

Five Years Later

LOOKING BACK AT THE PAST AND LOOKING AHEAD TO THE FUTURE, people are not yet convinced that they are in the process of building a democratic, harmonious and stable society under the rule of law despite a tectonic shift in electoral power balance in a number of states including West Bengal. It was January 2007. The people of Nandigram had no other options. Only by confronting the mighty CPM and its well-entrenched security establishment could they realise their cherished wish of salvaging land while thwarting the fascistic march of 'marxist' mercenaries. Five years on, people, mostly poor and marginal farmers, having small parcels of land, are not sure whether they have really succeeded in burying the land grab drive once and for all as the situation still looks gloomy, if not volatile. The movement started January 3-4, 2007 and in no time it turned violent and how all it led to the March 14 firing is now history. And that historic event changed the entire political complexion of Bengal. 14 martyrs are being remembered every year no doubt but people continue to nurse the feelings of helplessness. The movement had potential to develop into a wider mass upheaval, with appeal to broad masses both here and elsewhere, notwithstanding unprecedented repression and tremendous sacrifices made by the affected people of Nandigram. It certainly created waves of popular support across the country, raising a lot of contentious issues, challenging the notorious 1894 Land Acquisition Act, a British legacy and the western model of industrialisation at the expense of sustainable small peasant economy. Not for nothing it got international focus. That the movement, otherwise developed horizontally at the local initiative, was finally hijacked by right-wing forces is another matter.

To blame it on the right for this tragedy makes little sense. After all the non-traditional left, better to say the far left, never challenged the left rule seriously during the 34 years of suffocation, while implicitly advocating a 'lesser evil' theory which in turn helped the leftists to prolong their bloody engagements on all fronts, making the state a living hell for ordinary people. The far left avoided to fight the official left on its own turf with a kind of passivity theorising that any anti-left push might create a rightwing backlash. Ironically, it is still mired in that 'lesser evil' syndrome.

True, the new dispensation that has replaced the CPM autocracy in Bengal, has not offered anything new in policy orientation other than periodically announcing peace and development, rather peaceful development, to bring about a bright future for all. There is a growing call for change even in the changed context of political climate. People cannot eat emotions and dreams eternally, they face the ground reality that is as harsh as it was during the CPM regime.

The proposed 'chemical hub' that triggered a near mass rebellion in Nandigram is not on the agenda of the new rulers. But the very sponsors of the 'Hub' are not out of the picture. They are coming back with an undisclosed business and industry package to settle in a nearby river islet—Nayachar—not far away from Nandigram. Rumours have it that the new government entered into a secret agreement with those controversial promoters to develop eco-tourism in the char, whatever it means with all its *ancillary* industries ignoring the earlier warning by the

scientific community and environmentalists that the islet in question is still in the deltaic formative stage with unconsolidated sediments below the surface. In other words the people of Nandigram who suffered so much for the wrong industrial policy of the previous government have reasons to worry about what lies in store for them.

Not that 'Nandigram' and 'Singur' were the only anti-land grab agitations that influenced and inspired public opinion in a big way throughout the country. Anti-POSCO agitation continues to have cascading effect despite severe repression by the Odisha government. Then 'Kudankulam' in Tamil Nadu is a recent phenomenon. So is Jaitapur in Maharashtra. If the government shows a little bit of restraint at the moment in the forcible acquiring of land while seeking some amendments to the age-old Land Act, it is because the economy in general right now is facing too many road blocks, both domestically and globally, to keep the targeted growth rate going. In today's economic culture no economy, big or small, can develop in isolation. They are down-rating the magical growth rate all the time and failing to tame the double-digit inflation, albeit they never lose nerve to sell a 'better tomorrow'. They also hope American recovery which will stimulate the economy everywhere, is not a distant reality anymore. But America continues to face huge economic and social problems at home. And internationally it is not yet out of the woods in Afghanistan and Iraq. Also, the runaway European debt crisis poses a serious danger to world economic recovery and global financial stability. India cannot bypass global fall-out that stands in the way of what they call robust growth.

A slight sign of recovery will doubly encourage the advocates of 'third generation reforms' to resort to forcible land acquisition again. The tragedy is there is no force on the left to carry on the spirit of 'Nandigram'. Five years later 'Nandigram' seems to be a passing reference in electoral politics. Progressives in this part of the globe are looking for way-outs in 'Occupy Wall Street' movement as they once did in indentifying their cause with the Polish Solidarity movement only to land up in ideological wilderness in the end. □□□