

## Walking for Nandigram

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This text, posted on the Sarai Reader-list on 16 November 2007, is an account of a peaceful and spontaneous citizens' march, the '*Dhikkar Micchil* (Gathering of Shame)' that took place in Kolkata on 14 November 2007, to protest against the latest wave of violence unleashed by armed cadres of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) against the protesting peasants of Nandigram in West Bengal's East Medinipur district in early November this year.

The people of Nandigram have steadfastly resisted repeated attempts to make them acquiesce to the proposed moves by agencies of the state government to acquire their land on patently unfair terms, for the setting up of a 'Chemical Hub' to be operated by the Indonesia-based multinational corporation Salim Group of Industries. The Salim Group, closely associated with the cronyism and corruption of the authoritarian Soeharto regime in Indonesia, has expanding interests in West Bengal.

Nandigram (like Singur in the state of Orissa in the recent past) has become synonymous with unrest and discontent over the threat of land acquisition in West Bengal today. The politics of land acquisition here, and across many other sites in India under the aegis of the colonial Land Acquisition Act of 1894, is directly linked to the process of the formation of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) as bridgeheads of global capitalism all over Asia. SEZs are spaces where hard-won protections for labour and the environment can be held in abeyance through special governmental fiat. They operate as states of exception, as the frontiers of a ruthless, advanced form of capitalism gradually spreading power and influence over a bewildered hinterland.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led 'Left Front' government, which has ruled West Bengal for more than three decades, is currently acting as a chief facilitator of this mode of rapacious capitalist control over land and other resources through the formation of SEZs. This 'facilitation' has been sought to be achieved in Nandigram through a virtually year-long campaign of state-backed terror orchestrated by armed squads of 'party cadres'. This year, 14 March saw armed state police and a 'cadre' raiding party fire on a peaceful crowd of protesting villagers in Nandigram. Official casualty figures are said to have

included 14 dead bodies brought to the local morgue. Local inhabitants dispute this, claiming that many more have been killed and disposed of in mass graves, and that dozens of people are missing. Investigations are continuing.

Following the violence, supporters of the CPI(M) in Nandigram left the region and took shelter in camps which were used as bases for retaliatory raids. The protesting villagers of Nandigram, organised under the aegis of the Bhoomi Ucched Pratirodh Committee (Platform for Resistance to Eviction from Land), a ragtag coalition of widely disparate political formations, also used violence to defend their positions. This led to a significant increase in tension in the area over the past several months.

Recently, the CPI(M) initiated a set of manoeuvres to 'retake' Nandigram, including a final assault by party 'cadres' on 6 November. The violence and intimidation that this campaign has involved, coupled with a growing skepticism towards the state government's SEZ policy, has turned a large section of the population of West Bengal, traditionally inclined towards different shades of leftist politics, resolutely against the CPI(M). The 'Gathering of Shame' of 14 November in Kolkata that this post refers to is an embodiment of a rising tide of left-wing and democratic discontent against the sclerotic grip of the CPI(M)'s Market Stalinist policies in West Bengal.

**Subject:** [Reader-list] Walking for Nandigram, 14 November

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The organisers were obviously not prepared for the size of the turnout. That it would be big they must have known, as the outrage had reached a boiling point since the second offensive against Nandigram villagers started on 6 November 2007. But no one could have anticipated the multitudes that would render numbers obscure on the streets yesterday. The organisers didn't even bring enough of those little badges that just said "*Dhikkar* (Shame)!"

But then, who were the organisers? Some familiar faces were using a loudspeaker to issue basic instructions – "Please do not carry organisational banners; do not shout slogans; our route will be..."

No one was leading. Many people did not know who gave the call for the rally; they still do not know. No parties joined, no trucks and trains carrying obedient supporters; 100,000 people on the streets, smiling in the early winter sun – the smile of release from inaction, from silence. They had been asking constantly over the last few days: Is there somewhere we can go? Do you know if there is something we could do?

I saw my cousins, schoolmates, neighbours – many of whom admitted that this was the first time in their lives they had joined a procession. We exchanged looks across the street, from one row to the other; they smiled and said, “Could not stay home...”

Commuters, stranded by the endless human stream, often joined in. Someone shouted from an immobilised tram: “March on, we are with you!” Flower petals came raining down on the marchers from an old house near Wellington Square. On Nirmal Chandra Street, a group of locals stood by, displaying words of mourning and anger on small placards. I was near the Calcutta Medical College when Sibaji-*da* and Suman Mukhopadhyay called from Dharamtala, our destination, to say they had reached.

“Reached! But we have only just started here! And how many are still following...?” No one had a clear idea how many; but someone from the back reported that the tail was moving near Hedua, a kilometre behind us.

Calls were coming in from all points along the massive meandering stream. “Where are you? How long will you take?” As if one was still receiving calls to leave home and join. You could just inhabit these old central districts of the city and wait for the march to pass through you, making you a part of its open torso.

I felt like telling the first-timers that we were also doing this after a long, long time. A call came from Bankura: Dwaipayan Bhattacharya, missing the rally sorely, shouted, “When did you last see such a *michhil* (gathering)?”

I passed the question on to Sourin Bhattacharya, 70, walking in front of me. “When did we last see something like this, sir?”

“After Ayodhya”, he says.

“After Gujarat”, he then adds.

“But the CPM (Communist Party [Marxist]) and the other Left in power joined those rallies in droves... When did one last see a mass of this size *without* political parties?”

The question is passed on, the students wait for us to remember; we look to our *dadas* (lit. ‘older brothers’/seniors), the quiet, grey brigade walking with us.

“Maybe the hunger marches of ‘66?”

But even then, they add, there were party workers.

Some bystanders are found managing the lines. No one asks who they are, the most irrelevant question on 14 November. We look around and find almost every face familiar, but the wonder is we didn’t know so many faces would appear familiar. That’s where numbers become obscure.

We arrived at Dharamtala at a quarter to four. The tail end was to come and mix into the sea 45 minutes later. The protean mass in Dharamatala, standing, squatting

on the main thoroughfare, drifting about and chatting, reuniting with friends, forming circles, cheering one another, singing, collecting relief for the affected in Nandigram, created a perfect picture of a rally without a centre, or rather, without the familiar centering. People weren't even sure for a while if there was to be the customary dais around which we should finally gather. Someone suggested that the little truck leading the silent procession with the sole loudspeaker be made the dais – but Medha Patkar was already seen addressing the ground from a makeshift stage.

Let us have one stage then, the truck people quickly decided. But it was impossible to go near the spot. The space, recently christened 'Metro Channel' by anti-government protestors, was not meant for such a massive gathering. Indistinct voices came drifting in from there, but it was not designated as a focus for the eddying movements over the stretch between Lenin Sarani and S.N. Banerjee Road. Was Mahasweta Devi speaking, or Sankha Ghosh? Aparna Sen or Joy Goswami? Was it Pratul Mukhopadhyay singing?

Anjan Mitra materialised beside us with Gautam Ghosh, who was asking anxiously if Nabaneeta Dev Sen had been spotted. "She is ill", Gautam said. "We asked her not to come, but she has sneaked out of home".

The stage had its own little circle, like innumerable other circles of students, actors, office workers, little-magazine-*wallas*, bespectacled teachers, journalists, holding intense transactions of information, and wisecracks. The circles opened and closed to allow for a shifting membership, merged into one another. One could not see the neat police circle around the gathering, though, like those found in the aftermath of 14 March – why, we were asking ourselves. The fairly modest gathering outside the Kolkata Film Festival on 11 March had drawn an excessive display of force from the police, who arrested 68 of a crowd singing songs. On 10 March, they arrested stray people walking away from Medha's fast. Bodhisattva Kar, who has earned the distinction of getting arrested on both occasions, must have been wondering too: where were the cordons, the neatly-lined-up law-keepers? The police looked scattered and vaguely distributed over Dharamtala. Were they mirroring the formless discipline of the crowd, a mass that was swelling and flowing on all sides, not tied up into a bunch by a single thread of harangue?

Before people dispersed with companions in tow, looking forward to an *adda* (informal gathering place/conversation) where the narratives would start, they were asking – what next...? A sequence of rallies and meetings, writing, image-making, arguments? But what about a "project", something that was more sustainable, as Sourin-*babu* kept on saying?

If one tried, one could read many lips in the crowd uttering the same interrogative. The questions were no doubt carried over to the *addas* that followed.

Organising the streets of 14 November into a legible sequence, a story, will perhaps

be the small next step in the direction of formulating the “project”. One hopes the story does not forget, though, that there was no one to pass a single thread of yarn from the beginning to the end of the *michhil* yesterday.

Moinak Biswas  
Kolkata, 15 November 2007

### Editors' Note

For more information on Nandigram, see [www.sanhati.com](http://www.sanhati.com)

Grassroots activist Medha Patkar founded the Narmada Bachao Andolan, which began as a fight for information about the Narmada Valley development projects and continued as a fight for just rehabilitation for the lakhs of tribals and farmers to be ousted by the Sardar Sarovar Dam and other large dams along the Narmada river in the state of Gujarat. Eventually when it became clear that the magnitude of the project precluded accurate assessment of damages and losses, and that rehabilitation was impossible, the movement challenged the very basis of the project and questioned its claim to ‘development’. Patkar is a Convener of the National Alliance of People’s Movements – a non-electoral, secular political alliance that opposes globalisation/liberalisation- based economic policy, and supports alternative development paradigms and plans. She received numerous awards, including the Human Rights Defender’s Award from Amnesty International.

Mahasweta Devi, Sankha Ghosh, Joy Goswami and Nabaneeta Dev Sen are prominent Bengali writers. Pratul Mukhopadhyay is a famous singer Anjan Dutt is a popular musician and actor. Gautam Ghose is a filmmaker. Aparna Sen is an actor and film director. Sourin Bhattacharya is an economist. Dwaipayan Bhattacharya is a political theorist. Sibaji-da (Sibaji Bandopadhyay) is a literary theorist. Suman Mukhopadhyay is a theatre director and filmmaker. Bodhisattva Kar is a historian and a former Sarai-CSDS research fellow.

