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Blood On Their Hands

Nandigram is one of the darkest chapters in CPMs history

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West Bengal chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's rationalisation of the violent "recapture" of Nandigram by CPM cadres as mere "retaliation" against their opponents, who were paid back "in the same coin", is one of the most brazen defences by an Indian leader of the state's abdication of its fundamental responsibility to protect the life and limb of all its citizens. What Nandigram witnessed was a CPM campaign of armed violence to regain control of two of the area's three blocks, which it lost early this year owing to its abortive bid

to impose a 25,000-acre Special Economic Zone on an unwilling population to favour Indonesia's Salim Group.

Bhattacharjee didn't speak like a responsible, democratically elected CM, but like a party apparatchik who reposes greater faith in its cadres and musclemen than in the rule of law. Indeed, he explicitly defended his decision not to send the police into Nandigram because "I didn't want a repeat of the March 14 incident", in which 14 people were killed. The firing wasn't a fluke. Citizens' independent inquiries have established that armed pro-CPM cadres joined the police in that punitive expedition, some disguised in official uniforms. A People's Tribunal, consisting of a retired high court chief justice and social activists, documented this, after recording 174 depositions by the victims. Its chilling conclusions show close police-CPM collusion. The motive was to "teach" SEZ opponents "a lesson".

The CPM just wouldn't countenance that it would not be the people's sole representative or lose its influence in Nandigram. To regain it, it started a systematic campaign of intimidation and eviction of ordinary people, turning thousands into refugees, and imposing collective punishment on them through a months-long economic blockade. The logic was that the anti-CPM Bhumi Ucched Pratirodh Committee (BUPC) must be ousted at any cost

so the party's unquestioned supremacy could be re-established — even if that meant brutalising innocents. In recent weeks, the impending arrival of the Central Reserve Police Force lent urgency to the task.

The latest episode represents one of the darkest chapters in the history of the Indian Left. It has tarnished the Left's, particularly the CPM's, image as one of the few principled components of our political spectrum guided by an ideology and programme, which upholds constitutional values, public decency, and negotiated resolution of conflicts, represents the poor, and is an asset to democracy. Nandigram showed that the CPM can unleash, for entirely sectarian reasons, violence against farmers and other working people, in whose name it speaks



— and from whom it derives its very rationale.

Going by well-corroborated reports, last fortnight's armed invasion was meticulously planned. The police were confined to the barracks. CPM cadres from four districts were deployed, many of them trained in using firearms. The military-style operation had three components. On November 5-8, a multi-pronged offensive was launched by three attacking groups, each 200-plus-strong. On November 10, a second wave of attackers pushed BUPC supporters into CPM stronghold Khejuri, taking 600 of them "prisoner". Finally, BUPC stronghold Sonachura was overrun, using the prisoners as a "human shield". Within hours, the area was "liberated" amidst raucous celebrations by gun-toting musclemen.

This couldn't have happened without the state's complicity, indeed without the party suborning the state. This has disturbing implications. Any defence of such actions greatly weakens the liberal-secular-democratic argument against the communal Right, articulated ably by the Left too, that interference by political parties and their affiliates (e.g. the RSS) with the state's functions gravely undermines democracy.

However, several CPM members and supporters, including some distinguished academics, have turned a blind eye to this while rushing to the party's defence—just when they should be counselling critical introspection. Their argument rests on presenting CPM cadres as Nandigram's principal victims, and highlighting "infiltration" by Maoists, assisted by Trinamul Congress.

But evidence of such infiltration is of the same quality as the evidence about Saddam's mass-destruction weapons. Besides, it beggars belief that ousted "dislodged" CPM cadres greatly outnumbered BUPC-supporter refugees. By all credible evidence, the latter (several thousands) outnumbered the former by a factor of 10 or more. The BUPC and Trinamul indisputably have their own thugs. They too practised violence, but it's hard to believe they matched the state-assisted clout of the domineering, militant, well-oiled ruling party machine.

Even assuming the BUPC "dislodged" CPM cadres, it's for the state, not the party, to remedy this. Violent retaliation can only generate counter-violence, while breaching constitutional norms. Nor can Maoist "infiltration" justify indiscriminate attacks on adversaries or ordinary people.

Nandigram exposes the rot that has set into the West Bengal CPM in the form of criminalisation, pro-rich policies, corruption, reliance on muscle power, and arrogant disdain towards its own allies — the CPI, Forward Bloc and RSP. The three now say the CPM alone bears "responsibility" for the Nandigram violence and must rethink its policies. Their plea can only work if they quit the cabinet while remaining in the Left Front.

The writer is a political commentator.