

# Peasant Resistance in West Bengal a Decade before Singur and Nandigram

*Land acquisition in the name of building industry in Singur and Nandigram in West Bengal has seen popular opposition from various political entities and intellectuals. However, such opposition was lacking in earlier cases of acquisition of fertile land ostensibly for industrial development of the state. Despite the lack of such support from civil society and the polity, the people affected still protested to ensure compensation.*

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This is how forced displacement becomes cultural-economic equivalent of an earthquake that shatters production systems and social networks, undermines identity, and plunges those affected on a downward poverty spiral.

– Michael Cernea (2002).

The peasant protests in Singur and Nandigram, hitherto little known places, have been able to draw the attention of the national and international media, the leading economists and intellectuals of the country, human rights activists and above all, politicians. But if we take a longer view of events involving land acquisition for private industries, we will find that worse things had happened in Kharagpur during the early 1990s, a few years before the declaration of the “New Industrial Policy” (NIP) by the Left Front Government (LFG) in 1994. Kolkata-based scientists and intellectuals who are now protesting against the acquisition of fertile agricultural land for Tata Motors at Singur, did not pay any heed to the dispossession of thousands of small and marginal farmers and bargadars (including tribals) for the pig-iron companies of the Tatas and Birlas at Kharagpur.

The opposition parties, too, were silent. No opposition leader raised his or her voice in the West Bengal assembly on the acquisition of farmland for private companies at Kharagpur. The report on the adverse consequences of land acquisition

was published in the media, particularly, *The Statesman*, yet the intellectuals remained silent. The reasons behind the silence of Kolkata-based intellectuals and the opposition parties over the land acquisition for the Tatas and Birlas by the LFG at Kharagpur in the early 1990s are more than one. First, anti-Left Front political parties (the SUCI and CPI-ML) and human rights groups (APDR and Nagarik Mancha) were not interested in the land acquisition issue during that period when the Left Front-driven industrialisation was at its nascent stage, with promises of huge industrial investments by private companies in the state. The other partners of the LFG, viz. CPI, Forward Bloc and RSP were also silent on the acquisition of farmland in a district in which the majority of the population depends on agriculture. Undoubtedly, these pressure groups lacked the political foresight to take it up as their major agenda for agitation. Second, though the farmlands acquired in Kharagpur provided food security to a good number of villagers, these were monocrop (‘jal soem’ in the departmental classification) in nature. We still find among those who are opposed to the acquisition of multicrop farmlands an understanding which runs like this: “Well, monocrop land may be acquired since we need to have industrialisation in the state, but multicrop land should never be allowed to be acquired for non-agricultural use”. This argument defies logic, because the assumption is that where

monocrop land is cultivated people will benefit if industrialisation occurs there. Third, despite the spontaneous but weak protests and resistance by farmers of Kharagpur during the mid-1990s, no opposition party lent any solid support (as they have done in Singur) to them government. A comparative study between the cases of land acquisition in Singur and Kharagpur is thus required. According to information revealed in the print media, a total of 997 acres of agricultural land have been acquired for the Tatas’ small car factory at Singur. The process of land acquisition by the bureaucratic machinery of the West Bengal government took eight months. The compensation rate, according to government sources, turned out to be a little more than Rs 7 lakh per acre (*The Statesman*, December 14, 2006).

In 1992, a pig-iron manufacturing plant named Tata Metaliks was set up on monocrop land of six ‘mouzas’ under Kharagpur I block of the erstwhile Midnapore district, though non-arable land was available in the vicinity, having communication and other facilities. A total of 217.23 acres was acquired by the state government and the acquisition was complete within a year through the application of the more coercive West Bengal Land (Requisition and Acquisition) Act, 1948 which became defunct after March 31, 1993. The compensation paid by the district land acquisition department was Rs 20,686 an acre for a landowner, while for a recorded bargadar, it was Rs 11,211.75 an acre. On June 1, 1992 in the West Bengal assembly, Manas Bhunia of the Congress wanted to know about the land acquisition for the establishment of the pig-iron industry by the Tatas at Kharagpur. The land and land reforms minister in his reply informed the assembly about the amount of land given to the company and the rates of compensation. No question was asked about the rehabilitation of the displaced peasants by any member of the assembly (West Bengal Assembly Proceedings, Vol 99; 1992). An unpublished report of the Midnapore land acquisition department dated March 27, 1992 revealed that the lack of irrigation facilities and the monocrop nature of the acquired land led to the calculation of its market price at such a low rate [Land Acquisition

Department 1992]. The department, too, did not explore the possibilities of rehabilitation of the affected families in terms of providing permanent jobs and/or land as compensation. The administration seemed to be concerned only with monetary compensation at the market price prevalent in the area. Three years later, people of the same area were served with notices by the district administration for the acquisition of their farmland in 10 mouzas covering about 525 acres for another pig-iron plant named Century Textiles and Industrial Limited (CTIL).

The local people, being totally disillusioned and frustrated with the government's attitude towards rehabilitation and compensation in the Tata Metaliks case, began to protest against this decision of acquisition. This time, the land acquisition department prepared rates of compensation, which ranged between Rs 50,000 and Rs 1,00,000 an acre and Rs 7,000 an acre for the bargadars. The farmers objected to these rates and mass deputations to the district authorities began, and on January 10, 1996, the peasants prevented soil testing by the company and blocked National Highway 6 for eight hours. The farmers' agitation continued for about five months and they also boycotted parliamentary elections in May 1996. All these events were reported in *The Statesman* and some Bengali dailies. No political party came forward to organise this spontaneous movement of peasants; no social or human rights activist came forward to support land losers of a rural area in West Bengal, just 120 km from Kolkata. One former naxalite peasant leader, with the help of a few local Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) members, led a brief but significant movement against land acquisition. The district unit of the APDR published a leaflet, held a meeting in the locality and sent a deputation to the district magistrate, but that was all. The land acquisition episode for CTIL, however, took a horrible turn within a few years. After taking possession of 358.25 acres by April 1997 and fencing the land, the company decided not to deposit any money for payment of compensation [Guha 2004]. The company's managing director, B K Birla, in an interview with *The Statesman*, said they would not proceed with the project since "the national market of pig-iron has become very competitive because of the entry of China and Australia in the field". The then state land and land reforms minister, Surya Kanta Mishra, on the other hand told

*The Statesman*: "We are not finding any takers for the land" (*The Statesman*, November 18, 1999). This huge chunk of fertile agricultural land, which provided subsistence to nearly 3,000 families, remained unutilised till 2003 after which some portion of it was given to a private company but the larger area still remains unutilised. According to the survey conducted by the Kharagpur I block development office, 73 per cent of families of the gram panchayats from which land was acquired for Tata Metaliks and CTIL were living below the poverty line in 1997, that is, one to five years after the acquisition [Block Development Office 1997].

The current industrial policy of the LFG is rationalised by its protagonists by the success of its land reform measures, which as the argument runs has improved the conditions of the peasantry so that the rural areas of this state can now afford to have medium and large industries [WBIDC 1999]. The land for these industries is acquired by the colonial Land Acquisition Act of 1894 which only has provision for monetary compensation at the prevalent market rate. The net effect of this kind of development has not only been impoverishment at the social and economic level but also disempowerment of the peasantry at the political level. The all-powerful, Land Acquisition Act which bypasses the democratically elected local self-governments has no provision for rehabilitation nor has the LFG shown interest to create any kind of safety net for the group of small peasantry which has benefited from land reforms and includes sharecroppers and tribals. This is the broader context of the protests and resistance of a group of peasants in a region of West Bengal, who tried to create a greater space for compensation for the land taken over by the government in the early 1990s. In the following sections we would describe in some detail how the peasants of Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal made attempts to manage the risks created by the acquisition of agricultural land for the industries through various kinds of legal and extra-legal means. But before we enter into the detailed description of the peasant ways of risk management, let us contextualise land acquisition in West Bengal.

### Land Acquisition in West Bengal

In situations of rural poverty one of the best safety nets is the empowerment of the

poor through land reforms which is done through the distribution of illegally held excess ceiling land. In the Indian context the colonial Land Acquisition Law and the post-independence Land Reform Act stand in an antithetical relationship. While the latter empowers the peasantry, the former functions in an opposite direction; it disempowers the peasants. And quite frustratingly, land acquisition has taken place at a faster pace than land reforms in left ruled West Bengal [Guha 2007].

Dispossession from one's own means of production is one kind of displacement in which the dispossessed family not only loses its economic security but also social status and empowerment achieved through political movements and land reforms. Michael Cernea's pioneering study on displacement has shown that impoverishment has several 'dimensions' and the primary among them is landlessness. According to Cernea, landlessness is one of the most vital components of displacement which should be given a major importance in devising rehabilitation resettlement and plans. To quote Cernea: "Expropriation of land removes the main foundation upon which people's productive systems, commercial activities and livelihoods are constructed. This is the principal form of 'decapitalisation' and pauperisation for most rural and many urban displaces, who lose this way both natural and manmade capital" [Cernea 1999: 17].

**Table 1: Distribution of Households in Five Villages Affected by Land Acquisition for Tata Metaliks**

Name of the Village	Number of Households
Ajabpur	47 (33.6)*
Amba	21 (14.5)
Gokulpur	32 (22.2)
Liluakala	12 (8.3)
Mahespur	32 (22.2)
Total	144 (100)

Note: Figures in parentheses represent percentage out of column total in the table.

**Table 2: Distribution of Households of Different Castes and Communities Affected by Land Acquisition for TML**

Name of the Caste/Community	Number of Households	Per cent of Total
Baisnab	4	(2.8)
Brahmin	6	(4.2)
Kayastha	13	(9.0)
Kshatriya	15	(10.4)
Muslim	8	(5.6)
Napit	2	(1.4)
Sadgope	56	(38.9)
Scheduled Castes	12	(8.3)
Kora (Tribe)	24	(16.7)
Tantubay	3	(2.1)
Teli	1	(0.7)

The second aspect of dispossession of the farmers from their major means of production, is the differential impact of land acquisition on the heterogeneous group of agriculturists in a region. This is precisely because of the fact that when any government acquires agricultural land it does not take into consideration the pre-acquisition landholding pattern of a region.

Thirdly, dispossession also entails a political dimension. In a rural society where peasant movements have taken place in successive waves and the rights of sharecroppers as well as landless labourers have been ensured by a government just a few years ago, the acquisition of fertile agricultural land for capital-intensive heavy industries by the same government not only dispossesses the farmers economically but it also creates political disempowerment and dependency.

In this paper, we would briefly describe the consequences of land acquisition for the private industries in which all three aforementioned risks had been observed, viz, (i) landlessness, (ii) differential impact of land acquisition on the peasantry, and (iii) their political disempowerment.

### **Socio-economic Consequences**

The area in question lies on the bank of the river Kasai which is the largest river in Paschim Medinipur district. Cultivation of paddy (staple of the district) in the villages under study depends primarily upon rainfall and no systematic irrigation facilities have yet been developed by the government. The villagers residing on the south-eastern bank of the river cultivate a variety of vegetables on the land adjoining their homesteads owing to a very good supply of groundwater tapped through traditional dug wells. But just west of the south-eastern railway track the groundwater level is not very congenial for cultivation of vegetables. The main agricultural activity on this side of the railway track is rain fed paddy cultivation for about four to six months of the year. Land for the big private industries had been acquired by the government on this side of the railway track during 1991-96 in the wake of liberalisation in India.

The selection procedure of the households for this study followed a combination of purposive and opportunity sampling. The aim was to locate the households whose farmlands have been acquired for the establishment of the Tata Metaliks (TML) unit. Instead of searching through the

records of land ownership kept in the land and land records department of the district, this investigation depended directly upon fieldwork by following the traditional anthropological method of intensive interviews of the project affected people. Apart from knowing the current status of land ownership, (which are not promptly made up-to-date in the land records office) micro-ecological variations and local level political movement centering round land acquisition within the first few weeks of fieldwork, it became possible to know from the active members of the political movement the names of the villages whose inhabitants have been affected by the acquisition of agricultural lands for the industries. Later, at the time of conducting the household survey, snowball sampling was taken recourse to, wherein the affected households gave the names of other such household heads whose land have also been acquired. The household survey had to be completed within a period of three months owing to time constraints and as a result not all the affected households could be covered. A rough estimate about the total number of households affected by the acquisition of land was made available for us by the leaders of the peasant movement who took the help of the Congress Party. They estimated that about 200 families have been affected by the acquisition. Within the stipulated time, a total of 144 households (72 per cent of the estimated total) belonging to different landholding categories, caste and community affiliation as well as families residing in the two micro-ecological niches on both sides of the south-eastern railway track have been covered by the survey. The sample households included Hindu caste groups, Muslims, tribals, owner cultivators, sharecroppers on both sides of the railway track which provide interesting ecological variations in terms of groundwater level and cultivation of non-cereal food crops. In the following section, the findings of enquiry on some consequences of the said act of acquisition have been described.

The first and foremost consequence conforms to the observation of Michael Cernea that there are "eight major risks" involved in involuntary displacement caused by development projects all over the world. Industrialisation in the liberalisation decade in Medinipur has led to dispossession of the small and marginal farmers from their principal means of production.

From Table 1 it is found that the villages situated on the eastern side of the railway track (Ajabpur, Gokulpur and Liluakala) have been affected more in terms of the number of families who have lost their farmlands. The people of these villages are excellent farmers who keep themselves engaged throughout the year in agriculture. Besides paddy, they also grow almost all kinds of summer and winter vegetables like green chili, lady's finger, mustard, water gourd, pumpkin, bitter gourd, brinjal, potato, cabbage, cauliflower, radish and others.

These vegetables are grown in lands adjoining their homesteads which have not been acquired by the government. The villagers mainly sell these vegetables in the local markets which fetch them some ready cash. On the other hand, the families who live in the village Paschim Amba, lying on the western side of the railway track, belong to the kora tribe. Many of the kora women and men now work as temporary unskilled labourers in the coke oven industry.

Table 2 shows that the households belonging to Sadgops, who are one of the most enterprising peasant caste of western Bengal, have been affected most, while the scheduled tribe and scheduled caste families comprise almost a quarter of the total number of affected households. An estimate of the number of persons who were dependent directly on agriculture and related activities in the pre-acquisition phase may now be attempted. Since the mean household size in this area turned out to be 5.76 the number of persons in our 144 sample households would be around 829 and through our field based interviews and observations we have found that all these persons were dependent on agriculture and related economic activities before the acquisition.

In the pre-acquisition stage, there was no landless family within the sample households and 75 per cent of these families belonged to the size category of

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0.5-4.5 acres. According to the latest standards set by the government of West Bengal, these families should be regarded as marginal and small farmers. The pattern of landholding among the same families after land acquisition shows that 15 per cent of the families have become landless and the number of households belonging to the lowest landholding category ( $\leq 0.5$  acres) has increased from 19 to 35. On the other hand, the number of households within the size category 3.5-7.5 acres, has declined from 22 to only 9. Landlessness has another interesting dimension. The post acquisition phase shows that the project affected families are forced to support bigger families with a smaller amount of agricultural land.

It may be mentioned that even the administrative procedures for monetary compensation to the sharecroppers make them more vulnerable in terms of the amount as well as the delay towards its payment. The new industrial policy of the government of West Bengal did not spell out any safety net for the sharecroppers [Guha 2006].

### Utilisation of Compensation

While the policymakers of the government think that their task of rehabilitation ends with the payment of compensation, the project affected families begin to manage risk by spending the compensation money. The following table summarises this risk management behaviour of the peasants in the study area.

Here we have made an attempt to quantify the pattern of utilisation of the compensation money received by the land losers in the study area. It needs to be mentioned at first that all the 144 households have received monetary compensation, although many losers of land during the field investigation reported that they were yet to get the full compensation money. Secondly, all the families have utilised the compensation money in more ways than one. Eight categories of utilisation of the compensation money by the villagers could be identified, which were then arranged into 10 compensation categories. The maximum number of affected households have spent some portion of the compensation money on domestic consumption, while the second largest number of households has deposited a part of the money in banks. But if spending on marriage of the family members and house-building and repair are also

considered to be domestic consumption, then clearly the latter item predominates in the compensation utilisation process. In order to have a qualitative "feel" of the impact of land acquisition in our field area we would briefly describe the cases of some families from Gokulpur village in which about 22 per cent of the total number of families have been affected by land acquisition for the Tata Metaliks. Here we have used the real names of the persons with their consent.

*Case 1:* Nirod Choudhury, a middle-aged Sadgop peasant inherited 2.5 acres of fertile land. He used to grow paddy in the land which supplied him food for about six to eight months of the year. All the land was acquired and he received about Rs 56,000 as compensation in 1992. He spent all the money in marrying off his 17-year old daughter. His two sons have dropped out from school and now work as agricultural day labourers. Nirod-babu now works as a helper of a mason and buys paddy from the market.

*Case 2:* Ballav Jana, a Tanti peasant owned three acres of agricultural land and one acre of vegetable growing land. All his paddy land has been acquired and he got about Rs 66,000 as compensation which was spent in getting his daughter married and on domestic consumption. His one acre of vegetable growing land which is next to his home was not acquired and he now sells vegetables in the local market to maintain his family.

*Case 3:* Dhiren Choudhury, a Sadgop, owned one acre of paddy land and all his land have been acquired. He received about Rs 22,000 as compensation and purchased seven kathas of agricultural land. He has not yet taken up any non-agricultural job.

The above cases represent the impact of land acquisition at the household level in Kharagpur which clearly reveal that the main crisis encountered by the peasant families affected by land acquisition was food insecurity. The compensation money could not solve the problem. Secondly, unless forced, these families wanted to continue their traditional economic pursuit, that is agriculture.

The protests launched by the landowning peasants of the Gokulpur-Amba area against land acquisition took many forms, even though these did not last long. A good number of peasants took the statutory means to put up their objections against land acquisition under section 5A of the Land Acquisition Act during

December 1995. A government report dated June 21, 1996 vividly recorded the objections and described in detail how the latter were overruled. The objections submitted by the 342 peasants who lost land contained the following points: (i) The acquisition of agricultural land would affect the farmers seriously by throwing them out of employment, (ii) they would not get compensation at the rate they expect, and (iii) the proposed acquisition is against public interest and is beyond the purview of the Act. It is interesting to observe how the concerned officials of the land acquisition department overruled all the objections raised by the farmers. Before rejecting the objections, the officials, however, recognised the severity and magnitude of the acquisition. To quote from the report:

It is a fact that since large quantum of land is being acquired and the people chiefly subsist on agriculture many people

**Table 3A: Pre-acquisition Agricultural Landholding Pattern of Sample Households Affected by the Acquisition for TML**

Size Category of Holdings (in Acres)	Number of Household	Mean Household Size
Landless	Nil	-
0.5	19 (13.2)	4.7
0.5-1.5	58 (40.3)	6.4
1.5-2.5	32 (22.2)	8.8
2.5-3.5	13 (9.0)	8.6
3.5-4.5	8 (5.6)	8.9
4.5-5.5	6 (4.2)	12.6
5.5-6.5	Nil	-
6.5-7.5	8 (5.6)	13.3

**Table 3B: Post-acquisition Agricultural Landholding Pattern of Sample Households Affected by the Acquisition for TML**

Size Category of Holdings (in Acres)	Number of Households	Mean Household Size
Landless	22 (15.3)	6.4
0.5	35 (24.3)	5.5
0.5-1.5	51 (35.4)	8.3
1.5-2.5	14 (9.7)	7.6
2.5-3.5	13 (9.1)	12.1
3.5-4.5	5 (3.5)	9.2
4.5-5.5	3 (2.1)	10.3
5.5-6.5	1 (0.7)	15.0
6.5-7.5	Nil	-

**Table 4: Land Acquisition Scenario among the Sharecropper Households Affected by Acquisition for TML**

Amount of Land in Acres	Number of Households
0.5	2
0.5-1.5	8
1.5-2.5	Nil
2.5-3.5	1
Total	11

will be seriously affected in earning their livelihood and avocation (Land Acquisition Department 1996).

But this was the only sentence in the whole report which upheld the interests of the peasants. The rest of the three-page report was devoted to justifying the acquisition through the elaboration of some arguments. The arguments of the officials centered around the low agricultural yield of the lands which are monocrop in nature. Moreover the report also talked about the merits of the location of the land and the important infrastructure facilities available near by for industry. It is learnt from the report that during the hearing of the objections the petitioners could not "specify their individual difficulty in parting with the land" although the same report said that "most of the objectors submitted that they have no objection if employment is assured to them, in the company in favour of whom acquisition is being done". Three points raised in the report are quite significant and show the bureaucratic way of dealing with such an action on the part of the government which was going to have a severe impact on the subsistence pattern of a group of rural cultivators in a monocrop region. Firstly, at one place the report mentioned: "It is worthwhile to point out that objections have been received only from 342 landowners for the acquisition of 526.71 acres which will affect at least 3,000 landowners, if not more". It seems the official position rested on the logic that as the overwhelming majority of the farmers would not face any difficulty so there was no need to record any objection against this acquisition. Secondly, after citing the locational advantages of the land, the officials overruled objections regarding the question of earning a livelihood by

saying that the proposal had been approved both by the screening committee and by the state after considering all the aspects. Thirdly, the report dealt with the point "job for land" simply by saying that the Land Acquisition Act does not provide any relief except compensation, but that the government may take up the matter with the company particularly for those farmers who would become landless and would be devoid of any source of earning a livelihood. Now, after having overruled all the objections, the procedure for land acquisition made headway.

Apart from recording objections within the legal framework of the Land Acquisition Act, the farmers of this area also took recourse to extra-legal means to fight against the acquisition of their agricultural land. The information on this part of the peasant protest has been collected from interviews of the leaders and participants of this movement as well as from press reports and the various written memoranda submitted by the villagers to the district and state administration. In the following section the succession of the important events of the peasant resistance has been described.

The vast rural area which lies between Medinipur and Kharagpur townships is dominated by the two left political parties of the state, namely, CPI and CPI(M), which are also the major partners of the LFG. The Congress, which is the opposition party in the state has some followers in the area. This party being the major supporter of economic liberalisation did not raise any objection when the news of industrialisation in this area came to be known. They only raised doubts about whether the industrialists would at all choose West Bengal as a suitable site for industrialisation. In the study area Tata Metaliks was established on about 200

acres of agricultural land during 1991-92. Before the establishment of Tata Metaliks the leaders and cadres of CPI(M) and CPI organised meetings and continued individual level campaigns on the "bright possibility" of getting jobs by the land losers in the industry. But when the Tata Metaliks started production, the promise of providing jobs turned out to be false and the peasants also experienced the lengthy as well as tedious process of getting compensation from the district administration. All of these caused sufficient disillusionment among the peasants who were once hopeful about the positive effects of the establishment of an industrial estate in this region.

The decision of the state government to acquire agricultural land in the same area for Century Textiles Company was taken against this background. The pessimism created among the peasants owing to the establishment of Tata Metaliks inspired some of the inhabitants of this locality to agitate against the acquisition of land for another pig-iron industry. The movement gained much popularity under the leadership of Trilochan Rana (a former CPI(ML) leader) during 1995-96 who joined the trade union wing of the Congress Party and put considerable pressure on the district administration.

The movement reached its peak in the latter part of 1995 up to April 1996 during which time the farmers even went to the extent of using violence. In the first week of January 1996 hundreds of farmers in the Kalaikunda area stormed into the tent of the engineer who was conducting soil testing and land survey on behalf of Century Textiles. A leading national daily reported on January 10, 1996:

Land Survey and soil testing work in Mathurakismat Mouza in the Kalaikunda gram panchayat area of Kharagpur rural

**Table 5: Profile of Utilisation of Compensation Money by the Land Loser Households Affected by the Acquisition for TML**

Compensation Category in Rupees	Number of Household under the Various Categories of Utilisation							
	Purchase of Agricultural land	Purchase of Shallow Tubewell	House building and/or Repair	Domestic Consumption	Marriage Purpose	Repayment of Loan	Bank Deposit	Business Investment
1,000-10,000	6	-	9	31	9	2	18	6
10,000-20,000	5	5	5	12	9	1	16	3
20,000-30,000	-	1	5	5	4	2	6	1
30,000-40,000	-	1	5	5	5	1	6	2
40,000-50,000	1	-	1	4	1	-	4	-
50,000-60,000	-	-	1	1	1	-	2	-
60,000-70,000	0	0	0	2	1	0	1	-
70,000-80,000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
80,000-90,000	1	-	-	1	1	-	1	-
90,000-1,00,000	-	-	2	1	-	-	4	1
Total	13 (9.0)	7 (4.9)	28 (19.4)	62 (43.1)	31 (21.5)	6 (4.2)	58 (40.3)	13 (9.0)

police station undertaken by Century Textiles – a Birla group of Industries – had to be abandoned following stiff resistance from villagers last week...The farmers also blocked Sahachak for nine hours yesterday...They also lodged a complaint with the police against the firm (*The Statesman*, January 10, 1996).

On March 22, 1996, the same national daily reported a mass deputation by a group of peasants of the Kharagpur region before the district administration (*The Statesman*, March 22, 1996). In this deputation, the peasants demanded land for land or a job for the members of the land-loser families. They also demanded compensation of Rs 3 lakh per acre of agricultural land. After this deputation, about 100 farmers came to the Medinipur collectorate on April 10, 1996 and submitted a memorandum to the district magistrate saying that they would boycott the ensuing parliamentary election to protest against the acquisition of fertile agricultural land for industrial projects. The farmers stated in their letter that this acquisition would disturb the local economy and would destabilise the environmental balance of the region; this event was also reported in *The Statesman* on May 2, 1996. It is important to note in this connection that neither the state or district level Congress leadership, nor any MLA of this party showed any interest in supporting this movement of the peasants in Kharagpur region. The local CPI(M) leadership and the elected panchayat members of this area not only remained silent about this spontaneous movement of the peasants but they also made every attempt to smother this agitation by labelling it as a disturbance created by Congress to stall the progress of industrialisation under LFG. Without getting support from any opposition party and facing stiff resistance from the ruling left parties and lacking a coherent organisation, this localised peasant movement against land acquisition gradually lost its intensity.

Those who lost land also tried to organise themselves by refusing to accept compensation money for a very brief period under the leadership of a few local leaders but this effort too did not last long and the movement finally came to a halt in the Kalaikunda region.

At the end of this paper an anecdote from Kantapal village from where the huge chunk of land acquired for Century Textiles needs to be narrated. A discussion between this author and the villagers was going on about the condition of the small

dykes ('ail' in the local parlance) raised by the farmers to demarcate the plots of land possessed by different owners within the acquired area. Since no cultivation could be taken up for three successive seasons in the whole area, which had turned into a grazing field, the dykes had started to break. Two consequences of this situation followed. Firstly, the farmers who still had land in the vicinity of the acquired area were facing a lot of difficulties in protecting their agricultural plots from the grazing cattle. Earlier there were other farmers who also shared the responsibility of driving out the cattle from the fields during agricultural season. Driving out the intruding cattle in the paddy fields had always been a collective affair in rural areas. After acquisition, the number of farmers has decreased in this area. Moreover, cows and buffaloes of the milkmen of the urban areas of Kharagpur town have also ventured to exploit this huge chunk of land.

Secondly, after the breakdown of dykes the poorer people of the area who used to collect a good quantity of small fishes of various types from those agricultural plots as a common property resource, were not getting any fish in those plots. In the discussion three to four persons including one middle-aged woman and an old man were present. All of them were denouncing the government for the takeover of the fertile agricultural land for Century Textiles which had not yet been established. When the question arose that if people of this area had started to dislike the ruling party and the government, then why did they cast their votes at the panchayat and assembly elections to the same party every year? The old man replied: "Look babu, we poor people always have to ride on some animal almost blindfolded. After the ride for some time we start to realise whether it is a tiger or a bullock. But very often we have to twist its tail in order to keep it in proper direction" (translated freely from Bengali). The present peasant resistance in Nandigram clearly revealed the power of the peasantry to twist the tail of their political masters. [E]

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