

SOS from Nandigram

The killing of protesting villagers in Nandigram by a trigger-happy police on March 14 sounds an alarm bell that sends a warning not only to the Left Front regime of West Bengal where the tragedy occurred, but to all those at the helm of affairs in both the centre and other states, who irrespective of their party affiliation, are fond of riding roughshod over public opposition, for the sake of “economic growth” – the catchword in today’s official discourse of liberalisation.

The developments in Nandigram should not be treated as something coming out of the blue. The air was already heavy with signs of the approaching storm. The sequence of events exposes both the political myopia of an over-confident and arrogant ruling party and the inhuman indifference to public concerns by its administration – features shared in common by state governments, whether based in Bhubaneswar, Jaipur, Hyderabad or Gandhinagar. When the West Bengal government initially announced its plan to acquire land at Nandigram for the setting up of a chemical hub, it immediately provoked protests from among the affected villagers – the majority of them incidentally being supporters of the ruling CPI(M). But the party chose to ignore the signs of discontent in Nandigram, and also failed to take lessons from the popular outburst that had already challenged the ham-handed efforts of its administration to acquire land in Singur for the Tata car factory a few months ago. Instead of correcting its past mistakes, the CPI(M) in Nandigram persisted in ramrodding the drive for industrialisation, without caring to take into confidence the affected villagers. The Haldia Development Authority (under which Nandigram falls and is headed by the local CPI(M) MP), went ahead by issuing a circular declaring its unilateral decision to acquire land for the project. A smug party leadership apparently assumed that since the villagers had voted for the Left, they would meekly submit to the orders issued from above.

When the villagers rose in protest, chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya retracted by admitting in public

that it was a mistake, and had to announce that no land would be taken away from them without their consent. Yet, rather than following up the public gesture by meeting and apologising to the disgruntled villagers and officially withdrawing the circular, the ruling CPI(M) seemed to have been driven by a petty vindictive motive of teaching a lesson to their voters and dissident followers for having dared to oppose the party’s plan. Reports by both the media and human rights activists reveal that in the terror that was unleashed in Nandigram on March 14 – all in the name of restoring “law and order” – the police were accompanied by CPI(M) armed cadres who wreaked vengeance on their opponents.

The bloody trail of terror left in Nandigram has besmirched the image of Bhattacharya, who till recently was basking in the glory of success in winning the elections, regaining the confidence of Indian investors, and earning the admiration of bhadralok Bengali society. The Nandigram tragedy will also hang as an albatross around the neck of his party’s central leadership which has just begun to acquire some respectability and importance among the Indian political classes, thanks to the Left’s ability to win enough seats in Parliament to influence national policies.

Beyond the immediate tragedy of Nandigram, there lurks the more frightful prospect of increasing confrontation all over India between state governments, which are bent on following a particular model of development, on the one hand, and the vast masses who are to be dispossessed by that model, on the other. Nandigram is only one episode among the series of agitations that have exploded in various parts in the recent past (in Sangrur in Punjab over acquisition of land for a special economic zone, Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh against the construction of a mega hydel project and Panaji in Goa in opposition to selling of farm and forest land to corporate houses – to quote a few instances). L K Advani of the Bharatiya Janata Party who is now crying hoarse over the killings in Nandigram, chose to remain silent

over a similar happening in Kalinganagar in Orissa (where his party is an ally of the ruling Biju Janata Dal) in January 2006, when the police shot down 13 villagers as the local tribal community came out in a demonstration against the appropriation of their land for an industrial project. **EPW**