The meaning of Nandigram: Corporate land invasion, people's power, and the Left in India

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Abstract: This article discusses the events at Nandigram in West Bengal where in 2006–7, a Left Front government collaborated with an Indonesian corporate group to forcibly acquire land from local peasants and construct a Special Economic Zone. The events are placed against the broad processes of accumulation by dispossession through which peasants are losing their land and corporate profits are given priority over food production. The article looks at the working and implications of the policies and the way in which a Communist Party–led government had become complicit with such processes over the last decade. It critically examines the logic that the government offered for the policies: that of the unavoidable necessity of industrialization, demonstrating that industrialization could have been done without fresh and massive land loss and that industries of the new sort do not generate employment or offset the consequences of large scale displacements of peasants. The article's central focus is on the peasant resistance in the face of the brutalities of the party cadres and the police. We explore the meaning of the victory of the peasants at Nandigram against the combined forces of state and corporate power, especially in the context of the present neo-liberal conjuncture.

Keywords: land struggles, Nandigram, neo-liberalism, peasant resistance, West-Bengal

Nandigram is the name of a cluster of villages in Purba Medinipur district in West Bengal, the Indian state that has been ruled by a Left Front government uninterruptedly since 1977—the longest period that communists have been democratically voted into power anywhere in the world. Many poor farmers live in Nandigram, most of them Muslims and the rest are “low” and “scheduled” (ex-untouchable) castes. For much of 2007, they managed to keep all state functionaries, including the police, out of their vil-

lages as they resisted the forced takeover of their land by the state on behalf of a foreign multinational company.

The name has, therefore, come to signify much more than a place. Nandigram is invoked wherever peasants in India oppose the forced acquisition of their land. Multinationals and state governments worry about peasant action when they remember Nandigram. It is uncanny that such mighty powers should be haunted by mere peasants. What is most uncanny is that Indian

leftist parties, previously strident critics of corporate land invasions, turned into neo-liberalism's most determined defenders at Nandigram (All India Citizens' Initiative 2007; Banerjee 2008; G. Roy 2008; Sarkar 2007).

It all began with the question of who should be allowed to live on and make use of agricultural land. Critical issues included the lack of transparency and undemocratic character of the decision making on land transfers, the ecological impact of turning agricultural land into industrial zones, the level of compensation to be paid to farmers and, most important, non-owning sharecroppers and agricultural laborers and the lack of livelihood possibilities and social security that land transfer would leave them with. In 2006, these issues came to a climax as the Left Front government in West Bengal forced through a spate of land transfers from peasants to large corporations: protest became more visible and uncompromising, gaining support from West Bengal's major Opposition party, the Trinamul Congress (TMC), as well as from the media and radical Left activists.

Nandigram farmers, who had always supported leftist parties, rebelled in early January 2007 when they were told that their land, villages, and homes were to be handed over to an Indonesian corporate group to build a Special Economic Zone. Ironically, this happened to be the Indonesian Selim Group, economic advisers of the erstwhile Suharto government—which probably massacred more communists than Hitler—and shunned by most Asian governments because of the highly speculative nature of their operations. When Nandigram peasants learned of the deal, they fortified their villages and ousted the administration, police, and many of the loyal Communist Party cadres from the locality to ensure that their land would not be forcibly annexed. In reaction, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M]), the dominant partner in West Bengal's Left Front government, repeatedly let loose armed party cadres and the state police on the peasants of Nandigram, to shoot, kill, torture, maim, blind, gang rape, and sexually molest—abuses that have been widely documented by journalists, independent inquiry

commissions, the National Human Rights Commission, and the Central Bureau of Investigation. Nandigram, then, is a story about how a harsh neo-liberal regime gets installed in the name of development: in this case, through a combination of Stalinism and neo-liberalism.¹ It is also a story about how this is resisted.

Sliding toward corporate communism

The Indian political scene is a highly fragmented one. At the Centre, various coalitions come and go, either dominated by the right-of-center Congress Party or by the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), a militant right-wing outfit of Hindu extremists that systematically organizes pogroms against Indian Muslims and Christians to augment its electoral base.² Then there is a plethora of regional parties, some of them organized by *dalit* (ex-untouchable) leaders. Left parties, especially the CPI(M), have powerful mass bases in West Bengal in the east, Tripura in the northeast, and Kerala in the extreme south. Left Front governments, currently in power in all three states, are secular regimes that countermand religious strife and oppose the growing tilt in Indian foreign policy toward the United States.

On the economic front, however, there is a consensus that cuts across party divisions. In the early 1990s, encouraged by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, Congress introduced "structural adjustments," throwing open sectors of the economy to foreign investment, folding back public sector undertakings and welfare spending, promoting middle-class consumerism, and clearing slums to carry out real estate aspirations. The BJP, when it ruled at the center, likewise zealously pursued such policies. Left governments embraced the new thrust in the mid-1990s. In West Bengal land reforms were abandoned, existing industries were allowed to go into terminal decline, and public health, roads, transport, and education were neglected. Moreover, the privatization of basic social services put them beyond the reach of the poor. Urban slums and petty trade were cleared from the streets, which began to flaunt spectacular

shopping malls and luxury residences. Whole villages were cleared to create space for speculative real estate investment and Export Promotion Zones for private companies. The turn became most pronounced and controversial in 2006, when the West Bengal government struck a deal with the Tata Group and handed over about 1,000 acres of immensely rich agricultural land at Singur for their small-car factory. The details of the deal and its rationale were not disclosed to the dispossessed. Facts were falsified and Singur was declared to be an arid and unproductive region. The move not only stripped landowners of their livelihood but also left thousands of sharecroppers and agricultural laborers stranded. The refusal by a large number of peasants to accept the compensation led to a historic peasant movement. Police and repressive laws were used to stifle public protest on the issue by farmers, opposition parties, radical movements, and students and intellectuals in Kolkata.

It was the Left Front government that introduced the bill to set up Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in 2003 and in 2005 the bill was passed by parliament with the approval of all political parties. This allowed multinational investment to control vast stretches of territory where normal labor and tax laws would not apply. Corporate land-grab—not all of them under multinationals—is a common occurrence all over India, especially in mineral rich areas, lush forest locales, and on the coastlines, where indigenous/tribal and low-caste people eke out a living and local land users are brutally evicted. When the Tatas attempted to acquire land at Kalinganagar in Orissa in 2006, the police opened fire on resisting tribal farmers, killing eleven of them (see Mishra 2006). To quell rural protest, various states have passed draconian laws against civil and democratic rights organizations. Often this is done in the name of fighting Maoists or Left extremists.³

It is to be noted that at a time when the entire world is witnessing a food crisis, India, with its massive population and spiraling inflation in food prices, is squandering away its rich food-producing resources at an alarming rate. In West Bengal alone, an estimated total of about 250,000

acres of agricultural land is scheduled to be transferred to industries, real estates, tourism, and other non-agricultural purposes. The alarming justification, as given by Chief Minister Bhattacharya (2007) in response to public criticism of the new policy by the historian Sumit Sarkar (2007), was that agriculture was a thing of the past: “the process of economic development evolves from agriculture to industry” and “it is incumbent on us to move ahead.”

There has not been a single cogent defense of the new land transfer policy by an economist close to the regime. Instead, the Left Front has reverted to abusing its critics, accusing them of “Luddism,” “right-wing deviation,” “extreme-Left infantilism,” “Maoism,” “communalism,” “a-political tendencies,” and “excessive moralism.” We, therefore, have no way of gauging how the mainstream Left reviews problems of the agrarian crisis and dwindling food production or environmental issues in the light of its new economic decisions; how it can explain the transfer of land on terms that are extremely favorable to the corporate sector but are ruinous for the present land users as a route to at least social democracy, if not socialism, in the future; why industries must displace many who manage to survive on agriculture to provide uncertain jobs to a smaller number of better placed workers; or how it will cope with the problem of the displaced poor in an overcrowded urban situation where no safety net or welfare exist. If so far its mantra of industrialization as the way of the future has appeared unconvincing to its critics, it is because we have not heard an answer to these questions.

If economists have not ventured into such explanations, state and party functionaries have done so. They have invoked two separate strands of arguments simultaneously. One is the neo-liberal logic: private enterprise and market forces should be unfettered for maximal effectivity. Of course, unfettered private enterprise is a myth as the corporate sector enjoys lavish state assistance (while the poor, even after thirty-one years of uninterrupted Left Front rule, do not enjoy anything by way of meaningful state welfare provisions). The other is the invocation of the Marx-

ist notion of invariant laws of history wherein a mode of production must cease before a more advanced one. This is augmented by the idea of a vanguard party, which understands the consciousness of the classes that it represents better than the classes do themselves, to the extent that it can countermand all expressions of their experience and consciousness if they contradict the party's decision. The idea of democracy is obviously attenuated: it shrinks to having elections every five years. Between one election and the next, the party in power can do what it wills.

West Bengal does, indeed, suffer from a huge unemployment problem. But that does not explain why industries should begin in areas where large populations subsist quite adequately on agriculture and must lose their livelihood if the new policies come into force. Singur, for instance, lay on one of the richest tracts in India and produced four to five crops annually.

We must also remember that modern industries do not create many jobs because they are not labor-intensive, but technology-dependent. Jobs, when available, go to skilled and educated employees, not to small peasants and agricultural laborers. Also, capital is notoriously mobile and the industrial landscape in the state is crowded with abandoned industries, under lock-out for decades. Much of the acquired land is often put to non-productive uses, usually for tourist hubs, residential buildings, and malls. The New Rajarhat Town that was built on the periphery of Kolkata, dislodged a flourishing and biodiverse economy of floriculture, orchards, agriculture, and fishing, displacing about 100,000 villagers. What is being built in its place are IT hubs, multi-crore rupee luxury residences, aquatic apartments where each floor has a swimming pool, expensive theme parks, and spectacular shopping malls (M. Roy 2005). None of this can be called industrialization or generates stable employment for the poor. Elsewhere, too, huge stretches of land are acquired forcibly, at terrible human and environmental costs, for state projects. The Centre and the West Bengal government have plans to build a nuclear power plant at Haripur in Purba Medinipur, on a cyclone-prone coast and very close to a populous town-

ship, disregarding all danger warnings and regulations (Bidwai 2008).

Strangely, while industrialization is fervently invoked, old industries that used to employ vast labor forces are allowed to remain closed for decades. In West Bengal, an estimated total of 55,000 "dead" factories dot the industrial landscape. In the early 1990s, an attempt was made by the Kanoria Jute Mill workers at Phuleswar in Howrah district to keep their locked-out mill open and run it on cooperative principles. The attempt eventually fizzled out as the Left government disapproved of the experiment. Most of these shuttered factories can be opened up to new industries or turned over to workers to manage on cooperative lines, as has been done in Argentina and Venezuela. If ownership laws needed to be changed, the Left Front has so far been in a most advantageous position to do so: its relations with the central government, until recently, have been most intimate and cordial. Quite obviously, the generation of employment for the rural and urban poor by setting up stable industries has not been a priority for the state. Nor are its critics "anti-industrialization," as the Left Front alleges, because they repeatedly have pointed out these alternative routes to industrialization.

There are other ways of expanding production and employment without land loss. Rural cooperatives can be promoted to provide ecologically sustainable agro-based manufacture, "dead" manufacturing units can be reopened with state aid, and instead of collaborating only with giant private concerns, the government could invest in joint ventures with small farmers in order to develop the potential uses of the land. One would have expected a Left Front government, well entrenched in power, to initiate such farmer friendly experiments. Instead, the economic vision of the Left Front is one of crony capitalism. The state invoked an old colonial law of 1894, which allows for land acquisition for public purposes. In colonial times, this law was used for government spending on canals and public roads. Now, states use it to transfer land to private enterprises, acquiring them with minimal compensation to land users, and selling them at

throwaway prices to global investors along with huge concessions in power and water rates.

Even the partners of the CPI(M) were kept in the dark about the various deals that the state government and corporate bodies—Indian and multinationals—entered into. Most pleas for transparency under the Right to Information Act were rejected. Party factsheets spread disinformation. Danger warnings by the Geological Survey of India and from the Green Bench of the Kolkata High Court were in certain cases ignored. A systematic withholding of information is combined here with an equally systematic lack of research on vital issues. If mapping was a colonial device for control, un-mapping has become the typical mode of power among post-modern states.

“We will not give up our land”

There is undoubtedly terrible rural poverty in parts of West Bengal and, consequently, a massive influx of rural immigrants to the cities in search for subsistence. Cities, however, provide no real shelter, nor do industries accommodate these unskilled, uneducated people. Migration to urban centers is distress—driven and displaced people survive under terrible conditions. The only mode of survival for the urban poor is the protection of a party, and they cling to whichever party controls the area (see A. Roy 2008). In fact, parties, especially the ruling party, have a controlling presence in almost all aspects of people's lives. Rural self-governing bodies or *panchayats*, possess substantial power and resources in West Bengal. These bodies are elected along party lines. Resources, too, get distributed as patronage along party lines, leading to dangerous outbursts of violence during elections as crucial material advantages are at stake. Although all parties try to impose total control in areas under their constituencies, the CPI(M) alone has enjoyed absolute state power for thirty-one years. Its patronage networks, its control over the police and bureaucracy, and the might of its cadres are unparalleled. There is little real distinction between state deliveries of public goods and

CPI(M) patronage networks, between party and government (see Bandyopadhyay and Ray 2005).

Land for industrialization is seized from peasants who are not destitute. Singur was particularly prosperous, and Nandigram is poorer but still solvent. Villagers told us, at Singur and at Nandigram, that they choose to retain the village homestead and their agriculture even when some sons and daughters go to the cities, looking for jobs. In fact, these urban salaries are mostly spent on adding to the rural landholding. American sociologists have long castigated such “backward linkages,” and circular migration between cities and villages as a sign of the typical backwardness of the Indian labor force, their ingrained inability to adjust to the industrial work discipline and modern urban life (see, e.g., Moore and Feldman 1960; Myers 1958). Conversely, historians of labor ascribe a distinct peasant rationality to such movements (Chandravarkar 1994; Morris 1965). Because neither the state nor employers offer permanent job assurance, training, adequate accident and illness insurance coverage, pensions, and an urban living environment where working class families can subsist safely and with dignity, the urban labor force requires a rural hinterland to recoup, retire to, and leave their families in. Unless the state and the capitalists change their ways drastically, ushering in at least a minimally welfare state, industries have to be parasitic on rural homes and links.

Villagers at Singur and at Nandigram told us that land is the source of continuous, simultaneous, and multiple occupations. It produces a surplus for the market while the homestead land contains fruit trees, a kitchen garden and a pond, yielding fresh fruit, vegetables and fish for domestic consumption. Common land provides pasture for domestic cattle which, in turn, provide milk for the various products that abound in the Bengali diet. Many villagers who were able to flee when Nandigram was invaded by the party cadres on 14 March 2007, told us that they came back soon, taking a huge risk, in order to feed their precious cattle. Multiple small-scale agro-industries and employment flourish around the villages: local marts, cold storages, power-tiller

production, home-based manufacture. The home provides a space where women undertake a number of processing operations after the harvest is brought in. They also run small-scale manufacturing units from the home. Nandigram women stitch garments for sale in Kolkata markets. Women thus see themselves as producers of surplus, important earners and contributors to the family budgets, whereas modern factories employ few women who work under harsh conditions. As feminist historians have pointed out that the separation between the workplace and the homestead that industrialization brought in its wake meant a marginalization and a devaluation of the female labor force.

This is perhaps an important reason why women are such militant activists in these movements. At Singur, old and young women explained the larger purpose of neo-liberalism as well as the micropolitics of local parties with fluency. They improvised small allegorical tales to describe the consequences of land loss. At Nandigram, Muslim women surrounded us in their hundreds, shouting: “Let them come and kill us, how many can they kill, we will not give up our land, our beautiful land which gives us, poor people, clean air and fresh food. Why should we move around the streets of cities like homeless gypsies, with tents on our backs? We will never be parted from our land, it is our life, the dearest thing to us.” They repeated all this after the March 2007 massacres, albeit in tired, despairing voices. At both places, we found them trudging to daily meetings and marching in processions, after they had cooked and fed their families, declaiming, discussing and debating the political issues of the day. In sharp contrast to this vibrant political life lies the dismal lack of political concerns among the women of the urban poor where local party bosses negotiate with families on a male-to-male basis (A. Roy 2008).

The problem is that the big corporate sector, too, sees land as a stable, constant source of profits, infinitely elastic in its possible uses. In older times of classical imperialism, capital acquired land globally as units of territorial sovereignty and authority. The British Empire in India did not create a settler colony. The state would,

from time to time, ruthlessly dispossess local land users to facilitate European-owned plantations, or for canals, railways, and new urban spaces. But by and large it did not dislodge peasants, especially as it derived the bulk of its revenues from agriculture. The postcolonial Indian state allows Indian and global capitalists to acquire land as a source of actual and potential production, as well as non-production, to be turned into speculative real estate investment, or to manufacture, which may be switched around or switched off entirely if profits from a particular industry plummet. Even then the land remains locked up for any number of future uses. The dead industries in West Bengal whose owners retain their ownership rights, including one very close to Nandigram, are signs of the flexibility of capitalist maneuvers with land. Peasants understand this only too well.

The meaning of Nandigram

Nandigram has become a symbol of peasant resistance throughout India. It also has an important place in the history of such resistance and some of the typical strategies of the present struggle in Nandigram go back a long way. In 1930, Nandigram people took an active part in Gandhi’s civil disobedience movement. The colonial Sub-Divisional Officer of Midnapore had then reported : “I was informed that all the villages had been converted to good forts, cutting up village roads, filling them with loose earth, thorn and rough sharp shells ... barricades with large bamboo trees and houses barricaded with thorn, removal of bamboo bridges and trenches dug into the middle of the fields.” (All India Citizens’ Initiative 2007).

In 1942, during the Quit India movement, there was formidable armed resistance to the state all over Medinipur. In December of that year, Tamluk—including Nandigram—was turned into a liberated zone and a sovereign government, declaring its independence from British rule, was formed. For nearly twenty-two months, all of Tamluk remained out of bounds for the British police and administration. Roads were cut

off at various points, armed volunteers guarded its frontiers, and the rebel government ran a parallel administration.

In 1946, when the peasant front of the undivided Communist Party of India, launched the Tebhaga movement,⁴ Nandigram became its epicenter in Medinipur. A significant feature of the Tebhaga movement was self-organization by rural women, largely autonomous of directives from male party activists. They came out with their domestic instruments—broomsticks, hammer, chopper—to defend themselves from assaults by the police. They also developed secret codes of communication to pass on messages, guarded crops in the field, kept vigil on the police and officials, and blew conch shells or beat gongs to warn the villagers of imminent enemy attacks. To the people in Nandigram, these remain active and vivid memories. And in their present struggle, they turned to the same forms of resistance.

In the rebellious 1960s, when a surge of anti-imperialist street action was sweeping across several continents, the radical youth of Kolkata coined a rallying cry about the Vietnam war: “*Amar naam, tomar naam, Vietnam, Vietnam*” (Vietnam is my name, your name). With the ebbing of the global revolutionary tide, the Vietnam slogan gradually faded from public memory. It returned in 2007, albeit with a slight variation. A new slogan filled the streets of Kolkata: “*Amar naam, tomar naam, Nandigram, Nandigram*” (Nandigram is my name, your name). Ironically, the slogan came to haunt the same people who in their youth had waved the red flags in the Vietnam solidarity rallies: the Left, now safely ensconced in state power.

Nandigram, and its surrounding areas, had always been faithful to the Left Front. The Communist Party of India, a smaller partner in the Left Front, has a big presence here, holding the Nandigram State Assembly constituency while the CPI(M) controls the parliamentary seat. The CPI(M) also commanded five of the six *panchayats* (local government) in the area while the TMC controlled only one.⁷ Local TMC leaders admitted to us that they had little influence on most local peasants who organized themselves to resist the proposed land acquisition without

any real help from opposition parties in the formative stages of the movement. The long record of local loyalty to the CPI(M) was squandered when the party chose to create a SEZ in its own constituency.

Nandigram thus signals the reversal of Leftist politics where peasants find Communist Party members as their enemies rather than their allies. For this reason also activists at Chengara in Kerala, another Indian state ruled by the Left Front, have started referring to their struggle as “Kerala’s Nandigram” (see Devika 2008). As these activists struggle to hold the government to its promise of redistributing land to the landless and have occupied government land previously held by the Harrison Malayam corporation, whose lease on the land has long since expired, they also find the Left Front against them—CPI(M) cadres have even assaulted the women, thrashed the men, and cut off food and medical supplies to the squatters occupying the land.

The symbol of Nandigram is however broader than that and has come to stand more generally for peasant resistance against being pushed off their land. It thus stands for resistance against the intensified capitalist trend toward what David Harvey (2005) has called “accumulation by dispossession” whereby fertile land is handed over for corporate profit making, actually productive potentials that could absorb India’s labor force are neglected, and peasants across India face the threat of being driven off their land and being added to the growing group of people considered “surplus population.”

Nandigram indeed is an extremely fertile area. Cultivation of paddy, thrice a year, growing vegetables and pulses and deep-sea fishing are the main occupations of the people on this 413.74 square kilometer area. *Paan* (betel leaf) grown in the vines also fetches a good income for many, having a fairly large market in other parts of the country and among Indian émigrés in London and Dubai. But despite the potential, agriculture in Nandigram has always been neglected—the state government has turned a blind eye to the longstanding demands of the local farmers for electricity so that modern irrigation could be introduced.⁵

Industry hardly exists in Nandigram. The only project at Jellingham⁶ on the shores of the Hooghly—a ship-repairing unit—was set up on a 400-acre plot in 1977 but was abandoned soon after. As many as 942 local families were ousted from their land, of which only five persons got employment in the project. Today it serves as the pilfering ground for the underworld, among them CPI(M) cadres as well as members of the right-wing opposition Trinamul Congress. During the bloody events of 2007, it was alleged that resistance groups were making guns from junk lying inside the factory premises.

In the total absence of industry, unemployment is rampant among the youth. This is worsened by more general government neglect, seen in the fact that in many hamlets in Nandigram only 27 percent are able to read and write. Many youth have thus taken up contract labor work in Haldia, the industrial township across the Hooghly or make daily or weekly trips to Kolkata's Metiabruz where they work in the small-scale garment-manufacturing units as tailors or cutters at very low wages.

At the same time, poverty is not abject and the local people explain how they manage. There is much to compensate for a certain level of stagnation: land of their own, fresh food and water, small-scale multitasking. All this would go once the SEZ came and swallowed up the villages. Most of all they need the ties of village community and solidarity in times of seasonal or exceptional need, periodic crises, for collective celebrations and festivals that keep alive their human identity. The chemical hub would have destroyed their villages and reduced them to landlessness, to far inferior, low-grade, and transient jobs in the new concerns. It would have dispersed the people, organically tied to one another, to far flung out locations, among streets of distant cities. The petty compensation they would have received in return for their small landholdings would be inadequate for any meaningful investment. Because the land reforms had petered out since the late 1980s, the number of unregistered sharecroppers has grown vast as has the size of agricultural laborers. Even though they make a meager living at present, they still do

find an occupation. All of them would be flung on city streets as the most vulnerable and marginalized of Indians: displaced rural migrants.

The land seizure

On 31 July 2006 Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya signed a deal with the representatives of the Selim Group.⁸ It specified that the Indonesian company would set up, among a slew of other infrastructural projects, a chemical hub SEZ at Nandigram as part of the proposed Petrochemicals and Petroleum Investment Region (PCPIR). The projects, it was said, were to bring in investments worth Rs400 billion to investment-starved West Bengal.

In 2005 Bhattacharya had made a trip to Singapore and Jakarta and returned with what he called a “package deal” with the Indonesian business giant. The projects he carried back could not, however, be implemented as there was strong opposition by farmers in Bhangar, a rural locality near Kolkata, to land acquisition for one of the projects. In any case, state assembly elections were drawing near and it was thought to be prudent to shelve the “package” for the time being. Queried about Selim's political antecedents, Bhattacharya replied that he would not look at the color of capital as long as it brought investments to Bengal.

Meanwhile, the anti-acquisition movement in Singur was peaking. At Haripur, where a nuclear power plant was planned, villagers put up a road block to prevent the entry of government officials, a situation that continues to this day. In Deganga in Nadia district, angry village women beat up district officials and police when they came to serve the land acquisition notice.

The mood in Nandigram, too, was gradually reaching a boiling point as days passed and CPI(M) functionaries began to talk about the imminent acquisition. The villagers' sentiments are best summarized by Sumit Sinha, an activist who joined the movement:

“Laxman Seth, the MP from here had pronounced that the land here was one crop, that people here were waiting with folded hands to

offer their land 'for industry.' The moment he said this, the local folks got infuriated—'Lies, there isn't a bigger lie than this. This land is our lung, our lifeblood. If we give that up what are we left with? Neither life, nor honour.' The women were icons of fortitude."

A decision was taken to form a village committee in every would-be affected village and also activate the *gram sansads* (village councils).⁹ Every village committee was to include fifteen men and five women. In practice, however, the number of female members far exceeded the quota allotted to them. In just one week, twelve village committees were formed.

On 29 December 2006, Laxman Seth, chairman of the Haldia Development Authority (HDA)—under whose jurisdiction falls Nandigram—addressed a public meeting. The aim was to convince the people of the necessity of land acquisition. Seth announced that a total of twenty-seven *mouzas* (village unit) in Nandigram Block 1—including agricultural fields, water bodies, homesteads, school buildings, and even temples and mosques—would be acquired. Even the sparse crowd, consisting mainly of CPI(M) supporters, was so angered by this announcement that many of them got up on the podium and began to question him. For the first time in many years, Seth's authority faced a real challenge.

On 2 January 2007 HDA issued a preliminary notice indicating a plan to acquire about 14,500 acres of land in twenty-seven *mouzas* in Nandigram Block 1 and in two *mouzas* in Khejuri¹⁰ Block 2. It was also made clear that 12,500 acres in Nandigram would be acquired immediately, because the construction work would soon begin for the mega chemical hub by the Selim Group and a shipbuilding-cum-repairing unit by the Pawan Ruia industrial group. As the news spread, more than a thousand people gathered at the Kalicharanpur panchayat office at Garchakraberia. Sumit Sinha who was an eyewitness, has a detailed account of the beginning of the movement:

"At 9am I reached Bhuta More and found the crowd worked up. A newspaper had already car-

ried a story that morning regarding the land acquisition. The people asked if a notice had been despatched to the panchayat why were they not informed. The crowd spontaneously organised itself into a march and a 300-strong rally set out towards the Kalicharanpur panchayat office. ... he said he was in a meeting on *sulabh sauchalay* (pay-and-use toilet). People's anger reached its peak. 'If our homes cease to exist, where will the toilets come up?'

... when the rally was returning towards Bhuta More ... five police vans went past the rally towards the panchayat office. People's ire turned into a blaze. 'Why are the police here? Turn the rally around. Let's go the panchayat office.' ... In no time, the number went up to 2,000. The crowd was bent on going to the panchayat office—after a lot of persuasion, complying with the local leader Nanda Patra's advice, the rally was turned around through the village road towards the Haldia ferry *ghat*. ... five police vans came back. ... the lathi charge began. The crowd was taken aback ... within a short time it regrouped. It began to lob hard mud balls ... at the police. The police, in turn, hurled stone-chips meant for road repairs. Soon, the whole area turned into a battlefield. The police burst teargas shells but couldn't stop the crowd. ... The police fired.

A bullet hit Jahangir's arm right in front of my eyes. Gurupada Barik's arm, too, was hit by a bullet. Another bullet made a hole on Sattar's foot. Any other time, I would've fled—but the people's indomitable courage gave me the nerve to stand my ground. ... At last, it was the police who had to look for an escape route. ... Within moments, people came out with spades and axes. In no time, all roads from Hazrakata to Sonachura were dug up. ... What do I call it? A festival or preparing for war?"

As part of an independent inquiry team, we visited Nandigram in late January, 2007. We talked to about fifty eyewitnesses who all told us this story with minor variations. In the clash, a police jeep was overturned and caught fire but the policemen were allowed to escape. In fact, some of the villagers helped one of them to change

into civilian clothes, in case he faced angry villagers on the way back (Sarkar et al. 2007).

Violence and resistance at Nandigram

From 3 January 2007, a civil war raged in Nandigram. On the night of 7 January, CPI(M) cadres poured into the villages even as the police camps evacuated their forces before the party-led operation began. Villagers were deliberately abandoned to the rage of the cadres. The furious crowd set fire to the house from where the party cadres were firing, and a local party leader was burned alive. Erstwhile CPI(M) supporters at Nandigram now pulled away from party loyalists while loyalists camped at Khejuri, on the borders of Nandigram, a place that was not scheduled to come under the axe of land acquisition. It had, therefore, remained loyal to the ruling party. An exchange of handmade bombs and firing went on every night among the combatants, CPI(M) cadres being far better armed and protected by the police. When our inquiry team visited Nandigram, women told us that each night they sheltered in adjoining forests. They lived in terror and begged us to stay with them. They were sure of terrible reprisals but they also said that even death would not make them part with their land.

The TMC so far had no real presence at Nandigram. As villagers moved away from their old party and faced its wrath, a way was cleared for their entry into the volatile situation. But as they themselves admitted to us, they had not created the movement, nor did they become its undisputed leaders. Rather, the struggle spawned a multi-party organization, the Bhumi Ucched Pratirodh Committee (Resist Land Eviction Committee—BUPC). It included some Muslim organizations, some far left activists, the Socialist Unity Centre, and the TMC. Non-party leftists and cultural activists from Kolkata and other parts of India came often to express solidarity. The person who drew much ire from the CPI(M) is Medha Patkar, leader of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, a movement of thousands of people, displaced by the Narmada dams that the

three state governments have constructed in a highly seismic zone. Party leaders and cadres referred to her in public with unspeakably filthy words and obscene gestures and she was even beaten up.

Between January and March Nandigram was a self governing fortress where state agencies had no place. The main arterial road that connected the villages lying on both sides was dug up into deep trenches at different points so that police jeeps and vans would not be able to go through. At other points, huge barricades had been built of stones and trees. Isolated, the resistance committees now looked after village affairs and prepared for an assault from the party and the police. It was alleged by the CPI(M) that their loyalists were forcibly evicted from the villages and were assaulted. These charges would redouble after the party had invaded Nandigram in March and massacred villagers. Some, indeed, did leave the threatening and hostile environment, some were, no doubt, forced to leave, though many of them left their families behind who carried on without any noticeable harassment. The refugees crossed over to Khejuri. The party set up camps to receive them and to prepare them for future combat. Wild stories circulated about anti-CPI(M) reprisals. There may have been some truth in them as Nandigram villagers were angry and apprehensive, but most of these reports were mutually contradictory and remained unsubstantiated.

In Nandigram villages there was remarkable amity between Hindus and Muslims, among different castes, as villagers—men, women and children—kept daily and nightlong vigil at the Sonachura-Khejuri borders that separated CPI(M)-dominated Khejuri from rebellious Nandigram. They faced and beat frequent CPI(M) and police incursions, and a continuous steady level of intimidation from across the borders. As the vigil continued, news of the struggle spread throughout the country. The chief minister promised, after a week-long delay that there would be no SEZ at Nandigram. He added a caveat: there would be no chemical hub only if villagers do not want it. Villagers would still not remove the barricades as they believed that as soon as they

did so, CPI(M) loyalists would pour in and demand land acquisition for the chemical hub. They also believed that if they allowed the administration and the police to move back into Nandigram, there would not only be renewed efforts for industrialization, but also horrific reprisals for their disobedience. Their fears were confirmed by the daily barrage of attacks and by threatening and violent speeches by senior party leaders. One of them promised that he would “make their lives hell.”

As peasants continued to barricade themselves, solidarity protests gathered strength in Kolkata despite arrests and lathi charges on peaceful demonstrators. Slowly, Kolkata was returning to a political life where demonstrations and processions were no longer command performances by the ruling party but were authentic peoples' protests. In its turn the Politburo of the all India party declared its unequivocal support for West Bengal economic policies and its politics of reprisals, eschewing its own recent criticisms of neo-liberalism.

The government imposed an economic blockade on the villages. The ferry service across the Hooghly river to Haldia and Kakdwip was withdrawn and CPI(M) cadres blocked the only road to Nandigram. Anyone opposed to the CPI(M), even media personnel and medical teams, were stopped from reaching the scenes of conflict. Some political activists were also arrested by the police. At the same time, there was a massive congregation of armed party cadres, across the Sonachura borders.

Much depended on crushing of the Nandigram rebels, not just in West Bengal but all over India where violent land acquisitions were being met with farmers' protests. Because Nandigram farmers had managed to build up a particularly tenacious, enduring and effective resistance, all eyes—of multinationals, state and central governments, and of peasants—were on that small cluster of villages that had become a test case in this most unequal of battles. Anticipating a cops-and-cadre invasion from across the Talpati canal, the BUPC mobilized a few thousand men, women, and children, ostensibly for a Hindu worship and a congregational chanting of the

Koran on 14 March 2007. The hope was that the combined presence of religious activities and women and children would stop a police-cadre invasion or would mitigate the worst of the offensive. Under colonial rule, nationalist demonstrations and barricades used to deploy this tactic before police onslaughts, on the whole successfully. However, this time this tactic did not work.

Cops and thugs, roughly 500 of each, had gathered across the border in the morning of 14 March. A single warning was broadcast, asking people to go away and let the police come in. It did not mention that there would be shootings if villagers disobeyed. When the people refused to move, firing started, along with the lobbing of teargas shells, hundreds at a time—eyewitnesses say that CPI(M) thugs, dressed in police khaki were the ones who opened fire. A woman at Adhikaripara later told us: “We had thought they would not fire on women nor thrash them. But they did. They fell upon us with such force that we went down like rag dolls.” In all, 635 rounds were fired, fifteen people were killed, several went missing, and seventy-five were injured.

What followed was even more gruesome. The cops and the thugs now entered the villages in a pincer movement. The entire area was sealed off for forty-eight hours, as loot, plunder, arson, torture, rape, and sexual molestation went on. When we visited victims at the Tamluk Hospital at the end of March, we found clear evidence that a single person was simultaneously attacked by several cadres and policemen with multiple weapons: cudgels, steel rods, guns, butts of guns, rubber and real bullets, kicks, and slaps. All the while, a thick cloud of tear gas smoke billowed around and people running helplessly fell into ponds, were separated from one another, or were dragged away into adjoining forests. A woman recalled that she was put into a truck with several others. She fainted and came to consciousness the next day. She found herself lying naked in the forest. A man who had his thumb ripped off by a bullet told us that he had spread his hands across a child's head protectively when the firing started. Several eyewitnesses told us that children were picked up, swung around by their legs, and were then flung onto ponds; “there

they floated on the water, like flowers,” said one witness. They were rescued in time by the villagers but a lot of panic stricken stories flew around for days that children had been ripped apart. What was very touching was the way in which men and women endured torture and injuries as they protected children they did not even know.

At Tamluk Hospital and at Adhikaripara villages, women of all ages told us that they had been raped or sexually assaulted and tortured. Before we could stop them, they would pull aside their saris to show us bite marks, gouge marks, deep and still festering wounds on their breasts, legs, and thighs. Several civil rights organizations and medical teams have recorded visual evidence of sexual torture. Some of them mentioned the name of a CPI(M) woman cadre who called on the party men to assault women and stood by and watched as they were molested. Women narrated these tales in an expressionless voice, looking away into the distant horizon. The only time some animation livened their voice was when they told us the names of the cadres and insisted that we write them down. When we hesitated, thinking that this may worsen things for them, they went on insisting: “Go on, take the names down. Don’t worry about us, we are already dead, we are dead people walking about. But let the world know about these men and women.”

Indian women are notoriously modest and careful about their reputation for chastity. The slightest violation can make them social outcasts and even family members are not told about such occasions. But here they were, shouting out their stories, they wanted to know that we have gotten every detail right and they wanted to be sure that we will tell the world. What was going on? It seems these women had crossed a very important threshold. They were ready now to read rape and sexual assault as marks of physical torture—nothing more and nothing less, without the additional stigma that sexual assault had so far carried. In the general devastation that all bodies had met with—male, female, and infantile—women displayed marks of sexual injury with the same ease with which men

disclosed marks of physical injuries on their bodies.

The voice that haunted us for days as we came back from Nandigram was that of an old woman who sat, arms dangling and eyes empty, outside her ravaged hut. As we were leaving, she murmured, half to us and half to herself: “Will we live? But how will we?” The same hopeless voice, nonetheless, affirmed quietly when we asked her if she would obey the party now: “I will not give up my land. I know they will take it away if they can—if not for the Selims, then just to punish us. I will not let them take my land away.”

Compensation is usually promised—though in this case, the state has still not delivered it—if there is rape and murder. But here were innumerable wounded bodies of laboring men and women with severe eye, chest, lung, liver, and urinary tract injuries who would never be able to work again. Disabilities that put workers out of work should be treated as a special class of torture effects, with the highest possible compensation rates. Treatment expenses were borne by BUPC activists and all relief was collected by groups of non-party citizens. As Nandigram lay devastated after two days of relentless pounding, villages remained surrounded by police and cadres and no media or relief teams were allowed in. Activists had to get a High Court injunction to get inside with relief material along with the inquiry team of the Central Bureau of Investigations.

Something incredible happened after this crushing experience. On 16 March more than 20,000 villagers—battered, bruised and flogged—picked themselves up from the dust. Men and women began a march to Sonachura with the dead bodies of two of the young people who had been murdered. As the procession approached, cadres fled across the canal into Khejuri. Nandigram was reoccupied by rebels.

The government provided no relief nor responded to the Central Bureau of Investigations findings about an arms dump that was controlled by party cadres. The party refused to accept any blame and no party leader visited Nandigram. At the same time, they had to watch helplessly

as Nadigram became a national scandal, as medical, women's, and relief teams poured in from all parts of the country; and as long-time supporters and sympathisers returned state awards as a mark of protest and resigned from state offices and academies. Intellectuals, cultural activists, students, and persons from all walks of life marched in protest demonstrations, and not just in West Bengal. Streets filled up with posters and slogans, there was an outpouring of protest plays, art and photography exhibitions, and poems.

Days and months went by. Nandigram retreated into the inside pages of newspapers in spite of the continuing violence from Khejuri. The government now talked less about Nandigram and more about Nayachar, an uninhabited silt island on the Hooghly next to Nandigram, where the chemical hub would now be situated.

In the last week of October there were fresh intimations of violence. Sophisticated weaponry came in trucks and ambulances up to the Sonachura Khejuri borders. The CPI(M) now opened a second front at Satengabari on the west, presumably to divert the attention of the BUPC fighters. Women supporting the BUPC-led movement were brutally assaulted and houses were set ablaze. Satengabari fought back but cadres finally took over the area. Another access to Nandigram was thus opened for the police.

On 2 November the skirmishes intensified in several parts along the frontline. TMC funds and arms bought guns and bombs for the BUPC who began to anticipate another invasion and began to prepare themselves. Firearms are legally not sold in the open market in India but there is a vast underground market in all sorts of lethal weapons. Even before Nandigram, party battles in rural and urban areas, especially at the time of local elections, had been fought with guns.

On the night of 4 November the police outpost at Tekhali bridge was suddenly withdrawn. Four days later, in response to a BUPC call to protest against the Satengabari massacre, the villagers joined two rallies, one in Sonachura and another in Garchakraberia. Just before the two could merge at Mahishpur, adjacent to Satengabari, masked gunmen appeared from behind the

bushes and started firing indiscriminately, killing several people. As people ran helter-skelter, the gunmen captured about 300 protestors as hostage. They were taken to Khejuri where they were tortured throughout the night. On 10 November, the hostages, hands tied and guns to their heads, were used as human shields and the cadres marched into Nandigram without a fight. Nandigram was "recaptured," BUPC flags pulled down, and red flags once again fluttered over every housetop. "A new sun has risen over Nandigram," declared Biman Bose, CPI(M)'s state secretary and chairman of the West Bengal Left Front.

The CPI(M) confidence proved premature. In May 2008, in the rural local elections, the CPI(M) fared very badly, for the first time in thirty years. In all areas, threatened with corporate takeover, the party lost miserably. In Nandigram they lost every seat.

Conclusion

Nandigram starkly exposed the failures of the CPI(M) of West Bengal to stand up to the neo-liberal model of development. Moreover, as the CPI(M) Politburo stood staunchly with the West Bengal communist party, it also lost credibility and the sympathy of leftist social movements all over India. Its opposition to neo-liberalism turned out to be restricted to its role as opposition party in the parliamentary arena as state government under its control followed the all-India trend, especially in terms of land policy. It seems that the Communist Party is not only incapable of organizing popular struggles but actually represses them when it is in power. All governments behave similarly, but, as Nandigram showed, a left-wing party which had come to power with the promise of radical land reforms and with the slogan "Land to the tiller" had created an aura of expectations that could not be dispensed with casually.

Nandigram may have been the most dramatic instance of resistance but there are other instances in India where poor villagers and tribal people have held out against land acquisition in

the face of state repression—Orissa, Jhargram, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, and many other places. The resistance is not so much an evidence of the innate heroism of peasants. It is born more out of a conviction that if their rural livelihoods go, then any other form of living would be so much worse that life would literally have no point; that industries would have no place for people like themselves; and that rural migrants in cities live a dog's life. The conviction is not a product of blind prejudice or conservatism. After all, many rural families do send out some members to find work in cities to supplement their agricultural income. But land—the most enduring and productive property of all—has to be the foundation of their existence. Without it, there is no permanent livelihood security, nor food to feed the entire family. The fate of displaced people on city pavements is far too vivid and familiar.

What Nandigram showed is that resistance against this trend can still have significant effects. With the defeat of the CPI(M), it seems certain that no SEZ will be built in Nandigram and that the villagers will keep control over their land—an incredible victory for a rural insurrection that had to hold its own in the face of a powerful multinational company, a state power that has ruled proudly for thirty continuous years, and, closely allied to it, a central government committed to policies of forced land acquisition for SEZs. The victory has inspired similar struggles throughout the country as it has sent warning signals to corporate bodies and to state governments. It seems the power of corporate capital is not so invincible after all. The challenge awaiting us now is to organize so that the charisma of Nandigram and the solidarity initiatives it set off will not be compromised but will rather be routinized in ways that will stretch its potential and possibilities.

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Notes

1. Indian communist parties, especially the CPI(M), have remained fervently committed to the Stalinist legacy. They also admire China's Deng Xiaoping's path of development and approved of the Tiananmen Square massacres. Since the mid-1980s the CPI(M) has been seen to give up on its erstwhile radical implementation of land reform and village-level organizing, through which it earned the support of peasants and agricultural laborers and since the early 1990s turned to wooing the urban upper- and upper-middle classes.
2. Among the most notorious of these pogroms had been the genocidal events in Gujarat in 2002 and the anti-Christian violence in Orissa in 2008. The Congress does not usually incite religious violence, but compromises with Hindu majoritarianism when it happens.
3. In Chattisgarh, a BJP-ruled state, a new law en-

abled not only massive repression of indigenous/tribal people but also the detention of civil rights activists, including Binayak Sen, a leading civil rights and health-care activist and recipient of prestigious international awards—despite widespread and international protest, he has been under arrest without a trial since May 2007 (see “FreeDr. Binayak Sen” 2007).

4. The landless sharecroppers of Bengal—called *bhag chashi*, *bargadar*, or *adhiyar*—declared that they would not hand over, as the custom was then, half the share of the crop they cultivated to the landowner—the *jotedar*—but only one-third. The militant movement, lasting nearly half a decade, spread to far corners of rural Bengal, turning violent in several pockets in response to the vicious repression let loose by the state and the landowners. Tebhaga has pride of place in the annals of peasant uprisings in India and is, in many ways, a precursor to the radical agrarian movements like Naxalbari in the post-independence period.
5. In 1984 the farming community had put up a seven-day blockade demanding electricity in Nandigram. It may seem incredible now, but the Left Front, the coalition in power in the state then and now, led the blockade. To lift the blockade, police resorted to firing, killing one.
6. This is how the local people pronounce the name. It could have been Gillingham, not Jellingham.
7. During the last *panchayat* elections held in May 2008, the TMC wrested all the *panchayats* from the CPI(M).
8. The Selim Group was founded by Sudono Selim, a close friend of former Indonesian president Suharto. An army general, Suharto came to power after ousting president Sukarno through an allegedly CIA-backed coup in October 1965, which saw the murder of over 200,000 communists belonging to the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Suharto was hated by communists the world over, including the CPI(M), for this crime. Selim's cement and flour business flourished after Suharto came to power and his ill-gotten money came from a number of underhand dealings that Suharto helped him make.
9. Gram sansad, comprising every eligible voter in a village, was given constitutional sanction by an act passed by the West Bengal Assembly in 2001, but has rarely been put into practice.
10. Khejuri is a CPI(M) stronghold to the south of Nandigram across the Talpati canal. Pro-acqui-

sition CPI(M) supporters, fearing that they would be harmed because they were a hopeless minority, fled to Khejuri when trouble broke out in Nandigram in the first week of January 2007 and took shelter in the so-called relief camps set up there. The entire CPI(M) leadership had been shouting from the rooftops castigating media reporters and civil society activists for not bothering to visit the relief camps and bring to limelight the plight of their ousted supporters. The fact is that no one was allowed to go to Khejuri barring their henchmen, for the relief camps were actually the place where armed goons and hired killers were housed. It was from Khejuri that for eleven months gunshots were fired and bombs were hurled at Nandigram to spread terror. There were also wild variations in the figures the CPI(M) leaders presented from time to time of their ousted supporters.

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