

# Industrialization Debate: Searching for Anthropological Roots

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The findings of the anthropological village studies were never taken seriously by the early planners of India. The intricacies and complexities of caste politics and the village level household economy were lost in the huge mass of National Sample Survey data and the macro economic models of growth and development in the Five Year Plans initiated by Nehruvian socialism. It seems that the same story is now being repeated in the era of liberalization in which macro-level planners are talking in terms of growth rates, gigantic Special Economic Zones and rapid industrialization of the country.

In a leftist state like West Bengal which emphasized land reforms and the recording of sharecroppers, this macro thinking has taken a very interesting course of argumentation. Put briefly, the Left Front Government (LFG) leaders had been arguing in favour of industrialization in West Bengal within a macro-economic framework.

During the early 1990s the ruling LFG leaders argued that since land reform is a very successful endeavour in the state which raised the agricultural production and also the purchasing capacity of the peasantry, the state is the ideal ground for the establishment of capital intensive heavy and medium industries. One may name it *industrialization-through-land reform argument*.

The second line of argument came from more theoretically oriented Marxists of the ruling parties, who claimed that industries would be able to absorb the extra labour force engaged in agriculture in disguised form and also owing to the introduction of mechanization in traditional means of cultivation. The proponents of this line of argument also stated that agriculture owing to land fragmentation caused by inheritance of property rights and hike in input costs have already become non-viable for many small and marginal farmer families. This argument may be termed as *employment-through-industrialization*. It may be noted here that the land reform initiated by the LFG resulted in pattaholders having small plots.

Needless to say that both these arguments were not supported by any empirical survey done in real situations of industrialization in West Bengal either by the government or by any independent researcher. On the contrary, the two substantial government reports, one prepared by Nirmal Mukarji and Debabrata Bandopadhyay in 1993 and the other by Jayati Ghosh in 2004 showed with a lot of data collected from government sources that land reform and sharecropper registration still remained incomplete tasks and landlessness had been increasing in West Bengal. The Jayati Ghosh report did not mention a single line in favour of industrialization as a development strategy for West Bengal in its long list of recommendations. The report suggested better land reform and formation of active cooperatives as well as more government responsibilities towards the creation of improved marketing facilities for the rural cultivators. The empirical findings of government's own reports by experts were largely ignored by the

government and huge investments for capital intensive industrialization was encouraged and justified by the aforementioned macroeconomic arguments.

At a later stage, when acquisition of huge tracts of fertile agricultural land began to take place giving rise to peasant resistance in a number of districts in West Bengal which culminated into Singur and Nandigram crises, another line of macroeconomic argument came into existence. In this argument it was stated with facts and figures that since all the land for proposed industrial investment for the coming years is only a very small fraction of the total amount of cultivated and cultivable land, so there would be no food crisis in the state if those lands are acquired. This is the third line of justification for industrialization and can be labeled as the *no-food-insecurity-by-industrialization* argument.

The fourth argument may be termed as the *historical necessity of industrialization*. This argument was advanced by the Nobel Laureate economist Amartya Sen which he expressed in his long interview in a newspaper in 2007. But there are other less famous followers of this argument. The proponents of this line of argument claim by citing examples from the pages of the history of Western Europe that industrialization is an inevitable stage after agriculture and accordingly, the peasants of Bengal have to give away their agricultural land for the establishment of industries.

There is still another line of argument in favour of the recent industrialization move of the LFG and this is the last in the list. Interestingly, this argument is often leveled by the opposition leaders of present day West Bengal. The followers of this argument advocate industrialization on uncultivated or monocrop land in the relatively arid districts of the state, viz., Purulia, Bankura and Paschim Medinipur in order to protect the highly fertile multicrop lands in Hooghly, Bardhaman or Purba Medinipur. This argument may be termed as *industrialization on uncultivated land*.

While identifying all the above classes of arguments in favour of industrialization, one should keep it in mind that these arguments do not form rigid watertight compartments. Most often, the supporters of industrialization utilize a combination of the argument classes to strengthen their positions. For example, *employment-through-industrialization* argument is often combined with *historical necessity of industrialization*. Likewise, *industrialization-through-land reform* may be mixed with *employment-through-industrialization argument*.

For one thing the arguments have missed the micro level ground realities which the anthropologists discover through their painstaking fieldwork. Second, all the arguments are based on some form of fallacy. For example, the first argument did not look into situations of land acquisition which would pauperize the land reform beneficiaries and drastically reduce their purchasing capacity. In fact, this is a self-defeating logic. The second argument also did not take into consideration the fact that in a land scarce and high population density state like West Bengal modern capital intensive and technologically advanced industries may not absorb the so-called extra labour force. The third argument totally ignored the fact of household level food insecurity and lowered purchasing capacity of displaced farmers which is a common feature of every case of land acquisition under the present legal arrangement. The fourth argument is the

weakest among all the five simply because comparison between Western Europe during industrial revolution and present day West Bengal is nothing but an infantile exercise by the best brains in economics. The fifth one though apparently looks like a pro-peasant argument is actually anti-poor because it supports acquisition of uncultivated and/or monocrop land as if people do not depend on those lands nor do the departments of rural development and irrigation have any responsibility to transform those lands into multicrop and cultivable lands.

In case of forest management also the West Bengal government must be credited for initiating the Joint Forest Management (JFM) movement as early as 1989 through the formation of forest protection committees (FPCs) by which the poor and the marginalized sections of rural Bengal particularly in tribal areas were empowered to manage forest in their own locality. The government in this case also depended more on macro-level data and some aggregate figures to show the benefits gained by the poor forest product users in the different districts of West Bengal. There was virtually no attempt to understand the difficulties and problems of JFM in particular Forest Protection Committees. Like land reforms, the success of JFM was measured in terms of large and quantitative figures, not based on specific case studies.

Against this backdrop, it is interesting to describe some anthropological cases in specific small regions and villages from Paschim Medinipur district which reveal the transformations of the development initiatives of the LFG in course of its more than thirty years of governance. The first case shows the initial phase of the LFG in which its local level leaders emphasized more on agriculture and egalitarian land distribution even in the absence of codified laws. The second case shows that even when backed by government orders and policies, failure to attend the real needs of the poor on the part of the local leadership how the much publicized JFM movement could not make much progress. The third case reveals the entry of market forces in the wake of the successful potato cultivation which ultimately put pressure on the forest although in the absence of cooperatives the poor suffered exploitation in the hands of middlemen. The fourth case shows how an educational institution despite having pro-poor research objectives mandated by the West Bengal Legislative Assembly, could not even manage its own campus land in a participatory manner by catering to the needs of the local tribal populations. The fifth and the final case reveals the climax of transformation of the development initiatives of the LFG. At this stage, the pro-land reform, pro-JFM Left Front Government became busy in building industries on fertile agricultural land. The final field anecdote foresees the peasant resistance against development through land acquisition and the recent setback for the left in panchayat elections.

### **Dahi : Law vs Unwritten Rules**

Dahi is not a fictitious name of a village like other classical village names frequently found in the anthropological literature. Like Gokulpur, Amba, Muradanga and Balijuri it is a real village in the Nayagram block of Paschim Medinipur. It is a multi-caste village situated on the bank of the Subarnarekha river bordering the Gopiballavpur block of Jhargram sub-division. After the devastating flood of 1978 in West Bengal which also affected the Nayagram block,

a huge piece of land emerged in the Subarnarekha river near Dahi. In Bengali language this type of land is called 'Char'. Char land has many interesting socio-political, legal as well as cultural connotations. Firstly, according to law the Land and Land Reforms Department of the Govt. of West Bengal can neither record nor distribute char land before a certain period of time which is twenty years and even after that period it may take many years for the Department to put this type of land under record. Secondly, it is a matter of common experience that the people living in the vicinity of *chars* begin to use them in a variety of ways ranging from the collection of fuel and fodder to regular cultivation of crops and building of houses. Thirdly, since the rights over char land is not being codified in law for a long period of time intense disputes over its use by the individual families and social groups are found to take place quite frequently. These disputes also lead to violent conflicts and *char lands* can become a perennial source of law and order problem to the local administration. The nature of use and the conflict over the *char* depend on geographical, socioeconomic as well as political factors. For the local people in general *char* is a new kind of natural resource which always contains a built-in element of risk and uncertainty. It is a pity that the anthropologists who have done their field researches in West Bengal have not yet paid any attention to the socio-cultural dynamics of *char* land reclamation. Interestingly, unlike the Social Anthropologists, the great novelist Tarasankar Bandopadhyay wrote wonderful accounts of village level family feuds centering round *char* land in his novels on Bengal villages.

The *char* which arose near Dahi was a semi-lunar piece of alluvial land of about forty acres having a slim natural land bridge with the village. Within a year, a local variety of tall grass started to grow on this land. The villagers, particularly the members of the poorer families began to collect that grass for the thatching of their huts. There was no dispute or conflict over the collection of this natural resource which grew abundantly on the *char*. After a few years, some enterprising peasant families started to reclaim portions of the *char* land by clearing the grass and began to sow paddy seeds and some rabi crops. The yield of the crops was not unsatisfactory and gradually the number of families who undertook *char* reclamation increased. Side by side, smaller disputes and minor conflicts over the establishment of the rights of cultivation on *char* land through reclamation also began to take place. In course of time, this piece of land became a good source of economic support for many families in different villages of the locality. But this transformation of a *char* land from a natural resource base for the collection of grass to regular cultivation of food and cash crops was not a very peaceful transition. Violent conflicts started to occur and the local panchayat and the political leaders of all shades entered into the arena of resource utilisation. Series of meetings at various levels cutting across caste, community and village boundaries were organized and there evolved a set of unwritten rules regarding the use of the *char*. The rules were interesting :

1. Only the people of Dahi were permitted to enjoy the usufructory rights of cultivation on *char* land since it had a physical connection only with this village.
2. The families of Dahi who have lost their arable land in the flood of 1978 were not allowed to reclaim land on the *char* since if permitted these

families might appeal to the court to receive legal entitlements on reclaimed land. The local political leadership at that moment did not want to invite legal dispute on the use of *char* land.

3. No family was permitted to reclaim land on the *char* through the employment of wage labour although during the different stages of agriculture one was allowed to do it.

The common element of all these three rules can be phrased by the single word "exclusion" which served two purposes, viz., (i) minimization of conflict and legal disputes and (ii) imposition of a constraint upon relatively wealthy families while they reclaim land on the *char* for cultivation. A student studied the impact of these unwritten rules in 1988 by collecting data on the pattern of landholding of the families who cultivated on the *char* land. His survey revealed that out of sixty households 95 percent could reclaim only 0.5-1.00 acres of land. The pattern of recorded landholding of all the households of Dahi showed a far greater range containing 36 percent households owning 2.6-4.1 acres of arable land. The rules of *exclusion* had protected the poor and the less powerful families on the *char* which was transformed from an open access resource to common property resource by the villagers themselves who rescued it from the "tragedy of the commons". Three years ago while visiting Gopiballavpur this writer learnt to his surprise that the Forest Department has started plantation on the land and the villagers have also begun to cut down those trees for timber and fuel wood. So conflict with the Forest Department has now started because people think social forestry on the *char* may threaten their economic survival through agriculture on reclaimed land.

### **BALIJURI : GOVERNMENT ORDER AND GROUND REALITY**

In the late nineties, with two M.Sc. dissertation students this writer took up a study of the joint forest management (JFM) experiment in a multi-ethnic village named Balijuri which is located within a radius of less than twenty kilometres from the illustrious Arabari forest of Paschim Medinipur. By combining anthropological fieldwork and forest department records anomalies as regards the JFM initiatives in Balijuri were noted. The punishment register of the concerned beat office showed a remarkable decline in illegal felling of Sal, Eucalyptus and Akashmoni trees within the jurisdiction of the Balijuri forest protection committee. But field observations and the narratives of the inhabitants of the village revealed that illegal felling of the trees did really decline for a brief period owing to the initial enthusiasm of the villagers created by an active beat officer during the early nineties. After a few months the Santals residing in the village as well as outside it innovated a peculiar strategy to fetch logs of trees used for making ploughs from the forest under protection. They were badly in need for logs and vigilance of the newly formed forest protection committee was interfering with their age-old customary rights over forests. In fact, they were also members of those committees. So what they did was very simple. During the summer month of Baisakh when the Santals practise their hunting ritual (*Shikar Parab* in local parlance) they began to fell logs by entering into the forests. The Forest Department till today relaxes their colonial Act during these days for about a fortnight. The smaller hunting expeditions in the different regions of South

West Bengal ultimately culminate into the biggest hunting expedition (*Disam Sendra*) in the forest of the Ajodhya hills of Purulia district. One may still find groups of Santal men either going into the forests in the morning or coming out drunk in the evening with bows, arrows and battle axes on the streets of Medinipur town, in the buses and in local trains frequently with dead squirrels but very rarely with a hunted wild boar. But one may also find some hunting party carrying a big pole of Sal tree or an Akashmoni log on the streets since they know it very well that on those days the Forest Department officials will not punish them for cutting down trees during their festive days. Incidentally, during the fieldwork at Balijuri the survey team saw the active members of the forest protection committees shouting over microphones on the State highway leading to Ranigunj. They made repeated appeals that ran like this; "Friends, hunt animals but do not hunt trees." Suffice it to say that the appeal was not fully respected. Both animals and trees were hunted. In one year, the Forest Department permitted only one pole of a tree to be carried by a hunter and the extra ones were confiscated and later sold by the Forest Beat Office to the villagers who had to produce a certificate of an elected panchayat member. The price was six rupees per pole and it was in the mid-nineties. But what is more important is the fact that nobody was neither punished nor were those fellings recorded in the register of the Beat Office.

#### **CHANDRAKONA : THE BREAKDOWN OF SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES**

The place is a four-point crossing thirty-five kilometres from the Medinipur town in the north and its older name is 'Sat Bankura.' The metal roads from Medinipur town to Bankura and from Ghatal to Sarenga meet at this crossing. The historical temple town Chandrakona lies near to this place. About thirty years ago, the place was typically rural but at present it has been transformed into one of the most booming business centres of West Bengal. A PhD student of the Department of Anthropology at Vidyasagar University working on the processes of urbanization did some research in and around Chandrakona which revealed certain interesting facts on the relationship between potato cultivation and sustainability of Sal forest in the region. Here are some of his research findings.

Rapid socio-economic changes began to occur in this area with the advent of numerous shallow tube wells installed by enterprising peasant families since the 1960s. Then the rice growing peasant families became potato growers within a very short period of time and since the 1970s, nearly twenty cold stores were built up by the enterprising businessmen in the region. Along with cold stores a transport business network developed at 'Road Chandrakona' depending on the marketing of potatoes. Fortunately the groundwater level in this region is still not very much alarming. In any case, the cycle of green revolution at Chandrakona was complete within the late eighties. Sufficient water at low cost, fertile agricultural land, a productive cash crop, good storage facilities and a modern transport network. But what all these have to do with Sal leaf collection? The connection is quite interesting and the narrative runs like this. The demand for Sal leaves has increased by leaps and bounds within less than a decade, particularly with the advent of the small Sal leaf plate making machines. Just a few years ago, the women of a poor peasant family used to bring about two thousand leaves in two weekly market days. The same family is now bringing in

nearly two thousand hand stitched Sal leaf plates in the same spot named 'Kendtala' located about three hundred metres from 'Sat Bankura'. Earlier, there were no middlemen but now they have appeared in the scene. They collect the Sal leaf plates irrespective of the size and quality of the leaves which are first kept in stores and then truckloads of Sal leaf plates are supplied within and outside the State. Kailash Malhotra and Debal Deb observed as late as in the early 1990s that the villagers did not pluck leaves with holes as well as younger leaves which helped in the sustainable conservation of the Sal trees to a great extent. But the leaf plate manufacturing machine can now nicely sandwich a thin piece of plastic between the leaves having holes. More interestingly, the concept of 'Kendtala' as a weekly market is fast disappearing from the cognitive map of the local residents. At present, it is a full-fledged daily market.

### **MAHESPUR : V U CAMPUS**

When a student of the Anthropology Department of Vidyasagar University first entered into the village Mahespur where the Tatas have built up their pig iron industry, one resident of the village enquired : "After the Tata company will the University now acquire some of our agricultural land for further expansion?" The question was significant. The narratives of a Munda rickshaw puller, Raghunath Singh, about what they really felt when the University campus was established on their common property resources are self-explanatory : "This was the land of the Rajas but they did not built up walls like you. They allowed us to graze our cattle here, our boys played on this ground, it was our road to the village. But now we are facing difficulties. Your guards intercept us every now and then." After the normal demise of this old Munda man who ended his long career of struggle by begging, the Vidyasagar University again received about forty acres of land right within the heart of Raghunath's village named Muradanga. It was a large piece of vest land which could have been distributed to the poor tribal farmers with proper arrangements for minor irrigation. The inhabitants of Muradanga always complain about the activities of the irrigation Department who according to them made no arrangement for canal in their village. One can see a big canal running through their village which remains dry throughout the year. After getting the land within Muradanga, the university authority first tried to encircle the plot with barbed wire fencing within which thousands of saplings of eucalyptus, akashmoni, mango, jackfruit, etc.were planted. The place was also given a name—the third plot of the campus. But within a short period of time the fence was broken and many of the good varieties of fruit trees were taken away by some of the enterprising villagers. Meanwhile, the university authority had given a yearly contract to a Calcutta based private security agency to protect its campus which included the third plot as well. The tribal villagers gradually developed an interesting relationship with the guards of the security agency by which they could graze their cattle particularly the plough carrying bullocks, in the afternoon. In the initial stage the daring peasants however brought their cattle to graze in the first and the second plots of the campus in the night. The third plot had already been reconverted to common property resource of the people of Muradanga. All these disturbing episodes led the university authority to devise another strategy to utilize the third plot. As many as nine academic departments were requested by the university authority to submit research oriented proposals

for the utilization of the third plot. Many interesting proposals were submitted which also included one by the Anthropology Department. The Department of Anthropology proposed to involve the people of Muradanga for the protection of the land through benefit sharing in the line of the joint forest management strategy which helped the Arabari forest protection committee of Medinipur to win a prestigious international award for achieving sustainable development through people's participation. The authorities of Vidyasagar University admired the proposal of social fencing advanced by the Anthropology Department by saying that "It is under active consideration." But that was all. The land is still legally owned by the university and customarily used by the villagers and both the stake-holders are always under threat from each other. About two years ago the district administration has revoked the ownership of this land from the University since the latter could not utilize it. The land has not been distributed to the villagers either. It is learned that this land may be given to some private organization for building a school.

### **TATAS**

During the mid-nineties, three students of the Department of Anthropology went to do fieldwork for their M.Sc. dissertations in a village named Paschim Amba, only eight kilometres from the Medinipur railway station. They selected a hamlet inhabited by the Koras and started measuring human bodies and collected data on family, marriage and kinship following the standard anthropological methodology. In one usual afternoon in the Department, during discussion about the colourful Kora marriage ceremony, a student remarked, "The colour and pomp of Kora marriage will soon go away since their lands are being taken over for a big pig iron industry of the Tatas." The remark of the student was a sufficient jolt to recall the agony of Trilochan Rana of Paschim Amba. Rana was then leading a militant movement against the acquisition of agricultural land for private industries by the State Government. Trilochan Rana and struggling peasants of the locality depicted how they were trying to protest against this kind of anti-peasant policy suddenly adopted by the Left Government in the wake of the liberalization in India. Ironically, Mr Rana, who an ex-Naxalite, took refuge under the Congress party to organize this peasant movement.

### **THE OLD MAN OF KANTAPAL**

Industrialization in economically backward areas, joint forest management on degraded forests, production records in cash crops, building up a non-traditional university within a rural milieu and social forestry on chars to check soil erosion—all are definitely sustainable development efforts if these could take into consideration the needs and aspiration of the people who first shared the pains but not the gains of development initiatives. So the events that took place in Gokulpur, Amba, Muradanga, Balijuri and Dahi are not simply local phenomena narrated by some anthropologists of Vidyasagar University. Viewed from a holistic perspective they show both longitudinal and cross-sections of the development scenario of West Bengal in the context of globalization. These villages are situated at the intersection of the local and the global politico-economic forces. For the sake of simplification, let us place Dahi first and Gokulpur last and then one can understand the evolution of the attitude of a so-called pro-peasant Left Government in West Bengal. And if anybody wants to

look at the cross-section of the development initiative then surely these villages represent the dynamics of people, politics and policy in the context of forest, agriculture, industry and modern educational institution. The problems of sustainable development should be viewed under this background. Since everything revolves around politics and development efforts are not outside its orbit. Anthropologists should not avoid policies and politics in their studies. Now an anecdote from one of the villages in the rural area of Kharagpur : The event occurred near Kantapal which is one of the ten mouza villages affected by land acquisition for a non-existent industry. The acquisition has affected more than three thousand families including sharecroppers and scheduled tribes and more than five hundred acres of fertile agricultural land was acquired in the year 1996 which still remains unutilized. Since no cultivation could be carried out on this huge chunk of land for three successive seasons and the whole area has been turned into a grazing field, the dykes (*ail* in local parlance, to demarcate land plots) have started to break down. Two consequences followed. Firstly, the peasants who still had unacquired land adjoining the acquired area were facing a lot of troubles in protecting their agricultural plots from the grazing cattle. In the pre-acquisition period there were other farmers who also shared the responsibility of driving out the cattle from the paddy fields during agricultural season. Driving out cattle is always a collective affair in the rural areas. After acquisition, the number of farmers have decreased in this area. Moreover, cows and buffaloes of the milkmen of the urban areas of Kharagpur town have also been venturing to exploit this huge chunk of land. Secondly, after the breakdown of dykes the people of the area who used to collect various types of small fishes from those agricultural plots during the rainy season were not getting any fish from those plots since fish did not grow in the plots when crops were not cultivated on them even when they were full of rainwater. These were some of the micro-ecological effects of large-scale land acquisition on the sheer survival of the peasantry, let alone its impact on sustainable agricultural development. All the villagers were denouncing the Government for the takeover of their fertile agricultural land for the Century Textiles Company which was not established. Gradually the question arose that if the people of the area really disliked the ruling Government then why did the majority of them voted the same party to power in all kinds of elections? The reply to this question came from an old man: "Look baboo, we poor people have to ride on some animal blindfolded. After riding for sometime, we begin to realize whether the animal happens to be a tiger or a bullock, but very often we have to twist its tail in order to keep the animal in its right direction." After Singur, Nandigram and the recent panchayat elections, the comment of the old man seems to be more symbolic than it appeared earlier.

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