

A Window to Reality

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The ruling elite of the country along with its various agents – the State, the media and academia is out to make everyone believe that India is progressing rapidly and this high tide of economic growth is bound to lift all boats in the coming years as it has happened in the west. They offer the lifestyles of the rich and the middle classes – the cars, the flyovers, the malls, the mobiles and their advancing living standards – as testimony to this progress and the source of hope for everyone. The establishment is out to assure that “all is well”, and in fact, can only become better. But on the other side, is the everyday lived experience of the common folks – mounting distress in the countryside which is reflected in farmer suicides and resistance against land-grab, as well as increasing casualisation, depressing wages and lengthening workday of the working classes. The sharpening lines between the small super-rich, their luxuries and decadent lifestyles on the one side, and

Sanhati Selections 2011: An Anthology in Solidarity with People's Struggles, Rs 30.

'Sovereign Are the People': A Diary in Stormy Times, selections from the Sanhati columns by Dipanjan Rai Chaudhuri, Kolkata, 2010.

the inhuman work and living conditions devoid of almost any material necessities befitting the tall claims of our rulers in the 21st century can be seen in its full horror and extremes in metropolitan centres like Delhi and Mumbai. As protest and resistance against such a state of affairs have gained momentum, especially in the last decade, such voices have found space in alternate and new media and Sanhati is one such endeavour that emerged in 2006, especially at the time of the turmoil of Singur-Nandigram in West Bengal, by a set of academic-activists.

All Is Not Well

The two volumes reviewed here are a selection of articles that have been carried

by the Sanhati website in recent times and are a reflection of such winds of change in the polity, society and economy that India has been in the process of becoming in recent years. The first selection, *Sanhati Selections 2011* (henceforth ss) is a collection of articles by various contributors in 2010 on a broad set of themes – agrarian change, displacement due to “development”, special economic zones (SEZs), economic policy, working classes, Maoists, Indian state, women, etc. The second volume is a selection from the regular column authored by the veteran academic-activist Dipanjan Rai Chaudhuri on the website from August 2007 to August 2010 (henceforth DRC). The column is focused relatively more on developments in West Bengal and predictably carries pieces on Nandigram, Singur, Lalgarh, Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM), Maoists, etc, though one can also find comments on topics ranging from Dandakaranya, agrarian conditions, jobless industrialisation, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), POSCO to price rise, nuclear power, Indian state, civil society, etc. Besides contesting the mainstream positions, in the two volumes one can also

find debates with Amartya Sen, Sumanta Bannerjee and Prabhat Patnaik. For the sake of brevity, I will discuss the two volumes together and highlight only a few articles, though there are several more analytical and informative pieces than those mentioned here in this short review.

Hollow Claims of Development

First and foremost this collection exemplifies the moribund condition of the Indian state and its hollow claims of economic development. There are several articles in the two collections which make this point, but my favourite is “Do 600 Million Cellphone Accounts Make India a Rich Country?: A Lesson in Economics for Mr Chidambaram”, the article written by the Sanhati collective. The Indian ruling classes, though give a damn to the plight of the masses, are greatly perturbed by the bad international press that they get because of this – the malnutrition, farm suicides, poverty, human development index, etc, and are very concerned that it paints them in a poor light amongst those whose opinion they value; hence their discomfort with the figures of poverty, malnutrition and destitution and their constant endeavour to negate them. A reflection of this is Chidambaram’s, one of the flag bearers of the big business interests, response to the Arjun Sengupta committee’s report which brought in the startling revelation that three in four Indians live on near starvation with less than Rs 20 a day. Speaking at a meeting in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, Chidambaram said that if there were 60 crore cell phone subscriptions in the country how could India be so poor? Ownership of mobile phones has become the mascot of India and Indian people’s growing prosperity.

In a well-argued piece the Sanhati collective brings out how empty and superficial, if not mischievous, is Chidambaram’s understanding of the Indian economy. The article contends that over years the prices of mobile phone services have drastically come down and at least some very basic services have become affordable for even those living on less than Rs 20 a day. More importantly, given the increasing casualisation and uncertainty of employment for the working classes, combined with irregular and long working

hours and contingencies like finding new employment and maintaining a network of contacts, mobiles have become a necessity for a large section amongst them. This is further corroborated by high price elasticity of cell phones and their skewed distribution – 80% of the mobile connections are concentrated in the urban areas.

Another significant claim of the establishment is taken up in several articles in the DRC collection – that of creating employment. Generating employment has become the last word to close any argument in an economy where large sections of toiling masses are devoid of economic opportunities, irrespective of number of people who are going to lose their livelihood, the fate of those who are going to lose out, whether there could have been any better use of the same investment in generating alternate employment. As long as there are wild claims of employment generation like POSCO or Singur, all the sins of the juggernaut of development can simply be ignored.

DRC in several penetrating articles based on specific micro-level data analyses such claims of employment generation and puts them in larger perspective. For instance, Haldia petrochemical (“Haldia Petrochemicals and Unemployment in East Midnapore”) has been able to provide direct employment to about 3,200 people in five years since it was commissioned in 2000 at an investment of whopping Rs 4 crore per job. DRC argues that at best another 10,000 indirect jobs can be added per year to the credit of the project, while every year 80,000 people are being added in the (un)employment age in the district of Midnapore itself, where the plant is located. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, most of the downstream units to the Haldia plant have gravitated to Kolkata in quest of better infrastructure facilities. So much for “development” and as DRC rightly asks, why should the proposed chemical hub fare any better?

Similar has been the experience with Bengal’s earlier tryst with automobile industry, DRC contends (“If Nano Had Not Left Singur? A Look at Hind Motors”). Localities around Hindustan Motor plant after 60 years have simply stagnated and only a few thousand jobs have been created; almost half the land given was never

utilised and finally a good part of it is being used to build a housing complex. Debates like Singur or Nandigram are never taken up in terms of the lessons from the past, somehow it is assumed that “next time it will be better” and the powers that be are extremely reluctant to face the facts of the past experiences. In Bengal 12 lakh job-seekers are being added annually while heavy industrial investments at best are capable of adding jobs in thousands.

‘Hood Robin’ Economy

Neo-liberal policies can lead to only certain kind of economic growth which results in redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich and further concentration of resources (Latin Americans call this “Hood Robin” as against Robin Hood economy) and this is brought out from other articles in the ss, like geography of sezs, the central government’s budget proposals or the conditions and struggle of almond workers in Delhi who de-shell the almonds for a pittance for the American consumers. While Amartya Sen has raised hope that increasing public revenue in recent years in West Bengal is an opportunity to boost public investments, DRC contends (“Work for Everyone and Amartya Sen”) that any kind of investment under neo-liberalism will primarily be in the nature of capital replacing labour and increasing unemployment and not towards welfare measures like education and health.

Selections also capture the dynamics of political economy of the country with special emphasis on the changing agrarian conditions. ss devotes a whole section to it (articles by Deepankar Basu, Amit Basole and Debarshi Das), and in DRC collection too it is a subject of several pieces. They attempt to capture the complex agrarian landscape through aggregate data, primary survey as well as the analyses of micro studies on West Bengal, Bihar, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. Almost all of them emphasise on the changes – flagging public investment, declining concentration of land and fragmentation of landholdings, growth of wage labour, decline of tenancy and attached labour, increasing contractual arrangements, increase of migration, especially towards the informal sector, etc. ss articles also suggest that relations of production have changed from semi-feudal to

capitalist in the country. While agreeing that the agrarian conditions are changing, for West Bengal DRC asserts ("Panchayat System, Rural Classes and Agriculture in WB"), "it will be hasty to conclude that pre-capitalist production relations have been transformed into capitalist production relations (p 54)". In his argument it is also inherent that changing relations cannot be understood merely by looking at land relations; as his analysis on West Bengal demonstrates, control by landlords and rich farmers over assets, irrigation resources, other inputs and even output is significantly larger than their control over landholdings; they continue to control institutions like panchayats as well to a great extent.

People's Resistance

As the ruling elite has attempted to bring market relations in almost every domain, from education, health to natural resources, the most exciting part of contemporary India has been people's resistance to such commoditisation of their lives through various resistance and radical movements,

from Lalgurha, POSCO, anti-SEZ and nuclear power to the Maoists. And most importantly, these selections capture the changing political discourse as against the one point mainstream talk of more and more economic growth. Several articles in the two collections capture the evolving political spaces and emerging formations and their limitations. Not surprisingly, Maoists are the focus of attention in many of the articles as they have emerged as the most significant political voice of resistance and challenge to the status quo – as DRC says, "They have captured the imagination" of a significant section of the masses. In ss, Gautam Navlakha reminds ("Azad's Assassination: An Insight into the Indian State's Response to People's Resistance") that Maoists were decimated in Andhra and were reduced to dominant presence merely in one district of Chhattisgarh by 2004-05, but if anything they have come out much stronger in the last five years, precisely the same years when Indian economy has grown the fastest. He analyses the assassination of Azad, the spokesperson of the Maoists and their

representative for negotiating peace with the state, and asserts that killing of Azad by the state is part of a broader pattern of not allowing political space to those who command legitimacy amongst the poorest of the poor and are demanding radical restructuring of Indian polity.

In another perceptive comment in ss, Saroj Giri explores ("Wither Maoists?") the political space being created and evolving with Maoists emerging as a significant threat to the status quo. The space that is being created and reshaped on a continuous basis through a tension within the establishment amongst those who want a "military solution" versus those who are for seeking negotiations with the Maoists, or due to tension amongst those corporate entities, which continue operating by giving taxes to the Maoists vis-à-vis those who advocate a hard line against them. He contends that even policies like MNREGA and laws like forest rights have to be seen in this context and liberal Left are finding new spaces for action precisely because of the radicalisation of a section of Indian

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people under the leadership of the Maoists. He also raises the question whether Maoists will end up becoming a local power broker and a reformist trend than a truly radicalising force capable of restructuring Indian society over a long run given this complex political landscape.

In another piece Siddhartha Mitra (“spos and Civilians: Or the Great Indian ‘Police’ Trick?”) analyses the continuum of state police, quasi-police like special police officers under Salwa Judum, Maoists and the “civilians”. In DRC collection, there are several pieces on Lalgarh, an ongoing concern being the nature of democratic space and degrees of freedom for the local people in the tussle between the state and CPM cadres on the one side, and the Maoists on the other (“Lalgarh – An Interim

Balance Sheet”). Concerns are also voiced on the lack of due process in killing of so-called informers by the Maoists and the ensuing endless cycles of violence (“Lalgarh – Civil Society Reactions”). DRC also finds hope in the Janatana sarkar established by the Maoists in Dandakaranya and yet emphasises the need to differentiate amongst people’s power, the party, and the armed wing (“A New India Is Being Born in the Central Forests”).

Thus, an interested reader will find here a window to the real and living India and examples in the best of tradition of *partisan reporting* (from the side of the broad masses) in the times of “embedded journalism”. It goes to the credit of the collective to bring up the volumes by a small group of committed academic-activists

with very limited resources. The selections will be quite useful for a broad set of readers who are trying to make sense of the complex Indian reality and which cannot be learnt through the official-formal channels. The collection is somewhat skewed in its reporting towards eastern and northern India and the purpose of the collection could have been better served by omitting some of the very short pieces as they are context specific and difficult to relate for someone not already familiar with the specific context, especially in the DRC collection. Also, careful editing could have helped as there are plenty of slip-ups and missing references, etc.

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