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A Bridge Too Far

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Combat Law

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The afternoon wind whistles through the cluster of young Casurina trees that dot the banks of the Talpati Khal, a canal that runs between the Nandigram and Khejuri blocks of East Medinipur district of West Bengal.

Approaching from the village of Sonachura, on the Nandigram side, you come upon the Bangabhera bridge, a narrow cement and mortar structure that spans the muddy waters of the canal.

The locals call this the 'border'. Taking a closer look it is not difficult to see the rationale behind this somewhat strange sobriquet.

Ever since a virtual civil war began in January this year, between the people of Nandigram and state authorities over the latter's attempts to take over farming land for a chemical hub project, this bridge has become like an international boundary dividing two hostile nations.

On the Khejuri side of the bridge fly a chorus of flags of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M), which rules West Bengal, fluttering ferociously, even menacingly for some. As far as the people of Nandigram are concerned, this is 'enemy' territory, the launch pad of regular raids and assaults by the police and the ruling party cadre.

On the other side, the road is all dug up at the point where it meets the bridge-making passage impossible for anything that moves on wheels. And, given the phenomenal violence that has occurred over the past four months - particularly the gory events of March 14, 2007 - no one dares to traverse this distance by foot either.

"We have relatives in Khejuri but we cannot predict what will happen to us if we go there to meet them" says Suhasini Paik from Sonachura, an ageing small farmer, who repeatedly asks our small team of two journalists and one

medical worker to stay back for the night to get an idea of the tension in the area.

Every night, according to her and other villagers, CPI(M) cadre from Khejuri come on to the bridge, lob grenades and fire guns into the villages nearby forcing residents to flee their houses and sleep out in the nearby shrub land. A day after our visit in the third week of April, news media reported fresh violence in the area - this time guns blazing from both sides of the canal.

The history

It was not always like this though. Even just six months ago the two administrative blocks of Nandigram one and two - like the entire surrounding area in East Medinipur and nearby districts - were some of the strongest bastions of the CPI (M), the main constituent of the Left Front government in the state.

Lakshman Seth, member of Parliament representing Nandigram, which falls under the Tamluk Lok Sabha constituency, belongs to the CPI (M). Ilyas Mohammad, the member of the legislative assembly, is from the Communist Party of India (CPI), a Left Front partner. Besides, six out of seven panchayats that fall within the area are controlled by the CPI(M).

Not just that, Nandigram has been a communist stronghold from even before the time of Indian freedom from colonial rule, with the people of Nandigram and Tamluk subdivisions forming their own 'independent' government in 1942, ousting the British administration from the area for months.

Farmers from this area also took part in the tebhaga movement in 1946 under the leadership of the then undivided CPI. Nandigram villagers have a long record of fighting the police and other state authorities, even violently if necessary, to protect their rights. Over the last three decades however, they have remained loyal to the ruling Left Front regime, voting repeatedly for their candidates in all elections.

The Singur effect

All this changed last year when rumours began to circulate in Nandigram that some of the mouzas or villages and cultivation land in the area might be acquired by the state government for setting up a Special Economic Zone (SEZ), the latest brainchild of India's economic liberalisers for attracting global capital.

High on the minds of the villagers of Nandigram were events then underway in Singur, 40 kms out of Kolkata, and the site of a small car factory to be set up by the Tata group of companies. What they saw happening there was the forcible takeover of around 1,000 acres of highly fertile farming land by the Left Front government on behalf of one of India's largest corporate houses.

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In Singur, while a section of absentee landowners had agreed to sell their land to the state, a bulk of farmers and sharecroppers in the area refused to acquiesce. In response, the state government occupied and fenced the Singur land, imposing section 144 of the Indian penal code to prohibit public protests - in other words using brute force to oust farmers from their own land.

So when towards the end of 2006 state ministers and CPI(M) leaders started talking publicly of setting up a huge chemical hub in Nandigram under the Salim group, an Indonesian multinational, the local folk here started getting

agitated.

At a public meeting in Nandigram market on December 29, 2006, the CPI(M) member of Parliament, Lakshman Seth, urged farmers to pave the way for development and industrialisation in Nandigram by giving up their lands in return for monetary compensation. Seth, who is also the chairman of the Haldia Development Authority, in his speech, named the villages that would have to make way for the chemical hub. The total area to be acquired was a whopping 14,500 acres to set up the SEZ that would include a mega chemical and petrochemical hub and a shipyard.

Though, according to CPI(M) leaders, no final decision has yet been taken about the exact location of the projects, an informal notice for public information regarding likely location of this project was circulated by the Haldia Development Authority to all blocks and Gram Panchayat offices of the area.

This announcement, however, was enough to aggravate tension in the area as resentment grew among villagers at not being consulted on the issue and at the thought of being kicked out of their ancestral lands. "If we leave our land we will become beggars in the cities," says Jayanti, another resident of Sonchura, explaining the strong sentiments behind the local resistance.

On January 3, 2007, villagers clashed with a police patrol that was surveying the Nandigram area. According to the CPI(M), the police had to be called in after members of the opposition Trinamool Congress ransacked the office of the local panchayat pradhan. Four people were injured in the police lathicharge and gunfire that ensued while one police jeep was set on fire by an angry mob.

On January 5, 2007, several opposition party groups that had already been working in the area - ranging from the Trinamool Congress to the Socialist Unity Centre of India and the Santosh Rana faction of the CPI(Marxist-Leninist Liberation) decided to join hands to form the Bhumi Uchchhed Protirodh Committee (BUPC) loosely translated as 'committee for resistance to eviction from homeland'.

According to locals, the response to this political consolidation of opposition forces got a swift response from the ruling CPI(M). In the early morning on January 7, villagers alleged, CPI(M) cadres, armed with sticks, knives and guns attacked Nandigram, crossing the Bangabhera bridge from Khejuri. The official CPI(M) version is that it is the BUPC members who started the fight by attacking their people camped in Khejuri.

Whoever started the fight, in the process three people from Nandigram - Bharat Mandal, Shekh Salim and Biswajit Maiti (just 12 years old) - died of bullet injuries. In retaliation, enraged villagers lynched Shankar Samanta, a local landlord accused of giving shelter to what they called CPI(M) goons and also taking part in the firings after which they ransacked and burnt down his palatial house close to the bridge.

Every night, according to her and other villagers, CPI(M) cadre from Khejuri come on to the bridge, lob grenades and fire guns into the villages nearby forcing residents to flee their houses and sleep out in the nearby shrub land

It was following this incident that the locals decided to dig a trench on the road connecting the Bangabhera bridge to Nandigram and block the road further with tree-trunks, boulders and bricks.

Civil war unfolds

In the weeks and months after the violence of early January, the Bangabhera bridge and adjoining areas became a war zone with almost daily attacks by CPI(M) cadre who had gathered in Khejuri, villagers said. These cadres

included some of those who had left the Nandigram area, along with their families, due to threats from those opposed to the acquisition of land for the chemical hub project.

In response, Nandigram villagers blockaded all entry points into their area making it a no-go zone for the state officials, particularly police. There are reports that some arms and ammunition also found its way into the hands of locals to be used against what has been termed as the superior firepower of the CPI(M) cadre, who, after all, also had the backing of state authorities.

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Surrounded as they were by the sea on one side and the CPI(M) on the other three sides, life got tough for Nandigram residents. They had not been able to carry on with their normal agricultural work for all these months. Those who had to go out of the area to work in nearby towns, like the busy industrial port of Haldia would often reportedly be pulled out of buses they were in and manhandled by the CPI(M) cadres. According to reports in the Bengali media, often they would be asked to get down and walk back home.

Doublespeak

While all this was going on, West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee announced at several public meetings that the proposed chemical hub would not be set up at Nandigram if villagers did not want it there. However, the original notification issued by the Haldia Development Authority, outlining the land to be acquired for the SEZ, was never withdrawn or officially annulled.

In fact behind the talk of reconciliation and dialogue with the villagers, it appears now that the local MP Lakshman Seth and his men were preparing for a massive assault on Nandigram with two objectives. First was to clear opposition to acquisition of land and pave way for the Salim Group of Indonesia to commence work on the chemical hub. The second goal, keeping with the CPI(M)'s long history of crushing dissent of any kind - within and outside the party - was to teach the recalcitrant people of Nandigram a 'lesson' they would never forget.

While it is not the first time the party has used sheer muscle power to browbeat its opponents, the price it may end up paying for its display of hubris on March 14, 2007 in Nandigram may end up far higher than anything in the past.

There is no other word to describe what happened in Nandigram on March 14, 2007 except as a massacre - the true scale of which will never really be known.

On one side were thousands of unarmed Nandigram folk - mostly women and children - gathered in the early hours of morning near the Bangabhera bridge to peacefully block any attempts by the state forces to invade their villages.

Ranged against them was a police contingent of at least two thousand along with several hundred armed cadre of the CPI(M) - some of them allegedly dressed in ill-fitting police uniforms.

Though the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), on orders of from the Calcutta High Court, has prepared a report on what really happened on that day, no one knows when, or if at all, the report will be made public. Establishing the truth about the events of March 14 are crucial to firstly bring all the culprits responsible for rape and murder to justice and secondly to restore peace in the area - which is now in the throes of a little civil war of its own. To date, no compensation has been announced for the victims by the government nor has any minister or senior administrator even bothered to visit the place.

A Bridge Too Far

Given below are excerpts from a report based on the testimonies of 62 patients and about 200 villagers met by a fact-finding team sent to Nandigram on March 15 and 16 by the Association for Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR) and Paschim Banga Khet Mazdoor Samity (PBKMS).

The event

"People were aware that there would be an attempt by the police and party goons to re-enter the area as a first step towards taking over their land. They decided to offer peaceful resistance by organising a Gouranga puja (incidentally Gouranga is a god that protects those who worship him). They also planned a Koran recitation ceremony.

Once this programme was known, people flocked to the spots where the puja was being held. At Bangabhera, the puja was in a trench that had been cut in the road earlier. About 5,000-6,000 people were present, of whom 3,000 were women and about 400-500 children. The mob was unarmed as they were in a religious ceremony.

The women and children decided to stand in front as the people assumed that the police would not be violent with women and children. A large police force with firearms and tear gas arrived in vehicles and buses on the Khejuri side of the Talpati Khal in the morning. They were accompanied by many armed CPI(M) goons.

At Bangabhera Bridge, they first filled up a large trench near the bridge. None opposed this. They then began advancing across the bridge. There seems to have been no prior warning. A few report that Anup Mondal of the CPI(M) was using a hand mike, but most heard nothing and were not forewarned about the police action.

Without any proper warning the police began throwing tear gas shells. This blinded the crowd and created confusion and panic. During this period, the police and the goons began firing and advanced while spraying bullets.

While the firing continued for about 15 minutes, the violence followed for the next hour-and-a-half or so. There are many complaints of horrific and deliberate violence during this phase and afterwards.

Women were taken away and allegedly raped. Women who tried to hide or wash their burning eyes in the pond were forced to come out and then beaten up again. Houses and shops were looted. Instead of using least force necessary, the police seem to have been of using maximum force to instil fear and terror in people and to break their spirits. Fourteen persons from amongst those who were resisting the attacks were also arrested. Grievous false offences have been filed against them.

Death toll

According to official statement, 14 persons died due to police firing. Out of them, nine bodies were not identified till March 16, 2007.

According to all the 200 or more villagers we met and the patients admitted in Tamluk Hospital and Nandigram Hospital, more than 100 persons had died in the firing. They alleged that most of the bodies were taken away by the police and CPI(M) goons by trucks towards Khejuri or buried under the newly repaired road at Bangabhera.

Violence against women

The violence that erupted in Nandigram on March 14 found the police and CPI(M) cadres specifically targeting

women. Of the 62 testimonies that we gathered in the hospital and from other victims outside, 30 are from women. In the injured list at Nandigram BPHC, out of 69 persons 39 were women. Interviews with scores of villagers and their testimonies brought home one point - that specific and systematic violence was used against the women to humiliate them and to break the backbone of their resistance.

Women who were beaten up complained of the abusive language used that they could not repeat. The lathicharge was more aimed at the breasts, stomach and genital regions of their body. Male police took it onto themselves to lathicharge the women though there were women police around.

Women who were not even participating in the puja but standing around were caught in the fire round and beaten mercilessly.

Apart from the lathicharge and firing the police and the CPI(M) cadres resorted to various forms of sexual violence which included ripping clothes of women and leaving them naked lying in the open. Girls were pushed forcefully into vans and cars and driven away.

When we met the nursing staff at Nandigram Block Hospital we enquired if any women had been raped. A nurse denied this. However, other people in the hospital informed one of our women team members about two patients who had been raped. It is only after this that these cases at our initiative were registered as rape cases.

Violence against children

Along with women, children who were present in huge numbers to participate and witness the puja also faced the brunt of the police firing and lathicharge. Scores of people have alleged that children were torn apart, hurled into ponds and killed. Many people have testified to children being shot at and killed.

Of the 38 missing, 11 are children. In addition to this we received a few other reports of children who were missing/killed.

Police camps have now been set up in four educational institutions affecting education in the area.

These schools are as follows:

Sitananda College, Nandigram

GK Shiksha Niketan, Gokulnagar

Gokulnagar Gobinda Jew Shiksha Niketan, Gokulnagar

KCA Milan Mandir, Sonachura

The education of about 2500-3000 students have been affected in this process.

Wall to gladden Wall Street

A Bridge Too Far

The East Germans had their Berlin Wall, the Israelis have their infamous apartheid wall to keep out Palestinians and now the Indian state of West Bengal has one too - in the district of Singur - to keep farmers out of their own land.

Within just a year after the ruling Left Front government forcibly acquired nearly 1,000 acres of fertile, agricultural land to hand over to the Tata group for a car manufacturing plant, a four meter high wall has come up to prevent its original owners from 'raiding' the land for cultivation. A contingent of several hundred heavily armed policemen, some of them atop high watch towers, guard the property on a 24x7 basis while company excavators dig the land to prepare the foundation for the new factory.

Once upon a time, Mahadeb Das, a small farmer in the area would have been fawning over his four bighas of land and 'counting potatoes' - a product for which Singur is particularly famous all over the state. Today, however, he sits idly in a nearby local youth club office staring at the wall and its uniformed bodyguards - biding his moment.

"As soon as the police leave the place we will bring down the wall and the factory. We will start planting our crops again," he says with a calm confidence. Other youth sitting near him nod in agreement at the idea.

It seems to be a somewhat foolish, though touching, statement to make given that he and other farmers like him are ranged against not just the might of the state government and the Tata corporate empire but also the formidable cadre-based organisation of the ruling CPI(M). The 'red-brigades' of the ruling party are fast acquiring a reputation for intimidating all those opposed to the unabashedly corporate-led industrialisation agenda in the state.

Complicating the battle for Mahadeb and others is also the fact that around 30 percent of the land owners, mostly absentee landlords living in Kolkata, have consented to sell their land.

The Left Front government has claimed in public statements that of the 997 acres required, it has received consent letters from landowners for 952 acres.

However, an affidavit filed in response to an order of the Kolkata High Court by the West Bengal government on 27 March this year says that compensation cheques have been collected for just 650 acres till date, which amounts to around 67 percent. Further, around 20 per cent of these seem to have retracted after the takeover, under the colonial-era Land Acquisition Act of 1894, that became a fait accompli amidst fear of retribution by the state and ruling party bosses.

According to Mahadeb, it is not just the small farmers living in the area but large numbers of agricultural labour, many of them migrants, whose livelihood will be severely affected by the state-organised land grab operation. The promise made by the government of training the local youth to obtain jobs in the new car factory, he says, is a pipe-dream as the company itself has not given any guarantee of jobs to local people.

Though the battle between farmers and state authorities in Singur has not been as fierce as that in Nandigram, there is no doubt that this is going to be a site of more struggles in the near and even distant future. Once the Tata car factory is set up - it is only a matter of time before other private corporations make a beeline for taking over more agricultural land in the area - a recipe for complete disaster in one of West Bengal's richest farming areas.

"This is a revolution that comes straight from our hearts. We understand the value of land as a fixed asset and as the only source of survival our families can depend upon," says Mahadeb. To understand his point of view will require the breaking of all the corporate-sponsored walls that seem to have sprung up in the minds of Bengal's Marxists-turned-merchant ruling elite.

The writer is a Delhi based journalist and documentary film-maker