

Report II

Land Acquisition and Internal Displacements in West Bengal *

A phenomenon of the last 10 years

West Bengal has faced the worst of refugee problems in the country after the Partition, and then again during the liberation war of Bangladesh. These refugee influxes have received much attention, nationally and globally. The liberation war of Bangladesh in 1970-71 was estimated to have sent about 10 million refugees to India, most of them returned later but some also stayed back. In another corner of the state, Darjeeling houses the Tibetan refugees who had fled from Tibet after the Chinese occupation, way back in 1959.

However, internal displacements in large numbers are a relatively new phenomenon in the state and have gone largely unnoticed. It is being witnessed for about past 10 years, since the sharpening of political conflicts over the issue of acquisition of land and capture of political space. Like other IDPs in India, these displaced people, too, have been largely neglected by the government. Rather, the political parties of which they are supporters have taken care of them, arranging for their food, shelter and rehabilitation.

Besides conflict related IDPs, West Bengal has witnessed instances of disaster related IDPs in the past. These displacements have taken place mostly because of floods, and in the hill areas of the state because of landslides. Ironically, the government as well as NGOs, national and international, like Ramakrishna Mission, Bharat Sevasram Sangha, CASA and CARE, has acted with more alacrity in the case of disaster IDPs, like the floods in the state in 1978, than in the case of conflict IDPs. One reason why NGOs want to stay away from conflict IDPs could be the political overtones in these conflicts.

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Nandigram: Shadow of Marx's Primitive Capitalist Accumulation

The most talked about displacements resulting from the land issue has taken place in Nandigram, which had shaken the conscience of the nation. Nandigram was a case of a political movement preventing a rapacious state power from dispossessing farmers of their land and handing over a huge area - about 25,000 acres - to a multinational group for setting up a special economic zone. The protests against land acquisition for a chemical hub led to widespread clashes between the ruling CPI(M) and Bhumi Uchchedh Pratirodh Committee, an organization of farmers in which different political parties were represented. In a way, Nandigram has a parallel with the process that Karl Marx had described as 'primitive capitalist accumulation,' its modern day variation.

It was highlighted by speakers at a seminar on the section on 'primitive capitalist accumulation' in Marx's Capital, organized by Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group some time ago, that 'primitive capitalist accumulation' is not so 'primitive' after all, and its manifestations can be seen even now in ways the capitalist mode of production interacts with the non-capitalist modes lying outside, trying to integrate these into the capitalist system. Indeed, the government in the state at that time - and an avowed Left government at that - had championed the cause of big capital and while trying to dispossess farmers of their land by the a brazen use of the state machinery and goons of the ruling party had argued that the only way for the farmers to improve their lot was to surrender their land, turn into industrial workers and work in the factories that would be set up in the proposed chemical hub. The excuse was the need for employment generation. "Neighbouring Haldia would glow under the arc of electric lights while Nandigram would wallow in darkness," senior CPI(M) leaders would lament at public meetings when the government decided to drop the proposal to set up the chemical hub in the face of massive protests.

Days of the enclosure movement in UK, analyzed by Marx in his writings, are, however, in the distant past. If Nandigram is any instance, democratic forces have become sufficiently powerful to thwart the process of 'primitive capitalist accumulation,' as pointed out by speakers in the CRG seminar. Indeed, the events of March 14, 2007, when 14 villagers were killed in police firing, had sparked a political movement that eventually led to the abandoning of the SEZ plan. The live coverage of the police action in the electronic media on March 14, as well as reports and photographs in the print media the next day, had played an important role in shaping public opinion against the process of forcible land acquisition in Nandigram. Media power was not so pronounced in the days of Marx, but television, in particular, is turning into an important bulwark against coercive processes like dispossessing farmers in countries like India where democracy prevails.

Displacement and Government Apathy

Nandigram had witnessed in the year-long agitation that had started in January 2007, widespread use of firearms by the rival groups, including some sophisticated weapons, loot, mayhem and rape. The total death figures, by a rough estimate available from political parties, could be 55, about 30 of BUPC and about 25 of CPI(M). Besides, large numbers of people had to flee from their villages time and again. They would be sheltered in temporary relief camps. While BUPC supporters evicted from their villages would usually be housed in camps set up at the Brajamahan Tiwari Sikshayatan school ground in Nandigram town, CPI(M) evictees would be in makeshift camps in neighbouring Khejuri, which in those days used to be a CPI(M) stronghold. Among the worst-affected villages from which people had to flee were Satengabari and Adhikaripara. During CPI(M)'s "operation sunrise" in October 2007, as the plan for recapture of Nandigram was dubbed, 150 houses were burnt in Satengabari, more than 1,000 people had fled. Relief camps had been set up at Brindabanchak and Samsabad schools. BUPC leaders in Nandigram, about 150 of them, had at one stage planned to leave Nandigram town permanently. BUPC leader Sheikh Sultan's family had fled to a relief camp. According to East Midnapore district CPI (M), 525 of their party supporters have still not been able to return to their villages, chased out by BUPC. But they are from Khejuri. In Nandigram proper, most of those who had fled have returned home.

A report, published by *Sanhati* and available in the website, of a team of social activists, like Tarun Sanyal, Sunando Sanyal, Debaprasad Sarkar, Meher Engineer and Medha Patkar, that visited the affected areas in Nandigram in November, reveals the plight of the evicted people. At the relief camp in the high school, there were about 1,500 inmates. The displaced people were housed in 24 rooms, with about 60 to 70 people in each room, including about 150 infants who were in need of baby food or milk. About 500 - 700 people are living in the houses of friends and relatives nearby and come to the camp for food every day. Thus the camp on the 13th was catering to about 2000 - 2200 people. "The cashier of the BUPC central committee who is in charge of the kitchen at the camp informed us that the camp had even more people a few days ago - about 4000 people." Relief like rice provided by the government at the camp was inadequate; 15 quintals of rice were given on November 9 and about 10 quintals on November 13. The camp had to depend on collection that could be done outside. Inmates kept complaining of shortage of food, no sanitation facility was provided at the camp. All the camp inmates had to depend on a public toilet complex located nearby. Clothes and bedding were a problem as most of the camp inmates had fled from their houses in a hurry, without spare

clothes and bedding. The team also visited Khejuri, a CPI(M) stronghold, where it found about 400 inmates in camps managed by CPM leaders for months, their story being that they had been evicted from their villages in Nandigram by BUPC supporters in the course of the agitation.

People in the relief camps were keen to return home, but were afraid of fresh attacks. The worst fear of the camp inmates was that their standing paddy crop would be harvested by members of the rival party if they could not return home early. Evictees who were spending a long time in relief camps also faced the problem of their land lying uncultivated. Nearly 700 acres belonging to CPI(M) supporters who were driven away from Nandigram proper by BUPC were lying uncultivated. CPI(M) supporters driven away from Satengabari and housed at a camp at Manu Chawk in Khejuri had returned to Satengabari to cultivate their plots as the sowing season for aman was running out, but BUPC members did not allow them, indicating that one motive behind attacks on supporters of rival political parties could be grabbing of cultivable land.

What the social activists and intellectuals had found was that 'operation sunrise' was "a planned action with full co-ordination between the state administration and the party." It was not just a matter of helping CPI(M) supporters who had been rendered homeless return to their villages but a matter of capturing all the political and physical space of the area. In Satengabari, the team members were told stories of armed goons attacking with bullets and bombs, raiding with their faces covered, looting burning and molesting women. In villages like Satengabari and Gokulnagar Adhikaripara, which used to be BUPC strongholds, and where villagers had all joined the agitation against the chemical hub, there were only CPI(M) flags after "operation sunrise." At Adhikaripara, some burnt and deserted houses had been left behind by BUPC supporters who had fled from the area but others who continued to stay in the village after its "recapture" by CPI(M) lived in mortal fear. Openly, they would support CPI(M), but would confide in private that they were afraid of atrocities of CPM and were forced to join processions of the party.

The recapture of Nandigram thus fitted the scheme of 'primitive capitalist accumulation' where the operation was planned like a war campaign. The police and the administration took no action to stop the violence, opposition parties, media and social activists were shut out when 'operation sunrise' was on. The target seemed to be on capture of physical and political space so that the chemical hub could be started, though the government had repeatedly assured after the March 14 police firing that there would be no land acquisition in Nandigram and the chemical hub would be set up elsewhere.

Things changed in Nandigram, however, because of the role democratic institutions played, ironically sometimes under the aegis of state power. As Central para-military forces curbed the free run of goons and

guns in Nandigram and created the condition for a fair panchayat election in 2008, political parties backed by BUPC swept to power in all panchayat bodies and all talk of a chemical hub in Nandigram ended. This was followed by an assembly by-election in which Left Front was trounced by Trinamool Congress, and all the political and physical space that CPI(M) had managed to win by muscle power were lost to the power of democracy. Media, too, had played an important role in highlighting the events of Nandigram which drew accolades from far and wide. The role played by media has been examined in detail in a study by Biswajit Roy and Nilanjan Dutta. Interviews taken by the authors in Nandigram reveal that many villagers first started viewing news channels in television after the electronic media started covering the events of Nandigram in detail, to keep abreast of the course of the movement. It was difficult to foresee in days of Marx how democratic institutions would influence social processes in today's world.

Lalgarh: Displacements in a Maoist Turf

Besides Nandigram, the happenings in Lalgarh and its adjoining areas popularly known as 'jangalmahal' around the growth of a CPI(Maoist) movement have been of momentous consequence for West Bengal in the past few years. One aspect of the growth of Maoist movement in the area and operations to suppress the Maoists needs to be highlighted. Maoists were there for a long time in the Belpahari area, which is close to Lalgarh but a different police station and in a different block. The Maoist Communist Centre led by Kanai Chatterjee had a long presence in Belpahari and organization among the poor tribal there. But, neither was MCC's presence much noticeable, nor did the government seem to be much concerned with them. In September 2004 MCC merged with the Andhra Pradesh - based Peoples War to form the CPI(Maoist). The merger gave more teeth to the Maoists in Belpahari, there was a noticeable growth in violent activities in the area, like use of explosives and attacks on CPI(M) activists. Even then, neither did the West Bengal government mull any crackdown nor did the Centre launch the para-military forces against the Maoists.

The picture started changing and Lalgarh grew into prominence after the state government signed an agreement with the Jindal group for the setting up of a steel plant at Salboni, which is close to Lalgarh and in the same block. Initially planned as an integrated steel and power plant, it was later given the clearance as a special economic zone. Developments took place fast since then, the convoy of former chief minister, Mr Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, was allegedly targeted by Maoists while he had gone to lay the foundation stone of the Salboni project in November 2007. The police cracked down on villagers, in retaliation Maoist activities grew rapidly, practically shutting out the administration from the Lalgarh area and driving

away most CPI(M) activists, till the Centre, in conjunction with the state government, launched the joint operations. Thus, behind the displacements in Lalgarth, too, we see the glimpses of the process of primitive capitalist accumulation studied by Marx, consolidation of land for industrial use.

The Salboni Project

Though the Salboni project is being built on a huge area, about 5,000 acres, it has been argued that it has meant the least interference with lives of the local people as about 4,200 acre had already been vested with the government, while the proprietors of the steel project purchased 500 acres directly from the landowners. It has been pointed out that there was no forcible land acquisition in Salboni, nor resistance by affected persons as there was no large-scale displacement at Salboni. But, a Sanhati report on the Salboni project on November 20, 2008, prepared by Jayanta Singha and Arjun Sengupta, says the sentiment of the adivasis of the area was that the government land that belonged to the state animal welfare board was meant for redistribution amongst landless tribal of the area. According to him, before being notified, this land belonged to adivasis who had reclaimed it from jungles. Out of the 500 acres purchased directly, more than 100 acres belonged to adivasis. Adivasi land is non-transferrable. Besides, there were also differences between local people and the CPI(M) leadership over felling of trees.

The proposed project area was an extensive forest land with precious trees like sal, segun, arjun and sirish, which no longer existed when the team visited the area. The prevailing custom entailed adivasis and local people a quarter of the proceeds from the forests, says the Sanhati report. The setting up of the project meant loss of livelihood for the adivasis of the area. The Salboni plant acquiring SEZ status in 2008 could also have alarmed villagers around as this had dispensed with the requirement for following a number of regulations for building and running the plant, such as doing an environment impact assessment. The Sanhati report quotes adivasis expressing the fear of pollution from the plant and threat to ecology. Because of the delay in construction of the plant and the subsequent political changes in West Bengal, the SEZ status for the Salboni project has, however, undergone a sea change. As the project could not be built within two years' time, the SEZ clearance was lost. And now the Jindal group has decided not to reapply for the SEZ status again. "We are not interested in an SEZ," managing director of Jindal group Sajjan Jindal had said last September after a meeting with the new chief minister, Ms Mamata Banerjee. Trinamool Congress, the new ruling party in West Bengal, has already announced that it is against SEZs. May be the Jindal group does not want the SEZ status any more as it does not want to go into a conflict with

the ruling party. They may also have fathomed the opposition of the local people against an SEZ project in their midst.

Since the launching of the joint operations against Maoists in West Bengal in 2008, the focus of the operations has been in Lalgarh. The operations do not seem to be as intense in the Belpahari area though the base of Maoists in Belpahari appears to be stronger, topographically it being a hilly and forested area. Besides, Belpahari, and not Lalgarh, adjoins the Jharkhand border, offering the Maoists easy transit routes. The question remains, therefore, if the real aim of the administration is to free the 'jangalmahal' of Maoists or to ensure that there is no hindrance in the way of the Salboni project. Bandimukti Committee convener Chhoton Das, who is also a member of the committee of interlocutors set up by the West Bengal government to mediate with Maoists, agrees that the Salboni project was the trigger behind the growth of Maoist movement in Lalgarh and the subsequent crackdown. But, he says Maoists were building their network in Lalgarh and Salboni areas for a long time, since the days their activities had become visible in Garbeta, another location in West Midnapore district, in about 2000-01. Also, because of the police excesses in villages of Lalgarh area after the attack on the chief minister's vehicle, Maoists had found a ready support from villagers, in the form of Peoples Committee against Police Atrocities.

The situation in Lalgarh changed again after the coming into power of the new government led by Mamata Banerjee in 2011 in West Bengal. The joint operations by the security forces achieved a major success as CPI(Maoist) leader in charge of rebel operations in the area Kishenji was gunned down. Following this, there were surrenders by important Maoist leaders active in the area and, overall, the Maoist operations in the so-called 'jangalmahal' lost its sting. One reason for this is believed to be the declared policy of the new government that it would not go for forcible land acquisitions. The Jindal project, too, has not made much progress. One reason for this could be the declining interest of the promoters of the project because of worsening market conditions in steel since the project was mooted.

These areas in West Midnapore district have also witnessed displacements in unspecified numbers. Among them are villagers running away from joint operations by police and para-military forces and taking shelter in near-by jungles temporarily. When security forces raided a village, the villagers usually took shelter in the forests for a day or two and then returned when the security forces left. But, according to locally available information, internal displacements continue to be a phenomenon in troubled Jhargram even after the waning in Maoist activities and the scaling down of joint operations. During the height of police operations in these areas against Maoists, nearly 6,000 youths were estimated to have fled from the area. They had taken up jobs as contract labourers in construction

projects in distant areas like Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, for a livelihood. But now that the police operations have been scaled down, many of them have still not returned. They are earning a better income as contract labourers and they do not want to come back and go to work as agricultural labourers in districts like Burdwan where wages are low.

The second category of IDPs in Belpahari and Lalgarh were CPI(M) activists, driven out by Maoists. They are considered to be the largest number of displaced persons from these areas and many of them have still not been able to return home. According to CPI(M) sources in West Midnapore, about 300 of their party workers in the area have not been able to return home, some are staying in party offices in towns others have gone in search of jobs elsewhere. But, their families are staying in the villages. Among the third category of displaced persons were Trinamool Congress supporters who had been driven by musclemen of CPI(M), often called 'harmads.' With the change in political situation in the state, most of them have since returned to their villages.

Nanoor and Keshpur: Other Conflict Zones

Though Nandigram and Lalgarh are the most serious instances of conflict-related IDPs in West Bengal, the phenomenon had started even before, in 2000-01, in places like Nanoor and Keshpur. In neither of these places has there been any instance of forcible land acquisition for industrialization. Rather, they were fights for capture of political space between the two main rivals in the political stage of the state, CPI(M) and Trinamool Congress. Interwoven with these political fights were also agrarian problems like tilling rights. The Nanoor incident, in particular, underscores how the high-handed and partisan attitude of political parties have divided the rural poor in the state and precipitated a political crisis. Continued violence since then has led to displacement of people who have fled from the disturbed villages. According to a recent estimate of CPI(M) in Birbhum district, about 300 families who had left their villages have still not been able to return home. This could total to about 1,000 people.

In Nanoor, 11 poor farmers were killed in a clash over tilling rights of a disputed plot of land at Suchpur village. The trouble snowballed because of the involvement of the two main rival political parties, CPI (M) and Trinamool Congress. Leaders of the ruling CPI (M) had adopted a divisive policy by allocating plots for cultivation only to those poor farmers who would support them. The clash occurred because farmers who were cultivating the plot had switched allegiance to Trinamool Congress and farmers backed by CPI (M) tried to evict them from the plot.

What is noteworthy about the Nanoor incident, however, is that it did not end with the clash in July 2000. The trouble snowballed with the involvement of the two rival political parties and the southern part of

Nanoor assembly constituency continued to witness intermittent violence over the past decade, in villages like Basapara, Thupsara, Papuri, Charkalgram and Sherpur. People of the area say after the 2000 incident CPI (M) started losing ground and Trinamool Congress seized the opportunity to increase its presence. There was a presence of Forward Bloc in Nanoor since earlier. In this period, a lot of Forward Bloc supporters switched allegiance to Trinamool. CPI (M) started losing further ground after 42 of their supporters were held guilty and punished in the Suchpur case. As a villager in Suchpur observes, as long as two parties fight for political supremacy, there will be violence. Before 2000, things were peaceful except some show of strength during polls. But once Trinamool tried to barge in, there was resistance.

While spreading political influence could be the main reason behind these clashes in Nanoor, there could be other “material” interests also involved, like control of the “balighats”(sand-fields) near the local rivers where unauthorized mining of sand goes on. Another issue is control over ‘chara jami,’ or unclaimed land, on river banks. The rival political parties try to grab these lands. Above all, the control of the panchayat and the right to spend ‘government funds’ is a big incentive behind gaining political upperhand. Illegal firearms are used freely in these clashes. Nanoor over the years has become a convenient route for smuggling in illegal arms.

Yet another instance of violence and displacements over spreading of political influence of rival political parties is the experience in Keshpur. In fact, Keshpur was the first place where Trinamool made a determined effort to dislodge CPI(M) from its stranglehold, way back in 1999. For the first time in West Bengal, Keshpur witnessed common villagers wielding guns and engaging in shooting sprees. Trinamool could not stand up to the onslaught of then ruling CPI(M) and many of their supporters fled the area for good. In a corner of Midnapore town, a “Keshpur colony” has come up. Here, Trinamool supporters evicted from Nandigram have constructed houses and have settled down, with little intention of returning to Keshpur. Both CPI(M) and Trinamool accused each other of following a “Keshpur model,” CPI(M) charging Trinamool of using armed people to capture the area by power, while Trinamool accusing CPI(M) of driving opposition members from the area for good. Both the rivals accuse the other of taking the help of Maoists. What is noteworthy in all these displacements is the apathy of the government in helping the affected people. Sometimes the political parties to which they owed allegiance helped them. At other times, they had to fall back on their relatives and friends for shelter. In the troubled days in Keshpur more than 10 years ago, it was a common sight to see political parties setting up temporary camps and gruel kitchens to feed and house their supporters evicted from their villages.

The Troubled Hills

While these instances of displacement are concentrated in south Bengal, another corner of the state, in north Bengal, has also been in turmoil in recent years. It is the hills of Darjeeling where Gorkha Janmukti Morcha had launched a movement for separate statehood since 2008. Supporters of rival Gorkha National Liberation Front have been driven away by GJM, the most important of them is GNLF president Subash Ghisingh himself who is now living in exile in Jalpaiguri. Among people who have been displaced are some businessmen also, like the owner of a popular eatery near Chowrasta in Darjeeling town who has set up a hotel in Siliguri and now living there. According to one report, more than 40 prominent GNLF leaders were forced to leave the hills since the Morcha started the statehood agitation in October 2007. Many lower rung leaders of CPI(M), too, have left the hills and are staying in Siliguri for fear of attacks by Morcha supporters. Houses of several GNLF leaders were burnt down or ransacked after a Morcha activist was killed in a bullet fired from the house of a prominent GNLF leader in Darjeeling town on July 25, 2008. Darjeeling is yet another instance how conflicts are sharpening in the state and political intolerance is growing. Police officers posted in Darjeeling say the administration did not opt for tough actions against the GJM agitation to avoid adverse media exposure.

Neighbouring Assam is known for frequent internal displacements, but there is a difference in displacements witnessed in Assam and other parts of the north-east and those taking place in West Bengal over the past decade. Displacements in Assam are also results of conflicts, but these are ethnic conflicts. There are also development-related displacements in the north-east like construction of dams. And such displacements are continuing for many decades. Because of involvement of trained and well-armed underground groups in the conflicts, displacements in the north-east are of a larger scale and are often a more permanent phenomenon. Also, the casualty rates are higher in Assam and the northeast when people are displaced. Often poor people have fled from their villages for a prolonged period or relocated themselves elsewhere, along with their more affluent counterparts. Often the poorer sections are the main targets of "ethnic cleansing." The most glaring instance is the adivasis displaced in the Bodo - Adivasi riots in Kokrajhar between 1996 and 1998. A large number of them are still housed in relief camps, which have taken the look of makeshift villages, in places like Bismuri and Kachugaon. Large displacements have also been witnessed in clashes between Bodos and Muslims.

In West Bengal, on the other hand, displacements are because of political clashes which flare up and then subside. The political parties want to extend their influence. People, both poor and well-off, leave their villages but they return to their houses when the situation improves. In fact, the poorer sections have little option but to return. Some people do relocate

themselves permanently, but only those who can afford to. Affluent people build houses elsewhere, when they find that the political rivals are strong enough to prevent their return for a prolonged period. Even then, often they leave a part of their families in the native village to take care of cultivation of the family land. Lately, conflicts have also taken place over the issue of forcible occupation of “Word on safe hill return for rivals.” land, following the industrialization overdrive of the previous Left Front government. Following the election of the Trinamool-led government, however, land-related conflicts have subsided as the new government has made it a policy that it will not go for forcible land acquisition.

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