



Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee
Research Foundation

How the Perilous Political Culture of Anti-Industry Agitation Forced the Rural Indian to become a Migrant Labour

by

Pathikrit Payne

Abstract

The Migrant Worker crisis that India has witnessed amidst the COVID-19 pandemic shows what happens when rural India is systematically denied industrial investments as well as agricultural reforms for decades, resulting in rural-urban divide and humongous migration of rural workforce to cities in their quest for jobs and a better future for progeny. The perilous culture of anti-industry agitation by vested interests that India has witnessed for several decades, including the agitations in Singur and Nandigram more than a decade back, has been the key reason for rural impoverishment and compulsive migration from certain under-industrialised states to more industrialised ones. This has resulted in lopsided growth. The solution to that lies in reforming agriculture to make it productive and viable, as well as allowing intensive industrial investments in rural India to make them self-sufficient and thereby prevent such migrations in future. Modi Government is precisely striving for that through a series of initiatives.

On June 4, 2020, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee stated that over a million¹ migrant workers would be returning to Bengal by June 10 due to COVID-19 pandemic related crisis. One can say, most of these migrant workers who went to other states for work, fall in the category of semi-skilled and unskilled workers. While the plight of the migrant workers is a profound one and needs immediate attention, it is also critically important to analyse as to why several thousand people from Bengal routinely go to other states to work especially when West Bengal back in 1950's was relatively among the most industrialised states of the country. Who has been responsible for this decay in the state which habitually boasts of being a repository of the nation's foremost intellect, wisdom and literary sense, and yet perpetually failed in the last six decades to create entrepreneurs, industrialists and jobs?

Imagine if Tata Nano Factory had Succeeded in Singur!

The question that then needs to be raised is whether

Bengal would have witnessed much lesser number of people being compelled to leave the state in search of jobs, in the last one decade, had the Tata Nano Factory in Singur, the proposed petrochemical hub in Nandigram or the Jindal Steel Plant project in Salboni been allowed to come up successfully. For sure, they would have acted as catalysts to reignite the engines of industrialisation in Bengal that has remained in coma for decades. In a chain reaction they would have pulled in more industries, both big and small, which would have given rise to a new generation of industrial hubs in Bengal. That in turn would have created a plethora of job opportunities, both direct and indirect, thereby possibly preventing outbound migration to some extent. When industrial centres grow in size, they develop their own townships and habitat clusters that in turn generate demand of different types of manpower for a variety of economic activities.

Where Singur Faltered But Gurugram and Faridabad Succeeded

What has been stated above is no rocket science. Development of Gurugram (formerly Gurgaon),

followed by Manesar, into a major IT and industrial hub was triggered by a single automobile factory there, i.e. Maruti Udyog. Since then it never had to look back and was no more an ignored shadow of Delhi. Rather it overshadowed Delhi eventually. Noida and Faridabad have similar stories of phoenix like rise that in due course resulted in the entire National Capital Region or NCR, consisting of Gurgaon, Noida, Faridabad, Ghaziabad Delhi, Karnal, Sonapat, Panipat, Meerut and Rohtak eventually become a major economic axis where hundreds of thousands, from across the country, flock every year in search of jobs. Back in 2016, as per Oxford Economics data, the GDP of Delhi Extended Urban Agglomeration consisting of Delhi, Noida, Faridabad, Gurugram and Ghaziabad was \$370 billion. By now it must have crossed \$400 billion² mark even as Singur stares at a dark future.

Both Nandigram and Singur could have taken the trajectory of Gurugram and Noida to emerge as industrial zones but the culture of disruptive anti-industry politics prevented those industrial buds from blossoming into flowers in Bengal. The culture of anti-industry agitational politics that was conceived and mastered by the Communists of Bengal through their 34 years of dark reign, was taken to the next level by TMC through their anti-land acquisition politics that prevented Singur from becoming the next Pune or Chennai in terms of emerging as an automobile manufacturing hub, and a major gateway for East Asian export.

That brand of agitational politics galvanised people around TMC because of their deep resentment against the Communist rule and their arrogance. It eventually catapulted Mamata Banerjee to power in Bengal in 2011. In spite of major anticipation, Bengal's industrial resurgence remained a pipe dream. Even as most other states of India were jostling with each other to bring in more industries, the same in Bengal became a major

challenge because of severe impediments in the realm of land acquisition for setting up factories, a legacy of the saga that was created in the Singur and Nandigram agitation. The whole country watched in dismay how a state was digging its own grave by consistently resisting industrialisation.

Seeds of Disruptive Anti-Industry Politics Germinated During Communist Era

However, it is not to say that those who spearheaded the Singur agitation were to be blamed alone for the mess of institutional unemployment that has embedded itself in Bengal. During the 34 years of Communist rule, all key pillars of governance including education, healthcare, police and administration saw systemic decay, politicization and decreasing productivity. The culture of violent militant trade unionism destroyed the very essence of work culture and ecosystem of harmonious industrial relations. Strikes, vandalism, hooliganism and unrealistic demands led to more than 63,000 factories³ eventually shutting down their operations in West Bengal thereby rendering millions jobless.

Thus, West Bengal became a graveyard for industrial investment and manufacturing. Factory owners and industrialists were treated as class enemies⁴ and were routinely subjected to humiliation by Left backed unions. Forcing lockdown became a matter of pride for the trade union leaders. However the initial euphoria and the 'fake' sense of victory over 'Capitalists' eventually turned into despair for the penniless employees who were routinely used as pawns by their trade union masters. Industrialists in hordes started exiting Bengal. Jobs became rather non-existent. Exiting West Bengal for jobs, both for the skilled, semi-skilled and the unskilled, became a norm thereby giving rise to the population of migrant Bengali workers in other states.

Such was the disdain and hatred for the quintessential

businessman or entrepreneur that Communists created in West Bengal that even when someone aspired to be a self-employed businessman, he was looked down with suspicion and contempt. Jaideep Mazumdar, in his article titled *The Communists Kick-Started Bengal's Decline Exactly Half A Century Ago*⁵, published in *Swarajya* magazine in 2017, mentions how Bengal's share of industrial output declined from 12.8% in 1970 to 10.2% in 1977 when the Communists came to power. By the time Buddhadeb Bhattacharya was handed over the reins by Jyoti Basu, it had reduced further to a despicable 3.7% while by 2017 it stood at an embarrassing 2.9%.

Eventually when Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya had thought that West Bengal needs to revive industry, it was too late. The culture of destructive trade unionism and opposition to setting up of new industry in uncharted or rural areas had become so deep rooted that protests were happening on an auto-pilot mode in Bengal. Even within his party there was intense opposition to his plans.

Bengal Failed to Create Agro based Prosperity Either

Nevertheless, not only industrialisation became a distant dream in West Bengal, in the realm of agriculture too, in spite of fertile soils, favourable climate and bumper production of many agro-commodities, West Bengal could not become a national hub for agro-processing industry. Most farmers being either marginal farmers or share croppers never had the benefit of scalability and thus productivity continued to falter as well. India's faulty farm produce marketing policies that crippled agriculture for decades played its part too in keeping farmers impoverished.

Also, even as states like Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Tamil Nadu went ahead and garnered half the share of organised food processing units of India, West

Bengal, in spite of having one of the largest numbers of unincorporated food processing units⁶, could never leverage economy of scale or invite investments to become a national leader in organised agro-processing that would have created rural prosperity. The household or cottage food processing businesses never got the institutional support to emerge as major players. Rural income was thus never good enough to sustain large families throughout the year, resulting in rural populace opting for menial jobs elsewhere, at least for some months every year. In the absence of industrial jobs within West Bengal, there was little option, for most, but to traverse to other states for some assured earnings to sustain families back home.

Decay Continued in the Last Nine Years as well

In the last nine years, time since the decimation of the Communist regime in West Bengal, things instead of going for better have turned worse. Syndicate Raj⁷ and the culture of organised extortion⁸ resulted in further decline in overall business environment. Law & Order continues to be a critical issue as well. Major investments did not happen to that extent as it happens in other states. Even the existing ones continue to falter as a result of which, migration for seeking jobs in other states has become a norm than an exception in West Bengal.

Even neighbouring states like Odisha have gone ahead of West Bengal in terms of industrialisation. While land acquisition⁹ for large scale investments continues to be a challenge in West Bengal, Odisha has gone ahead with creation of four major investment regions in industrial clusters namely National Investment & Manufacturing Zone in Kalinganagar, Petroleum, Chemicals and Petrochemicals Investment Region in Paradip, Port Based Manufacturing Zone in Dhamra and Information Technology Investment Region in Bhubaneswar¹⁰.

It is not to say nothing has happened in Bengal but what has been achieved is far less than its real intrinsic potential. As Sreemoy Talukdar wrote in his article in Firstpost, 'According to statistics from the state ministry of industries, between 2011 and September 2015, Bengal saw an investment of Rs 6,871 crore, working out to Rs 1,374 crore per year. It isn't the worst but in contrast, Gujarat received investments worth Rs 22,576 crore in the same period per year'¹¹.

Beyond Bengal: Larger Plot behind Anti-Industry Agitations & Role of Foreign Funded NGOs in India

It is important to mention that the culture of resisting development of industry across India has become an institutionalised one with vested interests, in many cases, starting from Maoists to Leftist Anarchists to foreign funded NGOs, playing key roles in vitiating the business environment and pushing away investments from coming to India. There are innumerable examples of how vested interests created anarchy type situation and wreaked havoc to prevent industrial investments. In many cases, hapless villagers have often become nothing but pawns in the hands of those groups.

From the most infamous agitation against proposed POSCO steel plant in Odisha to opposition to Jindal's steel plant in West Bengal to protest against proposed Jaitapur nuclear power plant or commissioning of Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant to as recently as the Sterlite related unrest in Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu, one has to understand the underlying ulterior motives of the key players, working in the shadows, who instigate, trigger and execute mayhem in the name of opposing new and existing industrial ventures.

As reports indicate, the violent agitation that led to the closure of Sterlite plant in Tamil Nadu, resulted in loss of more than 30,000 indirect jobs¹², an annual revenue loss to Tamil Nadu Government to the extent of Rs 1400 crore¹³ in the form of customs revenue, and

reducing India from a net exporter of copper cathode to a net importer, which resulted in total revenue loss to the Indian economy to the tune of Rs 20,000 crore^{14/15}.

Who Benefits by Triggering anti-Industry Unrest in India?

Now, invariably the next question that comes in mind is who benefits out of such closure of Sterlite kind of factories in India or by preventing POSCO from setting up steel plants in India? Is it not those who would perpetually want India to remain a net importer of many products and not leverage its economic potential to the fullest? Would it be wrong to say that there are vested interests who would never want the Indian economy to get deepened with intensive capital investments and further integration of the rural economy through a perfect blend of industry and agriculture? Did those who resisted land acquisition in rural India for industrial investments, ever try to even bring in agriculture reforms to unleash rural prosperity?

Would it be wrong to say that for long, in a deliberate manner, vested interests kept rural India impoverished, by depriving investments, and perpetually dependent on the state for sustenance by denying agricultural reforms? Was it not deliberately done so that the rural mass could be manipulated and swayed by their political masters? Would it be wrong to say that many of those who pretend to speak for the poor and impoverished, especially those who ruled India for more than 50 years and the Leftists, actually never wanted the impoverished rural Indian to become prosperous and self-sufficient one day?

Lalgarh in West Bengal was a classic example of how the local tribal populace literally rebelled against lack of development and non-availability of amenities, and wherein the Maoists sneaked in in the name of providing the people of Lalgarh with moral support. However, later when West Bengal Government wanted

to provide the people of Lalgarh with developmental work and job opportunities, the biggest resistance to that came from none other than the Maoist groups themselves who unleashed a reign of terror and resorted to persecuting anyone in that region who went against their dictums.

In fact, Maoists have been one of the biggest impediments to development and peace in certain parts of India and yet the self-proclaimed pseudo-intellectual, pseudo-secular, India-bashing, left-leaning, urban lobbies associated with some universities, foreign-funded NGOs and think-tanks, have always tried to do shadow boxing for Maoists and some even justified their violence against the Indian people by shamelessly projecting them as ‘Gandhi, but with guns’¹⁶ (sic). This is how an anti-Indian cabal with a cloak of intellectualism has been corroding India from within for decades.

Rural-Urban Divide was Created and Nurtured by Denying Investments in Rural India

Would it also be wrong to say that rural-urban divide was deliberately created by preventing industrialisation of rural India, and nurtured systematically to intensify sense of disenchantment and deprivation, which then could be cultivated by vested interests to create turmoil within the country? It is this rural-urban divide that has led to systematic migration of rural workforce to urban cities and who live a despicable life in city slums in search of a better future because there is no hope left in their villages.

India’s Adversaries Prefer a Fragile India that is Mired in Internal Strife

In a way, vested interests, both global and domestic always had a plan for India. They neither wanted India to collapse nor wanted India to become resilient and strong either. They preferred an India which was not entirely unstable but also always perpetually

fragile and immersed in managing the internal strife. Resentment, among others, was also due to lack of job opportunities in rural India that has been an outcome of lack of industrialisation and a faulty agricultural policy that forever kept the farmer impoverished and at mercy of the middlemen and state. This way, India could be manipulated better by the political elites who ruled this country as their fiefdoms for decades. Foreign funded NGOs also played a dubious role in resisting both industrial developments as well as in preventing agriculture reform. They had their own agenda in stunting India’s growth story. At the cost of the hapless rural India, they all had a great time till 2014. Their collective opposition to Modi Government now is because PM Modi is resisting and destroying their modus operandi and working towards empowering rural India.

How anti-Industry Agitation Results Eventually in Despair

Singur is a classic example of what happens eventually when industry is not allowed to venture into under-developed parts of India. Today, Singur stands as a literal graveyard after the exit of the Tata Motors. There is nothing but continuous saga of despair¹⁷ and hopelessness on ground there. Those who had to make their political career out of the anti-land acquisition and anti-factory protests have achieved what they wanted at the cost of perpetual plight of the locals.

Singur, during the days of construction of the Nano factory was brimming with economic activities. Small eateries and hotels had mushroomed everywhere. Many had taken loans to build an extra room to be given on rent to the construction workers engaged by the company. Today none of those exists. The peripheral economy that was slowly building up in that place has disappeared long back. It is ironic that many farmers and residents of Singur who had once agitated

against Tata factory now feel exploited and agitate with demands of setting up of factories¹⁸ there. Singur could have been West Bengal's Pune or Gurugram and not only would have had prosperity on a platter for its native residents but would have created a plethora of opportunities for people from other parts of Bengal. Instead, Singur today craves for jobs for its own youth.

The Sanand Saga of Industrial Renaissance: What Singur Failed to Achieve

Agitations against Singur's Tata factory eventually led to Tata Motors and its ancillary associates shifting lock stock and barrel to Sanand in Gujarat. Sanand overnight had hundreds of common farmland owners who became multi-millionaires¹⁹ by selling their land for the factory. Eventually, the Tata Nano factory acted as a catalyst for the region around Sanand to emerge as India's next automobile manufacturing hub with Ford Motors, Suzuki, Hero Motocorp and Honda pitching in with fresh investments. India thus had a new Detroit²⁰ in the making in Sanand, something which could have happened in Singur instead, but for the perilous political culture of destructive anti-industry agitation that did not let it happen. One should not be surprised if some from West Bengal have even migrated to Sanand to work in those auto-factories. What an irony!

Future of Rural Affluence Depends on Twin Pillars of Industrial Investments and Agricultural Reforms

When Modi Government 1.0 had introduced the Land Acquisition Bill, it was greeted with a barrage of opposition by different political parties. The objective of that Bill was to streamline land acquisition for industrial development and subsequent creation of jobs that would also invariably prevent rural migration to urban ghettos. Eventually the Bill had to be given a quiet burial because of lack of support. When the bill lapsed, top opposition leaders termed it as 'victory of the farmers'. Yet an objective observation of rural

economy would reveal that the only thing that has inhibited the growth of rural economy is the sheer lack of capital investment. Candenying access of industry to rural hinterland of India be a real victory for rural people when the same rural populace then move to city for seeking industrial jobs? Can there not be a middle path where rural populace can get adequate compensation by offering their land for setting up of new industry or organised farming, avail productive industrial employment in rural India itself, without having to migrate, even while their legitimate rights remain secured like that of shareholders or vendors or business partners of companies? The future prospect of rural India lies in becoming more organised to increase productivity in agriculture and by inviting more industrial investments to get integrated in the global supply chain.

Rural India was Systematically Kept Impoverished by Vested Interests

Thus, on one hand while land disputes and unending saga of litigations and anti-industrial protests inhibited India's investment plans to improve rural India, on the other hand, the agricultural mess made sure that taking up farming as a profession was the last option of the aspiring youth of this generation. The system resisted change or reform. It remained a fiefdom of a cabal and the farmer perpetually suffered both in times of bumper harvest and crop failure.

In spite of many systemic bottlenecks, India in the last 25 years emerged as a major IT hub with thousands of young educated Indians taking the entrepreneurial plunge every year. In the year 2019-2020, this industry generated revenues to the tune of \$191 billion²¹ and is a critical part of the Indian economy. Compare that with agriculture, wherein in spite of India being traditionally an agro based economy in the past, not many venture to start their entrepreneurial journey in

this sector because of the archaic rules that discouraged innovation. Yet, none before Prime Minister Modi had showed the courage to either improve productivity in farming or empower the farmer by removing the vintage restrictions on movement of farm produce.

How Modi Government is attempting to Reactivate Agriculture and Rural Economy

In June 2020, PM Modi led NDA Government took the bold decision to give nod to amend Essential Commodities Act²² and bring out many agro-commodities such as pulses, cereals, onions, potatoes, edible oils from the list under essential commodities that would allow their seamless trading and movement across districts and states, as well as empower the farmer to sell their produce to anyone as per their preference instead of remaining a prisoner of the cartel that manipulates prices in the Mandis under APMC Act.

Further, the reforms mentioned above are also expected to trigger the development of a new generation of entrepreneurs in the entire agricultural value chain. Also, the National Animal Disease Control Programme to eliminate critical ailments in livestock, creation of a dedicated Agri-Infrastructure Fund²³ for agricultural and food processing infrastructure development, as well as better post-harvest management, with an outlay of Rs 1 lakh crore, a Rs 15,000 crore outlay for Animal Husbandry Infrastructure Fund²⁴ for enhancing private investments in dairy processing and cattle-feed infrastructure sector, a dedicated plan for fishery revolution through the Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana, extension of the provisions of Operation Greens to all fruits and vegetables, sanctioning a central scheme for formalisation of Micro Food Enterprise²⁵ for increased access to formal finance, compliance, capacity building, and cluster based approach for

development of specific industries in micro food processing sector, are all concrete plans developed by Modi Government for building the market based agro-infrastructure value chain and for making rural India self-sufficient by directly catering to the end-customer, and through market based infusion of funds.

These are in addition to Jan Dhan Yojana and PM-KISAN policies that critically help farming community. No other government in past has taken this much initiative to make rural economy self-sufficient as PM Modi led NDA Government has been striving for. This is far more feasible and productive in the long run than a MNREGA type approach which can be good as a supplement but on its own would never make rural India self-sufficient.

Rural India is Far More Resilient than Urban India

The COVID-19 crisis has vindicated that when a massive disaster strikes, rural India is more resilient than cities. One cannot blame cities per se because of the massive pressure of influx of population that has been happening there for decades. Therefore, to ease the pressure on cities, to make sure that in future India does not have to face similar migrant related crisis and also for increasing farm income, it is not only necessary to reform agriculture but also allow industry to set up shops in rural India. It does not mean encouraging land grabbing by fraudulent companies, but genuine investments by long term players as well as creating incubation architecture for developing a new generation of rural entrepreneurs. Both agriculture and industry can coexist in each other's company. They would not only compliment but also sustain each other. PM Modi has laid down the road map for rejuvenating rural India by taking a series of policy decisions related to farm reforms. It is now up to the states to implement them.

Companies Quitting China May Do Wonders for Rural India through New Investments

Also, as several major companies plan to shift their manufacturing base from China to elsewhere, it is a great opportunity for India to ride a new wave of manufacturing based industrial renaissance. For that to happen, states would need to avail land because industry cannot happen in vacuum. Allowing major companies to have production bases in underdeveloped districts would not only help in triggering a new wave of progress for them but would prevent future migration from those districts. The huge army of migrant workers who are returning to their respective states can be leveraged as productive human resource for taking forward rural development. Those who provide their land for industrial land-banks can be given not just monetary compensation and jobs, but also be made stakeholders in the factories to be set up, by creating avenues for reserving a section of the equity for the land providers. This would ensure holistic growth of rural India even as agriculture too would be revived with increased capital investments and higher productivity.

Prevent Foreign NGOs and Vested Interests from thwarting Development in Rural India

Rural India can only progress if the vested interests are thwarted from taking forward their politics of agitation to disrupt development of India's rural economy in realm of both industrial and agricultural advancement. Only time would tell if states like Bengal, which has been a hotbed of politics of agitation, would do course correction or would continue with their suicidal and self-destructive politics of anti-industry agitation. If states like Bengal fail to change, then in spite of past heritage and immense intrinsic potential, they would continue to sink from where both the educated and unskilled often would be left with no option but to continue with their outbound journey for seeking jobs elsewhere. To prevent future migration from rural India to urban ghettos, industry would have to be taken to rural India. That is the only way forward to give genuine dignity to rural workforce and their real potential.

(Pathikrit Payne is a New Delhi based Policy Analyst & Television Panellist)

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**Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee
Research Foundation**

9, Ashoka Road, New Delhi- 110001

Web :- www.spmrf.org, E-Mail: office@spmrf.org,

  **@spmrfoundation**

Phone:011-23005850