

DEVELOPMENT OF THE 'BEAUTIFUL'

Nonadanga—Continuing Singur Tragedy

Parag

[Millions of people in India build their homes and shelters on land technically 'owned' by the state. In West Bengal, the Trinamool Congress government has been selling off this land to corporations, which means the squatters and slum residents are brutally evicted. All in the name of 'development'. Recently officials have set their sites on the Nonadanga slum in Kolkata, attempting to displace residents and jailing all who resist. The following article originally published in Radical Notes provides a useful political and economic analysis of the situation.]

THE 'BEAUTIFUL' AND THE "developed" entwined as it is with power, must make war on its underside, the 'ugly', the toiling, and demolish it, hide it under the shine of corporate towers and election promises. The brutal violence of the present process of 'development' in India comes buttressed with State Repression. This is exposed yet again when the Trinamool-led West Bengal government with its brute police force and Kolkata Municipal Development Corporation (KMDA) bulldozed and burnt the houses of 800 slum-dwellers in Nonadanga, South Kolkata on 30th March 2012 in the name of 'beautification'. This is backed up with continuous state repression—residents who tried to resist their homes being demolished were beaten, picked up and put into police vans. Picking up pieces from their broken homes, setting up temporary shelters with vinyl sheets and a community kitchen, the residents organized a protest march the next day, and again on 4th April. This was met with brutal Police lathicharge and abuses, male plain-clothes personnel pounced on the women, kicked twenty-one year Rita Patra in her advanced pregnancy, split the head of two-and-a-half year old Joy Paswan. A sit-in demonstration was organised on 8th April—police forcefully arrested 67 people and again on 9th April, 114 student protestors were arrested from College Street. Seven activists of various mass organizations have been sent to police custody till 12th April with non-bailable warrants and allegations of 'stockpiling of arms and ammunitions in Nonadanga' doing the rounds in the Chief Minister's press statements. Yesterday and again today 11th April, a huge consignment of police has cordoned off the entire area and the threat of imminent demolition even of the temporary tents and community kitchen looms large, reminding people of the situation in Singur of 2nd December 2006. A mass hunger strike has meanwhile started in the area by various progressive organizations, activists and intellectuals, which the state machinery is readying to crush.

The build-up to this has been the spate of eviction drives going on in the city under state supervision (read: repression) to hand over land to the corporate sharks at throw-away prices. All the roadside hawkers' huts and shops and markets along an 8 km stretch have been demolished by the side of E M Bypass a few days ago. For Mamata's '*poriborton*' [change], the working masses have to pay a price. The threat of an imminent eviction was looming large in Nonadanga days before the eviction drive. These are the people who have earlier been evicted from canal banks across Kolkata and have been resettled here and continue to be harassed by the networks of the local Trinamool and CPI(M) goons. Apprehending the worst,

the residents met the Urban Development minister, Firhad Hakim who said that there will be eviction only for the 'newcomers'. On the day before the scheduled date of eviction, the dwellers again went to meet the Chief Minister, but were stopped and arrested by the police just as they started their journey from Nonadanga. People of the locality then formed an independent forum named *Uchhed Protirodh Committee* (Eviction Protest Committee), with the help of several people and organisations who are supporting the movement who are now being accused of being close to Maoists.

The police, administration and a section of media is playing on the hashed argument that the evicted people were 'illegal' dwellers and 'encroachers' in the area, that they do not possess any legal ownership documents etc. The history of colony movement in West Bengal was to resettle people who have come to Kolkata from elsewhere, and the vast majority of population in the areas like Jadavpur, Baghajatin, Garia etc were once refugees. These 'encroachers' have arrived in the city pushed by the crisis of agriculture in the rural areas, in search of any type of employment, some have been pushed here after being evicted from one place to another, and many have come from the Sundarbans after their homes and lands have been devastated by the cyclone Aila in 2009. If the people here are 'illegal', it is the State's problem, which constitutionally guarantees the 'right of livelihood', corollary of which is the right to land and habitation. Besides, their demand of an adequate rehabilitation is also perfectly within the ambit of law. So, where is the question of being 'illegal'?

The obvious also does not point out that what is 'legal' may not be necessarily ethical. In fact, as history shows, apart the regime of law set to protect the property rights of the rulers, the coming in of any new slightly progressive law or the amendment of an old one is almost always as a result of mass movements which were fought on the premise of such demands that were deemed as 'illegal' previously by the legal system. The 'law and order problem' approach of the State backfired when the struggles in Singur and Nandigram forced the government to consider changing the British era 1894 Land Acquisition Act. Every private land ownership in the world is basically a sort of forceful occupancy, some days earlier or some days later, and the modern state has come in between to stamp some of them legal and some illegal, according to its class interest.

Brutal eviction drives have become normal in the ruling class agenda to pauperise the rural areas and move the thus insecure working masses to the cities, and restructure the cities themselves. Huge 'industrial model towns' and cities find no mention of workers housing even in the grand 'master plans'. This is seen everywhere from Guwahati to Bhubaneswar to Raipur to the resettlement colonies of Bawana and Bhalasva in Delhi, and Kolkata is no exception. For one, in Kolkata the Land Revenue Department had acquired lands around the Nonadanga region about 25 years back to distribute them among the poor homeless people of the city. Since then, while a resettlement colony has been built up for the evicted people from other places, for the last few years, the wetlands and fisheries have been filled up and the land steadily sold in phases and parts to different companies and real estate developers who work in tandem with Trinamool and CPI(M) government officials and local goons. A section from

among the settlers are also bought over given their precarious condition. Nonadanga is at just a stone's throw from the eastern metropolitan bypass behind such glitzy corporate hospitals like Fortis, Ruby and Desunand and plans are on to transfer the land at throwaway prices to big real-estate projects by 'Urbana' and IT hubs. Obviously, in such a strategic location in a metropolis, they will not tolerate slums and 'all these dirty people'.

Struggle against the evictions is ongoing in Kolkata, as in many other cities across the country. In Kolkata, slum-dwellers of different places are fighting against eviction and for housing, livelihood and the cost connected to their reproduction of their labour. These movements however have still not been able to build up solidarity among themselves and are still localised. The State and mainstream political parties are trying as always to create internal divisions among several sections of residents using their vulnerability and contradictions of their immediate interest. Advancement and generalisation of struggle can only throw out these problems from the arena of mass movements. □□□