

Bleeding Nandigram

Sandip Bandyopadhyay writes :

Nandigram is bleeding and civilisation in this rural area of West Bengal seems to have bled to death with all norms of democracy thrown to the winds. It is not at all rhetorical to say that Nandigram stands out as unprecedented in the history of post-1947 West Bengal. This left-oriented part of undivided Bengal has witnessed over the last sixty years numerous incidents of state oppression, killings and police violence on spontaneous or organised youth upsurges which also often found expression in violent forms. Ruthless police firing on people agitating against the state is, in fact, nothing new in West Bengal.

But what happened in Nandigram in the 60th year of Independence is different. It is a civil war between two sections of villagers. It is different even from the notorious police violence of the late 1960s and 1970s, directed particularly against the Naxalites. The militant naxalite movement and the resultant police action divided rural areas on political lines, created a dangerous rift among the urban youth and terrorised the society in general. But Nandigram is different in more than one respect.

In Singur and Nandigram, agitating people did not take to terrorist methods or make a plot to overthrow the government. A large number of them are, in fact, supporters of the ruling CPI(M). Unlike in Keshpur-Garbata (2000-2001) the agitation was not led by one particular political party. The *Bhumi Ucched Protirodh Committee* (BUPC) was formed in Nandigram in January this year on the basis of the village committees set up spontaneously by the villagers to oppose the government's land acquisition policy. It represents the Trinamul Congress, SUCI and others and its members include CPI(M) supporters too. These people stood against the ruling party to resist the official move to take away their land—their livelihood. Theirs was therefore a fight for survival, a desperate bid to protect their livelihood. In Singur, despite heroic resistance put up by the farmers, they could not stop the beginning of construction of the Tata Car factory. Nandigram however forced the government to scrap its plan to acquire fertile agricultural land for setting up a chemical hub and a SEZ.

The Chief Minister himself announced the withdrawal of this plan immediately after the farmers' resistance in January this year. But social life in Nandigram became far from normal. Terror rather gripped it with everyday bombing and firing from the adjacent Khejuri area, known as loyal to the ruling party. Khejuri, it seems, was bent on taking on the arrogant Nandigram. While the CPI(M) supporters of Nandigram left their homes for Khejuri and suffered from insecurity, escalating violence unleashed by Khejuri made social life in Nandigram miserable to say the least. This violence evolved on 14 March into a planned and organised attack launched by the police, the armed CPI(M) cadres and the hired goons, obviously to teach Nandigram a lesson. Meanwhile continuing violence from Khejuri had hardened the Nandigram people's determination to keep their area free from the influence of the ruling party. They put up road blocks, prevented police entry and resisted the Khejuri attackers' repeated attempts to enter Nandigram. People, literally, spent sleepless nights to guard their area.

The 14th March attack was planned out by the CPI(M) in order to reoccupy Nandigram from the control of the BUPC—the 'enemy camp'. The attempt ultimately failed but the calamitous massacre it resulted in attracted media attention at the international level. While women were raped or molested and children assaulted, firing was indiscriminate and directed against almost unarmed people. It claimed at least 14 lives; but according to the local people the death-toll is far higher and many people still remain untraced. 14 March bared the extent of barbarity the left can go to.

After March 14, Nandigram indeed turned into a battlefield. While violence continued unabated, none of those responsible for the massacre was arrested. Some CPI(M) leaders rather continued to fret and fume adding fuel to the fire already raging. On the other hand, while the BUPC's resistance was almost unarmed for the first several months, later a section of them also took up arms to combat the CPI(M) offensive and from around July-August exchange of gunshots between the two sides became a regular event and led the situation to a war of attrition. The ruling party of the state government not only failed to take well-meaning initiative to restore peace in Nandigram and Khejuri but actually added to the tension with provocative statements and by supplying arms to Khejuri. In September-October, the CPI(M) is reported to have brought hired goons and professional killers from other districts and the state of Jharkhand. Obviously, they were planning to launch a fresh onslaught.

Signs of the new tactic to tame the 'toughs' of Nandigram have been showing up since the last week of October. According to one estimate, 12 people belonging to both Nandigram and Khejuri lost their lives, caught in the crossfire between the two rival camps. Violence culminated in war against the enemy on 9-10 November. The CPI(M) goons armed with sophisticated weapons turned Nandigram into a 'no admission zone' for the media persons and social activists and pouncing on Nandigram began to capture one village after another, with the police acting as passive onlookers. The advancing 'red army' met with little resistance because apprehending violence on a larger scale people in most villages had already fled their homes. The 'army' therefore went on demolishing and setting fire to houses and cowsheds and assaulting the enemy people, particularly women, they found at hand. Then they celebrated their victory by taking out processions branding red flags.

To complete the cycle, on 10 November, the 'red army' felt free to open fire on an unarmed procession of homeless villagers and indulged in rape, molestation and abduction of women. With Nandigram closed to the media, the total number of people killed still remains unknown. While some newspapers have put the figure at 30/35, information received from Nandigram over cellphones suggest that the degree of brutality has exceeded that of what occurred on 14 March. This writer was present at Esplanade, Kolkata where Medha Patkar was going on fast when a chilling message brought the news that no less than 45 people had been done to death and many dead bodies had been sent off to Khejuri or other places or just burnt down.

On 11 November, a high-ranking CPI(M) leader declared that Nandigram was now 'free from terror'. What he did not mention that 'peace' has been established in a ravaged land of deserted villages and over rows of dead bodies as depicted by Gaganendranath Tagore in his famous sketch entitled 'Peace Restored in the Punjab' drawn after the Jalianwallabagh massacre.

P.S.: The evicted people of Nandigram whose morale the state violence could not sag are now being forced to return their homes, literally, at gun point. □□□