Nandigram massacre

Leading Indian intellectuals condemn West Bengal's Stalinist-led government

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The March 14 massacre at Nandigram perpetrated by West Bengal's Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front government has been forthrightly condemned by some of India's best-known historians, authors and artists—many of them longtime, prominent public supporters of the Left Front.

Last Wednesday, on the orders of the Left Front government, more than 4,000 heavily armed police stormed the Nandigram area with the aim of stamping out protests against the West Bengal government's plans to expropriate 10,000 acres of land for a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) to be developed by the Indonesian-based Salim Group.

The police shot dead at least 14 villagers and wounded 70 more. (See "West Bengal Stalinist regime perpetrates peasant massacre")

The wanton massacre of peasants on behalf of a transnational corporation infamous for the cozy relations its founder developed with the murderous Suharto dictatorship has provoked an outcry across India. For a section of artists and intellectuals who have long considered the Left Front and the Stalinist CPM (Communist Party of India—Marxist) to represent a progressive alternative to the venal Indian bourgeoisie and its corrupt, communalist and caste-ist political representatives, the Nandigram massacre has come as a cruel shock.

The most trenchant critique of the West Bengal actions to come from this milieu to date are the statements made by Sumit Sarkar, arguably the most respected historian of twentieth century India and a self-avowed Marxist, and his wife and fellow historian Tanika Sarkar.

To protest the massacre at Nandigram, the couple has returned to the government the *Rabindra Puraskars*, West Bengal's highest literary reward, while donating the Rs. 75,000 cash award to the Nandigram Relief Fund.

The Sarkars have said that the Nandigram massacre is more shocking than the British colonial state's gunning down of hundreds of unarmed demonstrators at Jallianwala Bagh (a park located in the city of Amritsar, state of Punjab) on April 13, 1919. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre is etched in popular memory as one of the key turning points in the development of mass opposition to British colonial rule.

Their telephone interview with the *Indo-Asian News Service* (IANS) is worth quoting at length.

"Jallianwala massacre happened in colonial India, but what happened in Nandigram is shocking since it happened in a Left-ruled government in independent India."

They continued, saying: "Jallianwala Bagh was the outcome of one single man's action [referring to General Dyer who issued the order to open fire] but here the entire CPM machinery and the government were involved in the killings."

"What happened in Gujarat in 2002 did not amaze us as much because it was a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, but in a Left-ruled state this is astounding." (The 2002 Gujarat pogrom was incited by Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, a senior BJP leader, and their allies in the RSS-led network of Hindu supremacists. It left some 2,000 Muslims dead and hundreds of thousands more without homes or jobs.)

"As a lifelong leftist," continued Sumit Sarkar, "I was deeply shocked by recent events in the countryside of West Bengal. On December 31, a group of us went to Singur (where the West Bengal government has expropriated 1,000 acres of prime agricultural land for a Tata auto plant.) "[We] spent the whole day there, visited four out of five most affected villages and three things became very clear, because of which the West Bengal government's version cannot be accepted.

"One, the land, far from being infertile or mono-cropped, as has been stated repeatedly, is extremely fertile and multi-cropped.

"Two, there is no doubt that the vast bulk of the villagers we met are opposed to the takeover of land and most are refusing compensation.

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"Three, we found much evidence of force being employed, particularly on the nights of September 25 and December 2 last year.

"The West Bengal government seems determined to follow a particular path of development involving major concessions, both to big capitalists like the Tatas and multinationals operating in SEZs.

"Yet the strange thing is that these, particularly the latter, are things which left parties and groups as well as many others have been repeatedly and vehemently opposing.

"Is this SEZ model that implies massive displacement and distress really the only way?

"If the West Bengal government thinks so, then it also has to accept that the inevitable consequences are going to be a repetition of Nandigram across the state."

Sarkar underestimates the CPM's and Left Front's complicity in the imposition of the Indian bourgeoisie's new liberal "reform" agenda, which aims to make India a major cheap labor platform for manufacturing, business-processing and research for world capitalism. The Left Front's "industrialization" policy in West Bengal—that is, the expropriation of peasants for SEZs where capital will be offered all manner of incentives and normal labor and environmental standards won't apply—is only the latest in a raft of pro-investor and anti-working-class policies. Moreover, at the national level, the Left Front is sustaining the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government in power even as it pushes ahead with further economic "reforms" and pursues a strategic partnership with US imperialism.

Nevertheless, the Sarkars' emphatic rejection of the CPM's claims that the peasant opposition to the West Bengal government's land expropriation is a political provocation mounted by the right and the Naxhalites (Maoists)—and their insistence that it is the Left Front that bears political responsibility for the violence at Nandigram—are to be welcomed.

The actions of the West Bengal government have also been denounced by a number of noted writers and artists.

The so-called Nandan Lobby (named after a cultural complex), comprising the state's left-leaning theater personalities, playwrights and writers, held a rally on the day following the massacre and condemned both Buddadeb Bhattacharjee, the West Bengal chief minister and CPM Politburo member, and the police. While the painter Subhaprassana demanded Bhattacharjee's resignation, another remarked that "[the] next time he (Chief Minister Bhattacharjee) comes to Nandan, he should be clad in a police uniform."

Sankha Ghosh, a prolific Bengali poet, and the vice-president of Paschim Banga Bangla Academy (West-Bengal Bengali Academy), Asru Kumar Sikder, a noted commentator on the works of 1913 Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore, and several others have resigned from the Bengali academy in protest. Ghosh and Sikder have described the Nandigram massacre as "state-sponsored killing of innocent villagers."

The outrage expressed by these figures is of considerable political importance because, despite the devastating crimes perpetrated by Stalinism in the twentieth century, a significant layer of Indian intellectuals and artists have clung to illusions in the progressive potential of the CPM, a party that arose out of a split from the Communist Party of India (CPI) in the early 1960s and then assumed a nationalist "independent" stance on the dispute between the Soviet and Chinese bureaucracies.

The CPM, in turn, has used these academics and artists to bolster its political and intellectual authority.

Referring to the complicity of the entire leadership of the CPM in the Nandigram massacre, Tanika Sarkar said, "'We are shattered. All this has happened and there is not a word of shame or apology from the CPM central committee or state committee."

Far from giving any sort of apology, the entire national CPM leadership is aggressively standing behind West Bengal chief minister Buddadeb Bhattachrjee. And several of its Left Front allies, including the CPI, which had made a show of threatening to withdraw their support for the West Bengal government, have quickly backpedaled on their demand for a "public apology" and a freeze on Special Economic Zones (SEZs).

The CPM and their Left Front allies play a pivotal role in buttressing bourgeois rule in India. The Nandigram massacre has simply revealed the ruthless methods the Stalinists are prepared to use in implementing the agenda of the bourgeoisie.

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