

**‘The blessed land’: narratives of peasant resistance at Nandigram, West Bengal, in 2007**

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## Abstract

In early 2007, the West Bengal state government in India sought to acquire over 10,000 acres of cultivated rural land in Nandigram, East Midnapur. The government, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) led Left Front coalition, sought to acquire this land to allow the Indonesian industrialists, the Salim group, to construct a chemical hub. Land acquisition had been increasing in India since 2005, when the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) Act was passed for the purpose of attracting investment from national and multinational corporations. Peasants in Nandigram were opposed to the acquisition of their land, and during 2007 successfully resisted the government attempts to do so. In response, the CPI-M sent party cadre to harass, rape and murder the peasantry, using their control of government to punish people in Nandigram. This thesis examines the events at Nandigram between June 2006 and May 2008 and investigates the narratives of peasant resistance that emerged in West Bengal. It focuses on three groups of West Bengal society: the peasants of Nandigram, the intellectuals and civil society of West Bengal, and the major political parties of West Bengal. Existing explanations of the events at Nandigram have focused on the role of intellectuals and civil society, and their views have dominated the literature. The existing historiography has argued that land acquisition policies and the subsequent resistance at Nandigram were an effect of neoliberal policies, policies that had been pursued by both the central and state governments in India since the 1990s. Resistance at Nandigram was explained as a broad movement that involved the peasantry and *adivasi*, but also the civil society groups that opposed neoliberal policies. However, as this thesis demonstrates, the peasantry at Nandigram rarely articulated their resistance as ‘against’ neoliberalism, and there was little consciousness of the movement challenging neoliberal policies. Rather, it was the local conditions and history of the area that informed their resistance. Amongst intellectuals and civil society, only a minority connected resistance at Nandigram to the wider issue of neoliberalism. The dominant perspective of these groups was that land acquisition policies, and neoliberal reforms in general, were necessary for the development of West Bengal. They criticised the CPI-M only for badly managing the process of land acquisition. The neoliberal consensus extended to the West Bengal political parties, muting serious debate over the economic direction of the state. The discourse of the political parties was limited to allegations of corruption, violence and criminality. Therefore, an investigation of how people in West Bengal viewed the resistance at Nandigram shows that discontent was not generally articulated in opposition to neoliberal policies. Rather, local politics and local issues had a more immediate effect on people’s views, focusing discontent on the governance of the CPI-M. This resulted in the resistance at Nandigram evolving into a movement that sought to challenge the continued rule of the CPI-M in West Bengal.

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Lastly, many thanks to friends and family for their love and support. It has been a lonely year at times, apart from those that mean the most, and I appreciate your support.

## List of Abbreviations

AIKS	All India Kisan Sabha
APDR	Association for Protection of Democratic Rights
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BoA	Board of Approval
BPKS	Bengal Provincial Krishak Sabha
BUPC	Bhumi Uchchhed Pratirodh Committee
CBI	Central Bureau of Investigation
Congress	Indian National Congress
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI-M	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
CPI (Maoist)	Communist Party of India (Maoist)
CPI (Marxist-Leninist)	Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)
CRPF	Central Reserve Police Force
CSP	Congress Socialist Party
DYFI	Democratic Youth Federation of India
EGoM	Empowered Group of Ministers
EPW	Economic and Political Weekly
FRICT	Final report of an Independent Citizens' team from Kolkata
HDA	Haldia Development Authority
IBEF	India Brand Equity Foundation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
Jamiat	Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind
MP	Member of Parliament
MSC	Medical Service Centre
NDA	National Democratic Alliance

NIP	New Industrial Policy
PD	People's Democracy
PDCI	People's Democratic Conference of India
RSP	Revolutionary Socialist Party
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SUCI	Socialist Unity Centre of India
TMC	All India Trinamool Congress
TOI	Times of India
TT	The Telegraph
UPA	United Progressive Alliance
WBSP	West Bengal Socialist Party

## Glossary

Adivasi	Tribal
Bandhs	General strikes
Bhadralok	Gentleman
Bhagchashis	Sharecroppers
Bigha	One third of an acre
Bhumi Uchchhed Pratirodh Committee	Save Farmland Committee
Gherao	The encirclement of employers by labour to gain demands
Harmad Bahini	Derived from 'Armada' used to describe European pirates and slave traders who had raided the Bengali coast. A term used to express the lawlessness and ruthlessness of the CPI-M cadre.
Jotedars	Intermediate tenure holders
Kantai	Contai
Kisan	Peasant
Lathi	Bamboo baton
Lok Sabha	Lower house of the central assembly.
Mahishya	Dominant caste in Tamluk and Contai
Mouza	Administrative area of several villages
Panchayat raj	Village level local self-government. Organised into three tiers. From lowest to highest: Gram, Samiti and Zilla.
Pashim Medinipur	West Midnapur
Pradhan	Village head
Purba Medinipur	East Midnapur
Thana	Police station

Vidhan Sabha

State assembly

Zamindars

Tenure holders

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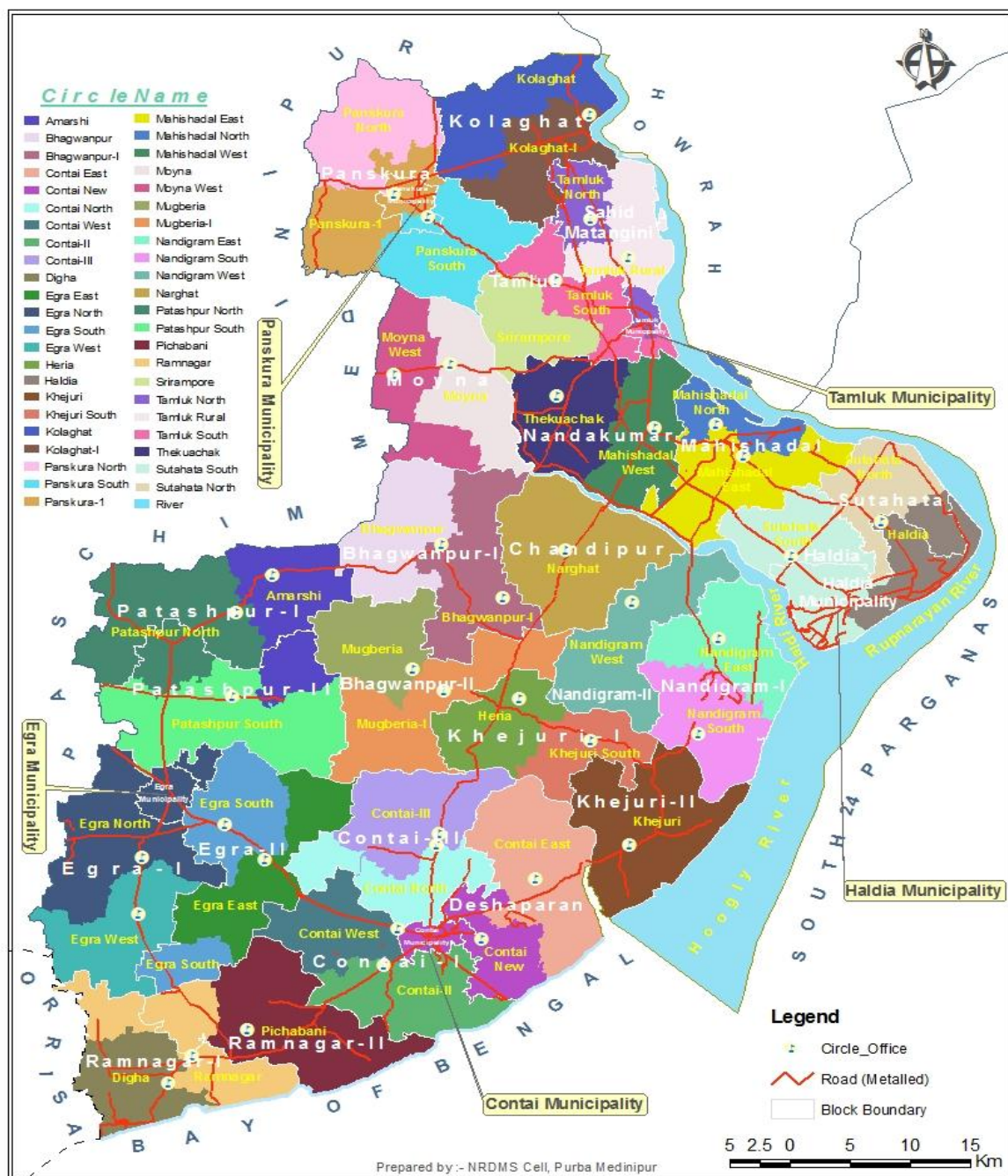
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## PURBA MEDINIPUR



Map One.

Map of East Midnapur

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Map of Nandigram *thana* (police station)

Rina Pal, *Women of Midnapore in Indian freedom struggle*, Calcutta, 1996, pp.122-123.

## Introduction

This is the blessed land, the land that has shown the path of change to the rest of Bengal. The people of this state have learnt to make a turnaround following the example set by Nandigram. This is the land which has made the people of Bengal realise that the CPM [Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M)] can be defeated.<sup>1</sup>

These were the words spoken by Mamata Banerjee, leader of the All India Trinamool (Grassroots) Congress (hereafter TMC), in April 2011. She was referring to events between June 2006 and May 2008, when the state government had sought to acquire over 10,000 acres of rural land in Nandigram, East Midnapur in West Bengal, to allow a multinational conglomerate, the Salim group, to construct a chemical hub.<sup>2</sup> Peasants in Nandigram were opposed to the acquisition of their land and during this period successfully resisted the government attempts to do so. Despite Banerjee's political motivation for framing the issue in this way, hers was a common sentiment in West Bengal; that while Nandigram may have begun as a movement to resist land acquisition, it ended as a movement to rid West Bengal of Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) rule. This perspective is at odds with the existing historiography, which tends to situate Nandigram as part of a broader movement resisting land acquisition in India and challenging the existing neoliberal development discourse.

This thesis will look at the hitherto unexplored narratives that were created in this period to explain and justify the movement to resist land acquisition at Nandigram. Due to the heterogeneous nature of these narratives, it is necessary to explore the divergent views of the various 'fragments'<sup>3</sup> that made up West Bengal society in 2007. This thesis examines three of these 'fragments' in detail: the Nandigram peasantry, the West Bengal civil society and the West Bengal political parties. It demonstrates that peasants in Nandigram rarely articulated their resistance as 'against' neoliberalism, and there was little consciousness of the movement challenging neoliberal policies. Rather, it was the local conditions and history of the area that informed their resistance. Amongst West Bengal civil society, only a minority connected resistance at Nandigram to the wider issue of neoliberalism. The dominant perspective of these groups was that land acquisition policies, and neoliberal reforms in general, were necessary for the development of West Bengal. They criticised the CPI-M only for badly

<sup>1</sup> Arnab Ganguly, 'Nandigram "address" on Didi wish list bag of promises, little sign of Left' in *The Telegraph (IT)*, 29 April 2011. I have used 'sic' sparingly in this thesis, and only in secondary sources. Primary sources quotations, many of which were translated or are quoting Bengali speakers speaking English, would become cluttered with repeated 'sic' inserts.

<sup>2</sup> The Salim group, a notorious Indonesia-based conglomerate with an estimated Rs 900 billion in assets and a reputation for speculative risky investments, was to build the chemical hub. Salim's ties to the Suharto government, a government 'which probably massacred more communists than Hitler' were questioned in Tanika Sarkar and Sumit Chowdhury, 'The meaning of Nandigram: corporate land invasion, people's power, and the Left in India' in *Focaal—European Journal of Anthropology*, 54, 2009, p.74. David Harvey discusses their wealth and power in Harvey, *A brief history of neoliberalism*, Oxford, 2005, p.34.

<sup>3</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, 'In defence of the fragment: writing about Hindu-Muslim riots in India today' in *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*, 26:11, March 1991, pp.559-572 and Partha Chatterjee, *The nation and its fragments: colonial and postcolonial histories*, Princeton, 1993.

managing the process of land acquisition. The neoliberal consensus extended to the West Bengal political parties, muting serious debate over the economic direction of the state. The discourse of the political parties was limited to allegations of corruption, violence and criminality.

In June 2006, rumours began to circulate in Nandigram that a chemical hub was to be built and over 10,000 acres of cultivated, densely populated agricultural land was to be acquired. When the state government, the CPI-M-led Left Front coalition, posted notices to this effect in early January 2007 resistance broke out, led by the fledgling Bhumi Uchchhed Pratirodh Committee (Save Farmland Committee, hereafter BUPC). The police and CPI-M cadres attempted to crush this resistance on 14 March 2007, shooting and killing fourteen, and injuring hundreds. Despite the efforts of police and CPI-M cadres to prevent media attention, news and images of this attack, including women being savagely beaten and children being gunned down by police, were broadcast around West Bengal and India and met by a chorus of condemnation. Bowing to widespread pressure, the police withdrew from Nandigram and the area remained 'liberated' or 'occupied' by the BUPC until November 2007. During this period, there were violent clashes between the cadres of the CPI-M and members of the BUPC, increasingly under the influence of Banerjee's TMC. The CPI-M was decisively defeated by the TMC at the May 2008 *panchayat* elections.<sup>4</sup> The scope of this thesis is limited to this period, between June 2006 and May 2008, and does not take into account the defeat of the CPI-M at the 2011 Vidhan Sabha (state assembly) election.

### Concepts of resistance

Scholars have yet to adequately question the reasons why the peasantry at Nandigram resisted land acquisition. Swati Chattopadhyay, for example, began her account by reviewing the actions of the state government and the events that led the government to acquire land at Nandigram. She then stated 'this led villagers... to organize to resist land acquisition.'<sup>5</sup> The motives or the reasons for their resistance were not questioned, but assumed. Ranajit Guha has argued that peasant resistance in colonial India was often characterised as a reflex to economic and political oppression. British administrators and colonial historians often described peasant resistance as akin to natural phenomena that 'break out like thunder storms, heave like earthquakes, [or] spread like wildfires'.<sup>6</sup> David Hardiman noted that resistance was labelled as 'backward-looking' and 'unprogressive'; peasant consciousness was dismissed as 'primordial' or 'superstitious'.<sup>7</sup> In 2007, sections of the media and the CPI-M would label the peasantry in the same way, as 'traditional' or as stalling 'progress'. Chattopadhyay did not do this, but in positing the resistance at Nandigram as merely responsive she risked denying the agency of the

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<sup>4</sup> Village level local self-government. Consisting of three-tiers; from lowest to highest is Gram, Samiti and Zilla, see Sunil Sengupta and Haris Gazdar, 'Agrarian politics and rural development in West Bengal' in Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen (eds.), *Indian development: selected regional perspectives*, Delhi, 1997, pp.129-204.

<sup>5</sup> Swati Chattopadhyay, 'A tryst with capital', *Citation: occasional papers of the subaltern-popular workshop*, 9 October 2007, p.1.

<sup>6</sup> Ranajit Guha, 'The prose of counter-insurgency' in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern studies II: writings on South Asian history and society*, Delhi, 1983, p.2.

<sup>7</sup> David Hardiman, 'Introduction' in David Hardiman (ed.), *Peasant resistance in India, 1858-1914*, Delhi, 1992, p.2.

peasantry.<sup>8</sup> A key aim of this thesis is to allow the peasantry to be seen on their own terms and shaped by their own historical, political and moral conceptions.<sup>9</sup>

To achieve this I have utilised Partha Chatterjee's concept of 'community'. For Chatterjee a fundamental feature of the class demands of the peasantry in colonial Bengal was the articulation and conceptualisation of these demands as in the interests of the 'community'. The principle of the community was the 'characteristic unifying feature of peasant consciousness'.<sup>10</sup> Power itself was conceived in relation to the community as 'a collective which exists in a close relationship to the land which it controls'.<sup>11</sup> The 'community' was not simply a 'traditional' or 'primordial' conception of the peasantry, nor was it one premised on egalitarian principles.<sup>12</sup> For David Hardiman, "the community" in this respect existed in a relationship of opposition to those who are not of the community.' Therefore in a 'conflict between money lenders and peasants, the "peasant community" would include those exploited by the moneylenders'.<sup>13</sup> The changing perceptions of the community were evident at Nandigram in 2007, where the CPI-M, which for many years was supported and elected into power, was now abandoned and seen as outside the 'community'. Therefore, peasant resistance at Nandigram was more than just a response to a state policy to acquire their land. This is discussed further in Chapter Two.

### Neoliberalism in India

Land acquisition has long been an issue in India. Previously it was limited to projects that would improve the 'public good', such as the construction of large hydroelectric dams, lauded by Jawaharlal Nehru as the 'new temples' of India.<sup>14</sup> It was the neoliberal turn in the 1990s, however, which accelerated this process. Neoliberalism, defined by David Harvey as an economic theory that proposed human wellbeing, was 'advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills'. According to neoliberal theory, strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade achieve this individual freedom. The state should limit itself to a minimal role, providing the coercive and legal apparatus to facilitate a free market, but should not be involved in this market as it will logically distort it. Importantly, if markets do not exist they 'must be created, by state action if necessary'.<sup>15</sup> Neoliberalism, in contrast to economic liberalism, 'depicts free markets, free trade, and entrepreneurial

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<sup>8</sup> As Ranajit Guha has pointed out, to resist was to risk lives, land and material possessions and not a decision made easily Guha, 'The prose of counter-insurgency', p.3 and Guha, *Elementary aspects of peasant insurgency in colonial India*, Delhi, 1983, pp.4-5.

<sup>9</sup> A point made by Partha Chatterjee, in Chatterjee, 'The colonial state and peasant resistance in Bengal 1920-1947' in *Past & Present*, 110, February 1986, p.202.

<sup>10</sup> Chatterjee, 'The colonial state and peasant resistance', p.201 and Chatterjee, *The nation and its fragments*, pp.163-164.

<sup>11</sup> David Hardiman discussed Chatterjee's concept in Hardiman, 'Introduction', p.8.

<sup>12</sup> Chatterjee, *The nation and its fragments*, pp.166-167.

<sup>13</sup> Hardiman, 'Introduction', pp.8-9.

<sup>14</sup> Shashi Tharoor, *Nehru: the invention of India*, New York, 2003, p.250. The construction of the Narmada dam in Gujarat from 1985 is an example of the controversies such projects generated, see Matthew John, 'Interpreting Narmada judgment in *EPW*', 36:32, 11 August 2001, pp.3030-3034.

<sup>15</sup> Harvey, *A brief history of neoliberalism*, p.2.

rationality as *achieved and normative*, as promulgated through law and through social and economic policy - not simply as occurring by dint of nature.<sup>16</sup>

Neoliberal ideas gained importance in India as a mechanism for elites to end the old 'licence raj', end protectionist measures such as import substitution and open up India to the world.<sup>17</sup> Global influences were also important; neoliberal economics were supported by the Bretton Woods institutions: the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.<sup>18</sup> These institutions influenced development theories known as 'structural adjustment', calling for the devaluation of currencies, deregulation of markets, reduction of government bureaucracies and the privatisation of government assets and industries.<sup>19</sup> In 1991, faced with an economic crisis, the newly elected Indian National Congress (hereafter Congress) government borrowed \$2.3 billion US dollars from the IMF and began to implement 'anticipatory conditionalities', broadly compatible to structural adjustment.<sup>20</sup>

Economists, journalists and politicians often credit the economic growth since 1991 to these reforms. India was regularly placed alongside China or the 'BRIC nations',<sup>21</sup> as challenging the global status quo and was praised as an 'up and coming' global power. Internationally, a wide range of publications have been produced where the discourse was dominated by the growth rates of India, comparisons to China and the 'burgeoning' of the Indian middle-classes.<sup>22</sup> However, the elite embrace of neoliberalism was not limited to economic matters but bound up in conceptions of modernity and India 'arriving' on the world stage.<sup>23</sup> For many elites the 'opening' of India to the world has been positive, and accepting the new and foreign has enabled India itself to 'stand up' and 'be counted'. This was exemplified by an article celebrating the 2011 cricket World Cup win which was, according to its author, only made possible by 'its parallel economic journey'. Liking pre-liberalisation India to its

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<sup>16</sup> Emphasis hers, in Wendy Brown, 'American nightmare: neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and de-democratization' in *Political Theory*, 34:6, December 2006, p.694.

<sup>17</sup> For this growth of neoliberalism amongst Indian elites see Rahul Mukherji (ed.), *India's economic transition, the politics of reform*, Oxford, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Institutions established post WWII to provide loans and maintain global economic stability.

<sup>19</sup> In response to various crises, and in return for IMF and World Bank loans, these institutions enforced structural adjustment in various countries around the world. For a perspective on this process in Africa see James Ferguson, *Global shadows: Africa in the neoliberal world order*, Durham, 2006. For South America see William Robinson, *Latin America and global capitalism: a critical globalization perspective*, Baltimore, 2008 and William Easterly, 'The lost decades: developing countries stagnation in spite of policy reforms 1980-1998' in *Journal of Economic Growth*, 6, June 2001, pp.135-157. The Bretton Woods institutions have been criticised, even by former heads like Joseph Stiglitz, critical of the impact of 'structural development' on developing countries. See Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and its discontents*, New York, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> For a typical, if formulaic account, see Vijay Joshi and I. M. D. Little, *India's economic reforms, 1991-2001*, Oxford, 1996.

<sup>21</sup> BRIC refers to Brazil, Russia, India and China. First used in 'Dreaming with BRICs: the path to 2050' in *Global economics paper no. 99*, Goldman Sachs, October 2003. For a critical view of this process, see Radhika Desai, 'Dreaming in technicolour? India as a BRIC economy' in *International Journal*, 62:4, 2007, pp.781-804.

<sup>22</sup> See Robyn Meredith, *The elephant and the dragon: the rise of India and China and what it means for all of us*, New York, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Literally the title of one book Rafiq Dossani, *India arriving: how this economic powerhouse is redefining global business*, New York, 2008.

cricket, the author argues both have prospered because of ‘fierce competition, resurgent commerce and deep confidence’.<sup>24</sup>

However, economists have contested the nature of this success. Kunal Sen and Deepak Nayyar have argued that growth preceded structural adjustment and that this growth can be traced to the early 1980s or even earlier.<sup>25</sup> Other economists, such as Prabhat Patnaik, have pointed out the uneven nature of growth and have noted that structural adjustment has often benefited elites and middle classes, while creating hardship for the poor, despite claims of ‘trickle down’ economics.<sup>26</sup> Kathy Le Mons Walker has argued that neoliberal policies have led to the ‘internal colonization’<sup>27</sup> of the poor while development theorists, such as Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen have argued for a larger focus on health care and education.<sup>28</sup>

Indian democracy has been presented as a bulwark against neoliberalism, or as incompatible with it and weakened by the confrontation. In other countries, foreign and local elites introduced structural adjustment quickly and often undemocratically, as a form of ‘shock therapy’ so that opposition had little time to coalesce.<sup>29</sup> However in India, it was argued, democratic institutions responded to the concerns of their constituents and forced more incremental reforms ‘creating a strong consensus for weak reforms’<sup>30</sup> or ‘gradualism’.<sup>31</sup> Not all agree that democracy has halted structural adjustment reforms. Sarah Joseph and Stuart Corbridge argued that foreign institutions have limited Indian democracy, Joseph criticising the influence of the ‘Washington consensus’.<sup>32</sup> Corbridge has argued that the rhetoric of institutions like the World Bank, has limited democracy by equating ‘good governance’ with respect for markets and a ‘free economy’.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ed Smith, ‘Tendulkar matched India’s economic revolution’ in *The Australian*, 5 April 2011. For a critique of ‘cricket as India’ see Samanth Subramanian, ‘Goodbye to metaphor: cricket is not India’ in *Firstpost*, 12 May 2011.

<sup>25</sup> In contrast to the ‘Hindu’ rate of growth. For arguments of early growth see Kunal Sen, ‘Why did the elephant start to trot? India’s growth acceleration re-examined’ in *EPW*, 42:43, 27 October 2007, pp.37-47 and Deepak Nayyar, ‘Economic growth in independent India: lumbering elephant or running tiger?’ in *EPW*, 41:15, 15 April 2006, pp.1451-1458.

<sup>26</sup> Prabhat Patnaik, ‘On some currently-fashionable propositions in public finance’ in *Social Scientist*, 33:7, July 2005, pp.3-16.

<sup>27</sup> Kathy Le Mons Walker, ‘Neoliberalism on the ground in rural India: predatory growth, agrarian crisis, internal colonization, and the intensification of class struggle’ in *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 35:4, October 2008, pp.557-620.

<sup>28</sup> Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, *India: economic development and social opportunity*, Delhi, 1995.

<sup>29</sup> For a good, if somewhat journalistic account, see Naomi Klein, *The shock doctrine: the rise of disaster capitalism*, New York, 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Montek Ahluwalia, ‘Economic reforms in India since 1991: has gradualism worked?’ in Rahul Mukherji (ed.), *India’s economic transition: the politics of reforms*, New Delhi, 2007, p.110.

<sup>31</sup> Baldev Raj Nayar, *Globalization and nationalism: the changing balance in India’s economic policy, 1950-2000*, New Delhi, 2001, p.11. Stiglitz argues that India was spared the effects of the 1997 Asian Financial crisis, because it did not liberalise its financial markets. Stiglitz, *Globalization and its discontents*, pp.125-126. For a critical perspective of gradualism, see Montek Ahluwalia, ‘Economic reforms in India since 1991’, pp.87-113.

<sup>32</sup> Sarah Joseph, ‘Neoliberal reforms and democracy in India’ in *EPW*, 42:31, 25 August 2007, pp.3213-3218.

<sup>33</sup> Stuart Corbridge, Glyn Williams, Manoj Srivastava and Rene Veron, *Seeing the state: governance and governmentality in India*, New York, 2005, pp.154-155. Similarly, Douglas Hill has commented on the reduction of development questions ‘to managerial vagaries concerning “good governance”’ in Hill, ‘Rural developments: a case study from Bankura’ in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 24:1, January 2001, p.120.

Indian voters have also been sceptical of the benefits of structural adjustment, polls indicating low levels of support for, and awareness of, reforms.<sup>34</sup> Voters rejected the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in 2004, a government that had confidently pushed reforms and pronounced 'India Shining', evidence of voter ambivalence toward neoliberal reforms.<sup>35</sup> However, people's relationship with neoliberalism in India was complex. Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase has explored this complexity in her study of lower-middle class women in West Bengal. For Ganguly-Scrase, structural adjustment had a negative impact on women, promoting inequality, and eroding working conditions. However, these women identified neoliberalism and globalisation as positive and identified media images of modern women as empowering and challenging the existing patriarchy.<sup>36</sup>

One of the most consistent critics of neoliberal reforms was the CPI-M. Despite this, the Left Front government in West Bengal largely followed mainstream opinion and embraced key aspects of the neoliberal agenda. In 1994 the West Bengal state government adopted its own economic reforms that aimed '[t]o attract foreign technology and investment' and '[t]o encourage [the] private sector to accelerate growth',<sup>37</sup> and began to discipline labour by prohibiting *gherao* (the encirclement of employers by labour to gain demands). This shift was symbolised by Chief Minister Jyoti Basu travelling overseas to gain foreign investment.<sup>38</sup> The West Bengal response was partly a result of structural adjustment. From 1991, income was reduced in all states as tariffs and taxes were lowered, and the centre monopolised more of the tax revenue.<sup>39</sup> In West Bengal, for example, subsidies for food and fertiliser were removed and the availability of rural credit was restricted.<sup>40</sup> State governments, responsible for health and education, become increasingly indebted and West Bengal was no exception.<sup>41</sup> Desperate for income, states were caught up in what Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya called 'competitive federalism', or a 'race to the bottom', in which states attempted to lure capital by offering a range of incentives.<sup>42</sup> To facilitate foreign direct investment the central government passed the 2005

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<sup>34</sup> Sanjay Kumar, 'Impact of economic reforms on Indian electorate' in *EPW*, 39:16, 17 April 2004, pp.1621-1630. Also see Ashutosh Kumar, 'Dissonance between economic reforms and democracy' in *EPW*, 43:1, 5 January 2008, p.55.

<sup>35</sup> Baldev Raj Nayar, 'India in 2004: regime change in a divided democracy' in *Asian Survey*, 45:1, January 2005, pp.71-82. Arvind Panagariya has questioned if the NDA lost because of the reforms, in Panagariya, 'Vote against reforms?' in *EPW*, 39:21, 22 May 2004, pp.2079-2081.

<sup>36</sup> Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase, 'Paradoxes of globalization, liberalization, and gender equality: the worldviews of the lower middle class in West Bengal, India' in *Gender and society*, 17:4, August 2003, pp.544-566.

<sup>37</sup> India Brand Equity Foundation, *State economy and socio-economic profile: West Bengal*, April, 2010, available from; [http://www.ibef.org/download/west\\_bengal\\_190111.pdf](http://www.ibef.org/download/west_bengal_190111.pdf); accessed on January 8, 2011.

<sup>38</sup> Amrita Basu, 'Parliamentary communism as a historical phenomenon: the CPI(M) in West Bengal' in Zoya Hasan (ed.), *Parties and party politics in India*, Delhi, 2002, p.326.

<sup>39</sup> Jayati Ghosh, 'India's structural adjustment: an assessment in comparative Asian context' in *EPW*, 32:20, 17 May 1997, pp.1122-1123. Also see Amiya Kumar Bagchi, 'Studies on the economy of West Bengal since independence' in *EPW*, 33:47, 21 November 1998, pp.2973-2978.

<sup>40</sup> Sudipta and Maumita Bhattacharyya argue this has contributed to a decline in rural growth since 1992-1993, in Sudipta and Maumita Bhattacharyya, 'Agrarian impasse in West Bengal in the liberalisation era' in *EPW*, 42:52, 29 December 2007, pp.65-71. Also see Utsa Patnaik, 'Neoliberalism and rural poverty in India' in *EPW*, 42:30, 28 July 2007, pp.3132-3150.

<sup>41</sup> State government debt in 2007 totalled Rs 1.5 trillion rupee, in Ashok Mitra, 'Santa Claus visits the Tatas - freebies from a debt-ridden government' in *TT*, 30 March 2007.

<sup>42</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'Left in the lurch: the demise of the world's longest elected regime?' in *EPW*, 45:3, 16 January 2010, pp.51-59.

(2003 in West Bengal) Special Economic Zone (SEZ) Act.<sup>43</sup> This act allowed Indian territory to be deemed 'foreign territory' and a range of tax concessions were offered, along with less stringent labour laws. Most SEZs were utilised by IT companies to extend tax holidays and there were relatively fewer large-scale industrial SEZs. However, states encouraged these large-scale industrial zones by committing to acquire the land on behalf of investors, and as states began to acquire large areas of land, resistance and protests broke out. In West Bengal, mid 2006, the state government acquired 1000 acres of land at Singur for the Tata factory, causing significant controversy and foreshadowing the debates that were to follow at Nandigram.<sup>44</sup> The debate over land acquisition in Nandigram was undertaken in this context.

### History of West Bengal

The CPI-M had ruled West Bengal since 1977. Independence and partition in 1947 divided Bengal into West Bengal, as a state of India, and East Bengal, as one wing of Pakistan (and Bangladesh in 1971). Partition transformed West Bengal beyond recognition as millions of refugees from East Bengal moved to Kolkata and the surrounding districts.<sup>45</sup> The first elections in 1951 saw Congress voted in, a position they held until 1967, through an alliance of Marwari businessmen, rural vested interests and anyone who could mobilise significant support, be they Muslim community leaders or *bustee* (slum) heavies.<sup>46</sup> Despite this varied support, Congress was led by *bhadralok* ('well-mannered person', the Bengali educated middle and upper classes),<sup>47</sup> who, according to Joya Chatterji, saw in partition a vehicle to resurrect their declining fortunes and begin a new golden age.<sup>48</sup> The problems that beset the state, such as a need to resettle refugees, central neglect of an ailing economy and food issues, led to the toppling of Congress in 1967.

The 1967 Vidhan Sabha elections saw Congress lose power, to be replaced by a wide-ranging coalition, the United Front, which included the two Communist parties. The presence of Communists in the government, and especially in key ministries, inspired a peasant insurgency at Naxalbari in north West Bengal. This insurgency, led by a faction of the CPI-M, pushed for more radical land reform, calling for 'land to the tiller'. Ultimately, the CPI-M closed ranks, used state forces to crush the resistance and expelled the dissidents leading the insurgency.<sup>49</sup> These dissidents established the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI-ML) in 1969 and in time, a host of Maoist parties were established.<sup>50</sup> Citing concerns of law and order the central government dismissed two United

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<sup>43</sup> Amitendu Palit and Subhomoy Bhattacharjee, *Special Economic Zones in India: myths and realities*, New Delhi, 2008.

<sup>44</sup> For the events of Singur see Kenneth Bo Nielsen, 'Contesting India's development? Industrialisation, land acquisition and protest in West Bengal' in *Forum for Development Studies*, 37:2, May 2010, pp.145-170.

<sup>45</sup> See Prafulla Chakrabarti, *The marginal men: the refugees and the left political syndrome in West Bengal*, Calcutta, 1990.

<sup>46</sup> See Joya Chatterji, *The spoils of partition, Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Cambridge, 2007, pp.211-259.

<sup>47</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonization in South Asia: meanings of freedom in post-independence West Bengal, 1947-52*, London, 2009, p.5.

<sup>48</sup> Chatterji, *The spoils of partition*, pp.4-9.

<sup>49</sup> On Naxalbari see Asish Kumar Roy, *The spring thunder and after: a survey of the Maoist and ultra-leftist movements in India, 1962-75*, Calcutta, 1975, Sumanta Banerjee, *India's simmering revolution: the Naxalite uprising*, London, 1984, Biplab Dasgupta, *The Naxalite movement*, Bombay, 1974 and Rabindra Ray, *The Naxalites and their ideology*, New Delhi, 2nd edition, 2002.

<sup>50</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The present history of West Bengal: essays in political criticism*, Delhi, 1997, pp.87-93.

Front governments before taking over government directly in 1971, with power not relinquished until 1977.<sup>51</sup> The CPI-M had learnt that direct action, like extra-legal land reform, invited central interference and led to repression and violence.<sup>52</sup> To avoid this, the CPI-M concentrated on building a mass base in the countryside, targeting policies that appealed to the middle as well as the poor peasantry. Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya has described this process as the ‘politics of middleness’.<sup>53</sup>

In 1977, the Left Front coalition, dominated by the CPI-M, was elected. The CPI-M at this stage can be ‘best understood as a well-organised, class-orientated reformist party’.<sup>54</sup> This was reflected in its initial policies, in particular: land reform; the protection of sharecropper rights through ‘Operation Barga’; and the devolving of governance through the panchayati raj.<sup>55</sup> These reforms have invited much scholarly attention, most arguing that these policies, along with rising agricultural production, offered real benefits to the people of the province.<sup>56</sup> Douglas Hill, for example, noted they have ‘diminished the relative vulnerability of a large proportion of the rural populace in West Bengal’.<sup>57</sup> These reforms had wide ranging consequences and while their limitations have been criticised by scholars such as Amrita Basu and Ratan Khasnabis, they have since transformed rural West Bengal.<sup>58</sup>

### ‘Party society’

The political culture of West Bengal in 2007 was characterised by violence. Sajal Basu dated this phenomenon from around 1967 when Congress began to ‘liquidate rival groups’. The CPI-M was sucked into this vortex and the ‘multi-dimensional effects of political violence’ led to political apathy and, for the politicians, a loss of legitimacy. According to Basu, all political groups in West Bengal became prisoners to violence.<sup>59</sup> For Partha Chatterjee, the limited reach of the liberal bourgeois state

<sup>51</sup> Atul Kohli, ‘From breakdown to order: West Bengal’ in Partha Chatterjee (ed.), *State and politics in India*, Delhi, 1997, p.342.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.356.

<sup>53</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, ‘Politics of middleness: the changing character of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in rural West Bengal (1977-90)’ in Ben Rogaly, Barbara Harriss-White, Sugata Bose, (eds.), *Sonar Bangla? Agricultural growth and agrarian change in West Bengal and Bangladesh*, New Delhi, 1999, p.280.

<sup>54</sup> Atul Kohli, ‘From breakdown to order: West Bengal’, pp.357-358. Also Debabrata Bandyopadhyay, ‘Not a Gramscian pantomime’ in *EPW*, 32:12, 22 March 1997, pp.581-584.

<sup>55</sup> Sengupta and Gazdar, ‘Agrarian politics and rural development in West Bengal’, pp.143-157; Atul Kohli, ‘From breakdown to order: West Bengal’, pp.336-366; Amrita Basu, ‘Parliamentary communism as a historical phenomenon’, pp.327-336; G. K. Lieten, *Development, devolution, and democracy: village discourse in West Bengal*, New Delhi, 1996; John Harriss, ‘What is happening in rural West Bengal? Agrarian reform, growth and distribution’ in *EPW*, 28:24, 12 June 1993, p.1238. For a dissenting view on the success of these policies, see Ross Mallick, *Development policy of a communist government: West Bengal since 1977*, Cambridge, 1993.

<sup>56</sup> On the initial impediments to the growth of Bengali agriculture see James Boyce, *Agrarian impasse in Bengal: institutional constraints to technological change*, Oxford, 1987. On the agricultural growth in the 1980s see Ben Rogaly, Barbara Harriss-White, Sugata Bose, (eds.), *Sonar Bangla? Agricultural growth and agrarian change in West Bengal and Bangladesh*, New Delhi, 1999. Ross Mallick was again a dissenting view crediting the previous Congress government for laying the groundwork for these successes see Mallick, *Development policy of a communist government*. This growth has slowed since the 1990s see Apurba Kumar Chattopadhyay, ‘Distributive impact of agricultural growth in rural West Bengal’ in *EPW*, 40:53, 31 December 2005, pp.5601-5610.

<sup>57</sup> Douglas Hill, ‘Rural developments: a case study from Bankura’, p.126.

<sup>58</sup> Amrita Basu has criticised them from a feminist view, as during ‘Operation Barga’ only men received *putta* (land) rights. Basu, *Two faces of protest: contrasting modes of women's activism in India*, Los Angeles, 1992, pp.54-64. For a critical view on ‘Operation Barga’, including data from Nandigram, see Ratan Khasnabis, ‘Tenurial conditions in West Bengal: continuity and change’ in *EPW*, 29:53, 31 December 1994, pp.189-199.

<sup>59</sup> Sajal Basu, *Politics of violence: a case study of West Bengal*, Calcutta, 1982, p.xii.

accounts for the violence in rural West Bengal. Therefore, while the state privileges itself with holding the monopoly of legitimate violence:

Rural West Bengal has never seen the Weberian ideal ... Rather, the political mediators in local conflicts have always used violence, or the threat of violence, as a strategic resource to be deployed in the task of building consensus and keeping the peace.<sup>60</sup>

Violence was not extraordinary but routine and part of the 'traditional repertoire' of politics.<sup>61</sup>

Chatterjee described this process as 'political society'; politics a 'shifting compromise... between the normative values of modernity and the moral assertion of popular demands.'<sup>62</sup> For Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, rural West Bengal was best described as a 'party society' due to the primacy of political parties, their ubiquity in daily life and their control of civil institutions, such as the police.<sup>63</sup> Pranab Bardhan noted the 'all-pervasive and oppressive party control' under the Left Front:

If you want a public hospital bed for your seriously ill family member, you have to be a supplicant with the local party boss; if you want to start a small business or be a street vendor you have to pay protection money to the party dada; if you want to ply a taxi or an autorickshaw you have to pay a tribute to the local party union; if you want a schoolteacher's job you have to be approved by the "local committee" and pay them an appropriate amount; your children are to go to schools where the union activist teacher is often absent, compelling you to pay good money in sending them to his private coaching classes; if you want to build a house you have to employ party-approved construction workers and buy higher-priced or inferior-quality building materials from party-approved suppliers; if you want to buy land, you have to go through the party-connected "promoter".<sup>64</sup>

In the countryside 'party society' extended to control of the panchayat. Challenging this control could lead to violence, such as at Keshpur in 1998 when the CPI-M and the TMC clashed over control of the villages in the area.<sup>65</sup> 'Party society' was evident in the example of Naru Maity, a member of the CPI-M youth wing, the Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI), who took part in the assault on Nandigram on 14 March 2007.<sup>66</sup> After the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) arrested Maity, family members were surprised as they assumed he would be protected because of his CPI-M status. Maity had gained from the patronage of the CPI-M - the local party committee had even loaned him Rs 60,000 rupees to cover his wedding expenses. Maity was not a typical rural Bengali, but he encapsulated 'party society' in this instance, his life connected intricately to the party and respected because of his association with the party. Maity's role in the violence at Nandigram was essentially an

<sup>60</sup> Partha Chatterjee, 'The coming crisis in West Bengal' in *EPW*, 44:9, 28 February 2009, p.45.

<sup>61</sup> Paul Brass, *Theft of an idol*, Princeton, 1997, pp.11-13.

<sup>62</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The politics of the governed*, New York, 2004, pp.40-41.

<sup>63</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'On control of factions: the changing "party-society" in rural West Bengal' in *EPW*, 44:9, 28 February 2009, p.60. On CPI-M domination of the police union, see Anindya Sengupta, 'Officer drain hurts Writers' - "Scope there and politics here" take toll on secretariat' in *TT*, 20 December 2007.

<sup>64</sup> Pranab Bardhan, 'The avoidable tragedy of the Left in India-II' in *EPW*, 46:24, 11 June 2011, p.10.

<sup>65</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'Making and unmaking of Trinamul Congress' in *EPW*, 39:14, 3 April 2004, pp.1529-1532.

<sup>66</sup> Maity was profiled soon after 14 March 2007 as one of the men in the service of the CPI-M, in a series of articles on the 'red brigades'. See Naresh Jana, 'When in trouble, call Red Brigade', Imran Ahmed Siddiqui, 'Sword arm at hand for the party, always' and 'Stockpile squad trail heads towards party' in *TT*, 19 March 2007, and Siddiqui, 'Family Red seal on squad' in *TT*, 20 March 2007.

extension of his job; to canvass support, work on re-election and to use violence to maintain control of the CPI-M. These issues are discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

### Historiography and sources

There has been little dispassionate scholarly analysis on Nandigram thus far. The events of 2007 aroused strong emotions and much of the debate was politicised. There are, however, prominent exceptions. Sumit and Tanika Sarkar have contributed an excellent chapter on Nandigram in the 2008 book *Nandigram and beyond*, a publication with strong chapters from Bolan Gangopadhyay, Dayabati Roy and Ratan Khasnabis.<sup>67</sup> Other prominent scholars such as Pranab Bardhan, Amartya Sen and Partha Chatterjee have all discussed events at Nandigram.<sup>68</sup> Much of their work can be found in the *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*, the site of a heated debate on the merits of land acquisition and resistance at Nandigram. Regular political commentators such as Sumanta Banerjee and Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya have also contributed to the debate.<sup>69</sup> Journalists Biswajit Roy and Nilanjan Dutta have produced an account of the media response to events at Nandigram.<sup>70</sup> Several longer articles have appeared in other journals, such as Tanika Sarkar and Sumit Chowdhury's article 'The meaning of Nandigram' and Swati Chattopadhyay's article, previously mentioned, in October 2007.<sup>71</sup> Jonathan Jones has completed a PhD thesis on grassroots resistance to SEZs, utilising Nandigram as a case study.<sup>72</sup> The literature has generally explained resistance to land acquisition at Nandigram as a response to neoliberal reforms in India. The historiography was sympathetic to the peasantry and many of the contributors were involved to some degree in movements protesting the actions of the state government. Reflecting this activist approach, Pradip Kumar Datta wrote a short book covering the response of civil society and suggesting ways that the events at Nandigram could create 'a new political movement... ethical in its orientation and commitments.'<sup>73</sup> However, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three, the civil society activists were often ambivalent in their attitude to neoliberal policies and tended to romanticise peasant resistance.

Politicians and political parties have published books to articulate their party position, carefully avoiding any reference to neoliberal policies. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) published *Nandigram*,

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<sup>67</sup> Gautam Ray (ed.), *Nandigram and beyond*, Kolkata, 2008. I was unable to access two publications on Nandigram. These were Saoli Mitra, *Dissent: writings on Nandigram & the state of West Bengal*, Kolkata, 2008 and Amal Kumar Mondal, *A phenomenon named Nandigram*, Kolkata, 2009.

<sup>68</sup> Bardhan, 'The avoidable tragedy of the Left in India-II', pp.10-13; Bardhan, Sandip Mitra, Dilip Mookherjee and Abhirup Sarkar, 'Local democracy and clientelism: implications for political stability in rural West Bengal' in *EPW*, 44:9, 28 February 2009, pp.46-58; Sen interviewed by Sambit Saha, 'Prohibiting the use of agricultural land for industries is ultimately self-defeating' in *TT*, 23 July 2007; Sen, 'Huge price of street politics' in *TT*, 20 September 2008 and Chatterjee, 'The coming crisis in West Bengal', pp.42-45.

<sup>69</sup> Banerjee, 'Moral betrayal of a Leftist dream' in *EPW*, 42:14, 7 April 2007, pp.1240-1242; Banerjee, 'West Bengal's next quinquennium, and the future of the Indian left' in *EPW*, 46:23, 4 June 2011, pp.14-19; Banerjee, 'Washing dirty Bengali *dhuti* in public' in *EPW*, 45:3, 16 January 2010, pp.20-22 and Bhattacharyya, 'Left in the lurch: the demise of the world's longest elected regime?' in *EPW*, 45:3, 16 January 2010, pp.51-59.

<sup>70</sup> Biswajit Roy and Nilanjan Dutta, *Nandigram and media: between the battlelines*, Kolkata, 2010.

<sup>71</sup> Sarkar and Chowdhury, 'The meaning of Nandigram', pp.73-88. Swati Chattopadhyay, 'A tryst with capital', pp.1-12.

<sup>72</sup> Jonathan Jones, 'Negotiating development: a study of the grassroots resistance to India's 2005 Special Economic Zones Act' PhD thesis in Philosophy, University of Florida, 2009.

<sup>73</sup> Pradip Kumar Datta, *Nandigram and other struggles: the emergence of new political movements*, Kolkata, 2008, p.12.

where mankind cried out, ignoring SEZs and concluding the violence was a result of the 'Stalinism' of the CPI-M; 'the Hammer and Sickle... the weapon of crime against humanity.'<sup>74</sup> Similarly, the Kanoria union published *Singur and Nandigram and the untold story of capitalised Marxism*.<sup>75</sup> This publication was supportive of the TMC and Mamata Banerjee, (even featuring a poem of hers) several sources citing it as a TMC publication. Despite this, it has provided some useful articles translated from Bengali, which otherwise I would have not been able to access. Mamata Banerjee has also written a book on Nandigram, *Nandi Maa*. The CPI-M produced a wealth of material explaining its position and justifying its actions at Nandigram, discussed in more detail in Chapter Four. Its weekly and quarterly party journals, the *People's Democracy* and *The Marxist*, have written extensively on the topic, arguing that their policies were not neoliberal and that a criminal conspiracy, including Trinamool and Maoist/Naxalite activists, was behind the resistance at Nandigram.<sup>76</sup> Where appropriate I have utilised government documents and sources, such as the details of the SEZ Act and advertising brochures produced by the state government to market West Bengal to overseas investors.<sup>77</sup> Most of the participants in the debate around events at Nandigram came from West Bengal and India. Exceptions include former American Attorney General, Ramsey Clark, who visited Nandigram in November 2007 as part of the *International Action Center* delegation and condemned the violence.<sup>78</sup> A brief controversy arose in November when the *People's Democracy* printed a statement from prominent international intellectuals, including Noam Chomsky, Tariq Ali, Howard Zinn and Susan George, supporting the CPI-M and urging the solidarity of the Left.<sup>79</sup> This was strongly criticised by intellectuals in West Bengal and elsewhere and led to a retraction from Susan George.<sup>80</sup>

Primary source information on events at Nandigram has been gathered from the media. Roy and Dutta's book, already mentioned, has discussed the bias of the media and Avinash Kumar argued

<sup>74</sup> Prabhat Jha (ed.), *Nandigram, where mankind cried out*, New Delhi, 2007, pp.1-2.

<sup>75</sup> Dola Sen and Debashis Bhattacharya (eds.), *Singur and Nandigram and the untold story of capitalised Marxism*, Kanoria, 2007. The TMC provided a link to the publication from their website, <http://aitmc.org/>

<sup>76</sup> Although a variety of parties contest the labels Maoist and Naxalite they were used synonymously and interchangeably by the CPI-M who, in portraying them as violent and criminal, were not interested in exploring these details. This is common as Asish Kumar Roy has pointed out. In this thesis, the terms are used together, except when a specific party or group is represented. Roy, *The spring thunder and after: a survey of the Maoist and ultra-leftist movements in India, 1962-75*, Calcutta, 1975, pp.vii-viii.

<sup>77</sup> Ministry of Commerce and Industry, *The West Bengal Special Economic Zone Act, 2003*, Department of Commerce, Government of India, available from; [www.sezindia.nic.in/writereaddata/statePolicies/wbsezact.pdf](http://www.sezindia.nic.in/writereaddata/statePolicies/wbsezact.pdf); accessed on January 8, 2011. The government brochures are: ICRA Management Consulting Services Limited, *West Bengal*, November 2010, November 2010, available from; [http://www.ibef.org/download/west\\_bengal\\_190111.pdf](http://www.ibef.org/download/west_bengal_190111.pdf); accessed, 11 March 2011, p.51 and PricewaterhouseCoopers, *Indian States, Economy and Business: West Bengal*, Haryana, August 2005, available from; [http://www.arc.unisg.ch/org/arc/web.nsf/1176ad62df2ddb13c12568f000482b94/43cf0caeed566faac12571d30061daac/\\$FILE/India%20Symposium\\_IBEF\\_State%20Reports\\_Westbengal.pdf](http://www.arc.unisg.ch/org/arc/web.nsf/1176ad62df2ddb13c12568f000482b94/43cf0caeed566faac12571d30061daac/$FILE/India%20Symposium_IBEF_State%20Reports_Westbengal.pdf); accessed on 8 January 2011.

<sup>78</sup> Steven Kirschbaum, 'Nandigram says "No!" to Dow's chemical hub' in *International Action Center*, available from; <http://www.iacboston.org/india/1207-nandigram-says-no.html>; accessed 7 July 2011.

<sup>79</sup> N. Chomsky, T. Ali, H. Zinn, S. George, V. Brittain, W. Bello, M. Mamdani, A. Bilgrami, R. Falk, J. Bricmont, M. Albert, S. Shalom, C. Derber and V. Prashad, 'Chomsky and other intellectuals on Nandigram' in *PD*, 31:47, 25 November 2007. Republished in *Nature, Society, and Thought*, 20:4, 2007 (listed as 19:4, 2007), p.491.

<sup>80</sup> M. Devi, A. Roy, S. Sarkar, U. Chakravarty, T. Sarkar and others, 'A CPI(M) public relations coup' in *Outlook India*, 25 November 2007. Martha Nussbaum, 'Violence on the Left' in *Dissent*, 55:2, 2008, pp.27-33. Discussed in S. Anand, 'The Left is always right' in *Tehelka*, 4:47, 8 December 2007.

that the media sensationalised events at Nandigram.<sup>81</sup> While these biases have been taken into account I have not analysed the media responses, due to Roy and Dutta's work. The newspapers used as primary sources include the English-language newspapers, *The Statesman* and *The Telegraph*, based in West Bengal, and the all-India papers, *The Times of India*, *The Hindu* and the *Indian Express*. All have been gathered online.<sup>82</sup> For Bengali-language sources, Roy and Dutta's analysis of the Bengali language media, has allowed some insight into newspapers such as *Anandabazar Patrika*, *Bartaman*, *Dainik Statesman* and *Ganashakti*.<sup>83</sup> Weeklies, such as *Teluka* and *India Today* have been utilised; these were appropriate as primary sources to show the perspectives and opinions of the elite. Visual media utilised include *NDTV* and *IBNLive*, all-India news stations that provide online electronic archives, allowing one to browse news clips from the period.<sup>84</sup> Other visual footage includes documentaries covering events at Nandigram. Partha Sarathi Banerjee and the Medical Service Centre produced documentaries favourable to those resisting land acquisition, while Anindita Sarbadhicary's documentary, *Nandigram in search of answers*, favoured the CPI-M.<sup>85</sup> These documentaries provide interviews with people in Nandigram and prominent Bengali intellectuals, such as Sumit Sarkar. They also provide pictures and video footage of Nandigram, including some footage of resistance. The Medical Service Centre documentary, *Nandigram genocide a living testament* provides video evidence of the violence inflicted upon the peasantry at Nandigram by the police and CPI-M cadre.

The most significant primary sources were gathered from human rights and civil society groups. Several of these human rights groups travelled to Nandigram after March and November 2007 and interviewed people, providing detailed historical records. For example, Medha Patkar led the *All India independent fact finding team on Nandigram massacre* in April 2007 and the *Fact finding report on Nandigram* in December 2007.<sup>86</sup> Established human rights groups, like the Association for Protection

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<sup>81</sup> They argue, for example, that *Anandabazar Patrika* was a pro-industrialisation newspaper. To 'reinforce the dominant discourse that makes the two synonymous' the words industrialisation and development (*shilpayan* and *unnayan*) were used simultaneously, in Roy and Dutta, *Nandigram and media*, pp.27-29 and Avinash Kumar, 'The battle for land: unaddressed issues' in *EPW*, 46:25, 18 June 2011, pp.20-21.

<sup>82</sup> Newspaper citing in this thesis therefore lack page numbers. I have not included Urls to each article for space reasons.

<sup>83</sup> Roy and Dutta, *Nandigram and media*, p.25. Robin Jeffrey's work on newspapers both in Bengal and India also provided fascinating insight into the role of the media in India see, Robin Jeffrey, *India's newspaper revolution: capitalism, technology and the Indian language press, 1977-1999*, London, 2000, and his Bengal specific article Robin Jeffrey, 'Bengali: "professional, somewhat conservative" and Calcuttan' in *EPW*, 32:4, 25 January 1997, pp.141-144.

<sup>84</sup> <http://www.ndtv.com/> and <http://ibnlive.in.com/>

<sup>85</sup> Anindita Sarbadhicary, *Nandigram in search of answers*, 16 July 2007, available from; <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-3924953024386968311#>, accessed on 6 April 2011, Medical Service Centre, *Nandigram genocide: a living testament*, 10 May 2008, available in four parts from; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAwHrIQ6xFE>, accessed on 6 April 2011 and Partha Sarathi Banerjee, *In the name of development*, available from; <http://vimeo.com/9491466>; accessed on 6 April 2011.

<sup>86</sup> A. D. Kumar, P. Roychowdhury, S. Bhadra, Raghu, A. Talwar, Jeeban, P. Roy, Sandeep, Chiro, Pramod, Ganguly, S. Roychowdhury, S. Roy, A. Das, 'Nandigram: horror stories emerge' in *Fact finding report of the delegation deputed by the Calcutta High Court*, 23 March 2007, available from; <http://www.countercurrents.org/nandigram-report230307.htm>; accessed on 10 March 2011; K. Majumdar and T. Sarkar, *Interim report of the citizens' committee on Singur and Nandigram*, 29 January 2007, available from; [http://www.sacw.net/Nation/Jan07reportSingur\\_Ngram.html](http://www.sacw.net/Nation/Jan07reportSingur_Ngram.html); accessed 15 November 2010; K. Panjabi, A. Kapoor, R. Dasgupta, S. Ghosh, S. Das, S. Banerjee, T. N. Banerjee, S. Lal, S. Sinha, S. Bhattacharya and S. Mirdha, *Final interim report of an independent citizens' team from Kolkata on the current state of affairs in Nandigram*, 30

of Democratic Rights (APDR), gathered information with the purpose of petitioning the state courts, demanding redress for the victims of the state. These petitions provide a wealth of material, often in the form of affidavits.<sup>87</sup> International human rights groups were also involved and Amnesty International travelled to Nandigram and wrote a report in January 2008.<sup>88</sup> The most significant single source has been the evidence collected by the 'People's Tribunal'. Various prominent Bengalis, including several judges established the 'People's Tribunal' in May 2007, and collected affidavits and depositions from the peasantry in Nandigram. Over 150 Nandigram residents deposed at the tribunal recounting their experiences of 14 March 2007. A book was published based on this information, *Nandigram: what really happened?* It included an annexure with a wealth of primary information including these depositions and affidavits, detailed police reports and documents otherwise difficult or impossible to obtain, such as the Haldia Development Authority notice to acquire land in December 2006.<sup>89</sup> These sources have been invaluable for articulating the perspectives and opinions of the peasantry at Nandigram. The problems and bias of these sources are discussed in detail in Chapters Two and Three.

### Chapter summaries

The discussion in this thesis is organised into four chapters. The first chapter situates Nandigram within the historiography of resistance in the district of Midnapur from the nationalist period after 1920. It points out some similarities between 2007 and other resistance movements in the area, in particular the Jatiya Sarkar of 1942, when Tamruk declared itself independent of British colonial rule. The second chapter serves two purposes. Firstly, it describes the events in Nandigram from June 2006 until May 2008 and secondly it seeks to examine how the peasantry at Nandigram represented their struggle against the state government. The response of civil society is the subject of the next chapter. Civil society, in this case the West Bengali elite, supported the peasantry at Nandigram and protested in Kolkata and elsewhere in solidarity. The last chapter focuses on the actions of the political parties. These parties were more concerned with political gain and exploited the events at Nandigram to this end. This thesis demonstrates that for people in West Bengal in 2007, the resistance at Nandigram was

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November 2007, available from; <http://www.sacw.net/Nation/CitRepNandigramNov07.Pdf>; accessed on 18 April 2011; Medical Service Centre, *Report of the medical team on Nandigram incident*, Kolkata, 5 April 2007, available from; <http://sanhati.com/news/180/>; accessed on 17 November 2010; M. Patkar, A. Talwar, D. Dutta, B. Chanda and S. Tripathi, *Fact finding report on Nandigram*, 8 December 2007; available from; <http://development-dialogues.blogspot.com/2007/12/fact-finding-report-on-nandigram-by.html>; accessed on 10 March 2011; S. Sarkar, C. Gonsalves, S. Chakravarty, M. Patkar, D. Thankappan, B. D. Sharma, T. Ghosh, G. N. Saibaba, A. Khote, R. Rafiq, R. Dhiraj, Srimant and M. Engineer, *All India independent fact finding team on Nandigram massacre*, 10 April 2007, available from; <http://sanhati.com/news/76/>; accessed on 11 January 2011; R. Dasgupta, K. Panjabi, A. Kapoor, T. N. Banerjee, S. Lal, S. Banerjee, S. Bhattacharya, S. Mirdha, S. Ghosh, S. Das and S. Sinha, *Final report of an independent citizens' team*, Kolkata, 10 March 2008; available from; <http://development-dialogues.blogspot.com/2008/03/final-report-of-independent-citizens.html>; accessed on 15 November 2010.

<sup>87</sup> APDR, 'To the chairman, People's Tribunal on Nandigram, *Request for deposition*, 28 May 2007 in Annexure H, APDR Report part 1, p.5 in All India Citizens Initiative, *Nandigram: what really happened? Based on the report of the People's Tribunal on Nandigram, 26-28 May, 2007*, Delhi, 2007.

<sup>88</sup> Amnesty International, *India: urgent need to address large scale human rights abuses during Nandigram "recapture"*, 15 January 2008, available from; <http://www.amnestyusa.org/document.php?lang=e&id=ENGASA200012008>; accessed 10 March 2011.

<sup>89</sup> All India Citizens Initiative, *Nandigram: what really happened? Based on the report of the People's Tribunal on Nandigram, 26-28 May, 2007*, Delhi, 2007.

not generally articulated in opposition to neoliberal policies. Rather, local politics and local issues had a more immediate effect on people's views, focusing discontent on the governance of the CPI-M. This resulted in the resistance at Nandigram evolving into a movement that sought to challenge the continued rule of the CPI-M in West Bengal.

## Chapter One

### **‘A land of revolt’: Nandigram in history.**

The villagers were roused to a state of fury... They were ready for a sort of guerrilla warfare.<sup>1</sup>

Midnapur District Officer, 27 September 1942.

We were trained by Bhupal Panda. We know how to protect our land. We are not scared to die for our land.<sup>2</sup>

Aunt of Sekh Selim, who was killed at Nandigram on 7 January 2007.

In 2007, the name of Bhupal Panda was often mentioned, his life seen as exemplifying the reputation of Nandigram, as ‘a land of revolt or unrest’.<sup>3</sup> Panda, a lifelong resident of Nandigram, participated in the civil disobedience movements of the 1930s, and whilst imprisoned joined the Communist Party of India (CPI). He had been heavily involved in the Tebhaga movement at Nandigram, which was a movement for sharecroppers to retain two-thirds share of the produce.<sup>4</sup> He was often cited as a source of inspiration and, as the quote signifies, indicated a historical continuity of the tradition of righteous revolt.<sup>5</sup> This chapter is concerned with examining the historiography of Nandigram from the nationalist period in 1919 until 2007. The historiography is mostly focused on the nationalist period, which took place between 1919 and 1947, with very little being written on Nandigram after 1947 until the events of 2007.

The existing historiography has taken a rather simplistic approach to connect Nandigram to its history. Accounts that do mention the history of the region, like Bolan Gangopadhyay’s chapter in *Nandigram and beyond*, focus on the fact that people in Nandigram had participated in previous movements that resisted the colonial state. It was assumed that this previous experience made people at Nandigram more likely to resist.<sup>6</sup> However, this tradition of resistance to colonial rule was not unilinear; it was much more complex and multifaceted. In contradistinction to this simplistic approach, this chapter argues that the nationalist period highlights the complexity of resistance in the area. The social structure of the region contained significant caste, class and gender divisions, but people in the region still united to resist the colonial state when threatened. These internal antagonisms flared in the

<sup>1</sup> Government of Bengal, Home Department, Political, *District officers’ chronicles of events*, Alipore, Calcutta, 1943, p.20 in Hitesranjan Sanyal, ‘The Quit India movement in Medinipur district’ in Gyanendra Pandey (ed.), *The Indian nation in 1942*, Calcutta, 1988, p.48.

<sup>2</sup> Bolan Gangopadhyay, ‘A tradition of resistance’ in Gautam Ray (ed.), *Nandigram and beyond*, Kolkata, 2008, p.60.

<sup>3</sup> Gouripada Chatterjee, *Midnapore the forerunner of India’s freedom struggle*, Delhi, 1986, p.6.

<sup>4</sup> Gangopadhyay, ‘A tradition of resistance’, pp.65-68.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp.65 and Jonathan Jones, ‘Negotiating development: a study of the grassroots resistance to India’s 2005 Special Economic Zones Act’ PhD thesis in Philosophy, University of Florida, 2009, p.115.

<sup>6</sup> Human rights groups also assumed this. The *All India independent fact finding team on Nandigram massacre* (hereafter *Independent fact finding team*) stated that ‘resistance today comes from this grand tradition of fighting for freedom’, in M. Patkar, D. Thankappan, B. D. Sharma, T. Ghosh, G. N. Saibaba, A. Khote, R. Rafiq, R. Dhiraj, Srimant and M. Engineer, *Independent fact finding team*, 10 April 2007, available from; <http://sanhati.com/news/76/>; accessed on 11 January 2011. Gangopadhyay, ‘A tradition of resistance’, pp.55-68.

absence of outside pressure, as East Midnapur was racked by several economic and social upheavals, from 'depeasantisation' to the Bengal famine in 1943. To understand this period, Partha Chatterjee's concept of 'community' has been utilised. This concept explains the ability of class interests and their related antagonisms to be subsumed when necessary and for them to reappear when power relations allow. An analysis of the nationalist period sheds light on the events of 2007. It moves beyond simple explanations of a 'tradition' of resistance, to one that seeks to unravel the continuities of resistance in the area and highlights the differentiation within the peasant community at Nandigram. The nationalist period also foreshadowed some of the tactics to resist that were used in 2007.

The Congress led several movements that opposed British colonial rule. The last of these movements was the Quit India movement, which in Tamluk saw the establishment of the *Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar* (Tamralipta National Government) in December 1942. Nandigram played a crucial role in the Jatiya Sarkar and in the Tebhaga movement that followed. After these events little has been written on Nandigram, while East Midnapur was increasingly referred to as a reactionary province after independence. However, during this period rural West Bengal experienced significant changes; changes which impacted on Nandigram.

### Descriptions of Nandigram

Journalists and human rights groups in 2007 provided contrasting accounts of the religious and caste affiliations of residents in Nandigram. During 2007 Nandigram was described as a majority Muslim area with a significant Dalit population although, as this chapter will demonstrate, this was in contrast to the historical record of the area. Nandigram *thana* (police station) is located in Tamluk, East Midnapur, a predominantly agricultural area, bordered on the east by the Hooghly River. The 2001 census classified 91 percent of the district as rural with a population density of 1028 people per square kilometre.<sup>7</sup> Nandigram Block One, approximately half of which was identified by the government to be acquired, had a population of 174,691 in 2001.<sup>8</sup> A profile in *Tebelka* in March 2007 described the region as a 'land rich in rice, coconut, fish, and betel leaf'.<sup>9</sup> In 2007 Nandigram was largely a subsistence area, with a year round cultivation of paddy, pulses and vegetables. Betel nut was the primary cash crop, and pisciculture was widespread with many ponds dotted around the area. Villages were generally not electrified, and many residents left the countryside to find paid work in urban areas.<sup>10</sup>

In 2007, land ownership in Nandigram was characterised by peasant smallholdings, with significant numbers of landless labourers and sharecroppers. According to Sumit and Tanika Sarkar,

<sup>7</sup> *District Profile*, available from; <http://purbamedinipur.gov.in/districtprofilenew.htm>; accessed on 10 March 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Three 'blocks' make up Nandigram. Around half the land of the block was to be acquired. Statistics taken from the 2001 census, in *Statistical handbook West Bengal 2008*, Kolkata, 2009, p.28.

<sup>9</sup> Shoma Chaudhury, Shantanu Guha Ray and Avinash Dutt, 'Bengal shows the way' in *Tebelka*, 4:8, 3 March 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Sumit and Tanika Sarkar, 'A place called Nandigram' in Gautam Ray (ed.), *Nandigram and beyond*, Kolkata, 2008, pp.38-39.

landowners in Nandigram owned between two and six *bighas* (0.66-2 acres) of land.<sup>11</sup> Chitta Panda has argued that from 1870, Midnapur exemplified the '*jotedar* thesis'. According to Panda, as the control of land by tenure holders, the *zamindars*, declined, they were challenged by the intermediate tenure holders, the *jotedars*.<sup>12</sup> Sugata Bose has challenged this '*jotedar* thesis', describing early twentieth century rural Bengal as organised by 'the peasant smallholding-demesne labour complex'. At the top was a small segment of landlords with labourers to work in their fields, at the middle were a broad section of peasant smallholders who would hire labour at peak seasons, and at the bottom were a landless segment that supplied the labour, with caste and religious ties often cutting across these boundaries.<sup>13</sup> According to Bose, some small holders, through control of the credit-market and the expansion in the grain market, were able over time to gain more control of the land. Those who were dependant on credit for survival, such as sharecroppers, became increasingly vulnerable; a situation accelerated by the depression of the 1930s, forcing many to sell land, incur debt and become part or fulltime sharecroppers.<sup>14</sup> Partha Chatterjee, in tracing the rise of the commercialisation of agriculture, has shown how these processes led to 'depeasantisation' or the loss of land due to indebtedness.<sup>15</sup>

The Mahishya caste was the dominant caste in Tamluk. Census figures from 1931 showed the Mahishyas accounting for 31 percent of the population in Midnapur,<sup>16</sup> and district statistics from 1933 showed Mahishyas totalling 54 percent of the population of Tamluk.<sup>17</sup> Bidyut Chakrabarty described the Mahishya as providing the 'backbone' of Congress support in Tamluk during the nationalist period.<sup>18</sup> The colonial state did not recognise the Mahishyas as a separate caste until 1921, a status gained through a social movement that emphasised English education and caste status.<sup>19</sup> For Partha Chatterjee, the Mahishya cultural movement was an expression of power and a means to gain vertical integration of the peasantry under *jotedar* leadership.<sup>20</sup>

As for the religious composition of Tamluk, Joya Chatterji has described it as Hindu with a small Muslim population.<sup>21</sup> The 1941 census indicated that Tamluk was twelve percent Muslim,<sup>22</sup> and

<sup>11</sup> Sumit and Tanika Sarkar, 'A place called Nandigram', pp.38-39. This matched the rest of the state according to Sunil Sengupta and Haris Gazdar, in Sengupta and Gazdar, 'Agrarian politics and rural development in West Bengal' in Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen (eds.), *Indian development: selected regional perspectives*, Delhi, 1997, p.141.

<sup>12</sup> Chitta Panda, *The decline of the Bengal zamindars, Midnapore 1870-1920*, Delhi, 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: economy, social structure and politics, 1919-1947*, Cambridge, 1986, pp.18-34.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Partha Chatterjee, 'The colonial state and peasant resistance in Bengal 1920-1947' in *Past & Present*, 110, February 1986, pp.176-179.

<sup>16</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The present history of West Bengal: essays in political criticism*, Delhi, 1997, p.75.

<sup>17</sup> *Midnapur District Gazetteer, District Statistics, 1921-2 to 1930*, Calcutta, 1933, pp.2-3 in Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Local politics and Indian nationalism, Midnapur, 1919-1944*, New Delhi, 1997, p.66.

<sup>18</sup> Chakrabarty, *Local politics and Indian nationalism*, pp.60-65.

<sup>19</sup> Adrienne Cooper, *Sharecropping and sharecropper's struggles in Bengal, 1930-1950*, Calcutta, 1988, p.122.

<sup>20</sup> Partha Chatterjee, 'The colonial state and peasant resistance', pp.179-191 and Chatterjee, *The present history of West Bengal*, pp.76-77. Also see Sumit Sarkar who describes Mahishya as gentry, *jotedars* and peasants in Sarkar, 'The conditions and nature of subaltern militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to non-co-operation, c.1905-22' in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies III: writings on South Asian history and society*, Delhi, 1984, p.282.

<sup>21</sup> Joya Chatterji, *The spoils of partition, Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Cambridge, 2007, p.163.

<sup>22</sup> The Census of India, 1941, Bengal, Vol. IV, Government of India Press, Simla, 1942, pp.77-8 in Chakrabarty, *Local politics and Indian nationalism*, p.141.

Hindus dominated the Quit India movement in Tamluk with less than one percent being Muslim.<sup>23</sup> In fact, Congress denounced the Muslims of Tamluk during Quit India as having 'betrayed their communal spirit and [having] played into the hands of the British at Contai and Tamluk.'<sup>24</sup>

In contrast, the media and civil society often described Nandigram in 2007 as majority Muslim. The 2001 census figures indicated that East Midnapur's population was eleven percent Muslim, although figures for Nandigram were unable to be obtained. Muslims in West Bengal made up 25 percent of the population in 2001.<sup>25</sup> The existing evidence suggests that Nandigram was majority Hindu, dominated by the Mahishya caste with a significant Muslim population. Mahishya caste names such as Mondal, Maity and Das, were prominent at Nandigram, and until 2007 Nandigram was never described as a Muslim area. Claims of a Muslim majority at Nandigram were often unsubstantiated. For example, Shoma Chaudhury estimated that 80 percent of the population at Nandigram was Muslim, without offering any evidence for this statement.<sup>26</sup> The most convincing figures were from Mohammed Salim, a former CPI-M representative in the Lok Sabha (lower house of the central assembly), who described Nandigram Block One as 46 percent Muslim.<sup>27</sup> The presence of the Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind (hereafter Jamiat), a Muslim community group important initially in resisting acquisition, indicated a Muslim presence. Similar to unsubstantiated claims of Muslim majorities, the Hindu population of Nandigram was often described as majority Dalit. Two human rights groups claimed this, one noting that a 'large majority of the Hindus... in Nandigram are Dalits'. The Medical Service Team described its Hindu patients as 'mostly SC [scheduled caste]'. No evidence or explanations were given for these classifications.<sup>28</sup>

### Historiography

For the purposes of this thesis, the period between 1919 and the Tebhaga movement in 1946 highlighted the multifaceted nature of resistance in the area. People in the region resisted the colonial state when the region was threatened. When this was not the case, the antagonisms created by an unequal power structure bubbled to the surface. The historiography of Midnapur recognised it as a region of peasant resistance. Gouripada Chatterjee has traced this resistance right back to the *divani* of 1765 and concludes that, '[t]he history of Midnapore leaves an impression on the mind of any reader that this district has always been "a land of revolt or unrest"'.<sup>29</sup> Rina Pal described Midnapur as a 'forerunner of every National Movement',<sup>30</sup> and that its people 'played [a] unique and almost heroic

<sup>23</sup> Chakrabarty, *Local politics and Indian nationalism*, p.141.

<sup>24</sup> India Office Records, London, R/3/2/38, intercepted Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, monthly report of the struggle for independence in Bengal, August-September 1942 in Chakrabarty, *Local politics and Indian nationalism*, p.142.

<sup>25</sup> Publications of 2001 population census from Purba Medinipur district, West Bengal. *District Profile*, available from; <http://purbamedinipur.gov.in>; accessed on 30 November 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Shoma Chaudhury et al., 'Bengal shows the way'.

<sup>27</sup> Subrata Nagchoudhury, 'An inconvenient truth for secular CPM: Nandigram victims' mainly Muslim face' in *Indian Express*, 20 November 2007.

<sup>28</sup> *Independent fact finding team*, 10 April 2007 and Medical Service Centre, *Report of the medical team on Nandigram incident*, Kolkata, 5 April 2007, available from; <http://sanhati.com/news/180/>; accessed on 17 November 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Gouripada Chatterjee, *Midnapore the forerunner of India's freedom struggle*, p.6.

<sup>30</sup> Rina Pal, *Women of Midnapore in Indian Freedom Struggle*, Calcutta, 1996, p.xiv.

role in the Freedom Movement.<sup>31</sup> Adrienne Cooper has produced a series of mapping typographies showing movements in Bengal that involved resistance or struggle, such as sharecropper protests or nationalist agitations. Continuously represented in these figures was Midnapur, and more specifically, Tamluk and neighbouring Contai.<sup>32</sup> This reputation as a district of resistance reached its apogee during the Quit India movement. Birendranath Sasmal, a nationalist organiser active during this period, claimed that if there were ten Midnapurs in Bengal, British rule would have collapsed much earlier.<sup>33</sup>

East Midnapur took part in the Khilafat and non-cooperation movement of 1920-21 and the salt *satyagraha* of 1929-30. Both were organised and led by Congress, and Birendranath Sasmal toured the region in 1921 'to preach non-cooperation'.<sup>34</sup> Within Tamluk and Contai non-cooperation was expressed by resisting the imposition of government controlled Union boards. The aim of these boards was to supersede local self-government and increase taxes, such as the *chowkidari* (watchmen) tax.<sup>35</sup> Sumit Sarkar and Adrienne Cooper agreed that the movement was successful because its aims were not divisive within the local community. However, this was a difficult balance to strike and Sarkar notes that when the Union Boards were withdrawn in December 1921 many peasants refused to pay the *chowkidari* tax, despite Congress support.<sup>36</sup> In 1931 Tamluk and Contai, as coastal districts, were involved in the salt *satyagraha*, and young volunteers travelled there to participate. Narghat *thana*, bordering Nandigram, was the centre of this resistance in Tamluk.<sup>37</sup> Rina Pal has described how local women from Nandigram were arrested during this time for participating.<sup>38</sup>

While the anti-Union Board movement and the salt *satyagraha* allowed Tamluk and Contai to present a united front, the tensions within the district were exposed by the sharecropper or *bhagchashis*' struggles during this period. Sharecropping was a significant form of tenancy in Bengal. It had increased alongside the commercialisation of agriculture and from the depression of the 1930s, landlords began to prefer it over other forms of tenancy. As a system, sharecropping was characterised by insecurity, oppression and exploitation.<sup>39</sup> Sharecroppers' demands, such as at Nandigram for the abolition of cesses,<sup>40</sup> led to violent clashes and sharecropper refusals to accept *jotedars* as Congressmen.

<sup>31</sup> Gouripada Chatterjee, *Midnapore the forerunner of India's freedom struggle*, p.1.

<sup>32</sup> Cooper, *Sharecropping and sharecropper's struggles*, pp.xii-xxii.

<sup>33</sup> Sanyal, 'The Quit India movement in Medinipur district', p.31. This was in contrast to India, seen as non-resistant. This was first challenged by Kathleen Gough. See Michael Adas discussion of Barrington Moore in Adas, 'South Asian resistance in comparative perspective' in Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash (eds.), *Contesting power: resistance and everyday social relations in South Asia*, Delhi, 1991, pp.290-294 and Gough, 'Indian peasant uprisings' in *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*, 9:32, August 1974, pp.1391-1412.

<sup>34</sup> Sanyal, 'The Quit India movement', pp.32-33

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. Also see Chakrabarty, *Local politics and Indian nationalism*, pp.76-90 on the anti-Union board agitation.

<sup>36</sup> Sumit Sarkar, 'The conditions and nature of subaltern militancy', pp.297-301 and Cooper, *Sharecropping and sharecropper's struggles*, pp.121-123.

<sup>37</sup> Sanyal, 'The Quit India movement', p.34 and Chakrabarty, *Local politics and Indian nationalism*, p.100.

<sup>38</sup> Pal, *Women of Midnapore*, pp.165-171.

<sup>39</sup> Cooper, *Sharecropping and sharecropper's struggles*, pp.102-103.

<sup>40</sup> Adrienne Cooper and Hitesranjan Sanyal provide details of this movement in Cooper, *Sharecropping and sharecropper's struggles*, p.124 and Sanyal, 'The Quit India movement', pp.35-37.

For Partha Chatterjee the sharecropper agitation in 1932-33 represented a 'sharpening of a new, and now more dominant, class antagonism in agrarian society'.<sup>41</sup>

A key dynamic during this period was the role of Congress. Congress in the 1930s adopted a position of mediator between the two groups; aware that agrarian agitation gave the movement its base, but also that *jotedars* and rich peasants provided resources and patronage as well as leadership within Congress itself.<sup>42</sup> These contradictions and the inability of Congress to lead both convincingly, led to the establishment of the Bengal Provincial Krishak Sabha (BPKS). The BPKS focused on the needs of the peasantry and sharecroppers, and included the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Congress Socialist Party (CSP) members. It appears these groups had some influence in Nandigram at this time.<sup>43</sup>

### **Nandigram in history**

The 1940s was the most dramatic period in Nandigram, and the surrounding Tamluk and Contai subdivisions. During this period Tamluk and Contai were hit by natural and man-made disasters, and took part in the Quit India movement before local authorities declared the area independent of the colonial state as the Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar (Tamralipta National Government). This period foreshadowed some of the tactics that would be used at Nandigram in 2007.

In April 1942, fearing Japanese attack following the fall of Burma, the colonial government identified Tamluk and Contai as a possible gateway for invasion and declared them an emergency area. To disrupt transportation the government removed, denied petrol and destroyed, buses, bicycles and boats - an action known as the Denial policy. At Nandigram the vast majority of boats in the area were destroyed, which had severe economic and social consequences as transportation by water was crucial for food and fishing in this coastal region.<sup>44</sup> Compensation for this was meagre and denied to people involved in anti-British activity.<sup>45</sup>

The Quit India movement began in August 1942, led by Congress and Mahatma Gandhi. It was different from previous Congress movements as it was a 'fight to the finish'. Gandhi, who was more militant than in any previous movement, remained committed to non-violence but was prepared to accept the consequences of resistance.<sup>46</sup> For East Midnapur in particular, Gyanendra Pandey described it as 'a popular nationalist upsurge that occurred in the name of Gandhi but went substantially beyond any confines that he may have envisaged for the movement'.<sup>47</sup> The movement

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<sup>41</sup> Partha Chatterjee, 'The colonial state and peasant resistance in Bengal 1920-1947', pp.179-191.

<sup>42</sup> Sanyal, 'The Quit India movement', pp.35-37.

<sup>43</sup> Cooper, *Sharecropping and sharecropper's struggles*, pp. 130-143 and Sanyal, 'The Quit India movement', p.38.

<sup>44</sup> 18,000 were destroyed in total. Paul Greenough, *Prosperity and misery in modern Bengal, the famine of 1943-1944*, New York, 1982, pp.89-90; Sanyal, 'The Quit India movement' pp.39-40; Chakrabarty, *Local politics and Indian nationalism*, pp.135-136; Satish Chandra Samanta, Syamadas Bhattacharyya, Ananga Mohan Das, Prahlad Kumar Pramanik, *August revolution and two years national government in Midnapore*, Calcutta, 1946, p.7.

<sup>45</sup> Chakrabarty, *Local politics and Indian nationalism*, pp.135-136.

<sup>46</sup> Sanyal, 'The Quit India movement', p.19.

<sup>47</sup> For example it was advanced by Subhas Chandra Bose supporters in Midnapur that establishing a national government at Tamluk could assist Bose should he land there with forces. Bose clashed with Gandhi over the

showed the limitations of British force to sustained resistance, although the movement ultimately failed to gain independence.<sup>48</sup>

In December 1942 the Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar was established with its capital in Tamluk town.<sup>49</sup> In form, if not scale, it resembled the colonial government, with courts and an army. In Nandigram, as in other parts of Contai and Tamluk, volunteers of the 'Vidyut Bahini' (lightening brigade) were organised to fight, and police and locals clashed several times in September 1942. Foreshadowing the events of 2007, the 'Vidyut Bahini' attacked and destroyed symbols of authority such as government buildings. Police opened fire several times, killing significant numbers of those resisting. Unlike 2007 the army was deployed and by November 1942 the police, under its protection, began to loot, destroy, torture and use mass rape in an effort to destroy the rebels.<sup>50</sup> Rina Pal has documented how, similar to events in 2007, the colonial government perpetrated sexual violence against women on a significant scale, punishing the community for resisting.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, a district magistrate in September 1942 reported that in defending the area from British attack, '[t]he principal roads were very effectively sabotages [sic] by being cut off at various places, by trees being felled and lain across the road and by the obstacles placed on the road.'<sup>52</sup> Similar strategies were utilised in 2007. Bidyut Chakrabarty remarked that conch shells were used to communicate or to warn of approaching policemen, a tactic also reported in 2007.<sup>53</sup> It was in this context that in October 1942 a cyclone hit the region, killing between 10,000 and 15,000, and destroying 95 percent of houses.<sup>54</sup> The colonial government suppressed news of the devastation for fifteen days.<sup>55</sup> The devastation weakened the community and magnified the effects of the famine that was to follow.<sup>56</sup>

The Bengal famine of 1943-44 killed an estimated three and a half million people, devastating the region. Midnapur was one of the worst hit areas. According to Paul Greenough there was an adequate supply of rice in 1943 despite the past 80 years being characterised by hunger and economic insecurity, and starvation occurred 'only after a series of fateful human errors.'<sup>57</sup> Tamluk and Contai were among the worst hit and, along with a subdivision in East Bengal, had the highest mortality rates

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movement and had significant support in Midnapur, in Gopinandan Goswami, *Banglar Haldighat Tamluk*, Tajpur, 1973, p.78. in Sanyal, 'The Quit India movement', p.26; the quote is from Gyanendra Pandey, 'Introduction' in Pandey (ed.), *The Indian nation in 1942*, Calcutta, 1988, p.5.

<sup>48</sup> Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885-1947*, Delhi, 1983, p.391.

<sup>49</sup> In 2010 Tamluk had a population of 72,000 with an economy based around betel leaf trade. Tamluk remained quiet during 2007 and was contrasted with the more dynamic Haldia as sleepy and quiet in comparison, in Devadeep Purohit, 'Patience, thy name is Tamluk' in *The Telegraph (IT)*, 21 May 2010.

<sup>50</sup> Sanyal, 'The Quit India movement', pp.46-53 and Paul Greenough, 'Political mobilization and the underground literature of the Quit India movement, 1942-44' in *Social Scientist*, 27:7, July 1999, pp.11-47.

<sup>51</sup> Pal, *Women of Midnapore*, p.xv. Paul Greenough has described how this was information was disseminated in the underground newspaper, *Biplabi*, in Greenough, 'Political mobilization and the underground literature', pp.11-47.

<sup>52</sup> India Office Records, London, R/3/2/36, N. M. Khan to the Additional Secretary, Home Department, Bengal, 30 September 1942 in Chakrabarty, *Local politics and Indian nationalism*, pp.146-147.

<sup>53</sup> Chakrabarty, *Local politics and Indian nationalism*, pp.147-149.

<sup>54</sup> Sanyal, 'The Quit India movement', p.52 and Greenough, *Prosperity and misery*, pp.92-94.

<sup>55</sup> Sanyal, 'The Quit India movement', p.52 and Chakrabarty, *Local politics and Indian nationalism*, p.145.

<sup>56</sup> Greenough, *Prosperity and misery*, pp.92-94.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., pp.vii-ix.

in Bengal.<sup>58</sup> The colonial government exacerbated the famine in Tamluk and Contai by privileging military needs over local needs, which made survival exceedingly difficult.<sup>59</sup>

Nandigram suffered exceptionally during this period. Arangamohan Das, a member of a relief committee, toured Nandigram in October 1943 after he had been informed it was the worst affected *thana* in Tamluk. He witnessed much death and despair, encapsulated in his description of:

[an] old man, [who] weakened by starvation, while very slowly passing his way home unfortunately stumbled down on that bank of the *kehal*, [canal] ... when three jackals ran up to him [and] began to bite his side and that side to satisfy their hunger. We lost no time to come to his help and found the man still living. The jackals were scared away [and the] poor fellow saved for the time being eaten while still alive.<sup>60</sup>

The evidence of people in Nandigram forced into prostitution or selling babies to survive, highlights the suffering during this period.<sup>61</sup> Compounding the suffering was the political situation.

By March 1943, the colonial government had driven the Jatiya Sarkar mostly underground and it disbanded in September 1944, in response to Gandhi's wishes.<sup>62</sup> Hitesranjan Sanyal notes that it was the turn to terrorism that eventually turned people against the movement, especially considering the strong influence of Gandhi in the area. When Gandhi visited in December 1945 he remarked, '[w]hat you have done is heroic and glorious. However you have deviated from the path of non-violence'.<sup>63</sup> Peasant solidarity had remained strong between 1942 and 1944.<sup>64</sup> At the conclusion of this movement, the internal divisions and antagonisms again rose to the surface, represented by the struggles of the sharecroppers in the Tebhaga movement.

The Bengal Provincial Krishak Sabha (BPKS) launched the Tebhaga struggle, which fought for sharecroppers to retain two-thirds share of the produce as opposed to the half that was typical in 1946. Tamluk was a centre of the struggle, with significant Kisan Sabha, CPI and Congress activity and a large concentration of sharecroppers.<sup>65</sup> Nandigram also took part in the Tebhaga struggle. In one instance, after the police and landlords armed with *lathials* (security personnel armed with bamboo batons) had come to retrieve paddy, '*Kisan* [peasant] women rushed to save it with their bare arms carrying broomsticks and sand to throw in their opponents' eyes.' Amazingly, this caused broomsticks to be banned in Nandigram.<sup>66</sup> Peter Custers has demonstrated the prominent role women played during this period and at Nandigram the CPI's Bimala Maji led the Tebhaga.<sup>67</sup> The Tebhaga struggle

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p.97.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> *Bengal relief committee records*, doc. no. 528-2/3 in *ibid.*, p.153.

<sup>61</sup> Greenough, *Prosperity and misery*, pp.155-157 and pp.221-223.

<sup>62</sup> Sanyal, 'The Quit India movement', pp.54-56.

<sup>63</sup> *Anandabazar Patrika*, 31 December 1945, in Sanyal, 'The Quit India movement', p.66. Bidyut Chakrabarty also discusses this turn to terrorism in Chakrabarty, *Local politics and Indian nationalism*, pp.150-157.

<sup>64</sup> Chatterjee, 'The colonial state and peasant resistance', pp.192-194.

<sup>65</sup> Adrienne Cooper has shown how the movement was not confined to North Bengal, in Cooper, *Sharecropping and sharecropper's struggles*, pp.166-169.

<sup>66</sup> *Peoples Age*, 12 January 1947 in *ibid.*, p.182.

<sup>67</sup> Peter Custers, 'Women's role in Tebhaga movement' in *EPW*, 21:43, 25 October 1986, pp.99-100.

was a very different movement to the events at Nandigram in 2007. Tebhaga represented the internal struggle of the community: sharecroppers and landless labourers challenging the rural elite.<sup>68</sup>

### **Nandigram in post-colonial West Bengal**

Since Tebhaga, little has been written about East Midnapur and Nandigram.<sup>69</sup> After independence, scholars began to describe East Midnapur as a reactionary province, rather than as a centre of resistance. For example, Joya Chatterji presents the Mahishyas, three million strong and the largest Hindu community in Bengal, as an example of the client-patron relationship that developed in post-colonial Congress ruled West Bengal.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, Chatterji described the Midnapur Congress as lacking sympathy for East Bengal refugees, the *Bangal*. Midnapur's initial support for the reactionary Jana Sangha was noted and Sajal Basu pointed out that the anti-*bangal* Bangla Congress, established in the 1960s, was based in Midnapur.<sup>71</sup>

From a rather different perspective, Amrita Basu discussed women's activism in Tamluk and Midnapur in the 1980s. Basu challenged the discourse that had previously glorified women's roles in movements such as the Jatiya Sarkar and Tebhaga. This discourse, evident particularly in Rina Pal's work,<sup>72</sup> ignored the often secondary and supportive role of women in these movements and emphasised the involvement of upper-caste and upper-class women.<sup>73</sup> As demonstrated in the next chapter, women remained in a supportive and secondary role at Nandigram in 2007.

Post-colonial rural West Bengal has seen significant social change. During the 1960s and 1970s the Communist parties supported land reform policies and increasingly came to lead a united peasantry.<sup>74</sup> Arild Ruud has focused on the role of culture in increasing this support and the formation of a rural Bengali communism. Ruud has traced the ideas and ideologies that informed the urban bhadralok and has shown how the bhadralok disseminated and translated these ideologies to rural Bengalis. These radical ideologies interacted with identities already established such as caste and political organisations.<sup>75</sup> The rise to power of the CPI-M led Left Front in 1977 changed the dynamic of village politics. The system was democratised and power devolved to a three-tiered system of

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<sup>68</sup> Jonathan Jones disagrees and argues the Tebhaga movement bears a 'striking resemblance to the current resistance in Nandigram'. Jones alternately dates the Tebhaga movement as occurring in the 1940s and the 1970s. He also confuses Tebhaga and the Jatiya Sarkar when quoting Debabrata Bandyopadhyay. Jones, 'Negotiating development', p.127 and 134.

<sup>69</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay mentioned Nandigram when discussing the CPI-led peasant insurgency in 1948-1949, in Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonization in South Asia: meanings of freedom in post-independence West Bengal, 1947-52*, London, 2009, pp.105-118 and Bandyopadhyay, 'The story of an aborted revolution: Communist insurgency in post-independence West Bengal, 1948-50' in *Journal of South Asian Development*, 3:1, 2008, pp.1-32.

<sup>70</sup> Chatterji, *The spoils of partition*, p.227.

<sup>71</sup> The Jana Sangha gained five of their nine seats in Midnapur, in Chatterji, *The spoils of partition*, p.274. Basu, *Politics of violence: a case study of West Bengal*, Calcutta, 1982, pp.71-72.

<sup>72</sup> See Pal, *Women of Midnapore*.

<sup>73</sup> Amrita Basu, *Two faces of protest: contrasting modes of women's activism in India*, Los Angeles, 1992, p.156-157.

<sup>74</sup> Sunil Sengupta and Haris Gazdar, 'Agrarian politics and rural development in West Bengal', p.141 and Joya Chatterji, *The spoils of partition*, pp.260-261.

<sup>75</sup> Arild Ruud, *Poetics of village politics: the making of West Bengal's rural communism*, Delhi, 2003, pp.29-30.

governance known as the *panchayati raj*.<sup>76</sup> Glyn Williams has shown how these policies empowered the rural poor, and for the first time they were able to access power and challenge the rural elite, the 'big men'. However, patronage and faction building remained important and elections were often fought over access to panchayat funds and the patronage that resulted in this access.<sup>77</sup> The legitimisation of peasant empowerment during this period played an important role in the resistance to land acquisition at Nandigram in 2007.

People in Nandigram referred to the history of the district and of previous movements during 2007, but their knowledge of this history was limited. Bolan Gangopadhyay noted that people at Nandigram 'take exceptional pride in understanding the present struggle as a continuation of the freedom struggle in which their ancestors had participated'.<sup>78</sup> Jonathan Jones provided a more nuanced view asking people in Nandigram in 2008 about their knowledge of the Tebhaga movement, and what, if any, influence it had during the resistance in 2007. Badaar, described as a land owning villager, replied that:

Yes we knew about them because we have heard stories from our grandfathers and fathers about their trysts while they were in Nandigram. But that was a lesser factor than the sheer feeling of the fact that we had to save our land, save our family and save ourselves from the cadres of the CPM and the government.<sup>79</sup>

Jones stated this response was typical and that knowledge of Tebhaga was often patchy. He concluded that previous resistance did not totally inform resistance in 2007, but knowledge that previous movements had been successful was important.<sup>80</sup>

## Conclusion

The role of Nandigram as 'a nerve-centre of nationalist agitation'<sup>81</sup> has been the focus of this chapter. Nandigram in 2007 was a coastal, densely populated rural region with a significant Muslim minority and a history of Mahishya predominance. The history of resistance in the region reflects Partha Chatterjee's concept of the 'community'. The elite of East Midnapur and Tamluk were able to unite people behind their leadership in specific circumstances; when the area was threatened by the colonial

<sup>76</sup> On panchayat governance see Glyn Williams, 'Panchayati raj and the changing micro-politics of West Bengal' in Ben Rogaly, Barbara Harriss-White, Sugata Bose, (eds.), *Sonar Bangla? Agricultural growth and agrarian change in West Bengal and Bangladesh*, New Delhi, 1999, pp.229-252. Also see Arild Ruud, 'Land and power: the Marxist conquest of rural Bengal' in *Modern Asian Studies*, 28:2, May 1994, pp.357-380; Raghavendra Chattopadhyay, Bhaskar Chakrabarti and Suman Nath, 'Village forums or development councils: people's participation in decision-making in rural West Bengal, India' in *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, March 2010, p.83 and Pranab Bardhan, Sandip Mitra, Dilip Mookherjee and Abhirup Sarkar, 'Local democracy and clientelism: implications for political stability in rural West Bengal' in *EPW*, 44:9, 28 February 2009, pp.46-58.

<sup>77</sup> Williams, 'Panchayati raj and the changing micro-politics of West Bengal', pp.246-248. Arild Ruud has argued that politics was perceived as *nungra* or dirty and participation in politics as 'morally dubious' and shamefaced, in Ruud, 'Talking dirty about politics: a view from a Bengali village' in C.J. Fuller and Véronique Bénéï (eds.), *The everyday state and society in modern India*, London, 2001, pp.115-136. Also see Jonathan Spencer for a similar argument – that politics is 'used as a convenient catch-all explanation for all manner of egoistic and anti-social behaviour' in Spencer, *Anthropology, politics and the state: democracy and violence in South Asia*, Cambridge, 2007, p.86.

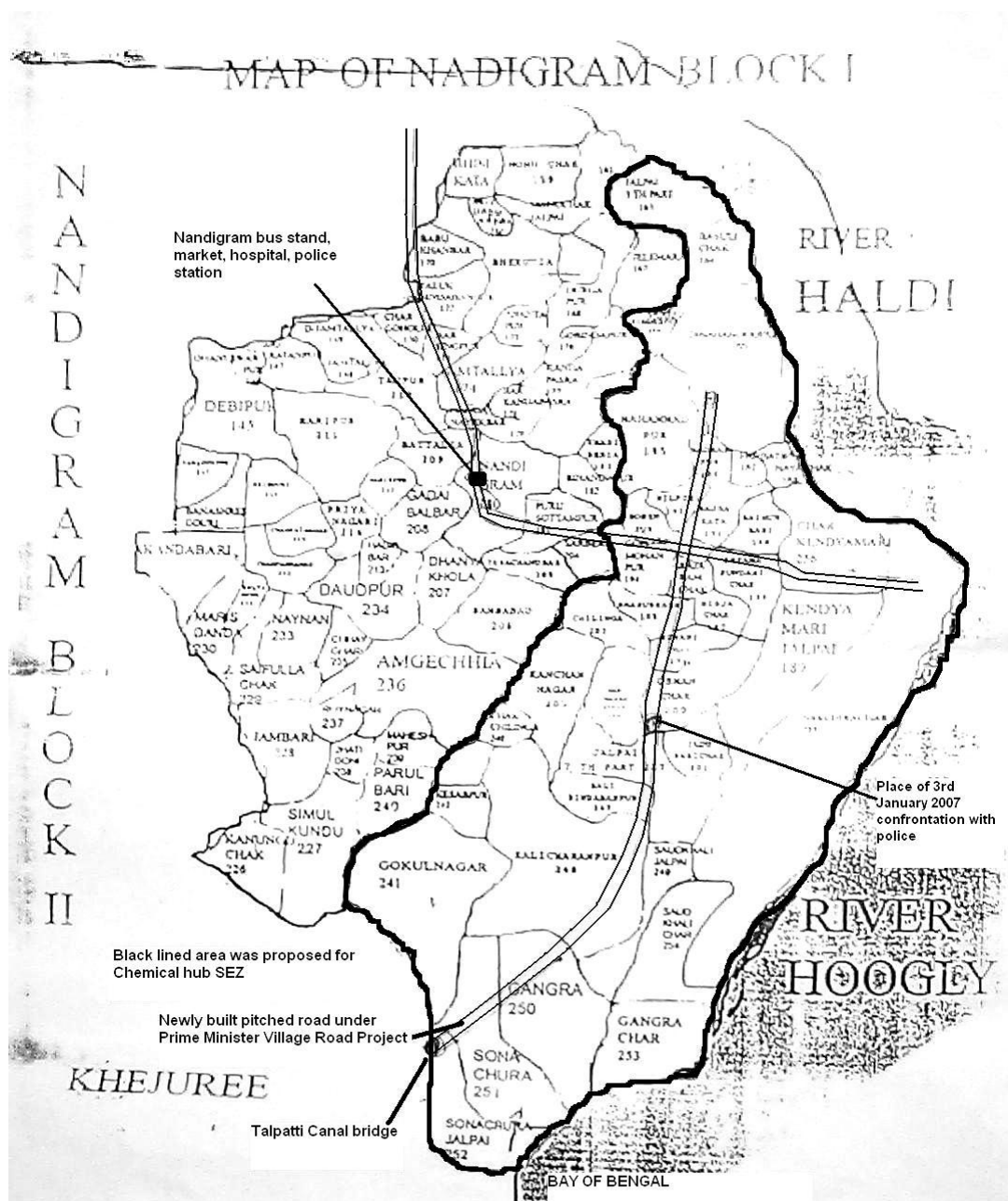
<sup>78</sup> Gangopadhyay, 'A tradition of resistance', p.60.

<sup>79</sup> Jones, 'Negotiating development', p.137.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp.134-138.

<sup>81</sup> Gangopadhyay, 'A tradition of resistance', p.60.

state. However, when this threat was not present the existing class, caste and gender antagonisms led to internal struggles, most vividly represented by the Tebhaga movement. This history is significant in order to understand the events of 2007 and to identify how 2007 corresponded to earlier movements of the rural elite to lead resistance in the area. Nandigram has seldom made the historical record in post-colonial West Bengal, although significant changes occurred throughout this period, challenging existing power relations. The evidence suggests that the peasantry in Nandigram were aware, although in a limited way, of their past resistance and used that memory to strengthen resolve and dictate tactics. The community, despite internal differentiation of caste, religion, class and gender, united behind the rural elite and resisted outside forces, in this case the state government, from entering the area. It is this resistance that is discussed in the next chapter.

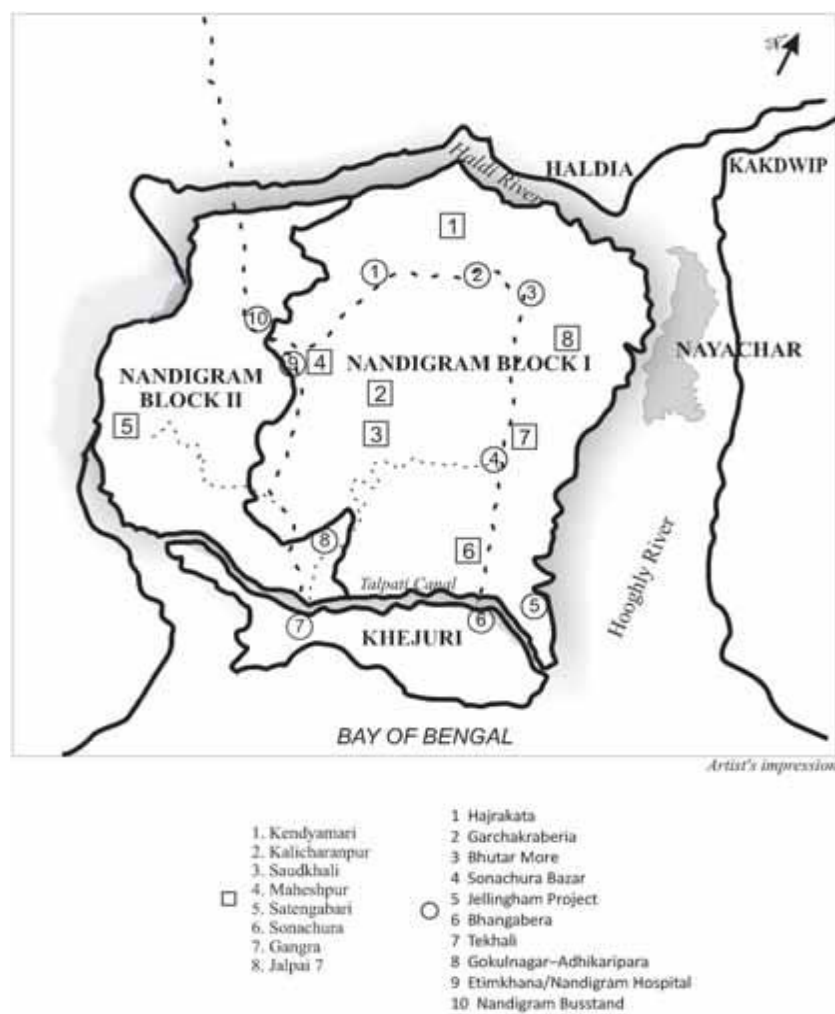


Map Three.

Map of proposed Special Economic Zone.

Lakshman Seth, head of the Haldia Development Authority, presented this map to residents of Nandigram in December 2006, informing them of the area to be acquired. The *Manthan Samayiki*, a Kolkata magazine, added the subsequent annotations.

*Special notification of chief executive officer of HDA, 28 December 2006 (in Bengali) in Annexure C, Calcutta High Court's own Petition, p.41, in All India Citizens Initiative, Nandigram: what really happened? Based on the report of the People's Tribunal on Nandigram, 26-28 May, 2007, Delhi, 2007 and Jiten Nandi et al., 'Long live people's resistance in Nandigram' in Manthan Samayiki, 5 April 2007.*



**Map Four.**

Map of Nandigram Block One.

All India Citizens Initiative, *Nandigram: what really happened?*, p.12.

## Chapter Two

### **‘We are ready to shed blood’: the Nandigram peasantry.**

Blood has started flowing... this agitation will go far. This government doesn't understand what land means to us.<sup>1</sup>

Panchanan Bera, a peasant from Nandigram, 8 January 2007.

Panchanan Bera's defiant remark rejected land acquisition and legitimised resistance. His statement was representative of the narratives created in Nandigram between June 2006 and May 2008 that this chapter seeks to interpret. David Hardiman has argued that when peasant communities resist, they announce their 'right to exist in and for themselves' and question 'the claim of the ruling classes to have a right to override local interests for supposed "wider" needs, such as "national development" or "progress"'.<sup>2</sup> The response of the peasants at Nandigram was initially limited to thwarting land acquisition and halting the imposition of a chemical hub. In achieving this, the peasants confronted the rule of the state government, the CPI-M led Left Front, challenging their right to rule at Nandigram. The response of the peasantry was not a critique of the wider economic policy of the Left Front, but a local reaction to the impending loss of land. Evident in the response of the peasantry was the mistrust of both the state and the CPI-M, a mistrust that pre-dates the events of 2007, despite the previous support for the Left Front in the area. This chapter serves two purposes: it outlines the main events at Nandigram from June 2006 through to May 2008, and uncovers the narratives created by the people at Nandigram in resisting land acquisition.

The first signs of resistance were evident in June 2006, when rumours began to circulate about the construction of a chemical hub, although the government's intention to acquire land was not made public until late December 2006. The announcement led to violent clashes between the fledgling BUPC and CPI-M cadres in January 2007. On 14 March 2007 Nandigram made national headlines, when police and CPI-M cadres attacked peaceful protesters who were angry at the proposed acquisition of their land. Fourteen were killed by police and CPI-M cadre and close to 200 were injured. The narratives that emerged from Nandigram articulated the importance of maintaining control of the land and emphasised themes of betrayal, particularly as the CPI-M was previously well supported in the area. Above all, the peasants' narrative was one of violence. Multiple reports of killings, vicious beatings and sexual violence were emphasised and bitterly denounced. Many in Nandigram displayed a mistrust of the state and perceived the CPI-M as *the* state. The violence of 14 March 2007 saw state institutions acting with marked hostility and did little to dispel these feelings. The BUPC gained widespread public support in Nandigram, and after 14 March 2007 established de-facto

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<sup>1</sup> Simi Kamboj, 'Village cries revenge' in *The Telegraph* (TT), 8 January 2007.

<sup>2</sup> David Hardiman, 'Introduction' in David Hardiman (ed.), *Peasant resistance in India, 1858-1914*, Delhi, 1992, p.59.

control of the area. This situation lasted until November 2007, when CPI-M cadres returned and re-established their control. Tension remained despite the presence of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and the subsequent defeat of the CPI-M in the panchayat elections in May 2008.

The sources utilised in this chapter have largely come from civil society, mostly human rights groups, both national and international, who travelled to the area and spoke with residents regarding the events. The nature of these sources makes it difficult to distinguish the authenticity of the ‘voices’ coming from Nandigram. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has discussed the problem of using sources from elite groups and the difficulty of hearing the subaltern ‘speak’.<sup>3</sup> However, it was possible to hear the people of Nandigram ‘speak’ through television interviews, documentaries, newspapers, and depositions made to human rights groups. In spite of these communications, however, they were rarely *listened* to. The way the peasantry framed the issues and translated the events has not been the primary concern of those recording their voices. Rather, their voices were translated for bhadrakalok and Indian middle-class sensibilities. Therefore, in contrast to the existing material, this chapter is concerned with uncovering the narratives of those resisting land acquisition at Nandigram.

### Rumours of acquisition

As mentioned earlier, the resistance to land acquisition at Nandigram can be traced back to June 2006. From this date people in Nandigram began to form groups, preparing to resist should rumours of land acquisition prove accurate. As groups met and rumours spread, narratives began to coalesce, explaining and justifying resistance. A consensus arose from this process that allowed conceptions of the community to be reconstituted. In June 2006 the business media in India began discussing the possible acquisition of 40,000 acres of land in Midnapur, Howrah and South 24 Parganas, providing the first indications that the government was planning to build a chemical hub.<sup>4</sup> On 26 July 2006, *The Telegraph* reported that Nirupam Sen, the West Bengal Industry Minister, was in negotiations regarding 10,000 acres of land for a ‘mega chemical hub in Haldia’.<sup>5</sup> On 31 July 2006 the state government signed a deal with Salim, an Indonesian conglomerate, for two Special Economic Zones (SEZs) spread over 20,000 acres,<sup>6</sup> and the central government approved this decision in October 2006.<sup>7</sup> The details reported in the media varied, and led to much confusion and rumours in East Midnapur and elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> By

<sup>3</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A critique of postcolonial reason: toward a history of the vanishing present*, Cambridge, 1999, pp.269-308. Also see Dipesh Chakrabarty and Ranajit Guha on the problems with using sources from elite groups, in Chakrabarty, *Rethinking working-class history: Bengal, 1890-1940*, Princeton, 1989, pp.65-115 and Guha, ‘The prose of counter-insurgency’ in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies II: writings on South Asian history and society*, Delhi, 1983, pp.1-42.

<sup>4</sup> ‘40,000 acres for Indonesian co in West Bengal’ in *The Tribune*, 16 June 2006 and Udit Prasanna Mukherji, ‘Reliance may bid for Haldia petrochem zone’ in *Business Standard*, 21 June 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Biswajit Roy, ‘Another 5000 acres on Salim plate’ in *TT*, 26 July 2006.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Violence at Nandigram over land acquisition’ in NDTV video archive, 3 January 2007, available from: <http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/news/violence-at-nandigram-over-land-acquisition/10436?cp; accessed on 8 November 2010>.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Bengal limits number of SEZs - Cut-off at “four to five” plans’ in *TT*, 4 January 2007.

<sup>8</sup> For example, in Bhargar clashes were reported over a fenced area thought to be part of an expressway and part of the Salim industrial hub project in Debashis Chatterjee, ‘CPM and TMC in Bhargar rally war’ in *TT*, 20 December 2006.

November 2006 both *The Telegraph* and *The Statesman* had reported that 25,000 acres of land was likely to be acquisitioned, causing considerable anxiety for the people of Nandigram.<sup>9</sup>

Within Nandigram itself, Syed Abdul Samad, a member of Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind (hereafter Jamiat), a secular Muslim organisation that ran madrasahs and orphanages at Nandigram,<sup>10</sup> also noted that knowledge of land acquisition dated back to October 2006:

We began the movement in October when we first heard from some officials of the Haldia Development Authority that the government would acquire over 14,000 acres comprising 27 mouzas [administrative area of several villages] in Nandigram block and two mouzas in the neighbouring Khejuri block. As the news spread, more and more people started joining us.<sup>11</sup>

One human rights group reported that locals had heard rumours about land acquisition since mid-2005.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Bhavani Das, the secretary of the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI) East Midnapur branch, commented that, '[s]ince November, we have been arranging small meetings at farmers' houses or courtyards, particularly at night, to motivate them against land acquisition'.<sup>13</sup>

With this consulting, organising, meeting and disseminating of information, the community began to build a consensus which could be acted upon should rumours of acquisition be confirmed. This consensus was necessary to address the consequences of resistance. Locals would have been aware of the coercive potential of the state government from recent events like Keshpur, or the ongoing armed clashes with Maoist groups. There were also local examples of acquisition and repression to draw upon. In 1977, a ship-repairing unit, the Jellingham project, was set up on a 400 acre plot. Almost one thousand families had their land acquisitioned, although the project was abandoned five years later. Land acquisition had also occurred nearby at Haldia, where land remained unused and jobs promised from the petrochemical industry had never materialised.<sup>14</sup> Biraj Krishna Jana from Garchakraberia, evicted from his land in Haldia, now faced losing his land again at

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<sup>9</sup> 'Salim land clock starts ticking - Takeover of 25000 acres set to begin' in *TT*, 14 October 2006 and Sukanta Goswamy, 'Nandigram gets Singur jitters' in *The Statesman*, 15 November 2006.

<sup>10</sup> The Jamiat had strong secular credentials. Historically the party 'famously' opposed Jinnah's two-nation theory and worked with Gandhi during the freedom movement. Francis Hutchins notes that during Quit India they were pro-Congress, but remained aloof from the movement due to the violence. In 2008 they organised an anti-terrorism convention. M. Patkar, D. Thankappan, B. D. Sharma, T. Ghosh, G. N. Saibaba, A. Khote, R. Rafiq, R. Dhiraj, Srimant and M. Engineer, *All India independent fact finding team on Nandigram massacre*, 10 April 2007, available from; <http://sanhati.com/news/76/>; accessed on 11 January 2011; Hutchins, *India's revolution, Gandhi and the Quit India movement*, Cambridge, 1973, p.238 and Editorial, 'A new Muslim leadership?' in *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*, 43:47, 22 November 2008, p.6.

<sup>11</sup> 'Build-up to bloodbath - Nandigram had been getting ready to fight acquisition for 3 months' in *TT*, 8 January 2007.

<sup>12</sup> S. Sarkar, C. Gonsalves, S. Chakravarty, K. Majumdar and T. Sarkar, *Interim report of the citizens' committee on Singur and Nandigram*, 29 January 2007, available from; [http://www.sacw.net/Nation/Jan07reportSingur\\_Ngram.html](http://www.sacw.net/Nation/Jan07reportSingur_Ngram.html); accessed 15 November 2010.

<sup>13</sup> 'Build-up to bloodbath' in *TT*.

<sup>14</sup> Dayabati Roy, 'Nandigram: victory of the subaltern' in Gautam Ray (ed.), *Nandigram and beyond*, Kolkata, 2007, p.78. Partha Chatterjee has argued that Haldia was a relatively successful acquisition process in Chatterjee, *The politics of the governed*, New York, 2004, pp.70-72.

Nandigram.<sup>15</sup> The state police had also fired on villagers in Nandigram in recent memory: a CPI-M led blockade to gain electricity had resulted in a death in 1984.<sup>16</sup>

Rumours played an important role in spreading social unrest. Ranajit Guha described rumours as ‘insurgent communication’,<sup>17</sup> which ‘represents a discourse of the subaltern, distinct from the elite.’<sup>18</sup> Therefore, as rumours spread, they allowed villagers to construct a narrative that justified their resistance. For example, one rumour, subsequently given credibility by newspaper reports, suggested that acquisition would see the destruction of mosques and temples.<sup>19</sup> Several villagers, such as Samiran Giri, stated that this rumour was a motivation for resisting acquisition.<sup>20</sup> Rumours allowed the community to present a united discourse, or to create what Arild Ruud called ‘[a] dispersed communal body of knowledge and opinion.’<sup>21</sup> Rumour and *adda* (gossip) have been characterised by James Scott as a relatively ineffective ‘weapon of the weak’ and as generally not contributing to resistance. Ruud disagreed, arguing that rumour was *the* village discourse and thus crucial in any explanation of how one maintains power in rural West Bengal; a conclusion that was supported by the example of Nandigram.<sup>22</sup>

Rumours of the imminence of land acquisition were supported by the information available in Nandigram. One key piece of evidence, presumably leaked and available within Nandigram, was a memo dated 12 September 2006. Lakshman Seth, Lok Sabha member for Tamluk and head of the Haldia Development Authority (HDA), sent this memo to Nirupam Sen, the Industry Minister, containing a list of 38 *monzā* to be acquired.<sup>23</sup> The CPI-M later denied the existence of this memo.<sup>24</sup> On

<sup>15</sup> Naresh Jana, ‘Again, 20 years on’ in *TT*, 5 January 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Tanika Sarkar and Sumit Chowdhury, ‘The meaning of Nandigram: corporate land invasion, people’s power, and the Left in India’ in *Focaal—European Journal of Anthropology*, 54, 2009, p.80 and 87; also see Sumit Sarkar et al., *Interim report of the Citizens’ Committee Report*, 29 January 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Ranajit Guha, *Elementary aspects of peasant insurgency in colonial India*, Delhi, 1983, p.253.

<sup>18</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya and Kumar Rana, ‘Politics of PDS anger in West Bengal’ in *EPW*, 43:5, 2 February 2008, p.68.

<sup>19</sup> See ‘Party flies from hawks - no acquisition without talks: CM’ in *TT*, 8 January 2007. The CPI-M denied this rumour in the *People’s Democracy* (*PD*), in ‘What happened on January 3?’ in *PD*, 31:2, 14 January 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Naresh Jana, ‘Again, 20 years on’.

<sup>21</sup> Arild Ruud, *Poetics of village politics: the making of West Bengal’s rural communism*, Delhi, 2003, p.183.

<sup>22</sup> James Scott’s work on peasant communities in Malaysia in the 1970s focused on ‘everyday forms of resistance’ and how subaltern groups rejected the cultural hegemony that placed them in a subordinate position. Arild Ruud has criticised this as evasive and notes that while Scott sees ‘culture as the arena for contest, the subalternists... do not see culture as the arena of contest, but as the setting within which contest takes place.’ This is crucial as, ‘(e)xpectations, demands, obligations, complaints, are all culturally constituted and formed.’ Scott’s thesis nonetheless has been influential, inspiring the publication of *Contesting power*, where his concepts have been placed in an Indian context, and in some cases considerably altered. James Scott, *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance*, New Haven, 1985. Arild Ruud, *Poetics of village politics: the making of West Bengal’s rural communism*, Delhi, 2003, p.8. Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash (eds.), *Contesting power: resistance and everyday social relations in South Asia*, Delhi, 1991, pp.290-294. Also see James Freeman for an account of a Bauri Dalit’s experience, in James Freeman, *Untouchable: an Indian life history*, Stanford, 1979.

<sup>23</sup> It is presumably this document, or information similar to it, that Syed Abdul Samad was referring to as being leaked to the Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind, in Chief Executive Officer, HDA to the Director of Industries, Government of West Bengal, ‘Revised proposal for approval of Special Economic Zone at Haldia’, 12 September 2006, Memo No. 88 / HDA/VII-M-72/05 in Annexure C, Calcutta High Courts own petition, p.38, in All India Citizens Initiative, *Nandigram: what really happened? Based on the report of the People’s Tribunal on Nandigram, 26-28 May, 2007*, Delhi, 2007. Henceforth all information cited from Annexure sources are from *Nandigram: what really happened?* and not repeatedly cited.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Facts about the “fact-finding team”’ in *PD*, 31:7, 18 February 2007.

27 December 2006 at Nandigram market, Lakshman Seth, on behalf of the government, announced plans to acquire the land. Seth stated that panchayat offices would post the details on 3 January 2007.<sup>25</sup> The notice stated that 27 *mouzas* in Nandigram Block One and two *mouzas* at Khejuri would be acquired.<sup>26</sup>

### Initial violence

The location of the acquisition notice on 3 January 2007 was the site of the first clash between the people of Nandigram and the police. Around three thousand gathered at the Kalicharanpur gram panchayat office where the panchayat *Pradban* (head), Samiran Bibi, was unwilling to explain the unpopular notice and called for police backup.<sup>27</sup> The crowd, now informed that the administration was preparing to acquire their land, attacked the panchayat office. Police then arrived and attempted to disperse the villagers, described in police reports as a ‘mob’, by using tear gas, *lathi* charges, and firing into the air. However, this was unsuccessful; the police were forced away, two police jeeps were set on fire and the panchayat office was ransacked.<sup>28</sup> Protesters, such as Ajay Kr. Gayen of Gokulnagar, downplayed the attack describing the clash only as an ‘altercation’.<sup>29</sup> However, this was a violent event and initial reports sympathetic to the protesters note the anger of people involved and their subsequent violence and destruction.<sup>30</sup>

The posting of the notice and the initial clash seemingly settled minds in Nandigram that acquisition was imminent and that resistance would be necessary. It was here that evidence of local organisation and planning was noticeable. As one Nandigram villager explained, ‘[i]n order that police cannot enter our Villages we dug up the roads. This for some time had saved us from police atrocities.’<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, to patrol these access points, border patrols were assigned. According to one newspaper report, by 5 January 2007 around six thousand men were patrolling the area.<sup>32</sup>

### ‘Community’ and the BUPC

Partha Chatterjee’s conception of ‘community’, as discussed in the Introduction of this thesis, was relevant in this context. The threat of losing control of the land reconstituted the community and defined its ‘other’ as those in favour of land acquisition. The community articulated the importance of

<sup>25</sup> *Calcutta High Court judgement*, 16 November 2007, in Annexure Y, full text of Calcutta High Court judgment, p.28.

<sup>26</sup> *Special notification of chief executive officer of HD&A*, 28 December 2006 (in Bengali) in Annexure C, Calcutta High Court’s own petition, p.41.

<sup>27</sup> Nabadwip Das Adhikari, ‘Depositions before People’s Tribunal on Nandigram’, Gokulnagar, 26 May 2007, WD-60/27 in Annexure A-1, p. 25. Also see media reports, ‘False alarm sparks clash’ in *TT*, 4 January 2007; ‘Haldia erupts over land acquisition’ in *The Statesman*, 4 January 2007; ‘What happened at Nandigram? A statement of facts’ in *PD*, 31:12, 25 March 2007. Depositions cited from Annexure A-1, from this point on will cite name of deposer, annexure title and page number but will exclude the following identical information: ‘Depositions before People’s Tribunal on Nandigram’, Gokulnagar, 26 May 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Anoop Kumar Agrawal, District magistrate, Purba Medinipur to chief secretary, government of West Bengal, ‘A brief report on incident in Nandigram-1 block’, 3 January, 2007, Memo No. 06/C, in Annexure E, affidavit submitted by Government of West Bengal Part I, pp.72-73.

<sup>29</sup> Ajay Kr. Gayen, WD-24/27 in Annexure A-1, p.16.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Haldia erupts over land acquisition’ in *The Statesman*, 4 January 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Ajay Kr. Gayen, WD-24/27 in Annexure A-1, p.16.

<sup>32</sup> ‘SEZ zone seethes, govt stalls - Naxalite twist with JNU link’ in *TT*, Friday, 5 January 2007, also noted in Sarkar and Chowdhury, ‘The meaning of Nandigram’, p.82.

'land' in a collective sense: collective control of land being imperative to the survival of the community. This collective shift was exemplified by the many diverse groups that came together to form the BUPC at Bhuta More on 6 January 2007. The BUPC was formed out of existing groups that were opposed to acquisition such as the Jamiat, and other localised anti-acquisition groups and local representatives of the West Bengal political parties. These included the TMC, Congress, SUCI and the People's Democratic Conference of India (PDCI).<sup>33</sup> The BUPC adopted the black flag to represent its independence and as a symbol of resistance.<sup>34</sup>

The bulk of the support for the fledgling BUPC came from dissatisfied CPI-M supporters. David Hardiman has explained the 'community' as one that 'exists in a relationship of opposition to those who are not of the community.' This shift best exemplifies the reconstitution of the community in Nandigram. By signalling its intention to acquire land, the CPI-M positioned itself outside the community.<sup>35</sup> Local CPI-M politicians, workers and supporters left the party *en mass*, joining or supporting the BUPC and later the TMC. Bulu Adak from Southkhali was typical in stating:

What was the point of doing CPI(M) all our lives? I have been a CPI(M) follower for 30 years, but what did I get? I am the local secretary of the Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti, but when I realized they were going to take my land by force, I joined the BUPC.<sup>36</sup>

By 2009, 35 out of 42 TMC Committee members in Nandigram had had previous links to the CPI-M. Most of the 834 CPI-M cardholders were inactive or had joined the opposition. All ten gram panchayati were headed by former CPI-M members and many of the branch committees were closed or had become defunct. For example, Nishikanta Mondal and Sheikh Sahauddin, prominent local CPI-M leaders before 2007, became firstly BUPC members and later TMC leaders, and ran the Sonachura and Kendamari village panchayat respectively.<sup>37</sup>

Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya has characterised rural West Bengal as a 'party society' with political parties dominating the key institutions in the countryside.<sup>38</sup> The BUPC reflected this, as it was also schooled in CPI-M techniques of organisation and discipline. Therefore, the BUPC moved first to control land. Once this was established, control of government followed, in this case the various panchayati institutions. This explains the BUPC turn toward the TMC after March 2007. The TMC offered a better means to establish control by offering more resources. Therefore, the BUPC was a

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<sup>33</sup> Sarkar and Chowdhury, 'The meaning of Nandigram', p.82.

<sup>34</sup> R. Dasgupta, K. Panjabi, A. Kapoor, T. N. Banerjee, S. Lal, S. Banerjee, S. Bhattacharya, S. Mirdha, S. Ghosh, S. Das and S. Sinha, *Final report of an independent citizens' team*, Kolkata, 10 March 2008, available from: <http://development-dialogues.blogspot.com/2008/03/final-report-of-independent-citizens.html>; accessed on 15 November 2010.

<sup>35</sup> David Hardiman, 'Introduction' in David Hardiman (ed.), *Peasant resistance in India, 1858-1914*, Delhi, 1992, pp.8-9.

<sup>36</sup> *Final report of an Independent Citizens' team*, 10 March 2008.

<sup>37</sup> Bidyut Roy, 'In Nandigram, Mamata uses CPM cadres to turn tables on CPM' in *Indian Express*, 6 May 2009, Arnab Ganguly, 'An alien turf for CPM' in *TOI*, 7 May 2009 and Sarkar and Chowdhury, 'The meaning of Nandigram', p.82. Nishikanta Mondal was killed in September 2009, Maoists claiming responsibility for his death, in 'Slain Nandigram leader betrayed Maoists: Deepak' in *TOI*, 5 March 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'On control of factions: the changing "party-society" in rural West Bengal' in *EPW*, 44:9, 28 February 2009, pp.59-69.

product of the system it was challenging, confirming Timothy Mitchell's point that resistance does not stand outside the state, but was often born from these same institutions, which use the same disciplines within to challenge power relations.<sup>39</sup>

### January to March 2007

CPI-M cadres killed four people at Nandigram on the morning of 7 January 2007, representing the first deaths in relation to land acquisition. The cadres attacked locals who were guarding the area at Sonachura.<sup>40</sup> One of these guards, Sabuj Kumar Pradhan of Gangra, recounted:

Around 250 CPM supporters had come over from Khejuri just crossing the Talpatti bridge. They wore army fatigues and carried guns and bombs. All we had were lathis and sickles which are [of] no use in the dark.<sup>41</sup>

This attack resulted in the deaths of Bharat Mondal, Sk Salim and Biswajit Maity; Maity was aged between twelve and fourteen years old. At around 7.30am an estimated five thousand BUPC supporters counterattacked,<sup>42</sup> burning local CPI-M member Sankar Samanta's house and killing him.<sup>43</sup> Subsequently, around two thousand local CPI-M followers left the area.<sup>44</sup> Although publically the CPI-M blamed the BUPC for the attack,<sup>45</sup> police reports subsequently submitted to the court admitted CPI-M culpability.<sup>46</sup>

Police remained in their camp just outside Nandigram during this clash and failed to stop the violence. This contrasted with the events of 5 January 2007 when 150 locals, 'armed with spears, sickles and sticks marched into Tekhali' and confronted the CPI-M; the police on this occasion defused the situation.<sup>47</sup> Police explanations as to why they did not attempt to stop the violence on 7 January 2007 were unconvincing. Inspector-General of police, Arun Gupta, argued that an attack appeared unlikely, despite clear evidence to the contrary. Newspapers had reported that it was 'no

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<sup>39</sup> Timothy Mitchell, 'The limits of the state: beyond statist approaches and their critics' in *The American Political Science Review*, 85:1, March 1991, p.93.

<sup>40</sup> 'Deaths in Nandigram, Bangla bandh today' in *TT*, 8 January 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. It was known that CPI-M cadres had travelled to Nandigram, see Naresh Jana, 'Mobilisation and mayhem, hitback men and motive' in *TT*, 8 January 2007.

<sup>42</sup> 'Deaths in Nandigram' in *TT* and Sukanta Goswamy and Joydeep Thakur, 'CPM shadow on 6 Nandigram deaths' in *The Statesman*, 8 January 2007.

<sup>43</sup> There is some controversy over this death. Nabadwip Das Adhikari, a Nandigram resident, witnessed a gun firing from Samanta's house and Sabyasachi Roychoudhury argues he was beaten to death because of this. *The interim report of the Citizens Committee on Singur and Nandigram* claims that he was killed when the body of thirteen year old 'Biswajit Mondol' (presumably Biswajit Maity) was found and 'in their fury' Samanta's house was burnt. The petition submitted to the courts by the state government contradicts many accounts and paces Samanta's death on the evening of 8 January 2007. In order of source mentioned Adhikari, Annexure A-1, WD-60/27, p.25; Roychoudhury, *Affidavit of Sri Sabyasachi Roychoudhury, learned advocate of the honourable High Court at Calcutta*, 28 March 2007 in Annexure D1, Roychoudhury petition, p.7; see Sumit Sarkar et al., *Interim report of the Citizens' Committee Report*, 29 January 2007; Affidavit submitted by government of West Bengal Part I, section viii, Annexure E, p.12.

<sup>44</sup> Section vii, in Annexure E, p.10 and 'What happened at Nandigram?' in *PD*.

<sup>45</sup> See Biman Bose, the state secretary of the CPI-M, claiming self-defence, in 'Battle for land: Nandigram clashes kill 6' in *NDTV* video archive, 7 January 2007, available from; <http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/news/battle-for-land-nandigram-clashes-kill-6/10532?cp>; accessed on 19 November 2010, also see 'What happened on January 3?' in *PD*.

<sup>46</sup> Section vi, in Annexure E, p.9.

<sup>47</sup> Simi Kamboj and Naresh Jana, 'Land backlash takes life of its own' in *TT*, 5 January 2007.

secret' that the CPI-M had called for activists from other parts of East Midnapur, and one source ran an article complete with quotes from party stalwarts openly claiming as much.<sup>48</sup> One officer, on becoming aware of the fact that CPI-M workers had arrived, claimed, '[w]e thought they had come to provide them [the refugees] with shelter and food and plan ways with us to normalise the situation.'<sup>49</sup> Gupta also blamed the BUPC for the violence, commenting that, '[p]olitical leaders spearheading the agitation against land acquisition had assured us that they would pacify the villagers'.<sup>50</sup> These claims favouring the CPI-M show the politicisation of the police in Nandigram at this time.

However, these claims also showed the limits of CPI-M influence over the police. The police could be persuaded to withdraw their forces in certain circumstances, but they could not always be used to crush dissent. Rural West Bengal featured multiple power relations, with local politicians and local police alternatively working together and competing with each other, while subject to pressures from above. For example, Inspector-General (law and order) Raj Kanojia stated that before 14 March 2007 the police had shown restraint as the 'situation was very volatile and not conducive for police action'.<sup>51</sup> The police were wary of becoming involved and attempted to remain aloof from the politics of the situation. The actions of the police are beyond the scope of this thesis, but seeing the police in 2007 as simply agents of the CPI-M at Nandigram is too simplistic.

From 7 January until 14 March 2007 the state government made contradictory statements. Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee declared the deaths of 7 January 2007 as 'unfortunate', with 'peace' stated as the goal.<sup>52</sup> However, Lakshman Seth suspended the ferry service between Nandigram and Haldia, effectively blockading the area - an action CPI-M State Secretary Biman Bose blamed on the behaviour of the BUPC.<sup>53</sup> Despite Bhattacharjee's speech at Khejuri on 12 February 2007 that land would not be acquired if it transgressed the will of the people, Seth stated on 13 February that acquisition would go ahead.<sup>54</sup> This did not do much to inspire confidence amongst villagers in Nandigram. The continued presence of Seth in a position of power, with his reputation for inflexibility and vindictiveness, made dialogue between the two groups difficult.<sup>55</sup>

### 14 March 2007

People in Nandigram, as well as the media and political parties were all aware that police intended to enter Nandigram prior to 14 March 2007. The state government made several statements that 'law and

<sup>48</sup> Naresh Jana, 'Mobilisation and mayhem' in *TT*.

<sup>49</sup> 'After caroms, cops grope in dark' in *TT*, 8 January 2007.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> 'Nandigram action signal' in *TT*, 13 March 2007.

<sup>52</sup> 'Nandigram incident unfortunate: CM' in *TOI*, 7 January 2007.

<sup>53</sup> Shyam Sundar Roy, 'Red terror revisits Nandigram' in *The Statesman*, 17 February 2007.

<sup>54</sup> B. Prasant, 'Industrial development will benefit the rural poor: Buddhadeb' in *PD*, 31:7, 18 February 2007 and Sabyasachi Roychoudhury, *Affidavit of Sri Sabyasachi Roychoudhury, learned advocate of the honourable High Court at Calcutta for the Calcutta High Court's own petition*, 28 March 2007, Section 30, in Annexure C, Calcutta High Court's own petition, p.12.

<sup>55</sup> Stuart Corbridge and others have discussed how the poor compare their 'sightings of the state' and report on the personal characteristics of key individuals, whether they were corrupt, quick tempered or otherwise, and act accordingly. Stuart Corbridge, Glyn Williams, Manoj Srivastava and Rene Veron, *Seeing the state: governance and governmentality in India*, New York, 2005, pp.7-8 and pp.119-120.

order' needed to be re-established. Police likewise made it clear that the situation could not go on indefinitely, with one human rights group claiming that Midnapur police had ordered 40,000 rounds of ammunition and 40 ambulances in preparation.<sup>56</sup> Subhendu Adhikari, TMC Vidhan Sabha member for Contai South, wrote to Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee on 13 March 2007 to 'beg' for a political solution and stop police action, showing that apprehension about the forthcoming police action was widespread, and that both sides had ample time to prepare.<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, the BUPC held an evening meeting on 13 March 2007 where they decided to mobilise supporters at Bhangabera Bridge near Sonachura and Gokulnagar, the two major access points to Nandigram. It was agreed that participants would be unarmed and non-violent, and *Puja* and *Namaz* would be observed/performed. Through prayer, participants would ask the police to leave.<sup>58</sup> The BUPC also decided to place women and children at the front.<sup>59</sup> This meeting holds significance in recognising 14 March 2007 as a planned protest rather than as a spontaneous religious gathering. The BUPC made a series of political decisions for the protest to appear non-threatening, religiously pious and communally united.

On the morning of 14 March 2007, police and CPI-M cadres entered Nandigram Block One at Bhangabera, Garupara and Gokulnagar and were promptly met by protesters at Bhangabera and Gokulnagar. Video footage from Bhangabera bridge showed people massed alongside the banks of the Talpatti canal and police firing tear gas, rubber bullets and live ammunition. Police and CPI-M cadre then attacked the estimated 20,000 BUPC members and supporters who had gathered in an attempt to stop forces entering Nandigram. The results of this attack saw fourteen people dead, all BUPC supporters.<sup>60</sup> 164 people were injured, including 84 women and 80 men, ranging in age from fifteen year old Srihari Kajli to 77 year old Sudhir Ari.<sup>61</sup> Many protesters sustained injuries from tear gas, beatings and bullets whilst fleeing the scene.

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<sup>56</sup> This was reputedly gained through the local press although I was unable to verify this information in the English-language media in *Fact finding team*, 10 April 2007.

<sup>57</sup> 'Letter from Suvendu Adhikari to Buddhadev Bhattacharya', 13 March 2007, Annexure D1, p.58.

<sup>58</sup> Madhuri Giri said 'People present there raised their hands with the instructions of Resistance-Committee and prayed for peace' Madhuri Giri, WD-2/26 in Annexure A-1, p.1.

<sup>59</sup> Renukabala Kar stated the, 'Bhumi Raksha Committee told the women to be in front so that the police cannot charge.' Renukabala Kar, WD-4/27 in Annexure A-1, p.11 and All India Citizens Initiative, *Nandigram: what really happened?*, p.29.

<sup>60</sup> The People's Tribunal received the names of six who had died through depositions and a further seven were gained through the deposition of the Association of Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR). The names contained in the APDR deposition were later proven inaccurate, but the number was correct. One more name was added through the deposition of the West Bengal Education Network. On 18 March, the District Medical Officer, East Midnapur, identified that fourteen had died, with four at that early stage unnamed. All fourteen died from bullet wounds, except Gobinda Das, who additionally had stab wounds (as deposed by his son's friend). In order of mentioned. APDR, 'To the chairman, People's Tribunal on Nandigram, *Request for deposition*, 28 May 2007, in Annexure H, APDR Report part 1, p.5; *Report of district medical officer, East Midnapur dated 18.3.07*, Annexure K, Nandigram hospital register; Annexure C, p.18.

<sup>61</sup> Annexure C, pp.19-27.

Video footage and news reports documenting the attack were smuggled out of the area, despite the media's difficulty in reaching Nandigram.<sup>62</sup> Footage repeated on local and national news (in particular an evocative clip showing a police officer beating a group of women) allowed knowledge of the attack to be disseminated quickly and widely, headlining news all around India and focusing intense attention on this previously remote corner of south West Bengal.<sup>63</sup> Despite police and CPI-M claims to the contrary, there was no evidence that the protesters were armed.<sup>64</sup> Perhaps five to seven police officers were injured, indicating that those protesting largely did not retaliate.<sup>65</sup> One participant in the protest admitted some children were throwing stones, which was also evident in video footage.<sup>66</sup>

West Bengal governor Gopal Krishna Gandhi stated that the events of 14 March 2007 'filled him with a sense of cold horror'.<sup>67</sup> Police withdrew from the area on 19 March<sup>68</sup> and the BUPC and its supporters returned to scenes of celebration, with one media report even pointing out the emptying of the local sweet shop in celebration.<sup>69</sup> The state government announced that the SEZ would be moved from Nandigram at the end of March 2007.<sup>70</sup>

### **Narratives of Nandigram**

The BUPC enjoyed considerable support in Nandigram, and between 10,000 and 20,000 people were mobilised on 14 March 2007. Only a small number, around 2,000, were prepared to publically declare their affiliation with the CPI-M and were subsequently driven from their homes and Nandigram because of this. It is therefore possible to ascertain a dominant narrative that emerged from this support. The impending loss of land galvanised the movement, but this in itself did not guarantee support. Several key themes were emphasised by the BUPC and its supporters such as the importance of land, the betrayal of the CPI-M, and the horrors of the violence inflicted upon them. This dominant narrative circulated internally, and aimed to build and maintain support within Nandigram.

Several studies on the composition of the CPI-M in rural West Bengal reached the conclusion that the long-term rule of the party led to its capture by the middle and rich peasantry. This led to the instigation of particular policies favourable to these groups, or what Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya has

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<sup>62</sup> See Subhro Niyogi, 'Nandigram: mediapersons roughed up by CPM activists' in *TOI*, 15 March 2007. The CPI-M blockade of Nandigram resulted in early news reports based only on police reports. For example, *The Telegraph's* initial report incorrectly stated that only police were present and that the villagers were armed, in 'Red-hand Buddha 14 killed in Nandigram re-entry bid' in *TT*, 15 March 2007.

<sup>63</sup> See 'Nandigram violence kills 14' in *NDTV* video archive, 14 March 2007, available from: <http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/news/nandigram-violence-kills-14/12280?cp; accessed on 17 November 2010>.

<sup>64</sup> Editorial, 'Defeat politics of terror' in *PD*, 31:11, 18 March 2007.

<sup>65</sup> There is little evidence that the protesters fought back. One credible account that does suggest this is Dr. Subrata Sarkar of the APDR, who said 'Five to seven policemen were injured and got first aid and were released.' Dr. Subrata Sarkar, K-1 in Annexure A-1, p.54.

<sup>66</sup> Jyotsna Mandal, WD-77/27 in Annexure A-1, p.31. Also see the documentary by the Medical Service Centre, *Nandigram genocide: a living testament*, 10 May 2008. The footage comes from STAR news.

<sup>67</sup> Governor defends his statement on Nandigram' in *TOI*, 23 March 2007.

<sup>68</sup> Section vii, Annexure E, p.33. Dayabati Roy has also suggested that the Central Bureau Investigation (CBI) probe saw CPI-M cadre leave Nandigram. The probe, ordered on 15 March, caused concern amongst CPI-M cadre, worried they would be arrested, in Roy, 'Nandigram: victory of the subaltern', p.85.

<sup>69</sup> Naresh Jana, 'Mishiti & march to mark "victory"' in *TT*, 20 March 2007.

<sup>70</sup> 'Nandigram SEZ scrapped' in *TOI*, 29 March 2007.

called the 'the politics of middleliness'.<sup>71</sup> As much of the BUPC leadership in 2007 were former CPI-M leaders in Nandigram, it is reasonable to assume that the leaders of the BUPC were of middle or rich peasant background as well. The dominant narrative reflects this. It was not a transformative movement that resisted women's oppression or fought for sharecropper rights. Instead it aimed to maintain power relations in the area and resist land acquisition imposed by people from outside Nandigram. Therefore, resistance at Nandigram had more in common with the historical circumstances of the Jatiya Sarkar and other previously Congress led movements against the colonial state.

Chandrasekhar Das, owner of five *bighas* of land was interviewed when guarding Sonachura in early January 2007. He set out his opposition to land acquisition in the following terms:

My brother and I support our family of eight from the rice and *dal* crops grown on our land. We sow paddy during the monsoon, and after harvesting we sow *kebesari dal*. There is a patch of low land which is flooded by the Haldi river during the monsoon, and we earn from fishing...

We have come to know that all our land and the house will be taken over by the government for industry. Where will we go? How will we survive? What will we eat? We will not part with our land at any cost.<sup>72</sup>

For some, the importance of land legitimised the ultimate sacrifice. Sutapa Das Adhikari commented in May 2007 at the 'People's Tribunal': '[w]e are ready to shed blood, but will not part with our land'.<sup>73</sup> However, the appeal to 'land' was often rather vague and expressed as belonging to the collective rather than to the individual. Although figures were unavailable, it appears that a significant percentage of Nandigram residents were landless labourers and sharecroppers.<sup>74</sup> These groups had to be convinced that landowners losing their land would disadvantage them as well.

Protection of land was not so much a reflex against 'progress', as CPI-M members like Malini Bhattacharya argued, but a realisation that control of land, along with education and migration to seek paid work, was a way to confront existing social conditions.<sup>75</sup> Control of land was no panacea, but the loss of land would likely make survival more difficult for people in Nandigram. Nandigram was connected to the outside world and many residents had lived and worked at Haldia, Kolkata or further afield. One journalist interviewed a group of ragpickers from Nandigram living in a slum in east Delhi, and sought their comments on events back home.<sup>76</sup> Tanika Sarkar and Sumit Chowdhury note that

<sup>71</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'Politics of middleliness: the changing character of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in rural West Bengal (1977-90)' in Ben Rogaly, Barbara Harriss-White and Sugata Bose, (eds.), *Sonar Bangla? Agricultural growth and agrarian change in West Bengal and Bangladesh*, New Delhi, 1999, pp.279-300.

<sup>72</sup> Naresh Jana, 'Again 20 years on' in *TT*, 5 January 2007.

<sup>73</sup> Sutapa Das Adhikari, WD-78/27 in Annexure A-1, p.31.

<sup>74</sup> Several human rights groups stated this without offering evidence. Adrienne Cooper has shown this up to 1950 and Peter Custers has described the predominance of sharecroppers in Nandigram during Tebhaga. See Cooper, *Sharecropping and sharecropper's struggles in Bengal, 1930-1950*, Calcutta, 1988, p. 57 and pp.166-169 and Custers, 'Women's role in Tebhaga movement' in *EPW*, 21:43, 25 October 1986, pp.99-100.

<sup>75</sup> Malini Bhattacharya, 'Nandigram and the question of development' in *EPW*, 42:21, 26 May 2007, p.1897.

<sup>76</sup> Avijit Ghosh, '1,500 km away, Nandigram comes alive' in *TOI*, 6 June 2007.

without a welfare state, control of rural land offers a small, but vital safety net allowing the young to search for work and hopefully return wealth to villages.<sup>77</sup>

Bhabani Giri and her husband Gitendranath owned no land, but according to Bhabani's testimony in May 2007, they were active in the struggle at Nandigram. For Bhabani, the acquisition of land was an act of betrayal; the CPI-M shot Gitendranath, 'the reward he got after following CPI (M) party for so long.'<sup>78</sup> Many explained that they had been supporters of the CPI-M for many years but moves by the party to acquire their land signalled an unforgivable betrayal. Jamuna Das of Gokulnagar voiced the views of many when she stated that she 'will no longer vote for CPI (M)'.<sup>79</sup> The people expressed this sense of betrayal in many ways. One villager spoke of rigging elections and intimidating opponents for the CPI-M. His willingness to carry out the party's 'dirty work' made this betrayal all the more hurtful.<sup>80</sup> Expressions of betrayal were common in the testimonies provided to the 'People's Tribunal' in May 2007 and it was likely that these proceedings dominated by politically active people. Nevertheless, examples like that of Bhabani Giri show the widespread disillusionment with the CPI-M.

While most of the villagers viewed the actions of the CPI-M as a personal betrayal, some viewed the party as betraying its previous principles. For example, Sheikh Abed criticised the CPI-M for originally giving 'voice to the poor. But now it is against the poor.'<sup>81</sup> One would have expected this critique to be more common, providing a clue about the style of leadership that prevailed in rural West Bengal. This emphasis on themes of support and betrayal, or of loyalty and reciprocation, suggest a patron-client relationship. This would align governance at Nandigram with the views of Glyn Williams, who showed how patronage remains important at the village level, and Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, who argued that the capture of state institutions assisted in perpetuating CPI-M rule.<sup>82</sup> While a conclusion that CPI-M support had previously been built on patronage alone would be an exaggeration, it was clear that these patronage links and their breakdown played a role in the CPI-M losing support in Nandigram.

### **Narratives of violence**

Witnesses recounted harrowing accounts of violence and police brutality. The peasantry at Nandigram presented the police and CPI-M cadres as vindictive, violent men, beating those who opposed them and denying basic courtesies such as water and assistance to the injured. In contrast, the peasantry's willingness to help and protect each other in the face of oppression was emphasised. Jayasri Mandal described her attempt to assist her neighbour, Uttam Pal, who had been shot in the leg:

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<sup>77</sup> Sarkar and Chowdhury, 'The meaning of Nandigram', p.77.

<sup>78</sup> Bhabani Giri, WD-44/26 in Annexure A-1, p.9.

<sup>79</sup> Jamuna Das, WD-9/26 in Annexure A-1, p.2.

<sup>80</sup> Partha Sarathi Banerjee, *In the name of development*, (29 minutes in) available from; <http://vimeo.com/9491466>; accessed on 6 April 2011.

<sup>81</sup> Avijit Ghosh, '1,500 km away, Nandigram comes alive'.

<sup>82</sup> See Glyn Williams, 'Panchayati raj and the changing micro-politics of West Bengal' in Rogaly et al., (eds.), *Sonar Bangla*, pp.229-252 and Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'On control of factions: the changing "party-society" in rural West Bengal', pp.59-69.

Together with Pal's aunt Tapati Pal [we] tried to help Uttam but [we] both were severely beaten. When Uttam asked for water the police spat in his face. Later I heard that Uttam died in Tamluk hospital.<sup>83</sup>

The peasantry emphasised the defenceless condition of those killed and injured. Lakshmikanta Gayen from Sonachura stated that after fleeing the police:

I fell into the pond where there were many of us at least 50-60 people in the pond. The police *gheraoed* [surrounded] us in the pond and they even entered the water and started beating us up with white pipe sticks. I tried to escape from the side when they caught me and started beating and that is when I lost consciousness.<sup>84</sup>

Abdul Kayial Khan recounted how police shot his son, Imadul Khan aged sixteen, in the back while he was washing his eyes in a pond.<sup>85</sup> Imadul Khan was probably washing his eyes because of the firing of tear gas. A team of Kolkata doctors commented that between 70 and 80 percent of patients they treated in Nandigram suffered from eye problems caused by tear gas including headaches, watering, photophobia, burning sensations and dimness of vision.<sup>86</sup>

The peasantry did not expect to gain justice for the crimes perpetrated by the CPI-M cadre at Nandigram. While several villagers expressed the opinion that Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee and Lakshman Seth should be hung for their role in 14 March 2007, few expected or sought justice from the state. While some villagers fought through the courts, this was exceptional and often a process driven by civil society groups.<sup>87</sup> No police officers or cadre were arrested or imprisoned because of their activities at Nandigram. Compensation, while mandated by the court, was a long drawn out process with mixed benefits.<sup>88</sup> This process was especially difficult for Kanchan Mal who was shot seven times on 14 March 2007. Lacking compensation, she spent three months at SSKM Hospital in Calcutta, but had to return to Nandigram because she could not bear the cost of treatment, '[s]o, I have been forced to beg on the streets in order to put food on the table'.<sup>89</sup> While people at Nandigram lacked faith in the judicial process, the scale of the violence and the oppression of the state bound the community together.<sup>90</sup> After 14 March 2007 the immediate threat of acquisition receded, but this shared experience of violence allowed for continued cohesion amongst the community. However, there was not total unanimity and voices of dissent from within Nandigram were evident.

<sup>83</sup> Jayasri Mandal, WD-11/27 in Annexure A-1, p.13.

<sup>84</sup> Lakshmikanta Gayen, 'Testimonies of patients met at Nandigram hospital' *APDR to People's Tribunal on Nandigram, request for deposition*, 28 May 2007, Annexure H, p.4.

<sup>85</sup> Abdul Kayial Khan, OD-26 in Annexure A-1, p.47.

<sup>86</sup> MSC, *Report on Nandigram*, 5 April 2007.

<sup>87</sup> Gouri Pradhan and Gangi, Kabita and Angur Das presented affidavits in Kolkata alleging rape. Their cases were relatively well documented and the women were assisted by several human rights organisations. The details of these cases are discussed later in the chapter.

<sup>88</sup> 'Nandigram injured rue late compensation' in *TT*, 28 October 2010.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. and Dr. Debapriya Malick who originally treated her, in K-12 in Annexure A-1, p.60.

<sup>90</sup> The violence and oppression of the British in 1942 during the Jatiya Sarkar, also strengthened the resolve of those resisting. Paul Greenough argued that *Biplabi*, the underground newspaper in Tamluk, helped achieve this by detailing the violence. Greenough, 'Political mobilization and the underground literature of the Quit India movement, 1942-44' in *Social Scientist*, 27:7, July 1999, pp.11-47.

It was the accounts of women that deviated most from the dominant peasant narrative. The dominant narrative suggested that the police attack of 14 March 2007 was a surprise, and that people had gathered at Bhangabera and Gokulnagar to pray peacefully for non-violence. People *did* gather to pray, but accounts suggest that although for many the CPI-M cadres and police attack was a surprise, for others it was not, and the BUPC leadership intentionally played down the danger of an attack to maintain discipline.<sup>91</sup> The testimony of Basanti Mandal, one of the women placed on the front line by the BUPC, hinted at this tension. Mandal and other women ran away '[a]t the sight of the police', but she was stopped by BUPC members who assured her that, '[p]olice won't do anything to you.'<sup>92</sup> On the instructions of the BUPC, many brought rags to protect their eyes from possible tear gas attacks, evidence that the BUPC were aware that police were likely to fire tear gas.<sup>93</sup> Purnima Das, an illiterate landless labourer, claimed that the BUPC threatened her, causing her to join the *pūja* of 14 March 2007. 'There were mainly women there, almost no males' she claims. 'It is not good that the women were put at the front.'<sup>94</sup>

While some women challenged these gender roles, the BUPC as a movement did not, and one could argue that the BUPC in fact exploited gender stereotypes for political gain. Participants at the meeting of 13 March 2007 indicated that women were placed on the front line to discourage police firing, but this does not rule out these leaders' awareness of the political benefits should these women be fired upon. Thus, in utilising these gender stereotypes the BUPC exploited the image of women as weak and in need of protection, rather than empowering these women as active agents.<sup>95</sup> Many outside accounts noted the involvement of women in resisting land acquisition with approval, implying that this demonstrated some form of gender equality. Involvement however, need not imply equality, as Amrita Basu has argued concerning previous movements in Midnapur, and women's role at Nandigram in 2007 was largely in a supportive and secondary role.<sup>96</sup>

At least six women alleged rape on 14 March 2007 and there were around twenty cases of alleged sexual violence.<sup>97</sup> Six women, mistrusting local institutions and bypassing the CPI-M controlled Tamluk, travelled to Kolkata to present affidavits to the courts. Gouri Pradhan of Gokulnagar stated that after fleeing police bullets she was caught and beaten before '[t]hree policemen took hold of me and dragged me, raped me one after another. I lost my consciousness then and there.'<sup>98</sup> Radharani Arhi, also of Gokulnagar, was running from police when three men, including one CPI-M cadre, sexually abused her. Both women went to Kolkata to present this information, despite the fact that

<sup>91</sup> All India Citizens Initiative, *Nandigram: what really happened?*, p.29.

<sup>92</sup> Basanti Mandal, WD-65/27 in Annexure A-1, p.28.

<sup>93</sup> 'Leaders warned us to bring towel and water because police may fire teargas.' Jyotsna Mandal in Annexure A-1, p.31.

<sup>94</sup> Purnima Das, WD-38/26 in Annexure A-1, p.7.

<sup>95</sup> Some in Nandigram accused the BUPC leadership of double standards, of keeping their wives at home but expecting other women to participate in BUPC marches, in *Independent Citizens' Team*, 10 March 2008.

<sup>96</sup> Amrita Basu, *Two faces of protest: contrasting modes of women's activism in India*, Los Angeles, 1992.

<sup>97</sup> Satya Sivaraman and Dipanjan Rai Chaudhuri, 'Nandigram: six months later' in *EPW*, 42:41, 13 October 2007, p.4105.

<sup>98</sup> Gouri Pradhan (narrated in Bengali and written in English), *Copy of affidavit presented to the notary public at Kolkata*, 23 April 2007, in Annexure A-2, Copy of affidavits submitted to the Balbir Singh enquiry commission, pp.4-6.

unsympathetic medical personnel and police actively discouraged many from doing so.<sup>99</sup> This mistrust of the state was not limited to the police, as the example of Anima Pramanik attests. Pramanik alleged mistreatment at the hands of a doctor in Tamluk Hospital, describing him as *paaaji* (evil) and reported that he tried to discharge her and other rape victims quickly.<sup>100</sup>

Tanika Sarkar has pointed out that women at Nandigram were prepared to admit rape and sexual abuse in defiance of social conventions. Sarkar met a mother and her two daughters who were raped and beaten by several CPI-M activists on 15 March 2007. All three travelled to Kolkata and narrated their rape and humiliation, including the youngest daughter, Ganga Das, who was twelve years old.<sup>101</sup> Sarkar was struck by how these women were willing to present evidence of their abuse as ‘their bodies now appeared to them as mere sites for torture and violence, no longer bodies of women.’<sup>102</sup> Similarly, Anima Pramanik, (discussed above) was gang-raped by three policemen:

One of them bit my breast... One, two, then a third one came upon me viciously, then I lost consciousness. I was found lying in a cowshed and was brought home.<sup>103</sup>

There was historical precedence for this lack of stigmatisation. Bidyut Chakrabarty construed from the evidence that women raped by the British during the Jatiya Sarkar in 1942 were not ostracised by those resisting.<sup>104</sup>

While some women were brave enough to come forward to allege rape and sexual violence, they would appear to be the exception rather than the rule. Others alluded to sexual assault without directly stating it, such as Renuka Midda aged 50 from Gangra, who said, ‘we were brutally beaten with lathi and modesty of the women [was] outraged’.<sup>105</sup> There were others who ‘[h]eard [that] 2 or 3 women have been “spoilt” at Gokulnagar’.<sup>106</sup> This silence was unsurprising. Many traumatised women preferred not to revisit such memories, and the women who did come forward were often used to exploit political tensions. Human rights groups often brandished examples of sexual violence to discredit the CPI-M, rather than to gain justice for the affected women. More worryingly, they lacked any support from the West Bengal Commission for Women, who failed to take any action,<sup>107</sup> and Malini Bhattacharya, a former CPI-M Vidhan Sabha member and a member of the National Commission for Women, blamed the BUPC for much of the rape and terror in Nandigram.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Radharani Arhi, Annexure A-2, pp.12-15.

<sup>100</sup> *Independent Citizens’ Team*, 10 March 2008.

<sup>101</sup> Gangi, Kabita and Angur Das, *Copies of affidavits presented to the notary public at Kolkata*, 23 April 2007, Annexure A-2, pp.8-11 and pp.16-21. This case eventually went to court, which was unusual, see ‘Rape-&-hostage case on Nandigram leaders’ in *TT*, 20 December 2007.

<sup>102</sup> I am assuming Sarkar is referring to the same women. She does not mention their names, but the details of the events they describe match the depositions provided to the Kolkata court. Sumit and Tanika Sarkar in ‘A place called Nandigram’, pp.46-48.

<sup>103</sup> *Independent Citizens’ Team*, 10 March 2008.

<sup>104</sup> Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Local politics and Indian nationalism, Midnapur, 1919-1944*, New Delhi, 1997, p.159.

<sup>105</sup> Renuka Midda, WD-92/27 in Annexure A-1, p.34.

<sup>106</sup> Kakoli Das, WD-46/27 in Annexure A-1, p.22.

<sup>107</sup> Satya Sivaraman and Dipanjan Rai Chaudhuri, ‘Nandigram: six months later’, p.4105.

<sup>108</sup> Malini Bhattacharya, ‘Nandigram and the question of development’ in *EPW*, 42:21, 26 May 2007, p.1896.

Lakshman Seth challenged the credibility of their claims, as ‘no woman subjected to sexual violation would talk publicly about it’.<sup>109</sup>

The rape of women has been repeatedly used as an instrument of warfare enabling one group to humiliate their opponents. For example, *The Human Rights Watch* states:

Combatants and other state agents rape to subjugate and inflict shame upon their victims, and by extension, their victims’ families and communities... women are raped precisely because the violation of their ‘protected’ status has the effect of shaming them and their communities.<sup>110</sup>

Police and CPI-M cadres punished Nandigram for refusing to submit to its rule. Anand Chakravarti and others have criticised the use of rape for political means in India and the normalisation of ‘rape culture’, noting that ‘[w]oman’s bodies continue to be seen as a prime site and resource for asserting hegemony of one kind or another.’<sup>111</sup> The account of Lata Mandal, who was beaten and verbally abused, provides an example of this assertion of power relations:

Police grabbed our hair and started beating. They abused us in dirtiest language and said ‘You dare to do movement! You won’t give up land! Does the land belong to your father? We will shove the land into your arse.’ They beat us with the batons. Then they beat me so severely on my legs so that I couldn’t walk.<sup>112</sup>

Lata Mandal was not just beaten and abused, but had power asserted over her and by extension her community. Evidence suggests that such humiliations were successful and the community felt ‘shame’. Many men (and some women) within Nandigram lamented the attack on women and especially their inability to protect them. This was expressed with comments like, ‘[t]hey [the CPI-M] have taken away the modesty of women folk’.<sup>113</sup>

Sexual violence, or the threat of sexual violence, was effective in creating a climate of fear in Nandigram. In November 2007 the *Independent Citizens’ Team* stated that, ‘[r]ape and sexual assault have clearly become dominant weapons of war in the crossfire between vested political interests in Nandigram.’<sup>114</sup> Many accounts showed vividly this fear. For example, Shibrani Sahu recounted the attempted rape of her daughter-in-law, resulting in Sahu shifting house and her daughter refusing to

<sup>109</sup> Satya Sivaraman and Dipanjan Rai Chaudhuri, ‘Nandigram: six months later’, p.4105.

<sup>110</sup> The human rights watch, *Global report on women’s rights*, New York, 1995, in Amrita Basu, ‘Engendering communal violence: men as victims, women as agents’ in Julia Leslie and Mary McGee (eds.), *Invented identities: the interplay of gender, religion and politics in India*, Oxford, 2000, p.266.

<sup>111</sup> A. Chakravarti, M. Singh, N. R. Levin, S. Zaidi, A. Tellis, X. Barbora, P. Baxi, U. Butalia and U. Chakravarti, ‘Rape culture’ in *EPW*, 42:50, 15 December 2007, p.4. Also see Maithreyi Krishnaraj, ‘Understanding violence against women’ in *EPW*, 42:44, 3 November 2007, pp.90-91.

<sup>112</sup> Lata Mandal, WD-70/27 in Annexure A-1, p.29.

<sup>113</sup> Bhabani Giri, WD-44/26 in Annexure A-1, p.9.

<sup>114</sup> K. Panjabi, A. Kapoor, R. Dasgupta, S. Ghosh, S. Das, S. Banerjee, T. N. Banerjee, S. Lal, S. Sinha, S. Bhattacharya and S. Mirdha, *Final interim report of an independent citizens’ team from Kolkata on the current state of affairs in Nandigram*, 30 November 2007, available from; <http://www.sacw.net/Nation/CitRepNandigramNov07.Pdf>; accessed on 18 April 2011.

attend school. Likewise, Malati Rai reported threats made by CPI-M cadres saying, '[w]e'll come back at night – light your lamps and wait for us with open doors.'<sup>115</sup>

The treatment of those injured on 14 March 2007 was criticised by people in Nandigram as inadequate, and medical authorities were accused of political bias. Nandigram, Tamluk and SSKM Hospital in Kolkata received those injured on 14 March 2007, but lacked adequate facilities to deal with the injuries received. The 'People's Tribunal' reports detailed operations conducted by torchlight, a lack of separate medical facilities for men and women, and an inadequate nurse to doctor ratio. Nandigram hospital, described by the Medical Service Centre (MSC) in their report as a 'glorified primary health center',<sup>116</sup> was considered inadequate for the scale of injuries, lacking for example facilities to care for burns caused by tear gas shells.<sup>117</sup>

More serious was the evidence that these hospitals and medical professionals did not provide the best possible medical care for political reasons. One report identifies four areas of concern: discrepancies in post-mortem reports, fraud in the discharge certificates, deliberate negligence, and a violation of basic medical norms.<sup>118</sup> Tapas Kr. Kar's experience exemplifies these difficulties. It took him two days to locate his mother, Basanti Kar, after enquiring at three different hospitals – including Nandigram hospital where her body was eventually produced, two days after he had first enquired about her whereabouts. The post-mortem was conducted only on this date (16 March 2007) and the cause of death was left blank.<sup>119</sup>

There were other examples too - Dr Debapriya Mallick, a member of the voluntary medical aid organisation *Nandigram Swasthya Udyog*, found that Haimabati Halder was forcibly discharged with two bullets still in her body.<sup>120</sup> Dr. Subrata Sarkar noted that two women at Nandigram hospital reported rape but the hospital ignored this for three days, by which time it was difficult to prove.<sup>121</sup> The political situation also meant that many were unable or unwilling to go to better-equipped hospitals such as at Tamluk, where the city was known as a CPI-M stronghold. These incidents suggest that the state or the CPI-M pressured medical staff into underreporting injuries, or that medical staff were complicit in doing so. Clearly the peasantry of Nandigram mistrusted these institutions and many reported an unwillingness to attend these hospitals after 14 March 2007.

### **After March 2007**

The BUPC remained in control of Nandigram until November 2007. This period was described by the media as a 'turf war', as there were several violent clashes between the BUPC and the CPI-M.<sup>122</sup> During this period, the influence of the TMC grew whilst other parties such as the Jamiat were

<sup>115</sup> *Independent Citizens Team*, 10 March 2008.

<sup>116</sup> MSC, *Report on Nandigram*, 5 April 2007 and MSC, *Nandigram genocide: a living testament*.

<sup>117</sup> All India Citizens Initiative, *Nandigram: what really happened?*, p.43.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.41-42.

<sup>119</sup> Tapas Kr. Kar, WD-42/26 in Annexure A-1, p.8.

<sup>120</sup> Debapriya Mallick, K-12 in Annexure A-1, pp.60-61.

<sup>121</sup> Subrata Sarkar, K-1 in Annexure A-1, pp.54-56.

<sup>122</sup> See 'Bullets fly, Nandigram still on boil' in *TOI*, 17 June 2007.

marginalised. As the immediate threat of land acquisition subsided,<sup>123</sup> there was a shift toward challenging the CPI-M and entrenching BUPC control of Nandigram. Although local members had been involved since the beginning, the TMC had a limited presence in Nandigram before 14 March 2007 and it was only after March that the party gained influence. This was a symbiotic relationship and the BUPC benefited from the assistance of the relatively powerful TMC. More importantly, however, was the willingness of TMC leader, Mamata Banerjee, to exploit the situation in Nandigram for her party's political benefit. Human rights groups generally saw the growing importance of the TMC as a one-sided process, the *Independent Citizens' Team* arguing that by November the TMC had 'taken over the BUPC leadership'.<sup>124</sup>

The CPI-M regarded the control of Nandigram as crucial to maintaining power in West Bengal. In late October 2007, the state government requested from the central government that the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) be deployed to Nandigram to restore 'law and order'.<sup>125</sup> Before their arrival, the CPI-M ordered its cadres to attack Nandigram. Benoy Konar, the CPI-M State Secretariat member said before 'the CRPF comes, the ground reality is either we wrest control of our positions or they take over Khejuri'.<sup>126</sup> To facilitate this attack, police were withdrawn from the Nandigram border areas on 29 October 2007.<sup>127</sup>

The CPI-M re-captured Nandigram between 29 October and 12 November 2007. From 29 October, sporadic gunfire was reported between CPI-M cadres and the BUPC, and from 4 November the CPI-M cadres began pushing the opposition out of Nandigram.<sup>128</sup> The *Times of India* estimated that 15,000 people fled on 6 November 2007 and that over 2,000 went to relief camps in Nandigram town. Many of the key BUPC leaders' houses were burnt and their property looted.<sup>129</sup> The last major 'battle' was fought at Sonachura, a key BUPC village. *The Telegraph* reported that on 11 November 2007, fearing stiff resistance, 450 armed CPI-M cadres advanced toward Sonachura, using 600 captured BUPC supporters as human shields. The BUPC were unwilling to fire on their captured supporters and

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<sup>123</sup> On 4 September 2007, the chemical hub was shifted to Nayachar. See 'Nandigram's chemical hub shifted to Nayachar' in *TOI*, 4 September 2007. Sunando Bandyopadhyay has discussed the environmental issues of building a chemical hub at Nayachar, in Bandyopadhyay, 'Factories in place of mangroves' in Gautam Ray (ed.), *Nandigram and beyond*, Kolkata, 2008, pp.200-223.

<sup>124</sup> *Independent Citizens' Team*, 30 November 2007.

<sup>125</sup> Bhattacharjee claimed he had requested the CRPF from the central government on 27 October and blamed them for the delay. This was subsequently denied by the Indian Home Secretary and the Minister for Home Affairs, in Amnesty International, *India: urgent need to address large scale human rights abuses during Nandigram "recapture"*, 15 January 2008, available from: <http://www.amnestyusa.org/document.php?lang=e&id=ENGASA200012008>; accessed 10 March 2011.

<sup>126</sup> 'Planned attack: RSP minister' in *TT*, 7 November 2007.

<sup>127</sup> 'Party firm in CM support' in *TT*, 31 October 2007 and Amnesty International, *Nandigram "recapture"*, 15 January 2008.

<sup>128</sup> See 'War-like tag on Nandigram - flare-up kills three, peace effort "goes down the drain"' in *TT*, 7 November 2007 and '2 die in Nandigram landmine blast' in *The Hindu*, 7 November 2007.

<sup>129</sup> *Independent Citizens' Team*, 10 March 2008 and Amnesty International, *Nandigram "recapture"*, 15 January 2008.

<sup>129</sup> 'Miffed CRPF may opt out of Nandigram' in *TOI*, 24 November 2007 also see *Independent Citizens' Team*, 10 March 2008 for similar estimates.

surrendered.<sup>130</sup> The CPI-M cadres re-captured the rest of Nandigram by 12 November as '[s]quads of armed, bike-borne cadres, carrying stacks of red flags, kept criss-crossing Nandigram... to "consolidate" the recapture.'<sup>131</sup> Lata Rai described these CPI-M cadres, dubbed *harmad bahini* by opponents,<sup>132</sup> in the following way:

Their faces and heads were covered with black cloth; they wore black trousers and shirts, and high black boots. The *Harmads* came on bikes. There were three people on each bike, all carrying guns.<sup>133</sup>

The CRPF arrived on the same day at 4pm and stated:

The private armies, comprised of CPM cadres, have already captured the area. It was only after that the CRPF personnel were allowed in. Now there is not much that the CRPF can do, except maintain status quo and protect the private armies.<sup>134</sup>

Bhattacharjee caused more controversy by justifying the takeover, stating that the BUPC and the TMC had been 'paid back in their own coin'.<sup>135</sup>

The CPI-M used the CRPF to maintain the peace at Nandigram. However, the CPI-M was uncomfortable with the presence of the CRPF at Nandigram and in the *People's Democracy*, accused it of political bias.

Guided by the villainous elements of Trinamuli desperadoes, these units of the CRPF would single out families who supported the CPI(M) – and there are large numbers of such families – and conduct raids *during the night*, putting the women to derision and heckling that included threats, attempts at unscrupulous physical overwhelmings, and lewd commentaries. *In most instances, the sepoys are drunk and never in full control of their behaviour.*<sup>136</sup>

The CRPF leader at Nandigram, Alok Raj, was outspoken in his criticism of the CPI-M, accusing them of interference.<sup>137</sup> Officers in the CRPF were critical of particular decisions, such as the local police releasing Anup Mondal, a CPI-M cadre with several cases pending, after the CRPF had arrested him.<sup>138</sup> One officer complained that '[w]e have not come here to do CPM's bidding'. This tension continued until the panchayat elections in May 2008,<sup>139</sup> which saw convincing TMC victories in Nandigram and East Midnapur, amongst violence and CRPF supervision.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> See Imran Ahmed Siddiqui and Anshuman Phadikar, 'The hub falls - human shields, CRPF brake in final assault by cadres' in *TT*, 12 November 2007 and *Independent Citizens' Team*, 10 March 2008.

<sup>131</sup> Imran Ahmed Siddiqui, 'The hooded hunters, Red army roars into Nandigram' in *TT*, 13 November 2007.

<sup>132</sup> Derived from 'Armanda' used to describe European pirates and slave traders who had raided the Bengali coast. In the context of Nandigram it was used to express the lawlessness and ruthlessness of the cadre, in Biswajit Roy and Nilanjan Dutta, *Nandigram and media: between the battlelines*, Kolkata, 2010, pp.27-29.

<sup>133</sup> *Independent Citizens' Team*, 10 March 2008 for similar estimates.

<sup>134</sup> Bhavna Vij-Aurora and Imran Ahmed Siddiqui, 'Not much to do now: CRPF boss' in *TT*, 13 November 2007.

<sup>135</sup> 'Public defence of recapture by party squads' in *TT*, 14 November 2007.

<sup>136</sup> His emphasis, in B. Prasant, 'Maoists make a stealthy re-entry: CRPF beats up villagers at Nandigram' in *PD*, 31:5, 23 December 2007.

<sup>137</sup> 'Officer who won't stoop - Topper in Patna and paramilitary, but Nandi "tough"' in *TT*, 12 May 2008.

<sup>138</sup> 'Miffed CRPF may opt out of Nandigram' in *TOI*.

<sup>139</sup> 'Seth complains to CRPF boss against Alok Raj' in *The Financial Express*, 13 May 2008.

<sup>140</sup> 'CPM readies to review rural result' in *TT*, 23 May 2008 and 'Trinamul targets CPM "tormentor" in Nandi: Man killed on way to work' in *TT*, 24 May 2008.

## Conclusion

In January 2007 Panchanan Bera stated that, '[t]his government doesn't understand what land means to us' and predicted that further attempts at land acquisition would be met with violence, that 'blood has started flowing'.<sup>141</sup> Bera was correct; the state government could crush the resistance at Nandigram only with much bloodshed and violence. From June 2006, a variety of groups and organisations in Nandigram met and discussed the threat of land acquisition - a threat realised in December 2006. This led to the formation of the BUPC and subsequent violent clashes with the opposing CPI-M. On 14 March 2007, police and CPI-M cadre attempted to crush this resistance inflicting considerable violence upon those resisting. This resistance was defeated in November 2007, but the anger and betrayal of the people saw the CPI-M voted out at the panchayat elections in May 2008. The peasants' resistance at Nandigram, although initially focussed on land acquisition, was about more than land. When the immediate threat of land acquisition disappeared, the movement shifted to a broader goal of ousting the CPI-M from power.

The goal of this chapter has been to listen to the voices of the people in Nandigram and to analyse the complexities of the narratives that emerged. The people at Nandigram asserted their 'right to exist in and for themselves'.<sup>142</sup> The dominant narrative, of which the BUPC was representative, was intended to unite the community within Nandigram with the immediate goal of stopping land acquisition. It was not revolutionary or transformative, but based on the interests of the local leadership. This gave rise to contradictions, such as emphasis on land but ignoring landlessness, and an exploitation of gender roles for political gain. However, the movement and the narratives informing it remained united, effectively resisting the harassment inflicted by the CPI-M.

More generally, the peasants in Nandigram had become suspicious of their government, failing to believe that land acquisition would benefit them. This general sense of betrayal and the need to remain in control of land motivated a united resistance. Although one could relate this resistance to a general disapproval of neoliberal economic policies in India, there was little evidence that such a consciousness existed in Nandigram in the period under review. The resistance of the peasants at Nandigram was on local terms. It was the intellectuals and the human rights groups, offering support to the victims of the CPI-M violence, who tried to relate this local movement to a national discourse of protest. This narrative will be considered in the next chapter.

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<sup>141</sup> Simi Kamboj, 'Village cries revenge' in *TT*.

<sup>142</sup> David Hardiman, 'Introduction', p.59.

## Chapter Three

### **‘Welcoming industrialization’: civil society and Nandigram.**

A few days ago, I was stunned to see a picture in a TV channel: an official of the Beni Santosa group of Indonesia pointing out how much land his company required at a place near Haldia and a local leader of the ruling party indicating with an obliging smile that he would get what he wanted. While turning his finger, perhaps involuntarily it pointed towards the Hooghly river and from the expression of the leader, it looked as though he were willing to hand over the river as well!<sup>1</sup>

Debabrata Bandyopadhyay, former West Bengal Land Reforms Commissioner.

In September 2008, *The Telegraph* interviewed three prominent activists, Arundhati Roy, Medha Patkar and Mahasweta Devi in order to understand what made them ‘tick’.<sup>2</sup> All three had spoken out against the violence at Nandigram, with Arundhati Roy describing 14 March 2007 as ‘simply state-sponsored terror’.<sup>3</sup> Responding to the interviewer’s charge that they were ‘against progress and change’, Medha Patkar explained: ‘[i]t is wrong to call us anti-industry. We just want a form of development that is less destructive.’<sup>4</sup> This exchange was indicative of the debates surrounding Nandigram and illustrated how elite opinion focused on the effect, this being the violence of the CPI-M, rather than the cause, this being land acquisition and Special Economic Zones (SEZs). This chapter seeks to outline the public debate that surrounded land acquisition at Nandigram between January 2007 and May 2008 and to understand the narratives that civil society and human rights organisations created in supporting the peasantry at Nandigram. Civil society was not monolithic, composed as it was of a variety of groups and organisations; however, it is possible to ascertain a dominant perspective. The dominant perspective represented resistance at Nandigram as an example of the violent governance of the CPI-M, whilst ignoring or downplaying the economic policies that led to the resistance. This dominant perspective accepted the legitimacy of land acquisition but criticised the CPI-M for political mismanagement and for resorting to violence when challenged. This view was contested by a significant group of intellectuals, who saw resistance at Nandigram as occurring because of land acquisition policies.

A number of human rights groups, the ‘eminent women and men of public life’,<sup>5</sup> were disgusted by CPI-M violence at Nandigram in March 2007 and travelled to the area as ‘fact-finding teams’ or with the aim of offering medical assistance. These elite groups engaged in non-violent protest; publicising the violence, protesting on the streets, and mobilising supporters. Imbued with

<sup>1</sup> Debabrata Bandyopadhyay, ‘Industrialisation, yes but not by harming others’ translated by Himangshu Halder, transcribed by Pabitra Sarkar, in *Sbaradiya Kalantar*, 2006, in Dola Sen and Debashis Bhattacharya (eds.), *Singur and Nandigram and the untold story of capitalised Marxism*, Kanoria, 2007, pp.29-30.

<sup>2</sup> Seetha, ‘Goddesses of all causes’ in *The Telegraph* (TT), 7 September 2008.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Nandigram killings a carnage’ in *Times of India* (TOI), 3 June 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Seetha, ‘Goddesses of all causes’ in TT.

<sup>5</sup> Debabrata Bandyopadhyay, ‘Documenting Nandigram’ in *Mainstream*, 46:17, 12 April 2008.

ideals of human rights and individual freedoms they demanded the same for their fellow citizens. Shahid Amin has shown how Indian nationalists in the colonial era, when confronted with the millennial and subversive language of peasant politics, claimed peasant politics as their own, and channelled it to their own ends.<sup>6</sup> Like the nationalists, elite human rights groups grappled with how to 'address the question [of] our relationship with... the peasantry' and were aware of their privileges as 'the chief beneficiaries of the new [neoliberal] policies'.<sup>7</sup> The human rights groups created an image of resistance at Nandigram, as one of pious, peaceful, simple peasants, willing to sacrifice themselves to protect their land. In targeting these narratives to appeal to other elites, human rights groups aimed to apply pressure on the government and gain justice for the victims of violence. These narratives, focused on the actions of the CPI-M, were concerned with violence and the misuse of state power.

In 2001 Achin Gupta lamented the 'death of the autonomy of "civil society"' and described West Bengal under the Left Front as 'dominance without hegemony'.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, in January 2010 Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya argued that civil society had, 'rediscovered itself... after decades of political irrelevance'.<sup>9</sup> This was a common analysis amongst political commentators, and events at Nandigram played a role in these changing conceptions. James Ferguson has defined civil society as an 'intermediary domain' between the state and the family that encompassed voluntary associations like clubs, unions and religious organisations. Ferguson argued that the role civil society played in Eastern Europe when resisting Soviet domination led to a view that civil society was 'almost interchangeable with the concept of democracy itself', and by definition 'good'.<sup>10</sup> Debabrata Bandyopadhyay reflected this when stating:

One of the enduring and endearing beneficial side effects of the Singur-Nandigram struggle has been the burgeoning civil society activities. All of a sudden from a state of almost utter hibernation, it has become animated, alive and vibrant. Apart from protest marches, meetings, street dramas, "dharnas" and the like it revived the concept of People's Tribunals where former Justices of the High Courts and/or Supreme Court and eminent women and men of public life, known for their independence and probity, heard the victims, visited scenes of occurrence and came to conclusions strictly following the laws of natural justice and settled judicial procedure.<sup>11</sup>

However, Partha Chatterjee argued that most in India were not citizens with equal rights as was commonly understood, and therefore were not members of civil society. In contrast, Chatterjee described civil society in India as a 'closed association of modern elite groups, sequestered from the wider popular life of the communities, walled up within enclaves of civic freedom and rational law'.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Shahid Amin, 'Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921-2' in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies III: writings on South Asian history and society*, Delhi, 1984, pp.1-61.

<sup>7</sup> Pradip Kumar Datta, *Nandigram and other struggles: the emergence of new political movements*, Kolkata, 2008, p.9.

<sup>8</sup> A term taken from Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without hegemony: history and power in colonial India*, Cambridge, 1997 in Achin Gupta, 'Left Front rule in West Bengal: domination without hegemony' in *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*, 36:45, 10 November 2001, p.4320.

<sup>9</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'Left in the lurch: the demise of the world's longest elected regime?' in *EPW*, 45:3, 16 January 2010, p.59.

<sup>10</sup> James Ferguson, *Global shadows: Africa in the neoliberal world order*, Durham, 2006, pp.89-91.

<sup>11</sup> Debabrata Bandyopadhyay, 'Documenting Nandigram'.

<sup>12</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The politics of the governed*, New York, 2004, p.4.

Most citizens, although granted rights as individuals under the Indian constitution, interacted with the state not as individuals but as part of a collective. Therefore, for Chatterjee the democratic processes of the post-colonial state have been adjusted in order to influence and control these groups in a way he called 'political society'.<sup>13</sup> Those outside civil society, such as the BUPC, were recognised as having rights, but as a collective rather than as citizens, and thus were forced to negotiate with the state as a collective to achieve their goals.

### **The dominant narrative – pro-industrialisation**

In July 2007 Amartya Sen argued that to prohibit 'the use of agricultural land for industries is ultimately self-defeating'.<sup>14</sup> This was the dominant position of the elite and of civil society. For Sen, land acquisition was not necessarily negative as industrialisation was necessary for the development of West Bengal. According to Sen, Bengal had been 'one of the major industrial centres in the world' but had de-industrialised after independence, a situation exacerbated by the demands of workers and the policies of the CPI-M. While 'industrial agitation may have given the workers a little bit more rights... they lost many more rights by the industries withdrawing out of Calcutta.' Sen argued that '[u]ltimately, those who want to prevent industrialisation of Bengal do not look enough at the interest of the people of the state' and failed to 'serve the interest of the poor'.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, a group of prominent citizens argued that events at Nandigram should not halt industrialisation, as arresting the decline of West Bengal industry was crucial and there was simply 'no alternative to industrialisation'.<sup>16</sup> They placed emphasis on the need to attract capital, arguing that 'West Bengal at this point is so behind in the industrialisation race that it cannot really afford to be too choosy', meaning that investors should be given the right to choose where they build and invest, even if this land happened to be populated or fertile.<sup>17</sup>

David Harvey's statement that, '[n]eoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse' was overstated in an Indian context, but the assumptions, promises and policies of neoliberalism were often evident in debates explaining how West Bengal should industrialise.<sup>18</sup> For example, Sebastian Morris and Ajay Pandey described the land market as 'distorted', arguing that for capital to be attracted to West Bengal the state government needed to intervene and create this

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp.38-40.

<sup>14</sup> Amartya Sen interviewed by Sambit Saha, 'Prohibiting the use of agricultural land for industries is ultimately self-defeating' in *TT*, 23 July 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Views also restated in Amartya Sen, 'Huge price of street politics' in *TT*, 20 September 2008. Joya Chatterji and Partha Chatterjee have discussed how the decline of West Bengal is often linked to the Left Front and its supposed support for worker rights. They argue that narratives of decline are often linked to a bhadrak anxiety of democratisation. Partha Chatterjee, *The present history of West Bengal: essays in political criticism*, Delhi, 1997, pp.vii-viii and Joya Chatterji, *The spoils of partition, Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Cambridge, 2007. West Bengal's industry had declined relative to other states, but for multiple reasons and not all to do with the performance of the Left Front. Sunil Sengupta and Haris Gazdar have shown that in 1960-61, West Bengal produced 23 percent of India's industrial input. In 1990 this had declined to seven percent, in Sengupta and Gazdar, 'Agrarian politics and rural development in West Bengal' in Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen (eds.), *Indian development: selected regional perspectives*, Delhi, 1997, p.130.

<sup>16</sup> M. Ghatak, M. D. Chaudhury, K. Basu, P. Bardhan, A. V. Banerjee, A. S. Guha, M. Majumdar, D. Mookherjee and D. Ray, 'Beyond Nandigram: industrialisation in West Bengal' in *EPW*, 42:17, 28 April 2007, pp.1487-1489.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> David Harvey, *A brief history of neoliberalism*, Oxford, 2005, p.2.

market.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Abhirup Sarkar argued that the need to attract investment to West Bengal was crucial and without investment the state would be unable to provide the necessary infrastructure or generate employment. For Sarkar, West Bengal's 'comparative advantage' lay in industry not agriculture.<sup>20</sup>

The dominant view from intellectuals and civil society was that West Bengal should not abandon industrialisation because of events at Nandigram. Instead, the political mismanagement of the CPI-M was identified as the problem, and it was this, rather than land acquisition, which was criticised. Swati Chattopadhyay made a similar point, noting that a 'large section of the media elite viewed the violence as necessary state politics gone astray'.<sup>21</sup> Abhirup Sarkar argued that 'it is industrialisation alone that can lift West Bengal from the depths of poverty and destitution', but that the 'Nandigram carnage should also teach the policymakers that the means were as important as the ends'.<sup>22</sup> Debabrata Bandyopadhyay, while 'welcoming industrialization', was concerned that compensation be carefully managed and that land acquisition remain legal.<sup>23</sup> The events at Nandigram were identified as intrinsic to CPI-M rule. For example, Amitava Mukherjee argued that, '[w]hat happened at Nandigram on March 14, is only a more crude and more brutal re-run of what has been happening in West Bengal for nearly the last thirty years'.<sup>24</sup> Supriya RoyChowdhury questioned criticising only the CPI-M, and not land acquisition, stated that, 'one may well highlight the pointlessness of an act, which critiques the symptom while being silent on the malaise'.<sup>25</sup>

Accepting land acquisition as legitimate and blaming the violence at Nandigram on government mismanagement led to a focus on rehabilitation and resettlement. Focusing on rehabilitation and resettlement allowed the legitimacy of land acquisition to be by-passed and shifted the debate to how best to achieve land acquisition. Debates in India over rehabilitation and resettlement were longstanding and can be traced to the displacement caused by the Narmada Dam project in the 1980s.<sup>26</sup> Abhijit Guha has highlighted how previous examples of land acquisition in West Bengal have caused displacement, although these examples have failed to gain the public attention like at

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<sup>19</sup> The right to property was not being contradicted as land acquisition for 'public purpose' would assist in creating a market in land. See Sebastian Morris and Ajay Pandey, 'Toward reform of land acquisition framework in India' in *EPW*, 42:22, June 2007, pp.2083-2090 and Abhirup Sarkar, 'Development and displacement: land acquisition in West Bengal' in *EPW*, 42:16, 21 April 2007, pp.1435-1440. Sarkar was feted by Banerjee to join the TMC for the 2011 Vidhan Sabha (state assembly) elections, in 'Mamata scouts for talent minus political colour' in *TT*, 9 March 2011. The 1894 Land Acquisition Act was amended in 1984 to interpret the potential of private corporations creating employment as fitting within the purview of 'public purpose'. This was the law used to acquire land for SEZ. See Mohammed Asif, 'Land Acquisition Act: need for an alternative paradigm' in *EPW*, 34:25, 19 June 1999, pp.1564-1566 and Amitendu Palit and Subhomoy Bhattacharjee, *Special Economic Zones in India: myths and realities*, New Delhi, 2008, pp.140-147.

<sup>20</sup> Abhirup Sarkar, 'Development and displacement', pp.1435-1440.

<sup>21</sup> Swati Chattopadhyay, 'A tryst with capital', *Citation: occasional papers of the subaltern-popular workshop*, 9 October 2007, p.3.

<sup>22</sup> Abhirup Sarkar, 'Development and displacement', p.1441.

<sup>23</sup> Debabrata Bandyopadhyay, 'Industrialisation, yes but not by harming others', pp.29-30.

<sup>24</sup> Amitava Mukherjee, 'Massacre in Nandigram' in Janak Raj Jai and Rajiv Jai (eds.), *SEZs massacre of human rights with special reference to Singur and Nandigram*, New Delhi, 2007, p.66.

<sup>25</sup> Supriya RoyChowdhury, 'The Intellectual-Left stand-off' in *EPW*, 42:13, 31 March 2007, p.1078.

<sup>26</sup> See Ramaswamy Iyer for an overview in Iyer, 'Toward a just displacement and rehabilitation policy' in *EPW*, 42:30, 28 July 2007, pp.3103-3107.

Nandigram.<sup>27</sup> In 2007, intellectuals argued that the CPI-M method of land acquisition was limited to coercion, and that it had proved ineffective both morally and ‘as a matter of practical policy’.<sup>28</sup> However, land acquisition should not be abandoned but ‘managed’, to minimise ‘discontent among the masses’.<sup>29</sup> One article argued that it would be ‘doubly tragic’ if the brutality of the CPI-M at Nandigram stopped industrialisation in West Bengal. However, ‘hope’ remained that:

perhaps the lives lost in Nandigram will not have been entirely wasted if, out of this tragic mess, emerges a better model for paying compensation, something that sets new standards for how it all gets done in the rest of the country.<sup>30</sup>

By focusing on the best way to manage land acquisition intellectuals were able to criticise the governance of the CPI-M, while still arguing for land acquisition and the continued industrialisation of West Bengal.

Civil society was unanimous in condemning the violence at Nandigram, but differed on how to explain it. Raghab Bandyopadhyay explained that it was because of the ingrained violence and ‘Stalinism’ of the CPI-M and communists in general.<sup>31</sup> This was a popular analysis and Rudrangshu Mukherjee argued that CPI-M violence at Nandigram was unsurprising as ‘the use of terror is part of CPI(M)’s DNA’.<sup>32</sup> Sumanta Banerjee challenged this arguing that it was the *abandonment* of communist ideology (an abandonment he traced to the communist splits of the 1960s) that caused the CPI-M to turn violent. The participation of the CPI-M in parliamentary politics for Banerjee led to a ‘decline in moral standards’ and a predilection for patronage and violence. In this context, Nandigram was just ‘one more betrayal’.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Abhijit Guha, *Land, law and the Left: the saga of disempowerment of the peasantry in the era of globalization*, New Delhi, 2007, pp.10-21; Guha, ‘Land acquisition in a West Bengal district’ in *EPW*, 39:42, 16 October 2004, pp.4620-4623 and Guha, ‘Peasant resistance in West Bengal a decade before Singur and Nandigram’ in *EPW*, 42:37, 15 September 2007, pp.3706-3711. Guha follows the research methods of Michael Cernea. Cernea, a World Bank researcher, focused on land acquisition for public means, such as dams and roads in contrast to Guha, who focused on land acquisition for private means. Michael Cernea (ed.), *The economics of involuntary resettlement: questions and challenges*, Washington, 1999 and Cernea, ‘Risks, safeguards and reconstruction: a model for population displacement and resettlement’ in *EPW*, 35:41, 7 October 2000, pp.3659-3678. See Mohammed Asif for a Foucauldian analysis of why peasants reject resettlement, in Asif, ‘Why displaced persons reject project resettlement colonies’ in *EPW*, 35:24, 10 June 2000, pp.2005-2008.

<sup>28</sup> Abhirup Sarkar, ‘Development and displacement’, p.1441.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1439.

<sup>30</sup> M. Ghatak et al., ‘Beyond Nandigram’, pp.1487-1489.

<sup>31</sup> See Raghab Bandyopadhyay, ‘Agrarian backdrop of Bengal violence’ in *EPW*, 36:5, 3 February 2001, pp.440-442 and Sanjeeb Mukherjee, ‘The use and abuse of democracy in West Bengal’ in *EPW*, 42:44, 3 November 2007, pp.101-108. Also see Tarun Vijay, ‘Dishonest intellectuals of Bolshevism’ in *TOI*, 21 November 2007 and his blog, <http://tarun-vijay.blogspot.com>; accessed 8 March 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Rudrangshu Mukherjee, ‘Kiss of death - the CPI(M)’s use of violence in Nandigram isn’t surprising’ in *TT*, 10 January 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Sumanta Banerjee, ‘Moral betrayal of a Leftist dream’, pp.1240-1242 and Banerjee, ‘Goodbye socialism’ in *EPW*, 43:4, 26 January 2008, pp.13-15. The Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI-ML) expressed this literally when on the fortieth anniversary of Naxalbari, May 2007, they travelled to Singur and Nandigram with a mobile tableau of the CPI-ML Krishak Jagaran Yatra in memory of the victims of the CPI-M. See Manas Ghosh, ‘Naxalbari to Nandigram Krishak Jagaran Yatra’ in *Liberation*, June 2007. Also see Dipanker Bhattacharya ‘The CPM just can’t accept the rural poor challenging it’ in *Telika*, 4:13, 7 April 2007.

## Pro-peasant intellectuals

This chapter argues that while civil society accepted land acquisition as legitimate, it was critical of the force used by the CPI-M at Nandigram. However, a significant group of intellectuals, many of whom had previously supported the Left Front government, challenged this dominant narrative. While critical of the violence at Nandigram, these intellectuals contextualised events as part of a wider struggle against land acquisition and SEZs. Sumit and Tanika Sarkar expressed shock after 14 March 2007, commenting that ‘Jallianwala massacre happened in colonial India but what happened in Nandigram is shocking since it happened in a Left-ruled government in independent India’.<sup>34</sup> The Sarkars condemned land acquisition, arguing against a ‘path of development involving major concessions both to big capitalists like the Tatas and multinationals operating in SEZs.’<sup>35</sup> Dayabati Roy and Partha Sarathi Banerjee questioned ‘whether this industrialisation would benefit the vast masses of the rural poor who are being asked to make sacrifices for the sake of “development” and how jobs would be created in an era of ‘jobless growth’.<sup>36</sup>

SEZs as a vehicle for land acquisition were especially criticised as financially ruinous and as biased in favour of developers. SEZs, described by one commentator in the *Economic and Political Weekly* as the most ‘obnoxious face’ of neoliberalism,<sup>37</sup> tended to be small, sector specific information technology (IT) zones, primarily existing for tax rules. Large scale, multi-product and job creating export zones, such as in China and as proposed at Nandigram, were less common.<sup>38</sup> Large scale zones required only 25 percent of the land to be dedicated to industry, leading to concern over real estate speculation.<sup>39</sup> Sumit Sarkar warned that this regulation was ‘liable to create one of the greatest land grabs in modern Indian history’.<sup>40</sup> Editorials in the *Economic and Political Weekly* decried the ‘race to the bottom’<sup>41</sup> created by states competing with each other for investment, and dubbed SEZs as ‘unnecessary giveaways’.<sup>42</sup> Ashok Mitra explored the magnitude of these giveaways in analysing the incentives to induce the Tatas to come to West Bengal at Singur. For Mitra, inflation, capital gains and

<sup>34</sup> ‘Nandigram was more shocking than Jallianwala Bagh’ in *TOI*, 17 March 2007.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Dayabati Roy and Partha Sarathi Banerjee, ‘Behind the present peasant unrest in West Bengal’ in *EPW*, 42:22, 2 June 2007, pp.2048-2050. Amit Bhaduri used the example of the Jamshedpur Tata steel plant to express this fear of ‘jobless growth’. The plant employed 85,000 workers and produced one million tonnes of steel worth \$800,000 US dollars in 1991. By 2005 production had risen to five million tonnes of steel worth five million dollars but employment had halved to 44,000, primarily because of mechanisation. See Bhaduri, ‘Predatory growth’ in *The South Asian*, 10 March 2008.

<sup>37</sup> A CPI(M) Supporter, ‘Reflections in the aftermath of Nandigram’ in *EPW*, 42:18, 5 May 2007, p.1597.

<sup>38</sup> Editorial, ‘The “Special Economic Zone” debacle of the Left Front in West Bengal’ in *Analytical Monthly Review*, January 2007. See Shankar Gopalakrishnan for differences on Indian SEZs and Chinese SEZs in Gopalakrishnan, ‘Negative aspects of Special Economic Zones in China’ in *EPW*, 42:17, 28 April 2007, pp.1492-1493.

<sup>39</sup> International consultants argued that the ‘distortions’ of the Indian land market (such as the legal protection offered in West Bengal to sharecroppers from being evicted) meant that Indian land was undervalued. SEZs were a way to bypass these restrictions. See Janak Raj Jai and Rajiv Jai, *SEZs massacre of human rights with special reference to Singur and Nandigram*, New Delhi, 2007, pp.1-3. Land to industry ratios were increased to 50 percent in April 2007 in *ibid.*, pp.24-25.

<sup>40</sup> ‘The “Special Economic Zone” debacle’ in *Analytical Monthly Review*, January 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Editorial, ‘Nandigram taking people for granted’ in *EPW*, 42:2, 13 January 2007, p.80.

<sup>42</sup> ‘Special Economic Zones: unnecessary giveaways’ in *EPW*, 41:14, 8 April 2006, pp.1300-1301. Also see Editorial, ‘Nandigram II- beyond the immediate tragedy’ in *EPW*, 42:12, 24 March 2007, p.992 and Palit and Bhattacharjee, *Special Economic Zones in India*, pp.127-128.

a myriad of concessions such as soft loans and tax breaks made this land effectively a ‘free gift’ totalling Rs 8.5 billion rupee.<sup>43</sup> Amitendu Palit and Subhomoy Bhattacharjee estimated losses solely from non-imposition of customs duties at Rs 10.7 billion and Rs 21.5 billion rupees respectively during 2005-06 and 2006-7 in India.<sup>44</sup> For those who questioned the dominant narrative, these economics made SEZs a dubious model and as a result land acquisition in their name was questionable.

Intellectuals cited the brief history of SEZs in other Indian states as evidence for their limitations. Medha Patkar, speaking at Gopalnagar, placed the Singur resistance into a wider struggle against SEZs in India, noting that at Chattishgarh land was bought at Rs 10,000 rupees per acre and sold for Rs 100,000 rupees per acre.<sup>45</sup> Amit Bhaduri compared Nandigram to the situation at Kalinganagar in Orissa where the state government killed twelve *adivasi* in January 2006 for protesting land acquisition.<sup>46</sup> The largest foreign direct investment (FDI) in Indian history, the Rs 535 billion rupee ‘mega’ steel plant in Orissa by the Pohang Iron and Steel Company (POSCO) was often compared and contrasted to Nandigram,<sup>47</sup> and K. Balagopal wrote a series of articles detailing the experience of land acquisition in Andhra Pradesh.<sup>48</sup> Balagopal and Bhaduri noted how in many instances individual state governments, despite their political leanings, acted remarkably similarly – backing the corporations and clashing with those protesting acquisition. In this analysis, the underlying issue was seen as neoliberal policies and SEZs, or as Bhaduri noted: SEZs were ‘the most grotesque reminder of this pro-corporate, anti-people bias’.<sup>49</sup>

### The human rights groups

The human rights groups petitioned the courts regularly, leading the fight to gain compensation for the victims of violence, and in doing so documenting the scope of the violence. The Association for Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR) petitioned the Kolkata High Court immediately after 14 March 2007 for permission to travel to Nandigram ‘to provide assistance to injured and deceased

<sup>43</sup> Of course, Singur was not a SEZ. Ashok Mitra, ‘Santa Claus visits the Tatas - freebies from a debt-ridden government’ in *TT*, 30 March 2007.

<sup>44</sup> This does not take into account lost tax revenue from tax holidays and the like. These authors also detail the conflict between the central Finance and Commerce departments with Finance worried about the losses in revenue. Palit and Bhattacharjee, *Special Economic Zones in India*, p.126 and pp.92-94.

<sup>45</sup> Medha Patkar, ‘Medha Patkar speaks at the end of the Public Hearing’ translated by Debashis Bhattacharya, transcribed by Samik Sarkar, in *Manthan Samayiki*, September 2006 in Sen and Bhattacharya, *Capitalised Marxism*, pp.72-74.

<sup>46</sup> Amit Bhaduri, ‘Alternatives in industrialisation’, p.1597. Also see Pramodini Pradhan, ‘Police firing at Kalinganagar’ in *People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) Orissa*, April 2006, available from; <http://www.pucl.org/Topics/Dalit-tribal/2006/kalinganagar.htm>; accessed on 25 July 2011.

<sup>47</sup> Palit and Bhattacharjee, *Special Economic Zones in India*, pp.98-101. One *TOI* article remarked it was similar to Nandigram but without the ‘body count’ in ‘Eviction in Orissa, unlike in Nandigram’ in *TT*, 16 May 2010. For an overview on the situation, see *The POSCO project in Orissa: overview and opposition*, 26 February 2010, available from; <http://sanhati.com/articles/2170/>; accessed on 29 April 2011. R. Nagaraj and Jayati Ghosh have highlighted the volatility and unpredictability of investment flows that a reliance on FDI brings, by looking at the experience of the East Asian economies. R. Nagaraj ‘Foreign direct investment in India in the 1990s: trends and issues’ in *EPW*, 38:17, 26 April 2003, pp.1701-1712 and Ghosh, ‘India’s structural adjustment’, pp.1114-1119.

<sup>48</sup> K. Balagopal, ‘Land unrest in Andhra Pradesh-I: ceiling surpluses and public lands’ in *EPW*, 42:38, 22 September 2007, pp.3829-3833, K. Balagopal, ‘Land unrest in Andhra Pradesh-II: impact of grants to industries’ in *EPW*, 42:39, 29 September 2007, pp.3906-3910 and Balagopal, ‘Land unrest in Andhra Pradesh-III: illegal acquisition in tribal areas’ in *EPW*, 42:40, 6 October 2007, pp.4029-4034.

<sup>49</sup> Amit Bhaduri, ‘Alternatives in industrialisation’, p.1597.

villagers.<sup>50</sup> This petition led to the court ordering the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to investigate the events on 14 March 2007.<sup>51</sup> The courts eventually ordered compensation, although the state government delayed payment until 28 October 2010.<sup>52</sup> While these courtroom battles were removed from the ground level, it was significant that the battle over the 'truth' of events was contested in the courts, much as it was fought over in the media, in parliament and at Nandigram. While the judicial system was regularly criticised in India and West Bengal for being slow and overburdened, it performed its role during 2007, despite criticisms of West Bengal as undemocratic and 'Stalinist'.<sup>53</sup> Elite groups appeared to have had more faith in the ability of the courts to deliver justice than people at Nandigram.

Human rights groups exhibited their solidarity with the residents in Nandigram in protesting the actions of the state government. Tanika Sarkar and Sumit Chowdhury, themselves involved in the movement, noted that in Kolkata '[s]treets filled up with posters and slogans, there was an outpouring of protest plays, art and photography exhibitions, and poems'.<sup>54</sup> The 'People's Tribunal', a group that collected depositions from the victims of Nandigram, praised the protest rallies and in particular the donations of '[s]tudents, teachers, doctors, lawyers, office workers, science club organisers, scientists, artistes, writers, dramatists, singers' which allowed its investigation.<sup>55</sup> After the 'recapture' of Nandigram on 15 November 2007, Kolkata witnessed a mass protest of up to 50,000 people opposing the actions of the CPI-M.<sup>56</sup>

The human rights groups often presented themselves as the lead actors, privileging their own role at Nandigram. Civil society, to a significant degree, followed rather than led and the 'fact-finding' missions and Kolkata protests happened in reaction to events in Nandigram. Despite this, many accounts emphasised the role of civil society, such as Pradip Kumar Datta describing a protest in Kolkata as the 'high point' of solidarity.<sup>57</sup> However, as Biswajit Roy and Nilanjan Dutta wryly note,

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<sup>50</sup> 'A.S.T. 205 of 2007', *Association for Protection of Democratic Rights vs. the state of West Bengal & Ors.*, 15 March 2007 in Annexure Y, full text of Calcutta High Court judgment, pp.5-6. See the results of this petition, in A. D. Kumar, P. Roychowdhury, S. Bhadra, Raghu, A. Talwar, Jeeban, P. Roy, Sandeep, Chiro, Pramod, Ganguly, S. Roychowdhury, S. Roy and A. Das, 'Nandigram: horror stories emerge' in *Fact finding report of the delegation deputed by the Calcutta High Court*, 23 March 2007, available from; <http://www.countercurrents.org/nandigram-report230307.htm>; accessed on 10 March 2011.

<sup>51</sup> See three articles by Imran Ahmed Siddiqui, 'Sword arm at hand for the party, always' and 'Stockpile squad trail heads towards party' in *TT*, 19 March 2007 and 'CBI bullet hole in police story' in *TT*, 20 March 2007.

<sup>52</sup> See 'SC Nandi cash blow to govt - firing damages without making any distinction' in *TT*, 28 October 2010.

<sup>53</sup> Marcus Franda made this point regarding 1960s West Bengal in Franda, *Radical politics in West Bengal*, Cambridge, 1971, p.67.

<sup>54</sup> Tanika Sarkar and Sumit Chowdhury, 'The meaning of Nandigram: corporate land invasion, people's power, and the Left in India' in *Focaal—European Journal of Anthropology*, 54, 2009, p.85.

<sup>55</sup> Cited in Satya Sivaraman and Dipanjan Rai Chaudhuri, 'Nandigram: six months later' in *EPW*, 42:41, 13 October 2007, p.4106.

<sup>56</sup> Biswajit Roy and Nilanjan Dutta, *Nandigram and media: between the battlelines*, Kolkata, 2010, p.124.

<sup>57</sup> To be fair to Datta he was addressing his fellow urban bhadrak in identifying strategies to expand the movement. Pradip Kumar Datta, *Nandigram and other struggles*, pp.9-10.

[n]o doubt, there is hierarchy even among the disadvantaged and dissenters. As historian Shahid Amin has pointed out that “peasants do not write, they are written about”, the representatives are always privileged over the represented, particularly in societies like ours.<sup>58</sup>

Satya Sivaraman and Dipanjan Rai Chaudhuri exemplified this privilege, commenting that ‘[h]ad civil society not erupted as it did, the West Bengal government would not have budged from its plan of imposing a chemical hub on Nandigram, drowning all protests in blood and tears’.<sup>59</sup>

Many intellectuals felt betrayed by the actions of the CPI-M at Nandigram and many withdrew their support for the party as a result. While the betrayal of the peasantry was expressed in client-patron terms, civil society focused on the ideological betrayal of the CPI-M. The most prominent example of this was Sumit and Tanika Sarkar returning their Rabindra Purashkar literary awards after 14 March 2007.<sup>60</sup> For Shibani Chaudhuri and Paramita Ghosh, ‘many have confronted not just a moment of self-questioning, but a larger churning of the collective conscience,’ arguing that previous intellectual support for the Left Front government had led to feelings of complicity.<sup>61</sup> To rationalise this, Shubhendu Dasgupta positioned the events of Nandigram as a break from the past. Dasgupta rhetorically questioned CPI-M minister Benoy Konar (noted for his role in the Tebhaga and the land reform movements in 1967-70) asking ‘what happens to your long standing views and opinions? Why you have abruptly changed?’<sup>62</sup> Nandigram was portrayed as extraordinary and unforeseeable. Supriya RoyChowdhury was critical of this response arguing that, for example, Sumit Sarkar has portrayed Nandigram as ‘an accident, an aberration, not a pattern.’<sup>63</sup>

### Peasant resistance in elite discourse

As mentioned in the Introduction, peasant resistance has long been portrayed as ‘backward’ and ‘traditional’, a view evident in the elite responses to Nandigram. A group of prominent citizens described the people in Nandigram as opposing what they did not understand and denigrated them as ‘semi-literate peasants’.<sup>64</sup> Human rights groups were sometimes guilty of this, emphasising villagers ‘traditional’ attachments to the land, even if in a positive sense. The *Interim report of the Citizens’ Committee on Singur and Nandigram* (hereafter *Interim report of the Citizens’ Committee*) portrayed resistance in Nandigram in almost quixotic terms, noting that ‘[v]illagers are determined to fight on, regardless of the costs to themselves’.<sup>65</sup> Bolan Gangopadhyay praised the resistance of Nandigram, historically and in 2007, but veered toward patronising the peasantry, describing them as ‘spirited’, prideful and

<sup>58</sup> Roy and Dutta, *Nandigram and media*, pp.171-172.

<sup>59</sup> Sivaraman and Chaudhuri, ‘Nandigram: six months later’, p.4106. Also see AM, ‘Eyeless in Bengal’ in *EPW*, 43:8, 23 February 2008, pp.10-14.

<sup>60</sup> ‘Nandigram was more shocking than Jallianwala Bagh’ in *TOI*.

<sup>61</sup> Shibani Chaudhuri and Paramita Ghosh, ‘The unbearable lightness of culture’ in *Telika*, 4:12, 31 March 2007.

<sup>62</sup> Shubhendu Dasgupta, ‘A conversation with a government peasant leader on Singur’ translated by Debashis Bhattacharya in *Ekok Matra*, 7:3, November 2006 in Sen and Bhattacharya, *Capitalised Marxism*, pp.31-35.

<sup>63</sup> Supriya RoyChowdhury, ‘The Intellectual-Left stand-off’, pp.1077-1078.

<sup>64</sup> M. Ghatak et al., ‘Beyond Nandigram’, pp.1487-1489.

<sup>65</sup> S. Sarkar, C. Gonsalves, S. Chakravarty, K. Majumdar and T. Sarkar, *Interim report of the Citizens’ Committee on Singur and Nandigram*, 29 January 2007, available from: [http://www.sacw.net/Nation/Jan07reportSingur\\_Ngram.html](http://www.sacw.net/Nation/Jan07reportSingur_Ngram.html); accessed 15 November 2010.

freedom loving patriots, ‘even the children of peasant families’.<sup>66</sup> The desire to glamorise and romanticise peasant resistance risks presenting peasants as stuck in a traditional time warp and, as Rosalind O’Hanlon pointed out, can neglect the role the subaltern have in oppressing their own community, especially women.<sup>67</sup>

This tendency to dichotomise the peasantry as ‘traditional’ and less modern could be evidenced with regard to gender. An all woman human rights group, the *Final report of an Independent Citizens’ team from Kolkata* (FRICT), comprised of activists and teachers, revealed this prejudice when they travelled to Nandigram in April 2007. They travelled to a CPI-M refugee camp in Khejuri to hear accounts of sexual violence, but were frustrated by the silence of the refugee women who seemed to fear the repercussions of confiding in them. Discouraged, the FRICT team went to leave, but not before:

Suddenly one of us burst out in an exasperated tone: “How long will you let the men control your every move? And you’re to blame too, because you let them do it! Do you realize how much damage you’re doing to yourselves?” They just looked back at us in silence. In place of the hostility in the men’s eyes, there was a lost look in theirs, clearly seeking solidarity, as if to say, “You understand the situation we are in – why do you still insist?”<sup>68</sup>

The FRICT team were critical of these women for not understanding or fighting gender oppression. However, the refugee women saw no value in defying the men and discussing their issues with the activists and teachers. In doing this, the FRICT team universalised their own experience of relative gender freedom. They appeared frustrated with those whom they regarded as traditional timid peasants, a common theme of the analyses by the human rights groups.

The human rights groups portrayed people at Nandigram as pious but secular. Religiosity was emphasised essentially to show their pious, peaceful nature, in keeping with their traditional image. However, at the same time, Nandigram was presented as a secular movement. The *Interim report of the Citizens’ Committee* praised the BUPC for its ‘remarkable communal amity’ and every human rights report mentioned how Muslims and Hindus had come together to resist acquisition.<sup>69</sup> The ‘community’ at Nandigram was solidly resistant against land acquisition, and divisions such as religion, caste and gender were subsumed in this fight. In a West Bengal context, however it was important to emphasise the secular nature of narratives of resistance at Nandigram.<sup>70</sup> This was because a political consensus had developed in post-colonial West Bengal, identifying anything ‘communal’ as negative. In 2007 political parties accused each other of communalism, reinforcing this consensus. In emphasising

<sup>66</sup> Bolan Gangopadhyay, ‘A tradition of resistance’ in Gautam Ray (ed.), *Nandigram and beyond*, Kolkata, 2008, pp.55-68.

<sup>67</sup> Rosalind O’Hanlon, ‘Issues of widowhood: gender and resistance in colonial western India’ in Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash (eds.), *Contesting power: resistance and everyday social relations in South Asia*, Delhi, 1991, pp.62-63.

<sup>68</sup> R. Dasgupta, K. Panjabi, A. Kapoor, T. N. Banerjee, S. Lal, S. Banerjee, S. Bhattacharya, S. Mirdha, S. Ghosh, S. Das and S. Sinha, *Final report of an independent citizens’ team*, Kolkata, 10 March 2008; available from; <http://development-dialogues.blogspot.com/2008/03/final-report-of-independent-citizens.html>; accessed on 15 November 2010.

<sup>69</sup> Sumit Sarkar et al., *Interim report of the Citizens’ Committee Report*, 29 January 2007.

<sup>70</sup> Although, if Roy and Dutta’s small survey is an indication more Muslims supported the BUPC than the CPI-M, in Roy and Dutta, *Nandigram and media*, pp.179-182.

the secular nature of the BUPC, the human rights groups were not just reporting facts but creating a narrative that presented Nandigram as 'good'. Apart from a pious faith, religion as a motivating legitimising ideology was not seen to have played a role at Nandigram by human rights groups.<sup>71</sup>

The human rights groups portrayed the resistance as non-violent and peaceful, and if violence did occur it was presented as justified. This portrayal was made possible by focusing on Nandigram only after 14 March 2007. Previously, Nandigram was considered a peripheral issue and only one group had travelled there (and this as a joint mission to Singur). Civil society was only sufficiently galvanised in its opposition once horrifying images and stories began to filter out of Nandigram in March. A peaceful protest that was brutally suppressed was a simple, powerful story, and a narrative of pious peasants pleading with police was born from the events of 14 March 2007. In reality, the BUPC did use violence to resist land acquisition. The protests of 3 January 2007 were described by the *Interim report of the Citizens' Committee* as a peaceful demonstration; although the evidence suggests that the crowd attacked the panchayat *Pradhan*. The burning to death of Sankar Samanta was justified by the alleged gunfire from his residence:

At around 3 AM, villagers woke to the sound of bombs and gunfire, coming from the house of Sankar Samanta, a CPM activist... When the body of thirteen year old Biswajit Mondol was found, villagers, in their fury, turned upon the Samanta residence and torched it, killing Sankar Samanta.<sup>72</sup>

Ignoring or downplaying the violence of the BUPC was a key narrative of human rights groups at Nandigram.

The human rights groups portrayed the BUPC and peasant resistance at Nandigram as innocent and somewhat naive in an attempt to gain sympathy for the plight of those resisting land acquisition. The peasantry assisted in this characterisation, presenting themselves as surprised by the violence of the CPI-M. For example, Tanika Sarkar and Sumit Chowdhury stated that on 14 March 2007 the BUPC, 'mobilised only a few thousand' in 'the hope' that a religious display with women and children would 'mitigate the worst of the offensive'.<sup>73</sup> The *Independent Fact Finding Team* argued, 'the whole attack on the villagers was [a] well planned one whereas the people were totally unprepared for this brutality'.<sup>74</sup> However, there were many reports of people being well prepared for an attack on 14 March 2007, holding meetings to describe tactics and bringing wet towels to protect themselves from tear gas. That the BUPC possessed tactics or indeed tactical ability appears to have been ignored. The clearest example of BUPC tactics was the placing of women and children on the frontline on 14 March 2007 to dissuade a police attack. The possibility that political calculations were behind this move has

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<sup>71</sup> Religion historically played a significant role in peasant resistance in Bengal. See Ranajit Guha, 'The prose of counter-insurgency' in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies II: writings on South Asian history and society*, Delhi, 1983, pp.1-42 and Sarkar, 'The conditions and nature of subaltern militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to non-co-operation, c.1905-22' in Guha, *Subaltern Studies III*, pp.271-320.

<sup>72</sup> Sumit Sarkar et al., *Interim report of the Citizens' Committee Report*, 29 January 2007.

<sup>73</sup> Tanika Sarkar and Sumit Chowdhury, 'The meaning of Nandigram', p.83.

<sup>74</sup> M. Patkar, D. Thankappan, B. D. Sharma, T. Ghosh, G. N. Saibaba, A. Khote, R. Rafiq, R. Dhiraj, Srimant and M. Engineer, *All India independent fact finding team on Nandigram massacre*, 10 April 2007, available from: <http://sanhati.com/news/76/>; accessed on 11 January 2011.

not been raised in *any* forum, apart from in noting the historical connections to Gandhian protests. If, however, the BUPC could see the political value in discouraging police to attack defenceless women, surely they could see the political value in allowing the police to attack these women and the resulting outrage that could occur.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, in creating this narrative of a simple people, the story of how people actually resisted and the tactics they employed, were lost.

Many of these civil society groups, angered by the state violence and politicised by the actions of the CPI-M, were guilty of exaggerating the violence towards the peasantry and repeating some of the more lurid rumours. For example, the Medical Service Team (MSC), which provided key medical assistance to victims, speculated that the tear gas used on 14 March 2007 'may not be the usual tear gas... but something unusual having more permanent and serious effects.'<sup>76</sup> The most persistent rumours repeated in Nandigram, which found its way into human rights groups' reports, were of missing children ripped apart from the legs and buried in trenches or otherwise hidden. For example, the MSC repeated stories of children whose 'throats were slit or heads chopped off, put in gunny bags, loaded in trucks and transported to unknown destinations.'<sup>77</sup> The *Independent Fact Finding Team* reported Bhavani Giri's comments: 'I saw with my own eyes that 4 yrs old child was torn apart by legs and one girl was thrown into the canal.' Sometimes minimal caveats were added, allowing the printing of rumours without providing the evidence to support them. For example, the same report, when reporting that after March 2007, bodies were loaded into a trench and then covered to hide them, added the proviso '[i]f this report is to be believed', which clearly betrayed the team's doubts about this information.<sup>78</sup> It was no doubt difficult to establish fact from fiction immediately after 14 March 2007; however this report was released in April 2007.

Human rights groups also appropriated the violence towards women in order to claim victimhood for Nandigram. While some evoked the trauma and hardship of the female victims of this violence, others used inflated figures or hyperbolic accounts of sexual violence as a means to criticise the CPI-M and the state government.<sup>79</sup> Sarmila Bose has termed this appropriation as using 'women as weapons':<sup>80</sup> using the victimhood of women to further male political agendas. The *Independent fact finding team* emphasised how women bore the brunt of the police attack on 14 March 2007, despite similar

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<sup>75</sup> The closest exception to this was the People's Tribunal, which noted the protests of particular women being used in this way. See All India Citizens Initiative, *Nandigram: what really happened? Based on the report of the People's Tribunal on Nandigram, 26-28 May, 2007*, Delhi, 2007, pp.29-30.

<sup>76</sup> Medical Service Centre, *Report of the medical team on Nandigram incident*, Kolkata, 5 April 2007, available from; <http://sanhati.com/news/180/>; accessed on 17 November 2010.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> *Independent fact finding team*, 10 April 2007.

<sup>79</sup> A notable example of a sympathetic account is Sumit and Tanika Sarkar, 'A place called Nandigram' in Gautam Ray (ed.), *Nandigram and beyond*, Kolkata, 2008, pp.21-53. Sarmila Bose has discussed this phenomenon in studying the rape of Bengali women by the Pakistan army in the war that led to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. In exploring the historiography she found the large numbers of rapes ascribed to the Pakistani soldiers are without basis, the numbers inflated to smear the enemy and claim victimhood for the women *and men* of Bangladesh, in Sarmila Bose, 'Losing the victims: problems of using women as weapons in recounting the Bangladesh war' in *EPW*, 42:38, 22 September 2007, pp.3864-3871.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p.3864.

death and injury statistics for both genders.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, the MSC reported that ‘many’ women complained of sexual assault and four women were directly treated by them for sexual assault. While still horrific, this would appear to contradict their conclusion that Nandigram was ‘a horrifying story of torture, murder, molestation, rape and killing of children... which in our view is a planned genocide and barbaric large scale sexual crimes committed upon innocent people.’<sup>82</sup>

### November 2007

The situation in Nandigram evolved throughout 2007. Political divisions had hardened after March and the ‘turf war’ had claimed multiple victims. By November 2007, the TMC was increasingly influential. Many ordinary people were caught in the middle of this conflict, hoping that some sort of peace could be delivered in the area.<sup>83</sup> The ‘re-capture’ of Nandigram in November led to more ‘fact-finding’ and humanitarian missions to Nandigram. The changing political situation meant that the civil society narratives of simple, pious peaceful villagers, while problematic from the beginning, became more so by November. However, the human rights groups failed to sufficiently recognise this and Roy and Dutta argued that the ‘dissenting intellectuals’ ignored or downplayed the negative aspects of the resistance.<sup>84</sup> The independence of the BUPC (emphasised initially in March) was less clear by November. The *Final interim report of an Independent Citizens’ team from Kolkata* argued at the end of November that the TMC had ‘taken over the BUPC leadership.’<sup>85</sup> In contrast, the *Fact finding report on Nandigram*, specifically denied reports of the influence of the TMC, instead arguing that the BUPC consisted of ‘villagers from the Nandigram villages who have rebelled against the CPI(M)’s oppressive ways and its bullying tactics to take away their land.’<sup>86</sup> This report was heavily biased in the BUPC’s favour, relying uncritically on information from BUPC conduits.

The violence of the CPI-M in November 2007, the use of rape to terrorise and the destruction of property were again emphasised by human rights groups and were crucial in documenting the violence. It was generally acknowledged, without confronting it directly, that the ‘turf war’ had seen violence on both sides. Amnesty International reported that ‘the CPI-M and the BUPC [were] engaged in armed confrontations attempting to assert control over the area.’<sup>87</sup> However, the *Fact finding report on Nandigram* denied the violence of the BUPC, claiming that not one person they interviewed (of 150-

<sup>81</sup> *Independent fact finding team*, 10 April 2007.

<sup>82</sup> MSC, *Report on Nandigram*, 5 April 2007.

<sup>83</sup> See Anshuman Phadikar, ‘Guided by young, Nandigram rediscovers neighbourliness’ in *TT*, 15 March 2008.

<sup>84</sup> Roy and Dutta, *Nandigram and media*, p.171.

<sup>85</sup> K. Panjabi, A. Kapoor, R. Dasgupta, S. Ghosh, S. Das, S. Banerjee, T. N. Banerjee, S. Lal, S. Sinha, S. Bhattacharya and S. Mirdha, *Final interim report of an independent citizens’ team from Kolkata on the current state of affairs in Nandigram*, 30 November 2007, available from; <http://www.sacw.net/Nation/CitRepNandigramNov07.Pdf>; accessed on 18 April 2011.

<sup>86</sup> M. Patkar, A. Talwar, D. Dutta, B. Chanda and S. Tripathi, *Fact Finding report on Nandigram*, 8 December 2007; available from; <http://development-dialogues.blogspot.com/2007/12/fact-finding-report-on-nandigram-by.html>; accessed on 10 March 2011.

<sup>87</sup> Amnesty International, *India: urgent need to address large scale human rights abuses during Nandigram “recapture”*, 15 January 2008, available from; <http://www.amnestyusa.org/document.php?lang=e&id=ENGASA200012008>; accessed 10 March 2011.

200) knew *any* instance of BUPC armed resistance.<sup>88</sup> This human rights group was unusually aggressive in denying the violence of the BUPC. Shahid Amin has discussed how non-violent narratives in the nationalist movement were often upset by violence. Amin notes how nationalists ignored such events through ‘obligatory amnesia’ and then selectively remembered and appropriated.<sup>89</sup> A similar ‘amnesia’ seems to have affected human rights groups at Nandigram.

## Conclusion

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Medha Patkar argued that she was not ‘anti-industry’ but wanted a less destructive form of development. This position was typical of how civil society, dominated by the elite of India and West Bengal, contextualised the events at Nandigram. Land acquisition was accepted as legitimate if West Bengal was to develop. Elite views were divergent and there was strong debate on which policies would best develop West Bengal. The dominant view of civil society criticised the role of the CPI-M, arguing that their violent response to resistance and their inability to manage land acquisition was the issue, not land acquisition. For a section of the elite, the violence at Nandigram turned them away from the party. In short, for the majority of civil society it was not the neoliberal policies of the state that was the main issue at Nandigram, but the political mismanagement of the CPI-M.

Strengthening this perception was the response of human rights groups that travelled to Nandigram. These groups were crucial in documenting the crimes perpetrated at Nandigram and for popularising and fermenting dissent against the state government. The reports and court cases generated by human rights groups, detailing the sickening violence of the CPI-M cadres and state police, contributed to a widespread anger against the CPI-M during the period in review. To achieve this anger, these groups presented narratives that portrayed resistance at Nandigram as undertaken by pious, simple peasants peacefully protecting their livelihood. Nandigram was a heavily politicised issue, and this chapter has examined how human rights groups popularised rumour and exploited women for political gain. The CPI-M condemned this politicisation, claiming that the opposition parties were insincere in their concern for the peasantry at Nandigram and were merely adept at exploiting the issues and events of Nandigram to gain politically. The TMC and the other opposition parties *were* effective in exploiting Nandigram for political gain, and for the TMC, Nandigram revived the fortunes of the party. How the CPI-M defended its actions at Nandigram and how the opposition exploited anti-CPI-M feeling is the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>88</sup> Although it is not clear if the authors were referring to November 2007 or the whole of 2007. M. Patkar et al., *Fact finding report on Nandigram*, 8 December 2007.

<sup>89</sup> See Shahid Amin, ‘Gandhi as Mahatma’. Emma Tarlo has discussed the ‘forgetting’ of the emergency, in Tarlo, ‘Paper truths: the emergency and slum clearance through forgotten files’ in C.J. Fuller and Véronique Bénéï (eds.), *The everyday state and society in modern India*, London, 2001, pp.68-90.

## Chapter Four

### **‘My identity is my party’: West Bengal political parties and Nandigram.**

What happened at Nandigram shouldn’t be attributed to the SEZ model or the process of industrialisation... [but is the result of a] political culture of confrontation and violence in the state.<sup>1</sup>

Jairam Ramesh, Indian Minister of State for Commerce and Industry, 19 March 2007.

‘Comrade X’, a CPI-M cadre who claimed to have participated in the ‘re-capture’ of Nandigram, was interviewed by journalist Imran Ahmed Siddiqui, on 16 November 2007. The man, 24 years old, and a party cadre for six years, explained that prior to the re-capture:

our leader had a meeting with 20 cadres like me from my village and we were paid in advance for the job. He also assured us that the party would look after our families if we died for its cause. We were each given a new motorcycle.

‘Comrade X’ justified the violence by stating, ‘[e]verything is fair when you are in power.’ He expressed his support for the party by noting that, ‘[m]y identity is my party and nothing else. We live for the party and die for it’.<sup>2</sup> This chapter examines the role of the political parties at Nandigram between January 2007 and May 2008, focusing on the CPI-M led Left Front government and the opposition TMC. This chapter argues that the political parties employed violence to further their political goals, and that this use of violence was deeply rooted in the political culture of West Bengal. Due to the similarities in their economic policies, the parties accused each other of violence and resorted to undemocratic measures in an attempt to discredit the other in the eyes of voters. The narratives of West Bengali politicians were crucial in associating Nandigram with the political re-birth of the TMC, and the de-legitimisation of CPI-M rule.

Events at Nandigram were consistent with what scholars have identified in West Bengal as ‘party society’, the features of which were discussed in the Introduction. To understand how this concept came to define the actions of the political actors in West Bengal in 2007, the history of post-colonial West Bengal from 1947-2007 will be briefly examined. Similarly, an exploration of the tension between the revolutionary and reformatory tendencies within the Communist movement in West Bengal brings several aspects of CPI-M policy into focus. The desire to maintain control of West Bengal saw the CPI-M construct a detailed justification for its economic policy, striving to present its adoption of neoliberal policies as consistent with the party’s political ideology. To maintain power also necessitated the use and the threat of violence. The TMC had challenged the CPI-M in the past, noticeably at Keshpur in 1998. However, the TMC failed to offer a new model of governance for West

<sup>1</sup> ‘Jairam sees no SEZ link’ in *The Telegraph (TT)*, 19 March 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Imran Ahmed Siddiqui, ‘Power flows from gun & bottle - encounter with Comrade X, a hooded hunter’ in *TT*, 16 November 2007.

Bengal, merely wanting power for its own benefit. Events at Nandigram in 2007 provoked conflict within the CPI-M and the Left Front, conflict that was contained in the period under review. During 2007 the CPI-M presented the party at Nandigram as a victim of a violent criminal opposition. The CPI-M argued that a 'Trinamool-Maoist combine' ruled the area, largely ignoring the BUPC. The TMC challenged this, presenting its own narrative of the CPI-M as an arrogant, corrupt and violent party. The TMC successfully mobilised dissent against the CPI-M and in May 2008 won the panchayat elections in the area.

This chapter's focus on the CPI-M reflects the available sources. Although there are sufficient primary sources to uncover the narratives disseminated by the CPI-M, there are few sources available for the TMC. The evidence used in this chapter was the English-language party publications of the CPI-M, the weekly *People's Democracy* and the monthly *The Marxist*. These sources have thus far been unexplored by scholars, and from them it is possible to unearth how the CPI-M presented their actions to party members and to the public of West Bengal. Biswajit Roy and Nilanjan Dutta have analysed the coverage of Nandigram in *Ganashakti*, the CPI-M daily newspaper (in Bengali). They argue that *Ganashakti* attempted to 'spread paranoia in its rank and file as well as its support base by launching a high-decibel propaganda against almost all the media houses' and that it resurrected 'a spectre of anti-Communist conspiracy of imperialists, big bourgeois-landlord ruling classes and their media cohorts'.<sup>3</sup> The TMC in 2007 lacked the CPI-M's ability to project a consistent message and this resulted in a fragmented TMC narrative. This fragmentation reflects the nature of the party in 2007: it was less organised than the CPI-M and reliant on the leadership of Mamata Banerjee alone. The TMC has attracted little scholarly attention, and the existing literature pre-dates the events at Nandigram in 2007. I have relied primarily on newspaper articles and TMC press releases to uncover the perspective of the TMC during 2007.

### Historical Background

Since its creation in 1964, the CPI-M has evolved from a radical Communist party to a reformist political party that accepts parliamentary democracy. This evolution has seen the CPI-M adopt neoliberal economics and resort to violence to protect its rule. Both can be understood as a mechanism to maintain power; hence the construction of 'party society'. Communist thought in West Bengal has long encapsulated a tension between revolutionary and democratic impulses, reflected in the number of Marxist and Communist parties in the state.<sup>4</sup> After independence in 1947, the Communist Party of India (CPI) followed the 'Ranadive line', calling for revolution and declaring independence 'a myth'. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has detailed the resulting insurgency in West Bengal during 1948-1949. This insurgency saw police stationed at Nandigram after attacks on local *jotedars* and looting, arson and other

<sup>3</sup> Biswajit Roy and Nilanjan Dutta, *Nandigram and media: between the battlelines*, Kolkata, 2010, p.141.

<sup>4</sup> Several Communist and Marxist parties in West Bengal have their roots in the terrorist groups, Anushilan and Jugantar. Individuals often renounced these terrorist groups whilst in prison during the 1930s joining up to the various Communist parties. Marcus Franda, *Radical politics in West Bengal*, Cambridge, 1971, pp.6-20. For a personal experience, see Abani Lahiri, *Postwar revolt of the rural poor in Bengal: memoirs of a communist activist*, translated by Subrata Banerjee, Calcutta, 2001.

violence.<sup>5</sup> The party eventually rejected this 'line', moving toward an acceptance of parliamentary democracy and participating in the elections of 1952. Parliamentary democracy became increasingly accepted within the party as support for the party grew and widened, and groups like the East Bengal refugees became increasingly supportive of the CPI.<sup>6</sup>

Local and international events combined with intense ideological debate saw the split of the CPI in 1964 and the subsequent creation of the CPI-M. Although the split was enacted to end factional conflict, Marcus Franda has argued that factional conflict remained because there were three factions and not two. Those who remained in the CPI were less radical and identified the ruling Indian National Congress (hereafter Congress) as 'progressive'. The faction that became the CPI-M wanted to confront Congress, especially over issues like land reform. This became increasingly possible in rural West Bengal, as *jotedar* power declined, and the peasantry began to unite under Communist leadership.<sup>7</sup> Complicating matters was a third faction of parliamentary members, some of which remained in the CPI while others, including future Chief Minister Jyoti Basu, joined the CPI-M. Although the CPI-M was formed as a counterpoint to the conservatism of the CPI, the influence of the parliamentary faction tempered the radicalism of the fledgling CPI-M, resulting in an unstable party.<sup>8</sup> The CPI-M split in 1969, after its more radical members had been expelled for leading the peasant insurgency at Naxalbari. The expelled former CPI-M members formed the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI-ML), which later branched off into a host of other Maoist inspired parties.<sup>9</sup> This had the effect of both purging the CPI-M of its most radical members and promoting an acceptance in the party of parliamentary democracy.

The Introduction has already discussed the trajectory of the Communist movement in West Bengal between 1967 and 1977. At the Vidhan Sabha (state assembly) election in 1967 the first United Front government, which included the two Communist parties, gained power. In 1977 the Left Front, dominated by the CPI-M, won power in the state. From 1977, the CPI-M argued that accepting parliamentary democracy meant accepting 'bourgeois capitalism', and that CPI-M rule could only mitigate the excesses of capitalism. Therefore, to remain in power, and avoid either being voted out or dismissed by the centre, the CPI-M took a flexible approach to policy, considering itself a pro-poor Marxist government. In 1994 the West Bengal state government adopted the New Industrial Policy (NIP). This policy saw the government court foreign investment and encourage the involvement of multinational corporations in the economy. The CPI-M maintained that this was a response to the

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<sup>5</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonization in South Asia: meanings of freedom in post-independence West Bengal, 1947-52*, London, 2009, pp.105-118 and Bandyopadhyay, 'The story of an aborted revolution: communist insurgency in post-independence West Bengal, 1948-50' in *Journal of South Asian Development*, 3:1, 2008, pp.1-32.

<sup>6</sup> In time the East Bengali refugees acted as a catalyst toward radical politics, acting as the 'striking arm' of the communist movement. Prafulla Chakrabarti, *The marginal men: the refugees and the left political syndrome in West Bengal*, Calcutta, 1990, pp.xxiii-xxiv and Joya Chatterji, *The spoils of partition, Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Cambridge, 2007, pp.290-293.

<sup>7</sup> Sunil Sengupta and Haris Gazdar, 'Agrarian politics and rural development in West Bengal' in Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen (eds.), *Indian development: selected regional perspectives*, Delhi, 1997, p.141 and Joya Chatterji, *The spoils of partition*, pp.260-261.

<sup>8</sup> Marcus Franda, *Radical politics in West Bengal*, Cambridge, 1971, pp.82-113.

<sup>9</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The present history of West Bengal: essays in political criticism*, Delhi, 1997, pp.87-93.

structural adjustment programme of the centre, 'taking into account the reality of the situation in India and the constraints of the Left forces in the state within the present framework.'<sup>10</sup> The NIP exemplified the adaptability of the CPI-M, but also represented an important break from the past. Aseema Sinha described the NIP as a 'systemic shift' creating a 'radical shift in the ruling party's public discourse'.<sup>11</sup> Sinha argued that the negative 'anti-business' reputation of West Bengal meant that to attract investment it had to aggressively market itself. It did this by creating an overseas advertising campaign, empowering the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation (WBIDC), and clamping down on organised labour.<sup>12</sup> Reflecting this shift, Chief Minister Jyoti Basu visited the United States in 1994, seeking World Bank loans and capital investment, yet declared that there was nothing 'un-Marxian' in his behaviour.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, the CPI-M continued to frame its policies as consistent with Marxist ideology, and the party as 'pro-poor', especially to its supporters.

Since 1994, a key aspect of Left Front economic policy was the need to attract capital investment. The party argued that capital investment would allow West Bengal, an area unable to build sufficient infrastructure itself, to 'catch up'. Therefore, to attract capital investment the party offered concessions to both domestic and foreign investors.<sup>14</sup> This was similar to structural adjustment policies adopted at the centre in 1991, and common to other states in India.<sup>15</sup> For example, in 2004 Aseema Sinha compared the Gujarat and West Bengal responses to structural adjustment. She concluded that, despite their differing governments, (Gujarat had a BJP government) both states adopted aspects of the central policy.<sup>16</sup> However, unlike Gujarat, the CPI-M denied that it adopted neoliberal policies. In 2007 the CPI-M frequently articulated the parties opposition to neoliberal policies, arguing that they were anti-poor and pro-corporate. Specific policies, such as the phasing out of agricultural subsidies, were condemned as contributing to rural hardship, and periodic victories were declared against 'the forces and ideology of neo-liberalism'.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, despite arguing that it was opposed to neoliberal policies, the CPI-M selectively adopted them in the name of West Bengal's development.

### Narratives of economic policy

The narrative constructed by the CPI-M in 2007 aimed to justify its economic policy and deny that it was attempting land acquisition at Nandigram. This denial sought to shift the debate away from economics and towards the violence of the opposition and the victimhood of CPI-M members at

<sup>10</sup> Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, 'On industrialisation in West Bengal' in *The Marxist*, 23:1, January 2007, p.1.

<sup>11</sup> His emphasis. Aseema Sinha, 'Ideas, interests, and institutions in policy change: a comparison of West Bengal and Gujarat' in Rob Jenkins (ed.), *Regional reflections: comparing politics across India's states*, New Delhi, 2004, pp.80-82.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp.82-85. For an example of a WBIDC advertisement, see 'West Bengal attracts mettle' in *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*, 41:26, 30 June 2006, Backcover.

<sup>13</sup> Amrita Basu, 'Parliamentary communism as a historical phenomenon: the CPI(M) in West Bengal' in Zoya Hasan (ed.), *Parties and party politics in India*, Delhi, 2002, p.326.

<sup>14</sup> See Arun Kumar Banerji, 'Adjusting to the process of change: India and globalisation' in Purusottam Bhattacharya and Ajitava Ray Chaudhuri (eds.), *Globalisation and India: a multi-dimensional perspective*, Kolkata, 2000, pp.27-40.

<sup>15</sup> See Vijay Joshi and I. M. D. Little, *India's economic reforms, 1991-2001*, Oxford, 1996 and Biplab Dasgupta, *Globalisation: India's adjustment experience*, Delhi, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Aseema Sinha, 'Ideas, interests, and institutions in policy change', pp.78-79.

<sup>17</sup> P. Krishnaprasad, 'Kerala farmers' debt relief bill: a political victory against neo-liberalism' in *People's Democracy (PD)*, 31:3, 21 January 2007.

Nandigram. The balancing act of CPI-M economic policy was highlighted by Douglas McLean in 2001, who remarked that, '[t]he NIP had to be dynamic enough to attract investors yet restrained enough not to frighten LF [Left Front] supporters.'<sup>18</sup> Therefore, in party publications like the *People's Democracy*, economic policy would be described as pro-poor and anti-neoliberal. However, when advertising West Bengal to investors the state portrayed itself as pro-business and 'investor friendly'.

In CPI-M publications, land acquisition at Nandigram was placed in a framework of industrialisation and development, and posited as progressive, modern and Marxist. Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee stated that, 'Marxists hold that development is from agriculture to industry' as the, 'transition from agriculture to industry is an inevitable phenomenon both in capitalism and in socialism.'<sup>19</sup> The benefits of the industrialisation of Nandigram were explained in a February 2007 *People's Democracy* article:

Only a few years back, Haldia in Midnapore was a neglected village of the fishingfolk and now with the industrial richness it occupies a special place in India and abroad. Investors are continuously coming to Haldia...

The industrial area when set up will certainly transform the life of the backward Nandigram and of the whole surrounding area. It will make the economy of the district and of the state enjoy a faster growth. Over and above the large chemical industry, there are developmental projects in the offing, like ship building and ship repair factories and port improvement schemes.<sup>20</sup>

According to this view, land acquisition in West Bengal was legitimate because, '[i]f land needs to be taken, it will be done by providing those owning and dependant on land a fair deal, without coercion.' The CPI-M contrasted their land acquisition policy with other states in India, where 'the expropriation of the land of the peasantry is taking place in a brutal manner'.<sup>21</sup>

Outside party publications, this economic policy was described differently. As McLean notes:

Part of the process of attracting capital lay in creating the "correct" image of Calcutta as a thriving, dynamic, modern metropolis. The jargon of "smart cities", "single window" facilities, "export processing zones"... and a host of acronyms gained currency.<sup>22</sup>

The India Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF), a public-private partnership between government and Indian industry, commissioned several state reports on West Bengal to attract investment. These reports advertised West Bengal as a 'business friendly policy regime', emphasising the emergence of Kolkata as an information technology (IT) 'destination'. The benefits of SEZs for investors were emphasised. For example, an IBEF report from November 2010, explained that SEZs have

<sup>18</sup> Douglas McLean, 'Tension between state and capital in West Bengal' in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 24:1, January 2001, p.105.

<sup>19</sup> Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, 'On industrialisation in West Bengal', p.4.

<sup>20</sup> 'Agricultural & industrial development, Bengal for overcoming obstacles' in *PD*, 31:6, 11 February 2007.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas McLean, 'Tension between state and capital in West Bengal', pp.93-115.

‘[e]xemptions from all state and local taxes’ and were part of the ‘incentives and concessions’ offered to investors.<sup>23</sup>

The CPI-M’s contradictory economic policies were best expressed in relation to SEZs. At the all-India level the CPI-M bitterly opposed SEZs. However, in West Bengal the CPI-M presented SEZs as a tool to industrialise West Bengal. In December 2006, the *People’s Democracy* criticised ‘the ruthless acquiring of fertile agricultural land for Special Economic Zones’.<sup>24</sup> The CPI-M consistently opposed the SEZ Act, arguing for changes such as limits to their size and regulations to dissuade land speculators. Land acquisition was criticised at Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, for its ‘scandalous proportions... depriving the poor and middle class people of their land and unduly benefiting the rich and the influential’.<sup>25</sup> However, in West Bengal the CPI-M set up SEZs, failing to implement the regulatory changes that it suggested at the central level. The 2003 West Bengal SEZ Act, created by the Left Front government, was remarkably similar to the central SEZ Act.<sup>26</sup> The CPI-M never satisfactorily addressed this contradictory message, essentially arguing that outside West Bengal SEZs were negative, but within West Bengal, they were positive.

### The TMC and conflict

In 2007, the TMC was dominated by its leader Mamata Banerjee, a politician with the single-minded goal of removing the CPI-M from power. To this end, the TMC challenged the CPI-M’s control of rural West Bengal by force, and took an opportunistic approach to coalition building. Nandigram presented the TMC with an opportunity to exploit anti-CPI-M sentiment, an opportunity Banerjee and the TMC skilfully accepted.

During 2007, the TMC agreed on the substance of CPI-M economic policy, such as the need to industrialise and attract investment, but lacked a detailed economic policy.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, Banerjee expressed her support for economic reforms and industrialisation, simply arguing that these reforms should be sought with a ‘human face’.<sup>28</sup> The TMC represented the events at Nandigram as primarily about the violence and corruption of the CPI-M, relegating the economic issues to a secondary

<sup>23</sup> ICRA Management Consulting Services Limited, *West Bengal*, November 2010, available from; [http://www.ibef.org/download/west\\_bengal\\_190111.pdf](http://www.ibef.org/download/west_bengal_190111.pdf); accessed, 11 March 2011, p.51. Also see PricewaterhouseCoopers, *Indian States, Economy and Business: West Bengal*, Haryana, August 2005, available from; [http://www.arc.unisg.ch/org/arc/web.nsf/1176ad62df2ddb13c12568f000482b94/43cf0caeed566faac12571d30061daac/\\$FILE/India%20Symposium\\_IBEF\\_State%20Reports\\_Westbengal.pdf](http://www.arc.unisg.ch/org/arc/web.nsf/1176ad62df2ddb13c12568f000482b94/43cf0caeed566faac12571d30061daac/$FILE/India%20Symposium_IBEF_State%20Reports_Westbengal.pdf); accessed on 8 January 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Editorial, ‘Review SEZ Act forthwith’ in *PD*, 30:52, 24 December 2006. Also see Chittabrata Majumdar, ‘SEZs only for real estate speculation? CPI(M) MP demands case by case review’ in *PD*, 30:35, 27 August 2006.

<sup>25</sup> M. Venugopala Rao, ‘CPI(M) demands judicial inquiry into land acquisition & land grabbing’ in *PD*, 30:43, 22 October 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Ministry of Commerce and Industry, *The West Bengal Special Economic Zone Act, 2003*, Department of Commerce, Government of India, available from; [www.sezindia.nic.in/writereaddata/statePolicies/wbsezact.pdf](http://www.sezindia.nic.in/writereaddata/statePolicies/wbsezact.pdf); accessed on 8 January 2011. Also see Arindam Sen, ‘A loud and categorical “NO” to SEZs’ in Gautam Ray (ed.), *Nandigram and beyond*, Kolkata, 2007, p.127.

<sup>27</sup> Mukulika Banerjee pointed out the lack of a detailed policy in 2004, in Banerjee, ‘Populist leadership in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu: Mamata and Jayalithaa compared’ in Rob Jenkins (ed.), *Regional reflections: comparing politics across India’s states*, New Delhi, 2004, pp.300-301.

<sup>28</sup> Derek O’Brien, ‘Doing away with peasantry’ in *TOI* (date not included) in Dola Sen and Debashis Bhattacharya (eds.), *Singur and Nandigram and the untold story of capitalised Marxism*, Kanoria, 2007, p.43.

concern. When the TMC did criticise the CPI-M's economic policy it argued that the CPI-M had mismanaged the economy and was primarily responsible for the 'decline' of the West Bengal economy. For example, Derek O'Brien argued that West Bengal has been 'held back by the Left's bad policies'.<sup>29</sup>

The personality and leadership of Mamata Banerjee dominated the TMC in 2007, and political commentators often associated the party and the person as one and the same. Banerjee was first elected in 1984 as a member of Congress, where she won a previously safe CPI-M seat. From this period onwards, she gained a reputation as someone willing to confront the CPI-M.<sup>30</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya noted she was often portrayed as a street fighter, '[c]lad in crumpled saree, wearing a street-fighter image, speaking in plebeian Bangla, mingling effortlessly with the urban poor in shanties'.<sup>31</sup> Bidyut Chakrabarty described her as a 'firebrand' leader, erratic but fighting for the poor.<sup>32</sup> In the 1990s, Banerjee began to drift from Congress. She argued that the party's focus on maintaining power at the centre, with CPI-M support if necessary, had relegated the ousting of the CPI-M in West Bengal to a secondary goal. This was an unacceptable compromise for Banerjee, and she began to label Congress as 'watermelons' and 'the B-team of the CPI(M)'.<sup>33</sup> Eventually Banerjee left Congress, establishing the TMC in 1998. The TMC gained immediate success in the 1998 Lok Sabha (lower house of the central assembly) elections, outpolling Congress and gaining 24 percent of the votes in West Bengal.<sup>34</sup>

The TMC challenged the CPI-M domination of rural West Bengal and the 'party society' by force. The first example of this was in 1998 at Keshpur, on the border of East and West Midnapur.<sup>35</sup> Here the fledgling TMC challenged CPI-M control by 'forcibly driving [out] all CPM leaders, activists and even symphathisers (sic)'<sup>36</sup> from the area. This was dubbed the 'Panskura line' and it was initially successful, resulting in a 1999 by-election victory. This proved fleeting however, as the CPI-M retaliated, driving the TMC out of the area with 'colossal violence'.<sup>37</sup> 'Party society' proved itself

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp.43-44.

<sup>30</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'Making and unmaking of Trinamul Congress' in *EPW*, 39:14, 3 April 2004, pp.1529-1532.

<sup>31</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'Ominous outcome for Left in West Bengal' in *EPW*, 34:46, 20 November 1999, p.3269. Sumanta Banerjee describes her 'as a street-smart politician, mouthing populist slogans and indulging in exhibitionist acts.' Banerjee, 'Washing dirty Bengali *dhuti* in public' in *EPW*, 45:3, 16 January 2010, p.20.

<sup>32</sup> Bidyut Chakrabarty, '1998 elections in West Bengal: dwindling of the Left Front?' in *EPW*, 33:50, 12 December 1998, p.3215. On her erratic behaviour see Aditi Phadnis, 'Mamata Banerjee: firebrand from West Bengal' in *Business standard political profiles: of Cabals and Kings*, Delhi, 2009, pp.172-175.

<sup>33</sup> 'Watermelons' as red and green represent the colours of the CPI-M and Congress respectively. Mayers and Bhattacharyya have traced these developments and Banerjee's single-minded goal to defeat the CPI-M. James Mayers, 'Transformation of opposition politics in West Bengal: Congress(I), Trinamul and 1998 Lok Sabha Elections' in *EPW*, 33:33, 15 August 1998, pp.2253-2260 and Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'Making and unmaking of Trinamul Congress', pp.1529-1532. See Poromesh Acharya for Banerjee's focus on ousting the CPI-M in Acharya, 'End of the Congress: new turn in Bengal politics' in *EPW*, 34:33, 14 August 1999, pp.2298-2299.

<sup>34</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'Making and unmaking of Trinamul Congress', pp.1529-1532 and James Mayers, 'Transformation of opposition politics in West Bengal', pp.2253-2260.

<sup>35</sup> The province was split in 2002 into East and West Midnapur.

<sup>36</sup> "Panskura line" strategy derails Trinamul' in *TOI*, 17 April 2003. Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya has also described it this way in Bhattacharyya, 'Making and unmaking of Trinamul Congress', p.1534.

<sup>37</sup> Sumit Mitra and Labonita Ghosh, 'Marx to Mamta' in *India Today*, 14 August 2000 and Suranjan Das, 'New Left has to please all' in *EPW*, 36:24, 22 June 2001, p.2117. On Keshpur also see Raghav Bandyopadhyay, 'Agrarian backdrop of Bengal violence' in *EPW*, 36:5, 3 February 2001, pp.440-442.

difficult to defeat by force alone, and the CPI-M had the advantage of state power, and more activists and workers. Atin Ghosh, TMC vice-president, recognised this and described the 'Panskura line' as 'suicidal' and '[w]herever we tried this strategy, we were routed by the CPM'.<sup>38</sup> During this period Banerjee consistently called for the centre to dismiss the CPI-M government, something she was to repeat at Nandigram.<sup>39</sup> This was consistent with her political goal of removing the CPI-M from power, but was not necessarily democratic, despite the TMC regularly criticising the CPI-M subversion of democracy.<sup>40</sup>

The TMC has taken an opportunistic approach to coalition building, breaking and rejoining numerous coalitions. Since 1998 the TMC has alternately allied with the two major power blocks in the Lok Sabha: the BJP and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA); and Congress and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). The TMC abandoned the alliance with the NDA on the eve of the 2001 Vidhan Sabha elections when it saw an opportunity to challenge the Left Front. This move backfired, however, damaging its electoral result.<sup>41</sup> Returning to the NDA in 2004, the TMC again broke the alliance in September 2007. By this date, events at Nandigram had contributed in placing Banerjee in a position of power. Banerjee now sought to exploit Muslim dissatisfaction with the CPI-M and to distance herself from the communal image of the BJP. Banerjee somewhat dubiously claimed that, '[e]ven when I was in the NDA, I had nothing to do with the BJP' and that BJP's 'principles and views are different from mine'.<sup>42</sup> Despite her prior mistrust of Congress, she now declared herself interested in an alliance with it.<sup>43</sup> The TMC's actions, in which alliances were discarded and joined on the basis of political expediency, show the opportunist nature of the party and its ideological flexibility.

In May 2006, the Left Front government convincingly won the West Bengal Vidhan Sabha elections, gaining 235 of 294 seats. The TMC were reduced to 29 seats, a result significantly worse than its 2001 electoral performance.<sup>44</sup> During the election campaign, the CPI-M stressed the necessity for industrial development, arguing that the significant victory margin was a mandate for industrialisation.<sup>45</sup> This strategy was not without risk, as one commentator noted in May 2006:

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<sup>38</sup> "Panskura line" strategy derails Trinamul' in *TOI*.

<sup>39</sup> Banerjee called for the central government to dismiss the Left Front government even before 14 March 2007 – the first time she called for the centre to dismiss the government was 4 February 2007. 'Mamata holds rally in Nandigram' in *NDTV.com*, 4 February 2007, available from; <http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/news/mamata-holds-rally-in-nandigram/11265>; accessed on 17 August 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'Making and unmaking of Trinamul Congress', pp.1529-1532.

<sup>41</sup> Mahendra Singh Rana, *India votes: Lok Sabha & Vidhan Sabha elections 2001-2005*, New Delhi, 2006, p.463, Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'Making and unmaking of Trinamul Congress', p.1535 and Mukulika Banerjee, 'Populist leadership in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu', p.297.

<sup>42</sup> She did not confirm if she was breaking the alliance, in Radhika Ramaseshan, 'Mamata balancing act, in rehearsed Urdu' in *TT*, 9 September 2007.

<sup>43</sup> This mistrust was expressed in her comment that, '[t]he CPM's red germs have infested the party. Let them be disinfected first'. In *ibid*.

<sup>44</sup> Ashok Mitra, 'Take it as red - West Bengal continues to be the psephologists despair' in *TT*, 12 May 2006, Sumanta Banerjee, 'Elections, Jatra style, in West Bengal' in *EPW*, 41:10, 11 March 2006, p.864 and AM, 'Suffrage in West Bengal' in *EPW*, 41:21, 27 May 2006, pp.2048-2050.

<sup>45</sup> 'Any vacillation or backtracking with respect to industrialisation would represent a breach of faith in the trust reposed by the people in the Front' in Surjya Kanta Mishra, 'On agrarian transition in West Bengal' in *The Marxist*, 23:2, April 2007, p.14.

Above all, the mandate the Left Front has won, in the view of a vast number of its rank and file, is a mandate for Left principles. Any deviation from these principles, such as a diminution of the role of the public sector in the development agenda, could meet with fierce internal resistance.<sup>46</sup>

This prediction was correct, and the CPI-M and the Left Front showed signs of disunity during 2007 as events at Nandigram unfolded.

### **Conflict within the CPI-M**

Peasant resistance forced the CPI-M to abandon the SEZ at Nandigram. The party accepted that it had made ‘mistakes’ and promised more consultation in the future. However, the CPI-M did not reject its economic policy, but defended it. The events at Nandigram in 2007 also caused conflict within the CPI-M and the Left Front coalition. Most of the conflicts amongst the Left Front coalition partners were limited to strategy; the smaller parties worried that the actions of the CPI-M would damage their electoral success. These conflicts were contained in the period under study. The conflict within the party was more complex, with many in the rank and file being confused over the direction of the party. The CPI-M narrative was, in part, an exercise in containing this conflict.

At the ground level, not everyone followed the CPI-M’s rather convoluted explanation of how its industrial policy legitimised land acquisition. As one CPI-M supporter at Nandigram said, ‘the only party we have known all our life is CPI(M). For years, we heard leaders spew anti-industry speeches. Now, there is a sudden turnaround. I don’t understand.’<sup>47</sup> Articles in the *People’s Democracy* had a pedagogical function, explaining how ‘the Fund-Bank directed policy of neo-liberalism’ had led to negative outcomes in contrast to the Left Front policy of industrialisation.<sup>48</sup> Rallies were organised to explain that there ‘was no conflict as such between industry and agriculture.’ The Bengal unit of the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) announced a month long campaign in February 2007 to ‘clear the fog of confusion from amongst the minds of a small section of the kisans [peasants].’<sup>49</sup> In April, the Central Committee announced that it would ‘conduct a countrywide campaign to counter the disinformation and anti-CPI(M) propaganda on the Nandigram issue’.<sup>50</sup> These rallies, campaigns and articles would appear to have had a limited effect on the wider Bengali population and in particular, on supporters of the CPI-M.

There was evidence of factional unease within the leadership of the CPI-M over economic issues. Partha Pratim Basu noted that Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee was often portrayed as reformative and as representing the modern and new, dragging a reluctant CPI-M with him.<sup>51</sup> According to this analysis, Bhattacharjee, since becoming Chief Minister in 2000 had taken the party in

<sup>46</sup> AM, ‘Suffrage in West Bengal’, p.2050.

<sup>47</sup> Bidyut Chakrabarty interview with Harihar Mondal, a Nandigram farmer, 29 March 2007, in Chakrabarty, *Indian politics and society since independence: events, processes and ideology*, New York, 2008, p.151.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Agricultural & industrial development, Bengal for overcoming obstacles’ in *PD*, 31:6, 11 February 2007.

<sup>49</sup> B. Prasant, ‘Kisan rally on March 11 demanding industrialisation’ in *PD*, 31:7, 18 February 2007.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Central committee call: counter anti-CPI(M) propaganda on Nandigram’ in *PD*, 31:14, 8 April 2007.

<sup>51</sup> Partha Pratim Basu, “Brand Buddha” in India’s West Bengal, p.299. Also see Debabrata Bandyopadhyay, ‘Licence to kill?’, p.11. For an example of this attitude, see Ashok Malik, ‘Didi’s long march’, in *Tehelka*, 8:20, 21 May 2011.

a radically different direction, a direction which saw his reformatory agenda praised by the Chamber of Commerce and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.<sup>52</sup> Bhattacharjee was critical of *bandhs* (general strikes) and *gheraos* (the encirclement of employers by labour to gain demands) and constantly articulated his concern that events at Nandigram were damaging the ‘investment climate’ of West Bengal. In January 2007 after the initial clashes at Nandigram, he pleaded with investors to retain their faith in West Bengal.<sup>53</sup> However, as Basu points out, many of the actions of the Bhattacharjee-led CPI-M represented continuity with past practice, rather than a radical break from the past. Biswajit Roy and Nilanjan Dutta have argued that this factional difference was overstated. They argued that it was largely the media that portrayed Bhattacharjee as an agent of change, especially *The Telegraph* and *Anandabazar Patrika*. Therefore, Bhattacharjee was presented to the pro-industrialisation, anti-communist elite as the acceptable face of the CPI-M.<sup>54</sup> Others highlighted the factional conflict between Prakash Karat, General Secretary of the CPI-M, and the West Bengal branch of the CPI-M. Publically though, Karat was solidly behind Bhattacharjee and spoke favourably of SEZs in West Bengal in May 2006.<sup>55</sup>

The most significant internal conflict within the CPI-M concerned the use of violence. This was sometimes represented as a conflict between ‘hawks’ and ‘doves’. Therefore, ‘hawks’ like Lakshman Seth and Benoy Konar threatened retribution against those defying the party at Nandigram, while ‘doves’ like Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee called for peace and the need to re-establish ‘normalcy’ and ‘law and order’.<sup>56</sup> In January 2007, State Secretariat member, Konar, threatened that:

If they [the BUPC] want a Keshpur-like situation, we are prepared for it. If they want to do things democratically, we shall reciprocate. But if they want to make things difficult for us, we are prepared to make life hell for them.<sup>57</sup>

There was a disconnect between local leaders like Seth (the Tamluk Lok Sabha member and head of the HDA) who threatened resistance with violence and those in Kolkata who downplayed the use (and existence) of violence at Nandigram. However, rather than a factional conflict or a rural-Kolkata conflict, this would appear to be an issue of party discipline – it was the *fiction* of peace and non-violence that needed to be stressed. A ‘dove’ like Bhattacharjee understood this and he played the statesman, urging a peaceful solution. However, violence was accepted as necessary and had been recognised as an extension of politics for some time.<sup>58</sup> Bhattacharjee’s emphasis on peace and ‘normalcy’ was exposed as rhetoric after the ‘re-capture’ of Nandigram in November 2007, when he

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<sup>52</sup> Partha Pratim Basu, “‘Brand Buddha’ in India’s West Bengal”, p.297.

<sup>53</sup> ‘the message that we would like to send to entrepreneurs abroad is that we need private capital’, in Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, ‘On industrialisation in West Bengal’, p.6 and ‘Nandigram incident unfortunate: CM’ in *TOI*, 7 January 2007. The *People’s Democracy* noted the party ‘actively solicited private investment’, in Prakash Karat, ‘After the election victories of the left’ in *PD*, 30:21, 21 May 2006.

<sup>54</sup> Biswajit Roy and Nilanjan Dutta, *Nandigram and media: between the battlelines*, Kolkata, 2010, p.125.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Singh song, sung by Bengal CPM’ in *TT*, 4 March 2011 and Karat, ‘After the election victories of the left’ in *PD*, 30:21, 21 May 2006.

<sup>56</sup> Roy and Dutta argued that *The Telegraph* was reluctant to admit Bhattacharjee’s role in the violence, after portraying him positively. Violence instead was blamed on the ‘Stalinism’ of the party to disassociate it from neoliberal policies. Roy and Dutta, *Nandigram and media*, pp.58-59.

<sup>57</sup> Naresh Jana, ‘Mobilisation and mayhem: hitback men and motive’ in *TT*, 8 January 2007.

<sup>58</sup> Partha Chatterjee, ‘The coming crisis in West Bengal’, p.45.

remarked that the BUPC had been 'paid back in their own coin'.<sup>59</sup> Despite the occasional uncensored comment, the CPI-M, with a strong tradition of democratic centralism, maintained unity in 2007. However, this tradition also made it difficult to express dissent and it left little room for 'creative grassroots participation'.<sup>60</sup>

The coalition members of the Left Front dissented against the CPI-M's management of events at Nandigram. However, this dissent was largely rhetorical. Their dissent was most pronounced in January and March 2007, and became more muted by November 2007. On 9 January 2007, the CPI called for 'transparency' and described the violence (like the Chief Minister) as 'unfortunate'.<sup>61</sup> Most criticism was driven by necessity; ignoring the events of 14 March 2007 was not a realistic option. This was evident in much of the criticism, which was often about being kept 'in the dark' about events or complaints about how this could weaken the coalition.<sup>62</sup> The CPI-M Central Committee recognised these disagreements and met in late March 2007 to discuss how to strengthen the existing relationships.<sup>63</sup>

By November 2007 it was clear that the coalition members were supportive of the CPI-M. Again, much of their criticism was not about the plight of the people of Nandigram (or for the CPI-M refugees for that matter), but over strategic issues and retaining electoral support. The Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) was the most vocal in its condemnation of the CPI-M. Kshiti Goswami, the RSP leader and Public Works Minister, threatened to pull out of the Left Front declaring that it was 'time to stand courageously against the CPM's Stalinist juggernaut'.<sup>64</sup> However, Goswami withdrew this threat under pressure from his party, which deemed his move as not 'tactically wise' and rejected withdrawing from government in view of what they could 'achieve by staying in the Left Front'.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, the CPI worked to maintain the Left Front as they could not 'afford to isolate the CPM for... national

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<sup>59</sup> 'Public defence of recapture by party squads' in *TT*, 14 November 2007. People in Nandigram were less likely to excuse Bhattacharjee. They blamed Bhattacharjee, and local strongman Seth, for the violence at Nandigram, many suggesting capital punishment as an appropriate sentence. For example, Muktirani Das, injured on 14 March 2007, suggested hanging them. Das was not alone and many others who deposed the 'People's Tribunal' suggested similar punishment, in Das 'Depositions before People's Tribunal on Nandigram', Gokulnagar, 26 May 2007, WD-29/26 in Annexure A-1, p.5 in All India Citizens Initiative, *Nandigram: what really happened? Based on the report of the People's Tribunal on Nandigram, 26-28 May, 2007*, Delhi, 2007. Bhattacharjee's belief in violence to serve party interests had been demonstrated during the Keshpur 'turf war'. He said of TMC cadre, 'those who roam the roads with arms cannot enjoy human rights. Just shoot them and leave me to handle the repercussion' in Debabrata Bandyopadhyay, 'Licence to kill?' in *EPW*, 36:1, 6 January 2001, p.12.

<sup>60</sup> Amrita Basu, 'Parliamentary communism as a historical phenomenon', pp.343-344 and AM, 'The state of the CPI(M) in West Bengal', pp.8-13. Partha Chatterjee and Ben Rogaly have questioned the strength of democratic centralism in the CPI-M, arguing that in villages and at the local level local cadres were allowed significant leeway and mediation. Chatterjee, *The present history of West Bengal*, pp.141-153 and Rogaly, 'Containing conflict and reaping votes: management of rural labour relations in West Bengal' in *EPW*, 33:42, 17 October 1998, p.2737.

<sup>61</sup> 'Left divided over SEZ land acquisition' in *TOI*, 9 January 2007.

<sup>62</sup> 'Press statement of A. B. Bardhan, CPI general secretary', *TOI*, 23 March, 2007 in Bidyut Chakrabarty, *Indian politics and society since independence*, p.151.

<sup>63</sup> CPI-M Central Committee, *Report on current developments*, 31 March 2007, available from: <http://cpim.org/documents/2007-march-april-cc%20report.pdf>; accessed on 13 December 2010.

<sup>64</sup> 'Allies angry but "no alternative" to CPM' in *TT*, 13 November 2007.

<sup>65</sup> 'Party puts Kshiti back in Writers' in *TT*, 30 November 2007 also see 'Planned attack: RSP minister' in *TT*, 7 November 2007.

compulsions'.<sup>66</sup> There was evidence that by November the CPI-M had managed to keep its coalition more informed about events at Nandigram. In an interview on 28 October 2007, Ashok Ghosh, leader of the Forward Block, framed the issue as one of 'law and order', echoing the CPI-M and the government line of argument. This, and his refusal to comment on whether a crackdown was imminent, suggested that he was aware of these preparations.<sup>67</sup> The final member of the Left Front, the West Bengal Socialist Party (WBSP), remained entirely silent, despite the fact that three of its four Vidhan Sabha members were from East Midnapur.<sup>68</sup>

### **CPI-M representations of the events**

The CPI-M narrative was intent on deflecting blame from the party. Therefore, blame was attributed to individual party members, the media, and most commonly, the political opposition. By denying their intention to acquire land, the CPI-M consistently denied that resistance at Nandigram was about land acquisition. In January 2007, the *People's Democracy* stated that:

The state government has not issued any notification for any acquisition of land in this area. Confusion was created by some information given by the Haldia Development Authority in this regard. This authority, in fact, has no authority on question of land acquisition.<sup>69</sup>

This statement effectively blamed the HDA and its head Lakshman Seth. Other articles in the *People's Democracy* would ignore the existence of the acquisition notice and label it as 'a deliberate campaign of misinformation... being run by opposition parties'.<sup>70</sup> Land acquisition was described as a 'vicious rumour',<sup>71</sup> or a 'mere proposal'.<sup>72</sup> Party members also made contradictory statements. Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee announced on 9 January 2007 that the HDA should destroy the original acquisition notice and that its posting was a 'mistake'.<sup>73</sup> At Khejuri on 12 February 2007 he reiterated that land would not be acquired if it transgressed the will of the people. Lakshman Seth contradicted this statement the next day, at a press conference at Tamluk, when he stated that the land would be acquired.<sup>74</sup> Despite these contradictory statements, the CPI-M repeatedly claimed that it could not understand why people saw acquisition as imminent.

The CPI-M represented events at Nandigram to reflect favourably upon the party. The *People's Democracy* described the 7 January 2007 incident as:

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<sup>66</sup> 'Allies angry but "no alternative" to CPM' in *TT*.

<sup>67</sup> 'Partners rally round Big Brother' in *TT*, 28 October 2007.

<sup>68</sup> The WBSP merged with the Socialist Party in April 2010, in Sabyasachi Bandyopadhyay, 'Kiranmoy returns to SP, will remain a minister' in *Indian Express*, 14 April 2010. Its leader, Kiranmoy Nanda, the Left Front Fisheries Minister, only commented publically on Nandigram in 2009, in Anshuman Phadikar, 'Trinamul takes Khejuri' in *TT*, 10 June 2009 and 'Cracks in West Bengal's red bastion widens' in *The Hindu*, 12 November 2009.

<sup>69</sup> Editorial, 'Nandigram: issues and facts' in *PD*, 31:2, 14 January 2007.

<sup>70</sup> 'What happened on January 3?' in *PD*, 31:2, 14 January 2007.

<sup>71</sup> B. Prasant, 'Trinamul Congress, Naxalites in murder spree at Nandigram' in *PD*, 31:2, 14 January 2007.

<sup>72</sup> Malini Bhattacharya, 'Nandigram and the question of development', p.1895.

<sup>73</sup> 'Tear up HDA notice: CM' in *The Statesman*, 10 January 2007.

<sup>74</sup> B. Prasant, 'Industrial development will benefit the rural poor: Buddhadeb' in *PD*, 31:7, 18 February 2007 and Annexure C, Calcutta High Court's own petition, Section 30, p.12, in All India Citizens Initiative, *Nandigram: what really happened?*

[s]ix CPI (M) workers were brutally gunned down and lynched at Nandigram in east Midnapore during the night of January 6 by murderous goons of the Trinamul Congress and the Naxalites, aided and abetted by the SUCI.<sup>75</sup>

Similarly, the 14 March 2007 incident was described as:

administrative officials accompanied by police personnel politely asked the agitating and armed Trinamul Congress lumpens to give way so that the repair work could start. In response, the hoodlums commandeered at gunpoint women and children and had them lined up as a barricade from behind which they started to lob bombs and brickbats on the advancing officials including the police.<sup>76</sup>

Both these representations were significantly different to reports by the media, civil society and the peasantry at Nandigram. In different circumstances the CPI-M was less bellicose, for example, admitting initiating the conflict on 7 January 2007 in documents submitted to the Kolkata High Court.<sup>77</sup>

The original SEZ proposal at Nandigram included Nandigram Block One and two *mouzas* in Khejuri. Despite this, in May 2007 the ‘turf war’ expanded to neighbouring Nandigram Block Two, where villages like Satengabari, saw violent clashes.<sup>78</sup> The CPI-M argued that this proved that the TMC was focused on political control and not land acquisition, and that the TMC was looking ‘to make political encroachment through violence’ in preparation for the May 2008 panchayat elections.<sup>79</sup> It was unclear how the ‘turf war’ expanded to Nandigram Block Two, but there were credible accounts of the BUPC attacking and burning rival villages in the area, suggesting that the BUPC were looking to expand its control.<sup>80</sup> May 2007 saw repeated allegations of ‘Trinamool-Maoist’ atrocities in the *People’s Democracy*, however these were unable to be verified by media or human rights reports.<sup>81</sup>

From August 2007 the CPI-M began to signal its intention to ‘re-capture’ Nandigram, arguing that peace needed to be restored. A series of articles in the *People’s Democracy* began to question how long the ‘liberated zone’ should be tolerated. It was asked why the ‘professional thugs’ of the TMC with its ‘lackeys on the right and the extreme left’ should remain to ‘run riot, organise armed assaults on all who would not support the “save agricultural committee,” and loot households’.<sup>82</sup> The violent retaking of Nandigram in November 2007 was defended primarily in this manner. This was made explicit in the Polit Bureau statement on 11 November. Nandigram was described as ‘an abnormal

<sup>75</sup> B. Prasant, ‘Trinamul Congress, Naxalites in murder spree at Nandigram’.

<sup>76</sup> B. Prasant, ‘Trinamul Congress, Naxals run rampage at Nandigram’ in *PD*, 31:11, 18 March 2007.

<sup>77</sup> See Chapter Two for details, pp.9-10.

<sup>78</sup> Naresh Jana, ‘Loot and rape mob in land protest’ in *TT*, 1 May 2007 and ‘Restrain message to police’ in *TT*, 1 May 2007.

<sup>79</sup> B. Prasant, ‘Trinamul goons attack, loot Tekhali relief camp at Nandigram’ in *PD*, 31:19, 13 May 2007. It also accused them of this in 25 March, in B. Prasant, ‘Nandigram oustees rally in Kolkata’ in *PD*, 31:12, 25 March 2007.

<sup>80</sup> Imran Ahmed Siddiqui, ‘Nandigram’s live bombs’ in *TT*, 1 May 2007.

<sup>81</sup> See B. Prasant, ‘Many villagers left critically injured: Trinamul Congress-Naxalites launch wanton assaults at Nandigram, Singur’ in *PD*, 31:21, 27 May 2007.

<sup>82</sup> See B. Prasant, ‘Trinamul Congress launches violent attacks on Nandigram’ in *PD*, 31:35, 2 September 2007 and ‘How long shall Nandigram remain a “liberated zone?”’ in *PD*, 31:31, 5 August 2007.

situation' and the site of a 'parallel raj' assisted by Maoist armed squads.<sup>83</sup> Peace and normalcy were declared crucial as well as the right of the refugees to return to their homes.

The CPI-M refugees, driven from their homes by the BUPC and housed mostly at Tekhali on the borders of Nandigram, were utilised by the CPI-M to claim victimhood and present the opposition as oppressive. The numbers of refugees ranged from around 1500 to 3500 and their stories were regularly presented by the CPI-M.<sup>84</sup> Their victimhood was emphasised in this passage, which celebrated their return home on 18 November 2007:

The terror-filled days and nights when the smell of fear, and the stench of blood, were common enough phenomena, as armed killers ran riot, and the corporate media exulted, have ended... the unhealthy condition of the relief camps as more and more people poured in to make the ranks of the displaced persons swell beyond manageable proportions, and of the dreadful torture meted out routinely to those who refused to be rendered homeless — everything was a painful past, difficult, almost impossible to erase, but for the returnees, the past was another country in another time.<sup>85</sup>

The cruelty of the opposition was documented by highlighting the suffering of the CPI-M supporters. For example, the story of the Pradhans, a family of CPI-M supporters was recounted. The Pradhans were attacked while attempting to reach the safety of a refugee camp. 'A physically-challenged member of the family, Baren could not run away quickly enough and he was caught and mercilessly beaten up by Trinamul Congress goons.'<sup>86</sup> It was suggested that Baren represented the CPI-M, damaged and victimised, suffering under TMC oppression.<sup>87</sup>

The CPI-M refugees did suffer, and the non-CPI-M media occasionally published stories about them. *The Hindu*, a paper considered sympathetic to the CPI-M with regard to Nandigram, ran an article where refugees alleged BUPC violence and extortion soon after 14 March 2007.<sup>88</sup> Media considered less sympathetic to the CPI-M also covered the sufferings of the refugees, recognising their desperation to return home.<sup>89</sup> The refugees themselves were critical of the media, arguing that it had ignored them. One refugee, Sabita Pradhan from Bhangabera argued that few reported 'our side of the story'.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> 'Polit bureau communiqué: Nandigram situation' in *PD*, 31:46, 18 November 2007.

<sup>84</sup> Amnesty international estimated 1500 in November. Numbers fluctuated in the *People's Democracy* with 3500 the highest estimate. Amnesty International, *India: urgent need to address large scale human rights abuses during Nandigram "recapture"*, 15 January 2008, available from;

<http://www.amnestyusa.org/document.php?lang=e&id=ENGASA200012008>; accessed 10 March 2011.

<sup>85</sup> B. Prasant, 'A dawn of courage, fortitude, and relentless struggle: the refugees return home at Nandigram' in *PD*, 31:46, 18 November 2007.

<sup>86</sup> B. Prasant, 'Nandigram: continuing rampage meets strong protests' in *PD*, 31:16, 22 April 2007.

<sup>87</sup> Similarly, CPI-M workers killed 'by the goons of Trinamul Congress - Maoists - SUCI combine' were presented as 'martyrs' to violence and listed in the *PD*, in 'Nandigram martyrs' in *PD*, 31:46, 18 November 2007.

<sup>88</sup> Antara Das, 'Nandigram victims narrate their tales of woe' in *The Hindu*, 21 March 2007. See Roy and Dutta for the controversy over *The Hindu's* editorial line, in Roy and Dutta, *Nandigram and media*, pp.167-169.

<sup>89</sup> 'Nandigram a ticking time bomb?' in *TOI*, 20 June 2007. Also Imran Ahmed Siddiqui and Naresh Jana, 'Bengal's overnight refugees' in *TT*, 3 May 2007.

<sup>90</sup> Roy and Dutta, *Nandigram and media*, p.208.



**Figure One**

Figure of graffiti from Nandigram. This was Mamata Banerjee, burning a factory.

Smita Gupta, 'Who's got change?' in *Outlook India*, 18 May 2009.

### **Representation of the Opposition**

The CPI-M attempted to deflect criticism of its own violent actions by accusing the opposition of being violent. Therefore, the CPI-M presented the opposition at Nandigram as politically expedient, criminal and illegitimate. With the CPI-M and the TMC accusing each other of essentially the same thing – of running violent, criminal gangs in Nandigram, the political narratives were dominated by violence. In January 2007, the *People's Democracy* described the 'ground level mobilisation at Nandigram' as attracting the 'strangest of political bedfellows.' 'From the BJP to the Jamaat, the Congress led by the Trinamool and a motley crowd of ultra-Left groups of all varieties have all converged along with many an NGO.' The article explained that the unity of such disparate forces was not motivated by resistance to land acquisition, but by 'political expediency at its worst.'<sup>91</sup> Political expediency also explained the opposition to industrialisation, as evidenced by the graffiti from Nandigram. The CPI-M consistently portrayed the TMC and the Maoist/Naxalites as behind the resistance at Nandigram, and their actions as motivated by violence and criminality. The *People's Democracy* saw Mamata Banerjee as exemplifying this, inciting violence, encouraging riots, and marginalising the 'peace process' due to her 'devious and criminal game'.<sup>92</sup> The CPI-M party newspaper, *Ganashakti*, termed the opposition *Trinamuli santras* or *Maobadi santra*; the terror campaign of the TMC or Maoists.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Editorial, 'Nandigram: issues and facts'.

<sup>92</sup> B. Prasant, 'Trinamul Congress Chief meets Jyoti Basu over Nandigram' in *PD*, 31:23, 10 June 2007 and B. Prasant, 'People foil sporadic attempts to disrupt the PDS in Bengal' in *PD*, 31:41, 14 October 2007.

<sup>93</sup> Roy and Dutta, *Nandigram and media*, pp.27-29.

The CPI-M presented the key opposition actor at Nandigram, the BUPC, as a TMC front. The CPI-M, as previously mentioned, denied that resistance at Nandigram was about land acquisition. Therefore, the BUPC was largely ignored. It was dismissed in January 2007 as a 'bogus paper organisation called the "save agriculture committee", a mask for the Trinamul Congress-Naxalite-SUCI combine.'<sup>94</sup> It was not mentioned by name in the *People's Democracy* until 18 March.<sup>95</sup> Malini Bhattacharya blamed the violence at Nandigram on the 'so-called' BUPC in May 2007.<sup>96</sup>

The CPI-M presented the TMC as the key actor at Nandigram. However, the TMC initially had a limited presence at Nandigram, and in early January 2007 the TMC was focused on the events at Singur. Mamata Banerjee was on hunger strike and did not visit Nandigram until early February.<sup>97</sup> The CPI-M argued that the TMC was not opposed to land acquisition, but was merely criminal and violent. An explanation that moved beyond this limited critique was advanced after 14 March 2007. Violence was linked to TMC and Maoist/Naxalite tactics 'perfected over the years in West Bengal', with events at Keshpur cited as a precedent. At Keshpur, it was argued, 'these elements created similar mayhem and terror in order to establish their political presence.' The TMC was replicating that model at Nandigram 'in their desperation to regain some political space.'<sup>98</sup> In other articles the TMC was also linked to the 'proto-fascist terror' of the 1970s, or portrayed as representative of the landlord class.<sup>99</sup> More frequently however, the TMC was represented as simply a party of 'goons' or 'armed lumpens'.

Nandigram, and Singur before it, were crucial for the TMC, providing the 'oxygen' with which the party could make a political comeback.<sup>100</sup> The TMC had performed poorly in the 2006 Vidhan Sabha elections and remained unable to challenge the rural dominance of the CPI-M.<sup>101</sup> Nandigram provided the TMC with a platform and a cause to support, freeing the TMC from its relentlessly negative campaigning. Mamata Banerjee was an experienced politician and was adept at channelling anger at Nandigram toward support for the TMC. This was best reflected in the comprehensive TMC victory in the May 2008 panchayat elections.<sup>102</sup>

After March 2007 the TMC came to dominate the BUPC. This was not simply a process of the TMC taking over. Non-TMC leaders like Nishikanta Mondal, Abdus Samad, Sabuj Pradhan and Bhabani Das, who belonged respectively to the CPI-M (before leaving), Jamiat, Congress and the

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<sup>94</sup> B. Prasant, 'Trinamul Congress, Naxalites in murder spree at Nandigram'.

<sup>95</sup> 'Chief Minister's statement in assembly' in *PD*, 31:11, 18 March 2007.

<sup>96</sup> Malini Bhattacharya, 'Nandigram and the question of development', p.1895.

<sup>97</sup> 'Mamata holds rally in Nandigram' in *NDTV.com*, 4 February 2007, available from; <http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/news/mamata-holds-rally-in-nandigram/11265>; accessed on 17 August 2011.

<sup>98</sup> Editorial, 'Defeat politics of terror' in *PD*, 31:11, 18 March 2007.

<sup>99</sup> B. Prasant, 'Trinamul rampage inside assembly: statewide condemnation rallies held' in *PD*, 30:50, 10 December 2006 and 'Nandigram: heinous conspiracy unearthed' in *PD*, 31:2, 14 January 2007.

<sup>100</sup> Ashis Chakrabarti, 'Seize the day and turn the bend' in *TT*, 22 May 2007.

<sup>101</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya noted that the TMC lacked a solid social base and its support was often described as 'lumpen'. Traditionally the TMC had been most effective in gaining votes in and around Kolkata, in Bhattacharyya, 'Making and unmaking of Trinamul Congress', p.1529.

<sup>102</sup> For figures see 'Trinamul targets CPM "tormentor" in Nandi man killed on way to work' in *TT*, 24 May 2008 and Bidyut Roy, 'In Nandigram, Mamata uses CPM cadres to turn tables on CPM' in *Indian Express*, 6 May 2009.

Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI), remained in the BUPC, while the organisations they were a part of were sidelined. The Jamiat was the first organisation to be sidelined by the TMC. The Jamiat had attempted to resist the encroachment of the TMC at Nandigram in February 2007.<sup>103</sup> Banerjee retaliated by sidelining it in May 2007 at the 'rainbow' peace meeting, the first attempt to achieve peace at Nandigram. Ashok Ghosh, the Forward Bloc leader and convener of this meeting, failed to invite the Jamiat, and Ghosh made it clear that Banerjee had no problem with their omission.<sup>104</sup>

The TMC was prepared to sacrifice the interests of peasants in Nandigram if it would further the interests of the party. For example, Banerjee used the 'rainbow' peace meeting in May 2007 as a chance for political grandstanding, and appeared uninterested in peace. Banerjee insisted at this meeting that the 14 March 2007 incident be described as 'genocide' and left the meeting when this was refused, stalling any chance at peace.<sup>105</sup> Banerjee gained politically from the continued conflict at Nandigram and during 2007 media and civil society increasingly assigned responsibility for the violence to the CPI-M. Therefore, peace at Nandigram, even if achievable, was not necessarily in the interests of the TMC.<sup>106</sup> After this meeting Sonachura locals complained of both parties being 'only interested in political mileage before the panchayat elections.' A BUPC member commented that, '[w]e don't expect the political big guns to do anything for us and we don't depend on them any more.'<sup>107</sup>

The CPI-M initially defined the opposition at Nandigram as communal. The Jamiat, despite possessing strong secular credentials, was accused by Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee in January 2007 of engaging in 'an ugly communal campaign'. '[F]undamentalist forces' were said to have gathered at Nandigram, claimed the *People's Democracy* on 14 January.<sup>108</sup> As discussed in Chapter Three, communal rhetoric was rare, and widely condemned in the West Bengali political discourse. Far more common, as these examples suggest, were parties condemning alleged communalism.<sup>109</sup> Before 2007 the Left Front had often been credited for the absence of communal politics in West Bengal and Muslims had traditionally voted for the Left Front.<sup>110</sup> Several events in 2007 weakened this support, such as the release of the Sachar report, the Rizwanur Rehman controversy and Nandigram.<sup>111</sup> These controversies

<sup>103</sup> 'Jamait shove to Mamata' in *TT*, 4 February 2007.

<sup>104</sup> 'B3 unlikely, Mamata confirmed - BJP & Jamait left out of invitee list' in *TT*, 23 May 2007. Abdus Samad criticised the TMC publically in 2009 for sidelining the Jamiat at Nandigram, in 'Father, son take on CPM might' in *TOI*, 18 March 2009.

<sup>105</sup> 'Drama over, stage waits - Mamata storms out of meet' in *TT*, 25 May 2007.

<sup>106</sup> Ashis Chakrabarti, 'Seize the day and turn the bend' in *TT*, 22 May 2007.

<sup>107</sup> 'Hush falls on Nandigram as ray of hope comes under a cloud - villagers gun for "selfish" politicians' in *TT*, 25 May 2007.

<sup>108</sup> 'CM singles out Jamait' in *The Statesman*, 7 January and 'What happened on January 3?' in *PD*.

<sup>109</sup> Partha Chatterjee has questioned this complacency in Chatterjee, *The politics of the governed*, pp.115-130. An exception to this occurred in 2002 when Bhattacharjee insinuated that unauthorised madrasahs in West Bengal included anti-national terrorists and operatives of the Pakistan intelligence agency, in *ibid.*, pp.116-123.

<sup>110</sup> A position that changed in the 2009 federal election, when the Muslim vote for the Left Front went from 46 percent to 37 percent: a swing of nine percent. 'A political quake in West Bengal' in *The Hindu*, 26 May 2009, p.5.

<sup>111</sup> On the Sachar report see, *Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India*, Prime Minister's High Level Committee Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India, November 2006, available from; [http://minorityaffairs.gov.in/newsite/sachar/sachar\\_comm.pdf](http://minorityaffairs.gov.in/newsite/sachar/sachar_comm.pdf); accessed on 11 March 2011. Ghanshyam Shah, 'The condition of Muslims' in *EPW*, 42:10, 10 March 2007, p.838 and Surinder Jodhka, 'Perceptions and receptions: Sachar Committee and the secular Left' in *EPW*, 42:29, 21 July 2007, pp.2996-2999. The lack of government follow up was criticised in September 2007 in the *EPW* see Editorial, 'Pretence of follow-up action'

(especially the Sachar report, which recorded low levels of Muslims in government positions) meant that the CPI-M failed to pursue these initial communal criticisms and the focus shifted to other groups, namely the TMC and Maoists/Naxalites.

The CPI-M described those resisting land acquisition at Nandigram as the ‘Trinamool-Maoist combine’.<sup>112</sup> By linking the TMC to Maoist/Naxalite groups the CPI-M sought to de-legitimise them. In 2007 Maoism, both in India and in West Bengal, was regularly presented by those in positions of power as criminal and illegitimate. Aditya Nigam has discussed this phenomenon in an all-India context, while criticising the central government: ‘[i]t is very convenient for it [the central government]... to dub all other anti-displacement and anti-SEZ struggles as “Maoist” – thus completely narrowing down the space of democratic mass struggles.’<sup>113</sup> The CPI-M also linked other groups to Maoist/Naxalites in an attempt to discredit them. In January 2007, the *People’s Democracy* noted that:

For the past couple of months or so, Naxalites and fundamentalists of the Jamiat Ulama-i Hind have been congregating there and settling in... There were also researchers and elderly university and college students with strong Maoist/Naxalite links.<sup>114</sup>

Groups, like the Association for Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR), the SUCI, a Bengali Marxist party, and individual intellectuals were often presented as ‘linked’ or ‘sympathetic’ to Maoist/Naxalites as this quote signifies. To a lesser extent, it also served factional interests within the CPI-M, marginalising the dissenting voice within the party by labelling it Maoist/Naxalite.

Despite the CPI-M labelling the opposition at Nandigram as a ‘Trinamul-Maoist combine’, the evidence was less clear about such a nexus. The extent of the Maoist presence at Nandigram has not yet been determined. In the period under review, little convincing evidence was presented of a Maoist/Naxalite presence. The police, compromised by their links to the CPI-M, were unable to prove their presence, noting in November 2007:

It seems students, probably influenced by Maoists, were present. A few Naxalites might have trained villagers, especially in Sonachura, to fight with guns and bombs. But we have not found evidence of large-scale presence of Maoists.<sup>115</sup>

However, after the ‘re-capture’ of Nandigram in November 2007, there was some evidence to suggest that Maoist/Naxalite individuals had been present since September. *NDTV* reported on 9 November that it possessed ‘information available’ that Maoists had infiltrated Nandigram in September, claiming that there was a core group of ten to twelve, plus between 110-120 Maoists who were camping in the

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in *EPW*, 42:39, 29 September 2007, pp.3895-3896. For the Rizwanur Rehman controversy see Rajashri Dasgupta, ‘Why did Rizwanur Rehman have to die?’ in *EPW*, 42:42, 20 October 2007, pp.4213-4217.

<sup>112</sup> Only one article in the *People’s Democracy* addressed the Maoist theoretical position, in B. Prasant, ‘Maoists on the path of violence at Nandigram’ in *PD*, 34:45, 11 November 2007.

<sup>113</sup> Aditya Nigam, ‘Democracy, state and capital: the “unthought” of 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxism’ in *EPW*, 44:51, 19 December 2009, pp.35-39.

<sup>114</sup> ‘Nandigram: heinous conspiracy unearthed’ in *PD*.

<sup>115</sup> ‘...comrades grope’ in *TT*, 13 November 2007.

area.<sup>116</sup> The Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) remarked that while there was no ‘conclusive proof’, ‘the trends show an indication’ of at least some Maoist/Naxalite support for the BUPC.<sup>117</sup> There was some evidence of a Maoist presence at Nandigram, although at this stage it does not seem a large scale presence. The CPI-M’s description of the opposition at Nandigram as a Trinamool-Maoist conspiracy was therefore, overstated.<sup>118</sup>

### **Post May-2008 – the continuation of party society?**

After November 2007, the TMC influence in Nandigram increased. The May 2008 panchayat elections saw BUPC leaders, including former CPI-M turned BUPC leaders like Nishikanta Mondal and Sheikh Sahauddin, contesting and winning elections as TMC members.<sup>119</sup> Although the BUPC survived after May 2008, this election marked the end of the BUPC as a significant political force. The evidence suggests that TMC rule in Nandigram, has not seen the death of ‘party society’, nor allowed the emergence of a ‘vibrant’ civil society. Rather, TMC rule in Nandigram has generally replicated that of the pre-2007 CPI-M, utilising patronage, corruption, and when necessary, violence.<sup>120</sup> Political allies turned rivals, have been attacked for contesting elections. For example, Badshah Alam, who was standing as an independent in the Nandigram by-poll in January 2009, was attacked in December 2008. This attack on Alam was justified by TMC Lok Sabha member Mukul Roy, as an ‘outburst of people’s anger against him’.<sup>121</sup> Since May 2008, the BUPC, and other dissident groups in Nandigram, have complained about corruption and the lack of development projects.<sup>122</sup> When BUPC members were

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<sup>116</sup> ‘Maoists behind Nandigram violence: reports’ in *NDTV.com*, 9 November 2007, available from: <http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/news/maoists-behind-nandigram-unrest/19251>; accessed on 16 August 2011.

<sup>117</sup> VK Shashikumar, ‘No proof of Maoist link to Nandigram violence’ in *IBN.live.com*, 20 November 2007, available from: <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/no-proof-of-maoist-link-to-nandigram-violence/52684-3.html>; accessed on 16 August 2011. The centre found it politically expedient to justify the CRPF deployment on Maoists. National Security Advisor, M. K. Narayanan, claimed it was ‘clear’ that Maoists were involved, in Saikat Datta, ‘The fuzzy arc of subversion’ in *Outlook India*, 26 November 2007.

<sup>118</sup> Since May 2008, most of the evidence of a Maoist/Naxalite presence at Nandigram comes from prominent Communist Party of India (Maoist) (CPI-Maoist) leaders admitting their presence in the media. See, Somen and Narayan’s accounts, in ‘Maoist top gun lands in net’ in *TT*, 24 February 2008; ‘Maoist leader names TMC, Mahashweta as allies’ in *Indian Express*, 20 June 2009 and Saugata Roy and Subhro Niyogi, ‘Trinamool armed us to fight in Nandigram: Naxal leader’ in *TOI*, 27 April 2009. While the TMC have denied any contact with Maoist groups, Maoist leaders have spoken of their contacts with the TMC. One TMC Lok Sabha member, Kabir Suman, wrote a book claiming Maoist-TMC collusion, in ‘Suman music for CPM ears - Left pounces on reference to “rebel-Trinamul nexus”’ in *TT*, 6 January 2011 and ‘Trinamool MP’s book “exposes party-Maoist nexus”’ in *Rediff News*, 7 January 2011. Maoist claims of involvement at Nandigram, and especially their relations with the TMC, must be treated with caution and Aditya Nigam accused Maoists of exaggerating their presence at Nandigram for self promotion. See, Nigam, ‘Democracy, state and capital: the “unthought” of 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxism’, p.38.

<sup>119</sup> Although pre-2007 TMC leaders, such as Abu Taher and Sheikh Sufiyan, have gained higher political positions. Bidyut Roy, ‘In Nandigram, Mamata uses CPM cadres to turn tables on CPM’ in *Indian Express*, 6 May 2009.

<sup>120</sup> Sumanta Banerjee has made this point in several articles, noting the criminal charges of TMC Vidhan Sabha members and evidence of corruption, violence and a lack of development work, in Banerjee, ‘Washing dirty Bengali *dhuti* in public’, p.21 and Banerjee, ‘West Bengal’s next quinquennium, and the future of the Indian left’ in *EPW*, 46:23, 4 June 2011, p.14.

<sup>121</sup> Alam has had a long political career beginning with the CPI-M, moving to the BJP, then the Jamiat and now as an independent. During his BJP-Jamiat phase, he was allied with the TMC. See ‘Trinamul admits vote-split scare’ in *TT*, 27 December 2008 and Indranil Ghosh, ‘Nandi free run for martyr’s mother’ in *TT*, 5 January 2009.

<sup>122</sup> Anshuman Phadikar, ‘Nandi’s chickens come home to roost’ in *TT*, 14 May 2010 and Banerjee, ‘West Bengal’s next quinquennium’.

arrested in May 2010 Abu Taher, a local TMC leader and prominent in the resistance during 2007, accused them of being 'local miscreants linked with the Maoists', a familiar narrative framework associated with the CPI-M.<sup>123</sup> Similarly, there was evidence that police had adjusted to the new power relations.<sup>124</sup> The capture of the CPI-M base at Khejuri in June 2009 saw police stand aside as the TMC attacked CPI-M leaders and destroyed their property. Subhendu Adhikari, now a Lok Sabha member for Tamluk, declared that '[j]ustice has finally been done', echoing the comments made by Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee in November 2007 that the BUPC had been 'paid back in their own coin'.<sup>125</sup>

Since 2007 Mamata Banerjee and the TMC have exploited the events at Nandigram in order to win elections and discredit the CPI-M. For example, on 3 January 2008 the anniversary of the initial clashes, Banerjee travelled to Garchakraberia and warned, 'that this government is eyeing your land and will take it away on one pretext or the other'.<sup>126</sup> By this date, land acquisition at Nandigram was unlikely. Similarly, the January 2009 Nandigram by-poll saw the TMC select Firoza Bibi as the TMC candidate. The TMC made it clear that Bibi was chosen because she was a *Shahider Ma* or 'martyr's mother'; her son was killed on 14 March 2007.<sup>127</sup> The TMC launched its 2009 Lok Sabha election campaign from Nandigram on 14 March 2009, dedicating the party's political platform 'to the martyrs of Nandigram'.<sup>128</sup> At this launch Banerjee held up a pot of soil from Nandigram, announcing her desire to carry it across Bengal:

Do you know why I am carrying the soil of Nandigram back with me? Because without this soil, it will not be possible to defeat the CPM. This soil is purer than gold. I will take this to every Lok Sabha constituency so it can usher in the winds of change

The association of the CPI-M with violence and land acquisition was made explicit with Banerjee claiming, '[i]f you look at the soil, you can still see blood'.<sup>129</sup> The 2009 Lok Sabha election also saw the burnt body of Tapasi Malik; a 17 year old raped and killed at Singur by the CPI-M, placed on election billboards.<sup>130</sup> The manipulation of fear and the exploitation of the brutality of the CPI-M at Nandigram were consistent with the history of the TMC and Mamata Banerjee – the goal of defeating the CPI-M justifying the means.

<sup>123</sup> Madhuparna Das, 'Once an ally, BUPC now faces fire from Trinamool' in *Indian Express*, 12 May 2010.

<sup>124</sup> Paul Brass discussed the advantages that a corrupt and dangerous police force had, in Brass, *Theft of an idol*, Princeton, 1997, pp.55-56.

<sup>125</sup> Anshuman Phadikar, 'Trinamul takes Khejuri' in *TT*, 10 June 2009.

<sup>126</sup> Biswajit Roy and Anshuman Phadikar, 'Mamata sniffs Buddha bluff - Nandigram residents cautioned against land-grab bid' in *TT*, 4 January 2008.

<sup>127</sup> Mamata Banerjee stated in November 2008 that she 'would like a member of a family of a Nandigram martyr to be a candidate for the by-election. That would be a real tribute to the martyrs of March 14', in 'Nandi ticket for "martyr" family' in *TT*, 11 November 2008. Also see, Kanchan Chakraborty, 'Nandigram heralded Left slip, decline continues' in *Indian Express*, 21 May 2009 and Indranil Ghosh, 'Nandi free run for Martyr's mother' in *TT*, 5 January 2009.

<sup>128</sup> 'Mamata launches poll campaign from Nandigram' in *TOI*, 14 March 2009.

<sup>129</sup> 'Mamata grabs Left ground - campaign kickoff with Nandi soil' in *TT*, 15 March 2009.

<sup>130</sup> Banerjee wrote a poem on her, in Banerjee, 'Tapasi' in Sen and Bhattacharya, *Capitalised Marxism*, pp.20-21. On the election banners see Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey, 'Raw violence in billboard battle shocks voters' in *TOI*, 22 April 2009. Two CPI-M supporters were found guilty of her murder in November 2008, in 'CPM workers get life term in Tapasi murder' in *TOI*, 12 November 2008.

## Conclusion

‘Comrade X’ observed in November 2007 that ‘[e]verything is fair when you are in power’.<sup>131</sup> Issues of power and violence were the focus of the political parties at Nandigram. Political parties created narratives that attempted to show how the opposing party was corrupt, violent and unworthy of support. As both presented similar economic policies the debate centred on issues of management and trust and how the opposing party was unable to provide this. The CPI-M had created a formidable network of control in rural West Bengal, understood here as ‘party society’. This resulted in a party prepared to crush dissent by force at Nandigram. This force was required to implement an economic policy that, reflecting widespread trends in Indian politics, accepted neoliberal economics. The TMC, a politically opportunist party which accepted neoliberal policies, saw in Nandigram an opportunity to revive its political fortunes and the party proved successful in uniting the area under its leadership. However, the TMC appears to have not replaced ‘party society’ at Nandigram but replicated it.

The narrative created by the CPI-M to justify land acquisition was contradictory. Although attracting investment was consistent with CPI-M policy, the CPI-M had continued to present itself as a pro-poor Marxist party. This meant the CPI-M struggled to convince rank and file members of the validity of its industrial policy. Tensions also arose within the Left Front coalition, although during the time in review these conflicts were contained. The key focus of the CPI-M narrative was to portray the violence of the ‘Trinamool-Maoist combine’ and argue that it had created terror and lawlessness at Nandigram. Ignoring its own role in this violence, the CPI-M presented itself as a victim, inverting existing power relations. Reflecting its brief history, the TMC viewed the events at Nandigram as a way to gain power and exploited the grievances of the people to this end. The neoliberal policies that informed land acquisition at Nandigram were relegated to a secondary importance in the narratives of the political parties. Instead, local politics and local issues primarily defined the political discourse during 2007. These local issues revolved around issues of violence and power and had the effect of focusing discontent on the governance of the CPI-M.

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<sup>131</sup> Imran Ahmed Siddiqui, ‘Power flows from gun & bottle - encounter with Comrade X, a hooded hunter’.

## Conclusion

This thesis has examined the resistance of the Nandigram peasants to land acquisition in 2007. Land acquisition was an effect of neoliberal policies - policies pursued by both the central and state governments in India since the 1990s. However, it was the local conditions and history of the area that informed the nature of resistance at Nandigram. The BUPC was formed to resist land acquisition, however local experiences of CPI-M governance meant that its goals eventually evolved beyond land acquisition, and it became a movement against the CPI-M-led government. The existing historiography identifies Nandigram as an example of a broad movement that developed in India in opposition to neoliberal policies. When viewed from this perspective, the protesters of Nandigram are described as a fluid coalition of peasantry, *adivasi* and human rights groups, which challenged the neoliberal development model and its implementation in states throughout India. This thesis challenges this perspective by examining how people in West Bengal explained the resistance. At Nandigram, opposition was rarely articulated as 'against' neoliberalism, and there was little consciousness of the movement challenging neoliberal policies. West Bengali intellectuals and civil society did connect resistance at Nandigram to the wider issue of neoliberalism. However, a consensus emerged amongst these groups that land acquisition policies, and neoliberal reforms in general, were necessary. Instead of blaming neoliberal policies for events at Nandigram, civil society blamed the CPI-M, criticising it for badly managing the process of land acquisition. The neoliberal consensus extended to the opposition party, the TMC. As a result, the TMC primarily viewed Nandigram as an opportunity to remove the CPI-M from power. Neoliberalism thus remained unchallenged amongst the national elite, in spite of the damage caused to the rural poor at Nandigram. Local politics had obscured the issues and saw discontent focused on the CPI-M.

Nandigram, and the surrounding Tamluk area in Midnapur district, played a unique role in West Bengal's history, functioning as a 'nerve-centre' of nationalist and sharecropper agitation.<sup>1</sup> People in Nandigram were aware of their resistant past and used the memory of these movements to strengthen their resolve and inform their tactics in 2007. The CPI-M control of rural West Bengal stifled dissent, forcing the peasantry at Nandigram to reject not only land acquisition, but also the rule of the CPI-M itself. The BUPC thus rejected CPI-M rule and was able to resist government control for eleven months, despite attacks by the police and CPI-M cadre. Through their actions, the people at Nandigram asserted their 'right to exist in and for themselves.'<sup>2</sup> Resistance at Nandigram was not revolutionary or transformative, as the local rural elite led the BUPC. The CPI-M, unable to countenance this challenge to its control, eventually crushed the resistance in November 2007. However, the anger and betrayal of the people saw the CPI-M voted out at the panchayat elections in

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<sup>1</sup> Bolan Gangopadhyay, 'A tradition of resistance' in Gautam Ray (ed.), *Nandigram and beyond*, Kolkata, 2008, p.60.

<sup>2</sup> David Hardiman, 'Introduction' in David Hardiman (ed.), *Peasant resistance in India, 1858-1914*, Delhi, 1992, p.59.

May 2008. Nandigram had advanced beyond a movement to resist land acquisition and become a movement against the CPI-M.

The actions of the CPI-M at Nandigram disillusioned West Bengali intellectuals and civil society. Elite views were divergent, but a consensus emerged that argued that the development of West Bengal necessitated the creation of industry and the attracting of investment. In this context, land acquisition was defended as unfortunate but necessary. Therefore, the disillusionment of civil society was linked to the CPI-M and its inability to manage the process of land acquisition, an inability that resulted in violence and death at Nandigram. The discourse of civil society focused on the violence of the CPI-M, a focus assisted by the documentation of this violence by human rights groups. Barring a few intellectuals, the civil society groups came to associate events at Nandigram not with opposition to neoliberalism but with opposition to CPI-M rule.

The consensus that neoliberal policies were appropriate for West Bengal's development extended to the major political parties of West Bengal, the CPI-M and the TMC. The CPI-M had adopted neoliberal policies in the early 1990s, although it continued to present itself as anti-neoliberal and as a pro-poor Marxist party. Events at Nandigram exposed this contradiction, weakening support for the party. The TMC lacked a detailed economic plan and its solutions for the West Bengal economy were broad and general. The TMC exploited the events at Nandigram for the purposes of politically damaging the CPI-M. Both parties portrayed the other as corrupt, violent and unworthy of support. Political parties dominated rural West Bengal, controlling key institutions and crowding out civil society. To maintain this control violence was utilised. This explains the use of police and CPI-M cadre to attack the BUPC at Nandigram when it resisted this political party domination. The TMC victory at the panchayat elections in May 2008 appears not to have replaced 'party society' at Nandigram, but replicated it.

The legacy of Nandigram is yet to be determined. Scholars have occasionally reflected on the 'meaning' of Nandigram, although no clear consensus has yet emerged. It has been argued that Nandigram challenged the neoliberal development model. Amitendu Palit and Subhomoy Bhattacharjee thought that 'the mantra of consensus on reform seem to have lost its magic spell'.<sup>3</sup> Tanika Sarkar and Sumit Chowdhury have argued that:

The name has, therefore, come to signify much more than a place. Nandigram is invoked wherever peasants in India oppose the forced acquisition of their land. Multinationals and state governments worry about peasant action when they remember Nandigram.<sup>4</sup>

Jonathan Jones argued that Nandigram halted the multiplication of SEZs throughout India and showed the strength of Indian democracy.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Pradip Kumar Datta has asked if events at Nandigram will 'simply go down as just an interruption in the progress of capital in West Bengal?'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Amitendu Palit and Subhomoy Bhattacharjee, *Special Economic Zones in India: myths and realities*, New Delhi, 2008, p.164.

<sup>4</sup> Tanika Sarkar and Sumit Chowdhury, 'The meaning of Nandigram: corporate land invasion, people's power, and the Left in India' in *Focaal—European Journal of Anthropology*, 54, 2009, p.73.

Indeed, Nandigram has had little direct influence on policy at the national level. In April 2007, the SEZ Board of Approval (BoA) and the Empowered Group of Ministers (EGoM) met, resulting in restrictions to SEZs legislation. Thereafter, multi product SEZs required 50 percent of the land to be dedicated to industry, state governments were not permitted to acquire land for investors (leaving it to the market), and the SEZs were limited to 5000 hectares.<sup>7</sup> The CPI-M claimed a victory, arguing that their principled opposition to SEZs had resulted in these ‘improvements’.<sup>8</sup> This ignored the more likely explanation that events at Nandigram had influenced these changes. However, neither the BoA nor the EGoM acknowledged that events at Nandigram had anything to do with these changes.

In West Bengal, other peasant movements cited Nandigram as an inspiration. Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya and Kumar Rana linked Nandigram to the protests against the corruption of the public distribution system (PDS) at Bankura in late 2007. They argued that Bankura was systemic of the ‘bureaucratic and highhanded manner’ of a government that disregarded ‘the democratic impulses of the local population’.<sup>9</sup> Other movements that resisted land acquisition, or agitated to improve compensation, cited Nandigram as inspiration, including a protest at Nandigram in March 2010.<sup>10</sup> Several commentators traced Muslim alienation from the CPI-M to events at Nandigram.<sup>11</sup> Tanika and Sumit Sarkar argued that Nandigram represented the apogee of civil society cooperation in West Bengal, citing the inability or unwillingness of these same groups to support the resistance in Lalgarh, West Midnapur.<sup>12</sup>

Media and intellectuals in West Bengal often expressed the ‘meaning’ of Nandigram in political terms. The 2009 Lok Sabha and the 2011 Vidhan Sabha elections saw CPI-M defeats and TMC victories. Psephologists credited Nandigram as contributing to these results. For Ashis Chakrabarti, Nandigram highlighted the CPI-M’s ‘arrogance and insensitivity to dissenting opinion’.<sup>13</sup> Pranab Bardhan noted that events at Nandigram had exposed the contradictions of CPI-M policy and

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Jones, ‘Negotiating development: a study of the grassroots resistance to India’s 2005 Special Economic Zones Act’ PhD thesis in Philosophy, University of Florida, 2009, pp.14-15.

<sup>6</sup> Pradip Kumar Datta, *Nandigram and other struggles: the emergence of new political movements*, Kolkata, 2008, p.7.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Final minutes of 10th BOA meeting - 26th April, 2007’, available from; <http://sezindia.nic.in/writereaddata/BOA/Final%20Minutes%2010th%20BOA%2026th%20April%202007.pdf>; accessed on 11 March 2011. For comments on these changes see Janak Raj Jai and Rajiv Jai, *SEZs massacre of human rights with special reference to Singur and Nandigram*, New Delhi, 2007, pp.24-25 and Vikas Dhoot, ‘Yes to Special Economic Zones’ in *Indian Express*, 6 April 2007.

<sup>8</sup> See ‘On SEZs: don’t proceed without changes in SEZ Act and rules’ in *Peoples Democracy (PD)*, 31:15, 15 April 2007 and ‘On SEZs: stop piecemeal changes’ in *PD*, 31:13, 1 April 2007.

<sup>9</sup> This rural unrest had parallels to Nandigram; a result of neoliberal policies made worse by the manner of the CPI-M and local police, in Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya and Kumar Rana, ‘Politics of PDS anger in West Bengal’ in *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*, 43:5, 2 February 2008, pp.63-69.

<sup>10</sup> Anshuman Phadikar, ‘Resistance stalls village power plan - Nandigram in another protest, land scarce for substations’ in *The Telegraph (TT)*, 29 March 2010.

<sup>11</sup> The 2009 Lok Sabha election saw the Muslim vote for the Left Front go from 46 percent to 37 percent, in ‘A political quake in West Bengal’ in *The Hindu*, May 26, 2009, p.5.

<sup>12</sup> Sumit and Tanika Sarkar, ‘Notes on a dying people’ in *EPW*, 44:26, 27 June 2009, pp.10-14.

<sup>13</sup> Ashis Chakrabarti, ‘Manmohan wind in sails, Mamata tide engulfs Red fort’ in *TT*, 17 May 2009. This was a popular analysis. Also see, Sujan Dutta, ‘Question to Left: is imperialism passé?’ in *TT*, 17 May 2009, Jyotiprasad Chatterjee and Suprio Basu, ‘West Bengal: mandate for change’ in *EPW*, 44:39, 26 September 2009, pp.152-153 and ‘A political quake in West Bengal’, p.5.

contributed to their electoral defeat in 2011.<sup>14</sup> Voters' rejection of the CPI-M in West Bengal, for the first time in 34 years, saw Nandigram increasingly viewed as a key event in this transition and less as a challenge to neoliberalism.

There has not yet been a definitive account of the events of 2007. This study has widened the historiography by enquiring how people in West Bengal represented the events at Nandigram between June 2006 and May 2008. However, gaps in the historiography remain. There has been no ethnographical study of Nandigram, which would determine the caste, class and religious composition of the area, and this adds to the paucity of information on the BUPC. Information is also limited for the period of Nandigram's 'liberation', between March and November 2007. This enquiry into the response of the CPI-M has relied on the written public records. One imagines that party discipline and democratic centralism have obscured the heated backroom debates that will emerge in time and provide further depth to the historical record. A significant gap in the historiography is apparent with regard to the TMC. The TMC has attracted few studies, and the lack of primary sources available make the TMC role at Nandigram difficult to examine. The TMC's relations with the BUPC and Maoist/Naxalite groups remain murky and provide avenues of study worth pursuing. This thesis has enquired into how the people of West Bengal understood the events at Nandigram as they occurred. The consensus, shared amongst the disparate 'fragments' that make up contemporary West Bengal, indicate that people primarily saw Nandigram as a challenge to the long rule of the CPI-M.

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<sup>14</sup> Pranab Bardhan, 'The avoidable tragedy of the Left in India-II' in *EPW*, 46:24, 11 June 2011, pp.10-13. Also see Sumanta Banerjee, 'West Bengal's next quinquennium, and the future of the Indian left' in *EPW*, 46:23, 4 June 2011, pp.14-19.

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