

## **Voice of Development and Trajectories of Governance: The Changing Role of Civil Society, emergence of Social Capital and the West Bengal Politics (2007-2017)**

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### ***Introduction***

*Acquiring private land for public purpose is nothing new to India, but in last few decades, it has been acquired in rapid rate by the government for the public purpose with various promises. To the advocates of development believed that acquisition of land is essential for the structural adjustment and generate rapid industrialization which in a way assure 'efficient and accountable governance' (Kundu, 2004). In the post liberalization period, the erstwhile left front government, for attracting the industrialist, they offered them very fertile land which they acquired from poor farmers at a negligible price in different places of India and West Bengal (Roy, 2014, 150). But it was a drastic policy step with severe consequences for the lefts in the electoral politics. After the acquisition of land at Singur, the then opposition party TMC mobilize rural left support base in their favor of capitalizing the sensitive issue.*

*The movement against land acquisition at Singur was an unique incident which led by rural farmers but interestingly, the urban centric civil society led by academia and intelligentsia also supported and campaigned for the unwilling farmers which later became the prominent political agenda for legislative election that overthrown the un-interrupted left front rule (1977-2011) in West Bengal. Not only that, West Bengal government has opposed to the passing of the much debated land bill even in the parliament. But just after completion of a single term in the power, two contrasting picture came into forefront. It has been noticed that, Govt. is more or less sensitive in the issue of land acquisition but they are not equally treating every instances of land acquisition with equal importance. It raised the question about the silence of civil society in the issue of land acquisition but people whose livelihood is directly associated with the land get united among themselves based on their similar problem, interpersonal trust and obviously on the*

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*question of their legitimate right which can be theoretically analyzed as an important example of interplay between formation of social capital and the practice of governance.*

## **Background**

The mass electoral verdict of 2011 has invoked a complex and multi-dimensional political domain of interpretation and argument about the upcoming critical nature of Bengal politics. After prolonged silence in Bengal politics, civil society and public conscience has played a crucial role in 2011 in shaping the ideological orientation and voting behaviour of the common people. But within the five years the vibrant voice of civil society seemed to have gradually become unheard by the present ruling authority. Before going into the detail discussion, it is essential to define the terminologies such as civil society and social capital.

Categorically, civil society emerged as a conceptually opposite autonomous space outside the realm of state but has a close connection with state. Until mid seventeenth century, there was no distinction between civil society and state. It was Locke, who made that distinction clear. Gradually, as an autonomous space between state and individual, civil society became considered as a night watchman of democratic values. In 1980's American Political Scientists like Coleman, Bourdeau and Putnam discovered the social bonding based on interpersonal trust among the members of the society is very crucial for the making the spirit of governance alive. After that, it became clear that, urban centric civil society is nothing but an external member and they hardly react and even became silent on the rural issues (Roy Chaudhory, 2008) such as land acquisition which has a direct impact on the livelihood of the poor people.

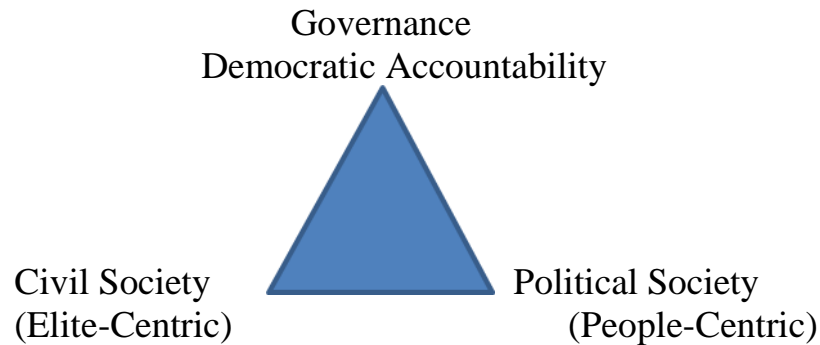
## **Objective**

The objective of the study is to understand the growing emergence of social capital instead of civil society in the political milieu of West Bengal in the post-communist period

## **Methodology**

The entire study is divided into some parts; analytical, historical, descriptive sections. For analytical and descriptive part of the study, focus group discussion has been adopted with the direct beneficiaries related to land acquisition as well as some non-beneficiaries have been undertaken for detail understanding of the problem, and telephonic interview arrangements. For the contextualization of the problem of land acquisition and decreasing of the role of civil society and increasing role of social capital in West Bengal, historical analytical methodology has been used. Majority of the data and information source are secondary as the field is still politically violent.

## Invisible theory and visible praxis



### Tripartite Model of Governance

Civil society has been considered as one of the essential indicators of the transition from developing to the developed stage of governance. Civil society since its modern appearance in modern political theory closely associated with the emergence of secular political authority, recognition of individual rights particularly the right to private property, rapid growth of urbanisation and associational culture as a result of industrial and print capitalism, and finally modern nation state making process based on constitutionalism and rule of law. But the stages of development in a country like India not only guided by the developmental logic rather also based on social bonding based on interpersonal social trust and networks. (Kaviraj and Khilnani, 2001).

Since 1990's Social capital appeared as a tool of building trust and strengthen associational spirit in a way contributed in producing the social glue essential for harmonious societal existence after the influential done by scholars like Coleman, Bourdieu and Putnam. As a concept, social capital depends on norms of the society, reciprocity, trust and networks. For the emerging new nations in the post-world war two period civil society played a crucial role, as the night watchman of democracy and federalism but gradually it became politicised and social capital emerged as a crucial player in countries like India. Political party also came into power encashing the social capital and TMC did the same thing in West Bengal but only after completion of a single term. The social capital started eroding which was reflected to some extent in the political verdict. Is it a mere syndrome of some other indication or it reflect different trend of political behaviour depending on the level of election?

### Who's Governance?

In March 2017 after the by-election, result was declared voting share of Bharatiya Janta Party rose from 14% in the last assembly election in 2016 to 22% in *Kanathi Dakshin* constituency. In that election Pujali was in limelight as it was in the South 24 Pargana district where BJP won in two words

(word no. 3,9) even after goons looted the vote in massive rate. The State Election Commission was recapitulating the same story of free and fair municipal election as like as a subsidiary administrative organisation of State govt. forgetting about its autonomy. And just a few of months ago of the by-election in Kanthi Dakshin two important incident took place in Bhangor (on 17/01/2017 in South 24 Parganas and Bhabdighi on 17/03/2017 in Hooghly) on the issue of acquisition of land for the development purpose.

### **Behind the Vail**

In Bhangor, two people named Mofizul Khan (26) and Alamgeer Seikh (22) were shot dead and a least twenty persons including security personals were injured by bullets allegedly in a police firing on a mass demonstration against the setting up of a power grid in the fertile multi-cropped land at Kamarhati area in the South 24 Parganas district. (The Hindu, 18 January, 2017). The land was acquired apparently for construction of gas insulated 440/220 kv. Power grid. The sole objection was lack of transparency among the locals about the projects and no proper route was chartered out for the high voltage electric transmission.

Reputedly, those local residents gathered at the site in the morning after a huge police force entered the villages of *Khamerhati, Natunhat, Machibhanga and shayamnagar*. Like other days local people assembled in the site while police raid the village and a broil happened between police and the local people, suddenly police started to fire with rubber palate gun and tear gas on the mass and situation deteriorated within minutes and the place turned into a battle ground. Thus, a peaceful demonstration eventually turned into a violent battleground.

The incident took place just two days before the Bengal Business Summit. After the incident, *Jomi Jibika Poribesh o Bastutanro Roksha* Committee (Committee to Protect land, livelihood, Environment and Ecosystem) was formed with the guidance of the CPI (ML) Red Star state level leaders. Thereafter, police arrested Sharmistha Chaudhory, one of the red star leader and wife of state secretary Alik Chaudhory, and eleven others in the charge of violating the law and order situation on 25<sup>th</sup> January. On 26<sup>th</sup>, Mr. Sabyasachi Dutta, the Trinomool MLA of the Rajarhat Newtown area (which is the adjacent constituency) and the Chairman of Bidhannagar Municipal Corporation, tried to enter the disturbed area of Bhangor to regain their political footing from the end of Bakdoba with his party cadre. Mr. Dutta went there to pacify the agitating mobs who were protesting against construction of power grid. But his attempt went in vain rather he was fortunate to escape from the anger of the local people with the help of police. On 30<sup>th</sup> January a *michil* (rally) of common people was called off by *Bahngaor Sanhati Moncho* in protest of arresting Sarmistha Chaudhory and eleven others.

On 23/05/2017 afternoon, the *Jomi Jibika Poribesh o Bastutanro Roksha* Committee (Committee to Protect land, livelihood, Environment and Ecosystem) organised a public meeting on protest of accusing the common protestor in UAPA act in the Tapobon field in the *natunhat* area but the armed musketries of the Arabul group, to spoil the meeting, made an armed rally since morning between *natunhat*, *khamerhat* and *haroa* more. Even the committee failed to make the arrangements for organising the meeting like set up a stage and holding the microphone. Then resistance came from *khamarhat* and *Machibhanga* village and at that time Fatema Bibi was injured by a bullet in her left thy. A delegation of save democracy forum were invited to deliver lecture at the said public meeting Ex Justice Ashoke Kumer Ganguli, Social worker Dipali Bhattacharyaya, members of the Red Star like T.P. Rabindranath, Palash Kar, Sunil Pal, member of PDS tried to enter into the meeting place but after seeing the armed goons they did not went to *natunhat*. On the way of their return, the local *Trinomool* party workers blocked their car in *Shamnagar* more and later police of *Cossipur* came and rescued them from the blockade (Ei Samay, 23/05/17).

A similar incident took place in *Bhaba Dighi* in *Hoogly Goghat*. *Bhab Dighi* is a seventeen acres fish farm in *Hooghly* with twenty dependent families on its fish production throughout the year. *Hooghly* and *Bankura* are two adjacent districts of West Bengal, famous for a *Hindu* pilgrimage. When *Mamta Bannerjee* was Union Minister of railway of the *NDA-I* government, she proposed a railway connectivity between *Bishnupur*, *Joyrambati*, *Kamarpukur* and *Tarakeswar* for the tourist and pilgrims. Interestingly, *Bhab Dighi* and *Singur* are located in the same district of *Hooghly*. For that railway connectivity seventeen acres fishing farm of *Bhab Dighi* needed to be acquired. To fulfil the dream project of Ms. *Bannerjee* land acquisition was started but a section of farm owners refused to accept the cheque and started an agitation against the forcible acquisition of the land. The locals decided that they will not allow any railway line across the area where the pond was located. The Leftist opposition went to *Bhaba Dighi* and rendered their support to the local protesters. The Chief Minister in her visit to *Bankura* (6<sup>th</sup> April, 2017) declared that there is no need to instigate owners of the fish Farm at *Bhaba Dighi*. Come what may, this railway project must go ahead ...' (The Times of India, 06/04/2017). Both the projects are temporarily suspended facing a vibrant protest from both peri-urban (*Bhangor* and *Kamarhati*) and rural (*Bhab Dighi*) society where social capital played a crucial role. The above mentioned sensitive issues were directly related with the livelihood and the question of sustainable development of the local people but no civic voice was raised on the part of intellectuals except some of the students of the *Jadavpur University*.

Ever since permanent settlement of 1793, in the colonial period land became a crucial immovable asset (Guha, 1963). Both the state and the

central government have acquired land in the pre-liberalisation period for the 'public purpose clause' as per the Land Acquisition Act 1894. And most of the land were acquired with compensation either in peri-urban areas which were highly sensitive as the inhabitants of the localities neither has neither the skill nor the capital to shift their income base. Acquisition of multi-cropped fertile land and transfer it into non-agricultural purpose directly affected the livelihood of the small landholders and sharecroppers.

In the post-liberalisation era, as Amit Bhaduri (1993) alleged that the model of development adopted by the right and the left converged at some points which ultimately keep faith on the age old 'trickledown theory' of development discourse. Planners believed that the huge rate of corporate led growth in the high productivity sector (i.e. industry), that eventually benefits the rich and poor, and minimize the rich – poor gap. The post Nehruvian Indian State tried to follow a model of economic development based on corporate led growth for which development of infrastructure sector is utmost important (i.e. rail track and power grid). Without guaranteeing the minimal human development Like others, to the so called pro-poor Bengal Chief minster's industrialisation is not a matter of choice rather compulsion.

### **Trajectories of the post-independent Bengal Politics**

In the history of post independent India place of West Bengal has occupied a unique example. Until mid – sixties like majority of states there was dominant party system led by Congress. Federalism was adopted in Indian constitution as a guiding principle with unitary bias but it has two aspects a) Political b) Fiscal. Political federalism was adopted in Indian constitution as a policy but to enhance fiscal federalism need to be followed keeping in mind the regional disparities. It is a place, where density of population is relatively high and among many of reasons migration from Bangladesh is a major reason and in terms of outflow of migration the rate is negligible. West Bengal is the worst victim of regional disparity. Here capitalism developed in profit-motivated guideline but in society, there is non-capitalist dominated informal social relation based on social trust. Instead of institutionalising the overall development, the development strategy has followed the sector specific strategy. It was expected that in the post 1990's regional disparity should be minimise, but since early 1990's role of the centre in fright equalisation and industrial licensing reinforced industrial divergence. However , it should be keep in mind that the story of liberal democracy is complex and conflict ridden relationship between economic development, inter-elite relations, interrelations between and within social classes and political institutions in a peculiar and specific arrangements of governmental form (Kaviraj ,2000).

The Left Front Government (LFG) based on 'parliamentary communism' (Basu and Majumdar, 2013) captured state power in west Bengal in June, 1977 and uninterruptedly ruled it near for three and half decades (April,

2011). The lefts came into the international limelight for their effective land policy, people centric land redistribution, sharecropper registration and peoples' participation and empowerment through direct engagement of them in the democratic decentralised decision making process by *panchayati-raj* system. Gradually, the ideological orientation has become irrelevant to them (Basu, 2004). With the help of land reforms, they gradually 'monopolize the control of social space, what Bhattacharayay called as the process of formation of 'Party Society' (Bhattacharyaya, 2011).

Since 1990's, national and international changes took place and the lefts adopted new industrial policy in 1994, and admitted the key role of private sector in providing accelerated growth (Govt. of West Bengal, 1994, p-8). As the left won a big electoral victory in 2006 assembly election, some developmental and reformative initiatives were taken by CPI (M) leaders. One of such initiatives was forceful acquisition of agricultural land for development purpose which proved to be a disastrous attempt for the govt. It was the step, which not only divided the support base of the left but urban intelligentsia also supported it. (Lofgren, Hans; 2016)

After defeating CPI (M) in 2011, TMC came into power. Trinomool like the lefts ideologically criticized the crony corporate capitalism but in reality, they are accepting the universal presence of capital everywhere like others. It is also interesting to note that economic transformation of India is not possible by neglecting the political component. In an informal society like India the social capital acts both as glue between the members of the society and as the integrating force. Whenever the glue is loosening, it creates a lot of disjunctions in the social structure. And in the capitalist world, besides, civil society there exist a 'political society' which is not duty bound law regulated rather they form their own laws for their governance.

As Kalyan Sanyal observed that, unlike West, in the postcolonial India where passive revolution needs to justify the consent of democratic political representation which Indian society is not allowing. To overcome this, Sanyal suggested scholars to break though the Gramscian historical construct of passive revolution. It is where the social capital came into play its role and civil society remains as a non-playing captain of the game. Dwaipayan Bhattacharyaya, Nirja Gopal Jayal, Bishnu N Mahapatra and Sudha Pai (2005) in their interesting study presented a varied experience of interaction between social capital and democratic functioning in field based micro level study in rural areas. They made sector wise analysis in their study and in Bhattacharyaya's study; he made observation in sector's like education where he directly related to the indicators of human development to dimension of social capital.

But in these Bhangor and Bhabdighi, incidents have hardly received any intellectual support from the part of the civil society which played a crucial role in historical regime change almost after four decades in west Bengal. In

these two particular cases common interest of the villagers based on their trust based bonding and limited networks pushed them to unite spontaneously and put forward the force of social capital in the forefront of the long lineage of the land battle legacy of west Bengal. Interestingly enough, so called public sphere and civil society remained almost silent.

### **Post Left Political Trajectories of West Bengal**

After winning the 2011 election, the successor govt. led by TMC took over the charge of a state that was in sever economic crisis as well as the expectations of an electorate fed up with arrogance of the left rule. The new govt. came with the slogan of *poribartan* (change) but after their first term in government, it seems that nothing has been changed. Unlike lefts, the support base of the party was not the urban *bhadrolok* and rural peasants rather the lower middle class of the peri-urban pseudo- intellectuals, political society of urban fringe areas and rural peasant and the labourer. Gradually popular aspiration about the ruling of the *Maa, Mati, Manus* govt. gradually started decline for number of reasons. Some of the allegations against the govt. were, a) corruption charges against the heavy weight ministers of the party; b) lack of interest for investment among industrialists and businessman due to land policy; c) shrinking of the autonomous public sphere, deterioration of civic voice, suppression of facts and curtailing of the individual liberty.

Since its inception to power Trinomool was keen to prove that they have formed a pro-poor govt. They objected the new land policy proposed by the NDA -2 Govt. and criticised it as it is an anti-people bill. But a huge gap became noticeable in the promise and practice of the new state govt. After a prolong silence and deadlock a group of representative of the people went to meet the Superintendent of the Police on 02/07/2017. After the meeting, the administration claimed that the local people were eager to seat on the discussion table and they do not have any objection regarding the power grid but there are certain conditions that need to be fulfilled by the govt. The leader-in charge of the district also gave the statement that the local people realised there mistake and eager to cooperate with the govt. But the another group of people of the village started agitation under the leadership of *The Jomi Jibika o Bastrutantra Banchao Committee* and they said they are dead against the installation of power grid and the local people of the adjacent villages were against still against the issue and near about hundred people started fasting for three days including the father of Mofijul Seikh, and they said that they were still against it. In the next week, the police came out with a charge sheet where they accused the near about fifty people on the UAPA charges among them ten were the leaders. The committee states that false charge should be withdrawn against the victim immediately, punishment for the Arabul and his groups and many other reacted issues. But till date nothing has come out as positive. The tension again escalated when in the allied area of Bhangor, Bhogali 1 Panchayt, govt. tried to build a



Karmatirtha project for the poor farmers. The people objected the forceful acquisition of 24-decibel land of a school premises as the ground has been used for paying for the 400 children. They objected as Nannu Hossain a local TMC leader tried to acquire the land by force.

### **Conclusion**

The above discussion proved that, the civil society only participate in the dialogue and debate on rural issues when it became a broader part of overall governance. But on the matter of exclusively rural issues the civic voice either get silent or biased. As the cost of urbanisation and development ultimately borne by the rural uneducated people who neither has the voice nor has the choice. But after getting denied of their right and false promises made by the government, people became very much disappointed and gradually they get united on the common ground, which ultimately made them united which can be seen as peculiar form of social capital that came out as a result of interpersonal relationship, wage and form the social solidarity that ultimately bargain with government and ensure the people centric governance for their own shake. The successful resistance of the local people of Bhangor Bhabdighi, and Singur inspired the people of Sahapore who agitated against the use of the land for state govt, sponsored housing project which was actually acquired almost two decades ago for the industrial purpose in Bolepure area.

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