

If Nano had not left Singur? Look at Hind Motors

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On Mayday, 2009, Uttarpara, site of the Hind Motors automobile factory, saw a well-attended rally and procession in defence of a water body.

The programme has an ironic side. Hind Motors, established in 1948, is, after 60 years, disposing of land occupied by it in expectation of an industrial expansion which never happened. And, at present, the factory is caught in a downturn. About the Nano car project, the official propaganda was of a flourishing township in the future. When it was pointed out to the state government that the Singur factory could employ seven hundred or so workers only, the reply was that the ancillaries and downstream products would swell up employment. But an automotive industry spokesman stated that for every job in the car factory there would at most be 5-6 jobs downstream. So, the car factory at Singur would provide at most 5 thousand jobs, while conservative estimates put the number of residents displaced to be at least 10 thousand. We were then told stories of some future time when the land around Singur would be resplendent with business and industry, townships alight and bustling with economic activity.

Of course, these were lies. Big, corporate industry in the era of old capitalism generates few new jobs and squeezes existing jobs in the quest for productivity and profit. Look at Hind Motors. Even in 1998 there were 9954 jobs. In 2007, within ten years, the number of jobs more than halved to stand at 4500. The surrounding localities of Uttarpara and Makhla stagnate. After 60 years there are no signs of flourishing townships. The future of Singur would have been no different.

The Birlas had been allowed by the government of West Bengal to occupy 744 acres for the factory at throwaway rates. Of this, 314 acres remained unutilized, 100 acres being a water body. Recently, the state government decided to give a gift to the Birlas at the tax-payers' expense. The Land and Land Revenue department sold the 314 acres of public land to the Birlas at a nominal price of Rs10.5 crs. The Birlas sold the land to one Bengal Sriram Hitech City Pvt Ltd at Rs 295.5 crs, a neat profit of Rs 285 crs. The Birlas had declared that Rs 70 crs would be used for modernizing the factory and Rs 25 crs for payment of workers' dues, though it seems that the windfall is actually being used to cut down the workforce by operating a Voluntary Retirement Scheme.

Bengal Sriram started to fill up the land with fly ash from thermal power plants, with a residential complex in its sights. The local people now stepped in. A platform called 'Gana Udyog' was formed and a movement started to save the water body and resist SEZ-type maldevelopment. Sensing the local resentment, the government formed a high level committee with the local MP, MLA, municipality chairman, panchayat pradhan and others, and the Fisheries department recorded a FIR against the company for filling up 3.5 acres of the water body.

But the committee became defunct and Bengal Sriram flouted the order of the Fishery department to restore the 3.5 acres of filled up wetland, though fresh filling up was stalled. The Fisheries department also initiated a case at the Uttarpara police station (No 149, July 17, 2008), but the PS has shown no interest in the case so far.

The KMDA, a state government undertaking, next permitted the company to build a 'protected city' on this land set away for industry, using 7 lakh sq ft for a housing estate and 60 acres for an IT Township and Auto Ancillary Park.

The state government seems quite happy with the programme of building residential complexes on industrial land. Invisible pressure is there on the organizers to call off the movement. Time and again, it becomes visible – on 30th April the shopowner supplying the public address system at the fast site was cautioned by the police against doing business with Gana Udyog. This was part of the police attempt to spoil the Mayday rally. But the movement continues. 5 thousand mass signatures against the proposed maldevelopment have been submitted to the Chief Minister. A fasting programme was organized from April 25 to May 1, and Mayday saw the rousing rally referred to already.

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