

Beyond the Immediate Tragedy

There is a need to go beyond the immediate tragedy of Nandigram and examine the underlying process that gives rise to such episodes. In the neoliberal times that we are living through, governments, whether at the central or a state level, are essentially for the markets, by the markets and of the markets. Indeed, the parliamentary political process is increasingly governed by the logic of the market. But at a more basic level, the process of capitalist development, which is now driven largely by private investment, is creating progress and wealth at one pole, while at the same time dragging masses of people – poor and middle peasants, landless rural workers, urban workers weakened by the decline of effective trade unions, and non-wage earners in the informal sector – “through blood and dirt, through misery and degradation” at the other.

Classically, the “peasant question” has been articulated in terms of class differentiation of the peasantry, ultimately tending to polarisation into capitalists and proletarians. However, the process of industrialisation also demands the mobilisation of agricultural land that leads to displacement of peasants, leading to their “proletarianisation” or “marginalisation” in an urban environment, a process that has accelerated in India since the 1980s. Of course, before the reforms and the drive towards free trade in agricultural commodities initiated at the World Trade Organisation, such effects were mitigated through state support to agriculture in various forms. But now the “commodification” of food is at high tide. The “peasant question” of the 21st century, more than in the past, thus brings to the fore issues of landlessness, hunger, “informalisation”, homelessness and environmental destruction. Millions of people have been victims of displacement and dislocation, and many more will follow, if the many proposals on the anvil to set up special economic zones (SEZs) go ahead in the country.

In West Bengal, to the credit of the Left Front (LF) government, land reform – implementation of the land ceiling and the redistribution of land, as also “Operation Barga” – improved the distribution of income and changed the incentive structure in favour of those who tilled the land, though subsequently some land transfers may have been reversed via the market. But over time there has been the inevitable rising disproportion between the rural population, land resources and jobs, what with the failure of rural industry to take off. The CPI(M) has been rightly quite concerned about the

future of the small and middle peasants, given the decline of landholding areas and the limits of the diffusion of technical progress, and with the increase in population density also about the landless. After all, with the land reform, around 80 per cent of the cultivated land is now with small and middle peasants, whereas elsewhere, where the implementation of the land ceiling and redistribution was a failure, this proportion is less than half that figure. And, post-land reforms, the Chayanovian tendency of demographic differentiation has also asserted itself. But will industrialisation in the form of a “mega-chemical hub” and multi-product SEZ over 10,000 acres of land in Nandigram or elsewhere and other such projects serve to address the question of alternative livelihood opportunities? An enormous number of people who are involved in agriculture and allied activities will be expropriated and displaced as a result, leading to a further increase in the huge mass of people in the informal sector, living on the margins of existence.

Should not the CPI(M) then be thinking and acting at least along social-democratic lines? In agriculture and allied activities, the LF government, with the active participation of the Kisan Sabhas, can help form mutual aid teams in which households can pool resources (tools, implements, draft power, occasional labour) but still cultivate the land on an individual basis. When this is successful, they can then move to the formation of elementary cooperatives in which land as well as other resources can be pooled, but individual ownership rights maintained, and where incomes can be based partly on property ownership and partly on labour time committed to cooperative production. In industry, the LF government should be pursuing more vigorously its policy of industrial clusters based on specific products/skills of small and medium units with common infrastructure services that improve the viability of the units. Here too, cooperative forms of organisation can be given precedence, with the trade unions as effective stakeholders. Land acquisition, as required, must of course go through the process of democratic consent via the gram sabhas, with environmental and social impact assessments, public hearings, and reasonable compensation, resettlement and rehabilitation. **EW**