

469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01 Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isasijie@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



The Battle of Nandigram and West Bengal's Political and Economic Future¹

Dhiraj Nayyar²

The rural islet of Nandigram in West Bengal is in the news again for all the wrong reasons following an outbreak of violent clashes between CPI(M) cadres and locals, allegedly led by armed Maoists. Nandigram has been in the news since late in 2006 after it was designated as a site for a chemicals based Special Economic Zone (SEZ). The villagers protested the imminent acquisition of their lands and expelled the ruling party cadres out of the village in January 2007, some of whom were also cultivators in the village. Nandigram was effectively cut off from the outside world through blockades, and the destruction of key infrastructure like roads and bridges leading into the area. The ruling party cadres, and local government authorities, claiming the earlier takeover as an act of mischief engineered by motley opposition groups including the Trinamul Congress and hard-line Maoists, made a botched attempt to recapture the village in March - at least 15 people were killed, probably more. The latest violence which left at least three people dead was another attempt by the ruling Left Front to recapture the village.

This time around the violence has elicited a strong response from different quarters. Nandigram has been termed a 'war zone' by the Governor, in an unusual display of displeasure from a ceremonial but constitutionally important office. It has prompted the main opposition leader Mamata Banerjee to resign her parliamentary seat. It has attracted the attention of social activists like Medha Patkar, whose convoy was attacked by Communist Party cadres as she approached Nandigram to express solidarity with the villagers. Even eminent film personalities in Kolkata including the acclaimed directors Aparna Sen and Rituparno Ghosh have expressed anguish over the state-sponsored violence, echoes of Gujarat 2002, in Nandigram.

¹ The views reflected in the brief are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute of South Asian Studies.

² Mr Dhiraj Nayyar is a research scholar in Economics at Trinity College, Cambridge, and a research fellow-designate at the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be reached at dn234@cam.ac.uk.

So how exactly did things come to such a pass in rural West Bengal, a long standing bastion of support for India's communist parties. The roots of the problem lie in the particular polity and economy of West Bengal, the unravelling of which will also reveal why the outcry over SEZs has been stronger in Bengal than anywhere else in India.

The ruling CPI(M) has ruled West Bengal for a record thirty years since 1977, winning successive elections with huge majorities. Their electoral success, it has been argued, stems from the success of their major land reform programme of the 1970s in which land was distributed to the cultivators from big landowners. Rural Bengal has been steadfast in its loyalty to the CPM since then. The empowerment, both economic and political, of this section of Bengal has ensured a heated response to the suggestion of land acquisition, much more than in other states. It is true, though, that many of the activists are not CPI(M) loyalists or beneficiaries from their rule.

However, even as agriculture has done reasonably well, with equity thrown in, industry has badly stagnated in West Bengal. Once India's most industrialised state, it now ranks way behind the leading states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Haryana and Punjab. Caught in a low level equilibrium, it has become necessary for the state government to encourage industrialisation, which would apart from all its other benefits, generate jobs. The CPM, under the pragmatic leadership of Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, has the right vision for industrialisation but has got the method horribly wrong.

SEZ, an idea from the past, has little relevance in India today. Originally pioneered by China in the late 1970s as islands of industrial activity, manned mostly by foreign investors, free from the restrictive rules and controls of the mainstream economy, these zones have less of a rationale to exist in an already liberalised and deregulated India. India could have used them twenty or thirty years ago, but now they are seen simply as a route to circumvent tax laws, and to indulge in real estate speculation. The fact that the State is charged with acquiring land at below market prices for handover to private industry is all the more unpalatable to the ordinary farmer. In the absence of any plans to retrain or resettle farmers whose fertile lands, at least those in Nandigram are used for multi-cropping, such a policy which will inevitably breed more inequality of wealth and income is bound to have disastrous political consequences.

The State would do better to build excellent infrastructure, such as power stations, roads and railways, in as many places as possible to attract industry, and then allow the private industry to negotiate the purchase of land directly with the local population. Given the likely high returns from industrial activity, private parties may be willing to pay more than the market price for agricultural land which would also be significantly under-priced when compared with land for industrial use.

The Left Front government, however, fell for the SEZ trap and is now suffering the consequences. The ham-handed response of the ruling government has not helped matters. The decision to allow party cadres to conduct operations, which should be undertaken only by the police, is a blot on Buddhadeb Bhattacharya's otherwise competent government. The cadres of the Left, like that of the Right, have the potential to cause great harm and must be reigned in. The Left, though, has already suffered great damage to its reputation as a progressive and democratic political force in India.

The Nandigram SEZ is dead and buried. And just as well. It should perhaps encourage a rethink on the part of the Central Government on the (de)merits of SEZs, in India today. For West Bengal, the challenge to industrialise still lies ahead. It will succeed if the government can persuade the people of West Bengal that the process is good for their futures. It would help if the most fertile lands are not the ones targeted for industrial acquisition at the start. Indeed, uncultivable land which is available would be more than sufficient for industrial use. For people displaced from land often lose their livelihoods. The government also needs schemes to train and educate farmers and their families to take up factory jobs when the factories do come up. For the immediate future though, the government needs to bring about peace and law and order in the troubled region. Reigning in the hooligan communist cadres would be a good start. Or else the perennially rabble-rousing Mamata Banerjee, hitherto considered unfit to govern, may just begin to sniff the long-elusive road to power.

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