
India: Peasants resist take-over of land by the 'left' Government in West Bengal

The Indian province of West Bengal holds the unique record of being ruled by the longest-serving 'democratically-elected-left-government' in the country, and, for that matter, anywhere else in the world, as the left never fail to point out.

This 'left' state is on rampage, and terror was unleashed on peasants, agricultural workers and small traders in Singur, an agricultural area located in the fertile basin of the River Ganga.

West Bengal contains some of the most productive agricultural areas in Indian sub-continent, especially the sprawling green plains washed by the river Ganga and hundreds of its tributaries. The green comes from extensive rice cultivations that traditionally dominated the Bengal landscape for better parts of last 2000 years. A long period in which invading armies came and went, the British built their empire and faded away, the Indian nationalism was born and degenerated into an excuse for exploitation -- he left had in fact branded India's political freedom as 'false'. In 1948 the Indian Communist Party gave a call for armed revolution that was to start from Bengal. The abortive revolution, and many of the struggles that preceded and succeeded it centred round the green of Ganga basin. The word 'Dhan' (Bengali term for rice) became a word synonymous with struggle, around which people rallied and fought, with sickles, bows and arrows, and resisted feudal landlords and rich peasants, and started the journey towards a new social order. In just 30 years since the country's independence, the Communist party survived repeated splits -- and severe state repression -- to emerge as the dominant political force in Bengal.

Land struggles led by left and more radical left engulfed Bengal in the 1960s and 70s, and ultimately helped the better organised among them to come to power. The rural poor, consisting of small and marginal peasants, agricultural workers and share-croppers, formed the strongest support base of the newly-elected Left Front Government. After coming to power, the Government tried to serve this constituency and initiated land reform measures like redistribution of surplus lands and a much-needed process of recording Bargadaars (tenants-at-will, and sharecroppers, those who tilled others' lands on basis of verbal contractual agreements). These reforms impacted positively on the economy of the region, and agricultural production throughout the state increased manifold as large quantities of new land were freed and came under tillage.

The green fields of Bengal dominated the economy and politics of the province, and let the left enjoy an uninterrupted reign that had now been continuing for 30 years. It was an eventful 30 years in which the political iconography and rhetoric of the left underwent significant changes worldwide, and revolutions and militant land struggles ceased to be in vogue in much of the erstwhile socialist societies. The state of USSR withered away —in reverse, the People's Republic of China built a capitalist economy within a 'reformed' socialist state, and in many other countries the communists tuned into social democrats and other 'moderate' sheds of left. These tumultuous events failed to change the Bengal left, however. The 'communists' in power still swear by Stalin, love Fidel, give Hugo Chavez a hero's welcome, and celebrate left electoral victories in Latin America. Looking at the red banners and hammer-and-sickle flags that are usually prominently displayed everywhere, it

seems nothing has changed.

But, beyond the red façade and the rhetoric, everything changed. The inexorable globalization juggernaut and the 'free' market moved in, shopping malls and wide roads replaced shanties, and the 'communists' metamorphosed into a hungry bunch of land speculators, contractors and power-brokers. The Government became pragmatic and started courting capitalists in public, the political logic being that in the era of global capital, you can only build socialism by developing capitalism! Also, one should always emulate China and its giant strides towards development.

The latest instance of this socialism-through-capitalism is Singur, where the government has forcibly acquired about 1000 acres of prime agricultural land for the Tata group's proposed low-cost car factory. Police deployed by the 'Left' Government went berserk at villages of Singur, while 'smoothing' the land acquisition process. In an incident strongly reminiscent of the Kalinganagar massacre (13 tribals were killed in police firing, while resisting enclosing of their lands by the same Tata group) in neighbouring province of Orissa earlier this year, police turned violent when local farmers and agricultural workers resisted physical take-over and attempted enclosure (the land was being enclosed with barbed wire fences) of fertile farmlands. A large police contingent entered people's homes, and beat up everybody present. Women were physically abused, and even children and infirm old persons were not spared. Some granaries were torched and fields were set on fire. Many people were injured and more than 50 were arrested. The resistance and rampage went on throughout the day, most of which was telecast live by regional TV channels.

The Police cordoned off Singur and neighbouring areas since the incident on 2nd December and did not let anybody enter, including noted social activist Medha Patkar. The ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist) leaders including the Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharya publicly defended police action, saying that the incident was just another ultra left show, and land acquisition and construction of the TATA factory would go on as usual.

Spontaneous protests against police brutality continue to rock Bengal, and in Singur, peasants and agricultural workers are still on fast. The scale and intensity of the popular protests have put the Government on the defensive, and they now accuse the opposition of slander and 'disinformation'. The area is not that fertile, Government-controlled media points out, and the state acquired only mono-crop lands or permanent fallows. The Government insists that the car factory and the socially responsible 'national' capitalists like TATAs would lead to people's development.

Why does a car-factory need so much agricultural land? How many families would the project directly displace? How much of the land acquired was mono-crop? What are the numbers of agricultural workers and unrecorded 'bargadaars' in the project area? The Government refuses to give precise answers.

Official facts, or the lack of it, show that the Government, in its commitment towards capital, market and globalisation decided to wish away the reality, and took up the 'challenge' to go ahead with the project. This 'challenge' means ignoring the very real existence of several thousand families dependant on this land: landless labourers; seasonal tribal migrant agricultural labourers; cycle-van operators and small transporters; traders who buy-carry-sell agro products to distant wholesale markets; artisans and craftsmen; and others involved in various occupations. Compensation can partially offset the cost of land of the land owners but who can compensate for the loss of livelihood?

Armed police and rapid action force on the prowl, important concerns and questions about Singur unanswered, the Bengal Government prepares for other projects that include handing over of several

thousand acres of farmlands in Bhangar (near Calcutta) to the Salim Group from Indonesia, staunch supporters of the infamous Suharto Regime that killed thousands of Indonesian communists. Another chunk of land would be handed over to Jindals for setting up a steel plant in forest areas of South-West Bengal. In coastal areas of South-West Bengal, the Government is all set to go ahead with a US-aided 10,000 Megawatt Nuclear Power Plant that would displace more than 200,000 peasants, agricultural workers and fisherfolk. This last, if we have to believe the Bengal Government and the Bush administration, is a climate-crisis-solution project, and clean!

It is ironic that this all-out attack on Bengal's environment, economy and people is led by the left, who, outside Bengal, are among the most vocal opponents of development-induced displacement and the 'imperialist' conspiracy to put the country's natural resources on sale. On the other hand, perhaps this typifies the new, 'reformed' reality of our times, where capital and the market enclose all commons past and present, and appropriate familiar concepts of subversion and opposition.

However, new concepts emerge, and protests always get renewed, contrary to capital's end-of-history proclamations. In India, tribals in Kalinganagar did not allow anybody from local administration and TATAs into their area ever since the massacre. Some kilometres away, villagers resist land acquisition for a steel project by the trans-national POSCO group. Adivasis of Jharkhand said a firm no to development projects on their ancestral lands. In Bengal, peasants, workers and civil society groups protest against unjust and tyrannical models of development. The ruling left in Bengal would do better to heed these signs. Repression provides only very short-term and potentially disastrous answers.

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