

Putting local govt in place

Elections should be timed carefully

HERE can be no difference of opinion on the importance of an empowered, independent, transparent and accountable local government system that would strengthen the foundations of democracy and participatory development process in the country. Functional and neutral local government institutions, elected democratically, not only can address key issues like poverty, employment, environment, illiteracy and malnutrition, they also can help uproot corruption and lawlessness that stem from opportunistic politics. But there is no denying that democracy and rule of law failed to take a firm root in the country as these important institutions so long remained in the hands of corrupt political elements and their goons and a section of unscrupulous government officials. Thus, a thorough restructuring of the institutions has become a need of the hour, and this has been stressed by the chief adviser of the caretaker government Fakhruddin Ahmed in his speech while addressing the conference of the local government representatives in the city.

We believe the decision to prevent unwanted interference at the lowest tier of administration by members of parliament and create a permanent and neutral local government commission will go a long way to remove such unwanted interference and strengthen the foundation of the local level institutions. The past records show how MPs remained more interested in controlling the finance of various developmental works in their constituency than attending parliament sessions.

The important thing would be holding free and fair local government elections within the shortest possible time once the voter list has been prepared and put in effect reform recommendations of the expert committee. If time permits then holding the local government elections before the national elections would authenticate how far the voter list has become fault free, and allow time for the Election Commission (EC) to fine-tune it. The election would be a trial run for the EC and it would increase public confidence in the system that no doubt has lost much of its esteem in public eye. Should the local government elections be held earlier the chances of political interference would be minimum and there would be greater possibility of honest and clean candidates coming forward to contest.

If, however, preparation of the voter list drags on, and there is no leeway in holding of local government elections earlier, then it would be judicious to hold national, local and mayoral elections simultaneously. That would save money of the exchequer and lessen the burden of logistics and manpower requirement on the EC. We feel careful planning well in advance can ensure the completion of the important tasks to the satisfaction of all concerned.

Rice crisis

Advisor's frank admission

WE find the comments of the finance advisor regarding the present crisis of rice as being the result of lack of proper coordination, a frank admission of the government's lack of planning. It is also a bit amusing.

We wonder why some advisors are found to be very free with explanations that appear to border on proffering excuses on matters gone awry, or making comments that appear to have been made without comprehending its implications.

In this instance what one finds strange is the statement of the said advisor that the unprecedented hike in price of rice, which has brought about untold misery to the poor and fixed income groups, was the result of mismatch between the supply and demand. We wonder why the obvious has to be restated if no corrective action was initiated immediately when the folly was identified.

However, there is an obvious question that we would like to ask. Pray tell us whose responsibility is it to ensure that all necessary coordination was made to implement government plans and policies, particularly when that had to do with something as important as ensuring smooth supply of food grains in the market.

Not only is there a lamentable lack of coordination there is also a lack of foresight and the ability to assess the situation in the correct perspective. Soon after Sidr had struck we were told by the finance advisor that the forthcoming harvest would allow us to tide over the crop loss and that there would be no crisis of food grains. But lo and behold! We now have to rein in a market that had gone completely beyond everybody's control. The government has decided to import a million tonnes of rice for now. One wishes that this decision had been taken sooner. The same situation had occurred in the case of fertilizer where, in spite of the relevant ministers' claims, we had to go for emergency import of the same.

Another possible reason for the price hike is not far to seek, which was the comment of another advisor that the government could do very little to arrest the escalation of price of rice.

To say the least there is little coordination amongst the ministries and the matter is compounded by untimely and injudicious comments by people in responsible places who must realise that whatever he or she says has implications for the country.

Lamenting aloud in a wintry noon...



SHAHNOOR WAHID

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

Is our education sector any better, which was supposed to be so anyway? My profession brings me closer to college and university teachers, and I must confess, every time I meet one, of course except a brilliant few, I worry till midnight about the fate of their students. If a teacher cannot speak his or her mother tongue properly then it is hundred percent unacceptable.

had robbed them of all the human qualities, and as a result, they let loose a reign of terror that left many rules of tyrants in history far behind. Is it the fault of power or something else?

There can be nothing wrong with power itself. George Bernard Shaw said: "Power does not corrupt men; fools however, if they get into a position of power, corrupt power." Dear readers, haven't we seen many of them around -- those I so fondly call "Powerfools?" More on power: Benjamin Disraeli said: "When men are pure, laws are useless; when men are corrupt, laws are broken." Quite a riddle, indeed.

Here is a pleasant thought from none but John F Kennedy: "When power leads man towards arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the area of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses." So, brother politicians, for God's sake do read some poetry and give us a breathing space.

So much for power and corruption. But are we having anything better in other sectors, known to be more benign ones? For example, the cultural world? Not really,

if we evaluate without attaching too much passion to it just because it is Bangladeshi culture. But, do we accept them as Bangladeshi culture? Do we own them? I don't think many of our saner citizens would like to own what is going on in the name of songs, modern music, dance, television drama and cinema as Bangladeshi culture. "Shameful" is one word that describes all.

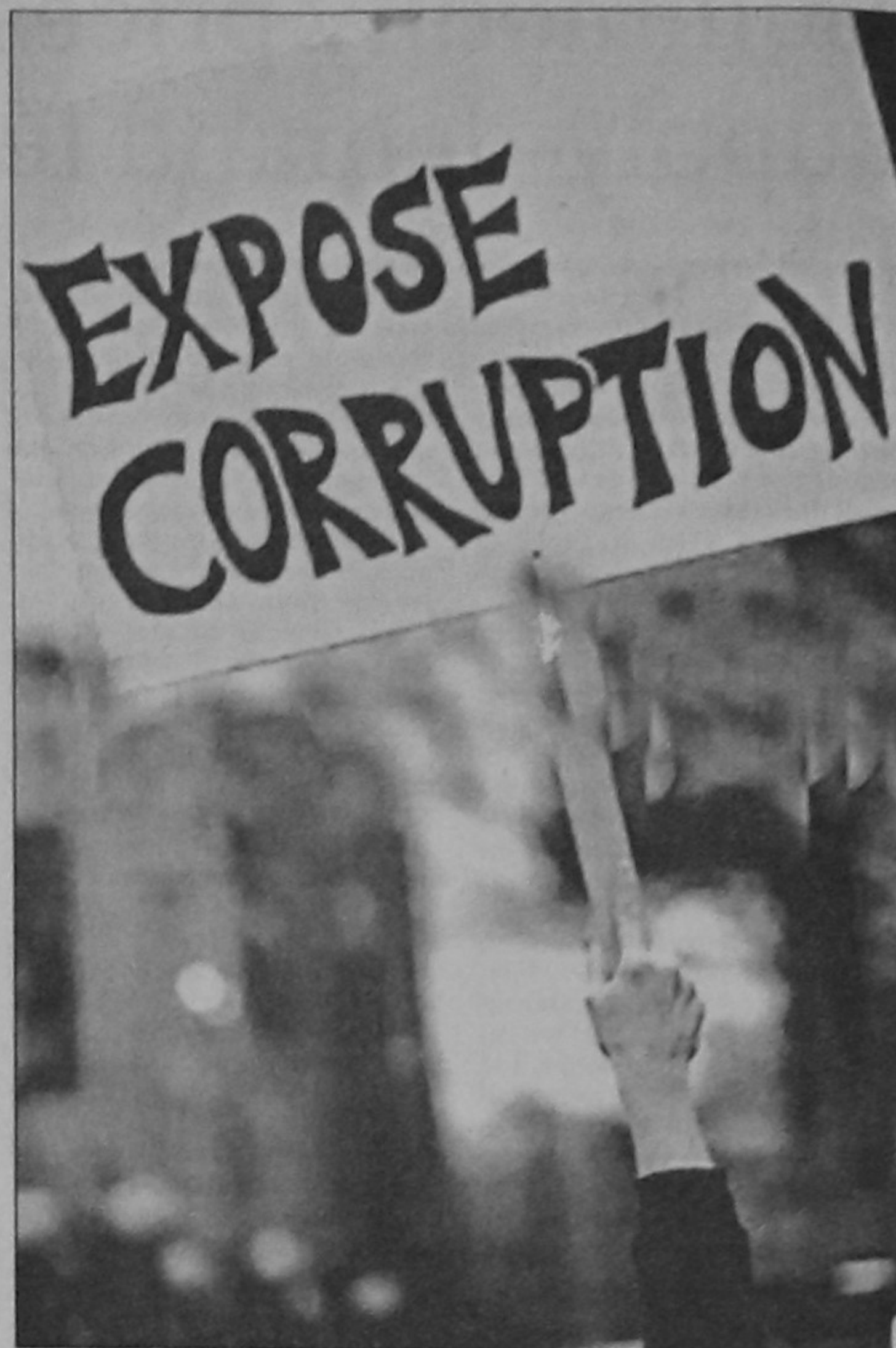
Thanks to the availability of billions, multi-sectoral organisations are promoting mediocre performers in glitzy shows, only to draw public attention to their products and brands. By doing so, they are doing colossal damage to our art and culture and our sense of aesthetics. And knowing it all too well we keep mum. Why? We all know why. Switch on your TV set and you will find strangely dressed men and women, some even fifty plus and refusing to stop, gyrating and hollering in the name of dancing and singing. Whatever comes out of their vocal chords cannot be called songs, if anything! Whatever has happened to songs that lower your blood pressure and make a better human?

Then let's watch a TV drama. Blistering barnacles! Most of the young heroes are roadside van-

dals, real life ruffians, doing things and talking in a language that belongs to the gutters! What are they doing in our drawing rooms where our growing children watch TV with parents? Imagine your twelve-year-old son using the same language in school with friends believing that it was macho talk.

The other day, on a TV drama a roguish-looking hero actually slapped a rickshawpuller just to give a realistic touch to his acting. It was real, by God! Now, would he dare to slap a gentleman or a police constable on the street for the same reason? In the same drama, one roguish hero kicked another when the latter interfered with his conversation with his girl friend on cell phone. It was so crass, so unacceptable, that I switched off the TV set.

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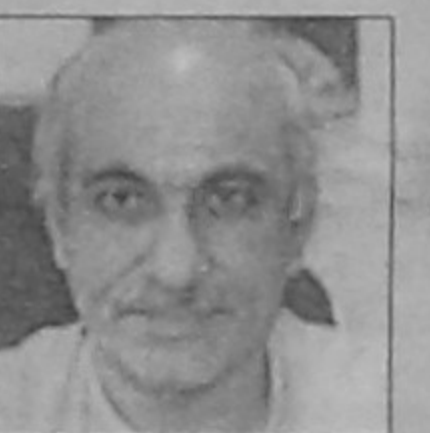
Absolutely!

the case of university departments giving away first classes on a first come first serve basis. Oh, how wish I were a student now! Gone are the days when a good second-class form Dhaka University kept a student smiling for weeks.

Will lamentation take us anywhere? No. Then what is the solution? How can we improve things and make this society a safe and liveable one? We have to search within for answers.

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A 'Policket' quiz



M. J. AKBAR

TEST your knowledge, analytical ability and skill as an astrologer through this simple quiz on two of the three great national entertainments of India, politics and cricket. Tick your preference, cut out, keep and check how right or wrong you have been by the end of 2008. (Even 2008 will come to an end, in about 360 days.)

1: Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will

- a) Abandon the nuclear deal and remain in office for another year
- b) Go for it, and challenge the Left and opposition to a sudden-death election in May
- c) Do neither and hope for the best.

2: The Padma awards on January 26 this year will be

- a) Dominated by CEO-types as government reinforces its liberalisation image
- b) Full of handouts to unknown sycophants backed by unknown ministers
- c) Go to those who genuinely

deserve them.

3: The Union Budget will be

- a) More leftist-than-thou, a sudden reversal to pro-poor policies
- b) Packed with subsidies to minorities
- c) A repeat of last year's neither-here-nor-there prescriptions, but this time overdoing on quotations from Tamil poets.

4: The BJP will

- a) Return to depression after losing in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan
- b) Discover stability and an alternative economic policy and win
- c) Behave as if it has already won the next general elections and swagger to another defeat.

5: Sharad Pawar will

- a) Send flowers every month to Bal Thackeray
- b) Smile at the Congress and sabotage it at every level
- c) Import huge amounts of wheat when international prices

BYLINE

Sourav Ganguly will -- a) Be reappointed captain b) Become chief minister of Bengal after Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee c) Refuse to retire until he signs a Rs 100 crore contract to advertise casual shirts that come off easily without tearing. If by the end of 2008 you discover that you have mastered both politics and cricket, you will be made a member of the Rajya Sabha and chair a special committee to investigate the role of bookies in fixing cricket matches.

are at their highest.

6: The decisive factor in the next general elections will be

- a) The nuclear deal
- b) Rising prices
- c) Narendra Modi
- d) Fractious alliances

e) Mayawati's ability to cut the Congress vote in seats she can't win.

7: Bengal's chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee will

- a) Reinterpret Marxism through a thesis titled Bindas Capital, which will be popularly known as Buddhism
- b) Be replaced as chief minister after severe reverses in the summer panchayat elections
- c) Re-establish control over Bengal through guns, cadres and sops.

8: The Left will

- a) Play hide-and-seek with the Third Front
- b) Play hide-and-seek with the

Congress

- c) Play hide-and-seek with itself.

9: The Congress will paint prime minister-in-waiting L.K. Advani as

- a) Modi without a beard
- b) Modi without Gujarat
- c) Modi without Modi.

10: The BJP will portray the Manmohan Singh government as

- a) Do-nothingjee huzoors
- b) Do-nothing minority-appeasers
- c) Do-nothing except both of the above.

11: The Congress will

- a) Taking a cue from Barack Obama, project Rahul Gandhi and "change" as the theme song of its next election campaign
- b) Stick to the comfort-level of Dr Manmohan Singh's prime ministership
- c) Leave matters ambiguous, wait for the results to come in, and then see how the politics of power play out.

12: India and Pakistan will

- a) Let relations stagnate for yet another year, using the excuse of uncertainty at the top and instability at the bottom
- b) Search for a surrogate war in Afghanistan
- c) Miraculously discover common sense and realise that unless they sort out Kashmir, and swim together against terrorism India will suffer and Pakistan will sink.

13: Rahul Dravid will unfreeze when

- a) He realises that he was nicknamed The Wall, not Wall's ice cream
- b) Gets written orders from his wife to relax
- c) Listens to his personal manager
- d) Drinks six large malt whiskies in half an hour at a good Australian bar
- e) Gets dropped.

14: We will get English cricket commentary when

- a) Ravi Shastri realises that "batter" is a mixture of flour, egg and milk or water, used for caking food before frying, and not a mix with a bat at the crease
- b) When some unmentionables stop saying that it was not a very difficult chance, but not an easy chance either
- c) When other unmentionables stop reading English in the Urdu script
- d) When a basic grammar test is a compulsory requirement for anyone aspiring to be a commenta-

tor

- e) When one or two commentators learn that people are interested in cricket and not the volume of gas in their vocal chords.

15: The Indian Cricket XI by the end of 2008 will have

- a) The present level of four Permanent Oldies, two regular Middle-Agers and young floaters
- b) Seven Oldies, two MAs and two floaters
- c) Three members of the Supreme Committee of the Board of Control for Cricket in India, seven Oldies and Shah Rukh Khan as coach-captain.

16: Sachin Tendulkar will score his fiftieth Test century in

- a) 2010
- b) 2012
- c) At the age of 50.

17: Sourav Ganguly will

- a) Be reappointed captain
- b) Become chief minister of Bengal after Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee
- c) Refuse to retire until he signs a Rs 100 crore contract to advertise casual shirts that come off easily without tearing.

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Nandigram: A facet of terrorism



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

PERSPECTIVES

Redoubtable Noam Chomsky and Tariq Ali have warned that the continuing Nandigram protests could harm Left unity in India against depredation of the globalisation projects spearheaded by multinational companies in pursuit of higher profits, and rationalised by the neo-liberal paradigm of a new pattern of specialisation based primarily on the movement of capital rather than of labour.

as it currently rests on the coalition between the Congress party and the Left Front, of which CPI (M) is an important element. It could eclipse Indo-US nuclear deal, and produce an explosive Molotov cocktail of Marxism, global capitalism and communism.

A linkage with the West, particularly the US, with its accompanying economic benefits, is attractive, and even Congress, once led by a non-aligned stalwart like Jawaharlal Nehru, suc-

cumbed to it. Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the communist leader of West Bengal, couldn't possibly ignore the likely windfall of such bonanza, and lent support to an unequal Indo-US deal in the hope of reaping the fruit of globalisation by attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) into his state.

It is a reflection of his desire to become a satrap, if required, in the global imperialism of the United States, even though the West Bengal communists may

have got involved unwittingly in this post-cold war game of international politics in which India wants to leapfrog from being a pawn to becoming a queen on the global chessboard of power.

Notwithstanding India's global desires -- and the West Bengal communists' stake in it -- domestic politics, ideology, industrial strategy, land acquisition, Naxalite insurrection and other factors, have all combined to become a volatile and lethal mix to exacerbate the situation in

Nandigram.

However, paradoxically, in West Bengal, there is a popularly elected regime, which ruled the state for over three decades through democratic elections, and has carried out one of the most credible land reforms in South Asia. In the elections held 18 months ago, it won a massive electoral mandate.

Yet, as pointed out in a recent article by Ashok Mitra, the veteran Marxist economist who was sworn-in as the first finance minister in West Bengal's CPM government in 1977 under the chief minister-ship of legendary Jyoti Bose, the left front administration led by CPM has since jettisoned its ideological agenda.

The uninterrupted three-decade reign of the party in West Bengal, and its recent electoral success, though considerably short of the peak gained in 1987 has, indeed, bred hubris and

ineptitude in the leadership, which had not been experienced before. Now, there is an increasing tendency to micro-manage the affairs of the society and state.

The Nandigram issue is part of the state policy to create SELs, and finds its genesis in an earlier incident in Hoogly district on December 2, 2006, when police brutally assaulted peaceful peasants while they were protesting against the forced acquisition of their land for building a car factory.

The police resorted to widespread baton charge, and fired teargas shells and rubber bullets, and entered the adjoining villages and mercilessly beating the residents. But most of the evicted people continued to resist and seek the return of their land. The CPM remained un-renting, and not only persisted with its plan for the automobile plant, but also announced plans for acquiring

land for the setting up of a chemical plant by the Salim Group of Indonesia.

This provoked strong protests from the affected people, most of whom were CPM members. As a result, Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee retracted by publicly admitting that the unilateral acquisition of land was a mistake, and promised to return land of those who had not consented.

Still, out of vindictiveness against the dissenters, terror was unleashed in Nandigram on March 14 last. There was an outpouring of sympathy for the sufferers. The observers of Nandigram incident, including left leaning academics, were appalled at the use of brute force to acquire land.

As the noted Indian economist, Amit Bhaduri, points out, the state acquisition of land is the most obvious case of forcible transfer of resources from ordi-

nary people to private corporations, causing destruction of livelihood and displacement of people. In the same way, many more were outraged by the methods that were used to recapture Nandigram by CPM cadres from an alleged incursion of outsiders, including Maoists and Islamic fundamentalists, who were said to be fomenting trouble.

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