like wild fire that they had come in connection with land acquisition, the villagers of 38 moujas burst in rage and ran amok. After the newspaper scoops, the grassroots cadres of the CPI(M) and the TMC were making and amassing bombs, grenades and firearms secretly. On 3rd January night, bombs were hurled from both sides of the block's border with Kheiyuri and became intense at night, causing casualties. A CPI(M) leader was killed and his house set on fire. In the beginning, the police did not act on the plea that they could not enter the region, as roads, culverts and bridges had been cut and destroyed, or blocked by felled trees and boulders. They did not try to enter the tense villages on foot, to avoid generating tension and fearing to be attacked by angry villagers. On 7th January, in a confrontation near Nandigram town, about half a dozen villagers were killed, a police jeep was burnt and a police officer injured. Violence continued for about a week and subsided when on the 10th, the Chief Minister in two public meetings outside the region, assured that if the people did not want, no industry would be set up and no land would be acquired in Nandigram. During and after the early January clashes, over two thousand CPI and CPI(M) supporters and cadres, some with their family members, fled homes in fear and in a few cases, being threatened by members of the several Save Farmland Committees, to live with their relatives elsewhere. Away from their deserted homes, they had a difficult life; they also feared reprisal by TMC and Congress supporters. The police opened three camps to shelter them and the CPI(M) bosses in Kolkata collected street donations to meet camp expenses. When the police tried to close the camps and help their inmates return home, the villagers and the Committee resisted, demanding a written promise from the government that their farmland etc. would not be acquired. The BDO, the SDO and the DM called several meetings of local political party leaders to repair the damaged roads etc. and close the camps but they did not attend, demanding that the government gives in writing that no land would be acquired in Nandigram.

The displaced CPI and CPI(M) cadres and supporters pressurised party leaders to help them return home and recover their lost political ground. This made the Chief Minister violate his promises and plan a massive police offensive. Curiously, three days before the offensive, Lakshman Seth affirmed that a chemical hub would indeed be set up in Nandigram. This was contrary to the Chief Minister's assurance on 10th January and apart from creating confusion, stoked fresh tension that was subsiding. Added to fear of another police offensive,

this statement by a considerably hated CPI(M) leader hardened the resolve of the villagers to save their land at any cost.

It is true that a low-intensity civil war between the supporters of the ruling and opposition parties was going on in Nandigram from 3rd of January '07, which climaxed 70 days later, 3 days before the ominous *ides* of March (15th in ancient Rome on which day in 44-BC Julius Caesar was assassinated).

14TH MARCH MAYHEM

Rumours of police mayhem were rife but nobody knew when. Shortly before the: 14th March mid-day, truck-loads of armed policemen entered through three points from Khejuri side and for nearly two hours, indulged in wanton caning, tear-gassing and firing bullets on children and women who were in front of columns of adult villagers to arouse compassion in the gunners. Particularly brutal, among the scenes seen on TV, was unprovoked brutal caning by a constable on a woman who was trying to help another to lift their family man, killed or maimed by bullets. Media photographers were probably not allowed when armed policemen entered Bhangabera and fired on villagers, singing *kirtans* in praise of God to ward off police attacks. The region has a dominant Muslim population and when the armed police and the CPI(M) goons stormed their villages, some were doing their *Namaj*.

The savage offensive, which ended before the sunset of 14th, came to be known to the media in the evening. The official death toll of 14, which the government gave to the media, is ludicrously low. TV cameras showed stray villagers pelting the police with stones but these could not have hurt many policemen, as claimed by the Chief Minister but touted by Jyoti Basu who doubted any policeman having been attacked by villagers. No TV channel has shown any wounded police officer, or constable, either. Rumours were rife of many dead bodies of the slain having been dumped in cuts of roads and culverts, covered the same day by truckloads of soil and mortar and thrown into ponds and canals, of CPI(M)'s hired goons killing children by tearing apart their legs, as Lord Krishna did to kill King Jarasandha in the Mababhatata of many bodies of the slain thrown into a tidal canal that separates Nandigram from Khejuri and flows into river Haldi, near whose confluence with river Bhagitathi, Haldia has come up. Another rumour is that truckloads of dead bodies, ferreted out of ponds and canals by the goons with fishing nets, were sent out on 14th night, hearing of CBI enquiry. How much of these rumours are true would be revealed when the enquiry reports are made public.

At least two housewives, admitted to Tamluk hospital for pelvic injuries, alleged rape by the goons or constables in a cowshed where they were hiding, running away from bullets. Many more did not report to the police, or go to the health centres in shame. A CBI team which began a probe under the Kolkata High Court's *suo moto* order from the 16th, found bullets fired on thoracic and pelvic regions and from behind, prohibited in the police code. Its officers have also established that the used bullets, picked up from the five villages that the police stormed into, were numerically far less than their marks on human bodies, trees and walls, raising the suspicion that dead bodies were removed before the arrival of the CBI team on the 16th. Doctors of Tamluk Sub-Divisional Hospital who

treated some of the injured say, most of the extracted bullets were not .303, used by the police; but mere splinters and 315 bullets, suspected to have been fired from pipe-guns and rifles used by other than policemen in the offensive. Who could they be but CPI(M) goons in police uniform?

The nation's conscience has been roused by the 'Operation Nandigram'; the opposition bandh on 16th March reflected this. Even hardcore CPI(M) supporters cannot swallow such a brutal offensive against unarmed people. Both Houses of Parliament were rocked on 15th and 16th; the State and Kolkata Corporation budgets had to be passed without the presence of opposition members. In over three months after the mayhem no CPI(M) goon or guilty police constable or officer has been punished. Where is justice? Leo Tolstoy asked the same question, when in 1910 he left home on a stormy night in search of it and died in a railway station.

The grounds that the Chief Minister gave for the 14th March offensive are not tenable. Local administration did not break down, because the police station, the block, land revenue and other government offices were all functioning normally in Nandigram town. Primary and secondary schools were open and students were preparing for their annual and final examinations. The main roads and culverts were indeed cut, or made impassable by felled trees, to prevent CPI(M) goons enter and storm Nandigram villages from Khefuri side, a CPI(M) stronghold but roads from Nandigram town to the villages in the east were not cut. Although some Gram Panchayats, run by the CPI(M), could not meet, others were functioning. Life in these villages does not depend much on civic facilities, because there are few.

The Chief Minister admitted that he could not anticipate, nor was apprised of the possibility of, such a fierce resistance; the latter has been contradicted by the State Home Secretary. A government's mistake is not like an individual's; it costs people dearly. In Nandigram not only scores of innocent lives have been lost, leaving an indelible scar but the possibility of acceptable industrialisation has been nullified by the Chief Minister declaring, vengefully. Some land was acquired, years ago, for building a ship-repairing yard at Jellingham in block-I near the Bay of Bengal by Burn Standard, in which a lot of jobs could be created for local people but construction was abandoned- The people would be happy if it was resumed and completed.

THE COVER-UP

Propaganda by the CPI(M) top brass on Nandigram, Singur and many other controversial issues has reached Goebbelsian level and has been exposed by the media-Untruths and half-truths pile up every day, weaving a cobweb before truth, if the Calcutta High Court, hearing a plethora of cases about Nandigram and Singur, does not give an adverse verdict, the Left Front may survive the deepest crisis in its 30-year history. The party's misdeeds are like waves on a sea, the latest erasing the marks of the previous. While some writers and artistes with Marxist leanings gave up the posts they held, or membership of the party in anger and outrage, some celebrities did not murmur a protest. This nexus between criminals and the police is not new in India but has never been so strong and diabolic and for such a savage attack on innocent unarmed people. It underlines,

once again, the need for placing India's civilian security forces under an independent authority.

ANGER & OUTRAGE

Not only of West Bengal but the people of other provinces and of the world at large too have been aghast by this mayhem by a trigger-happy police and hired goons of the ruling party. It has been rightly compared with the massacre of 579 civilians in a walled garden, Jalianwala Bag in Amritsar on 13th April 1919, by a British General, Michael O' Dyer. After Singur, the Chief Minister escaped censure by his party; he has been spared it again, despite a worse mishandling of Nandigram, at least publicly, if any side is victorious in this naked confrontation, it is some 71 thousand people of this backward region, who faced bullets with rare courage and grit, as their ancestors did during the 1942 Civil Disobedience Movement under the aegis of the Tamralipta Independent Government, headed by late Satish Chandra Samanta. Where the people of Singur failed, villagers of Nandigram won. In fact, the net gain in this barbaric offensive by the government has been zero, because the fugitive CPI(M) leaders and supporters have not been able to return home as yet. Nandigram police has detected bogus names in the list of the CPI(M) fugitives from their homes, pricking the balloon of propaganda by the party leaders. Nandigram saw a unique and spirited repulse of naked State terrorism by unarmed poor people. Some day, a clearer picture of Nandigram mayhem will emerge, shorn of cobwebs of untruth, half-truth, rumours and propaganda. The sun of Truth will emerge from behind the clouds and prove that India's communists are no better than Marxist villains of history—in Russia (Stalin), China (Mao Zedong) and Cambodia (Pol Pot). □□□