

Negotiating development: the nuclear episode in the Sundarbans of West Bengal.¹

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This paper examines the dynamics of anti-nuclear campaigns in the Sundarbans of West Bengal. By focusing on a voluntary agency's (in this case, the Development Forum) engagement with the anti-nuclear protest, it seeks to interrogate the standard environmental narrative in South Asia, which frequently characterizes the environmental movements as the people's spontaneous emancipation from a destructive and monolithic state. This paper argues against such dualistic notions of state and society and documents local level negotiations in the wake of plans to set up a nuclear power plant; negotiations that render problematic theories treating the state or people as some kind of unified and monolithic unit.

Introduction

In July 2000, *The Statesman*, an Indian national daily paper, published a report in its Calcutta edition on the *Unnayan Sangathan*² (Development Forum) in Canning (a place in the Sundarbans)³ and its campaign against the setting up of a proposed nuclear power plant in the Sundarbans. The report said:

'Two years ago the state's Left Front government⁴ had come down heavily on the Centre for conducting nuclear tests at Pokhran. Now they

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² *Unnayan Sangathan* is a fictitious name given to the organization.

³ The region known as the Sundarbans (also spelt as Sunderbans) forms the southern part of the Gangetic delta between the rivers Hooghly, in the west of West Bengal, and Meghna in the east, now in Bangladesh. The area consists of low, flat alluvial plains intersected by several tidal rivers. The Sundarbans encompasses an area of over 25,500 square kilometres, two-thirds of which lie in Bangladesh and one-third in India. The Indian part of the Sundarbans (at the southern tip of West Bengal) has about 104 islands (the rest is inhabited mainland), out of which about 54 are inhabited and the rest are reserved for tigers. Frequent embankment collapse, soil erosion, and flooding are some of the perennial problems facing the people of the region.

⁴ For the past 25 years West Bengal has been ruled by a Left-front government, consisting of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), as the dominant electoral partner, the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and the Forward Bloc (FB). In the pre- and post-independence period, the communists were engaged in various land struggles when they chose a revolutionary path to assert the rights of the landless against the *zamindars* or *jotedars* (big landholders). Later, the communist coalition partners, who came to power in 1977, were more reformist than revolutionary (Kohli 1990: 367), aiming to radicalize the rural landscape through electoral means.

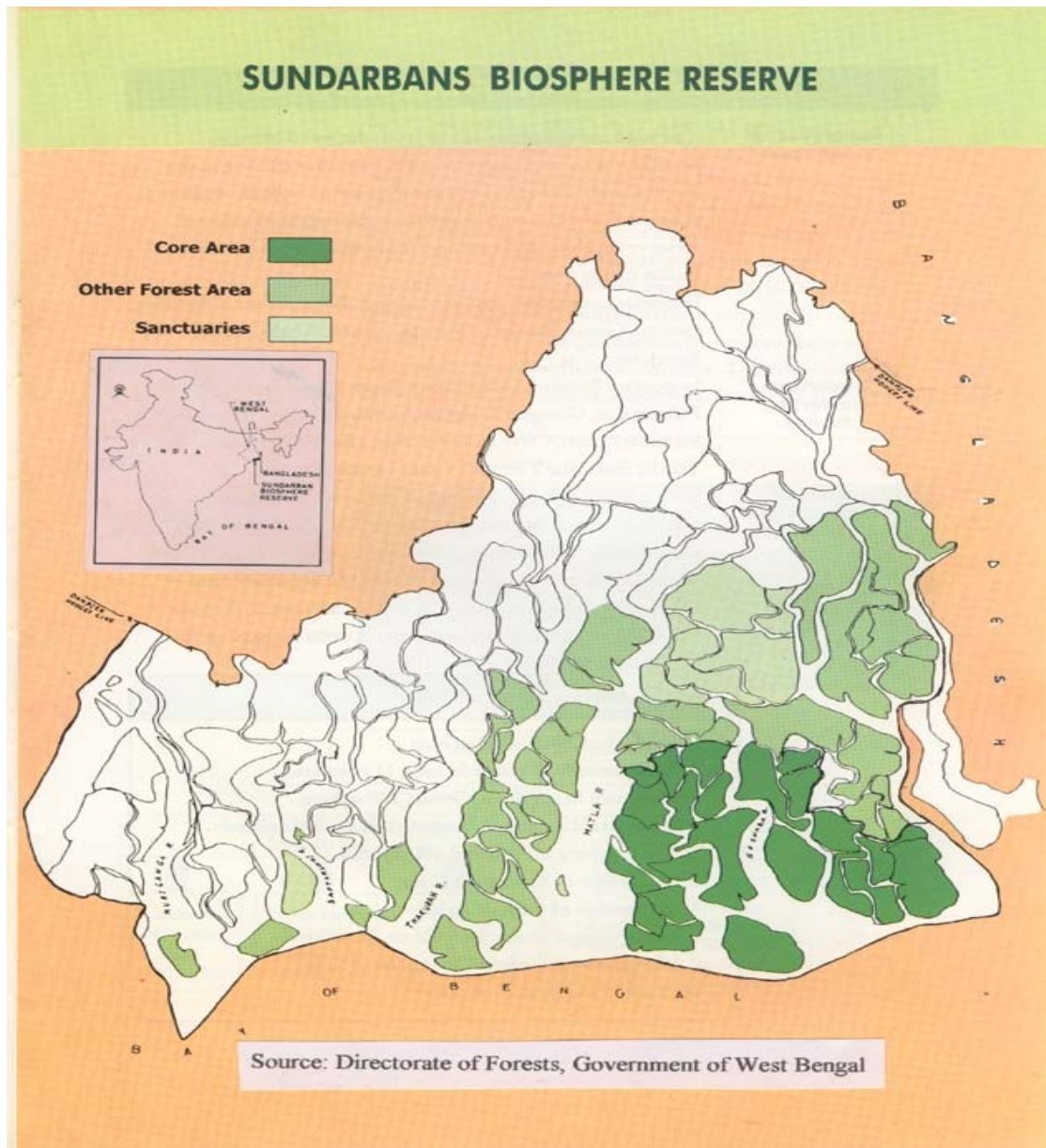
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plan to set up a nuclear power plant in the Sunderbans in South 24 Parganas. The CPI-M district committee is promoting the theory that the plant will help develop the poverty-ridden area... [Unnayan Sangathan], Canning, who held a convention with several [organizations]... apprehend radiation and that's the worst kind of development that this area could do with... The Sunderbans, they say, do not need N-power to light up their huts. They could do with non-conventional power options' (The Statesman 10.7.2000).

However, this was not the first time a nuclear power plant had been proposed for West Bengal. The earlier Annual State Plan Proposals also contained references to the possibility of such a power plant in West Bengal (Government of West Bengal 1986, 1987).

What has united the different ruling regimes—the right, left and centre—is their admiration for science as an indispensable constituent of the process of development unleashed in postcolonial India. No wonder 'science' has been declared 'a reason of the state' (Nandy 1988) that cuts across all political divisions and ideologies. If the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) coalition at the centre conducted nuclear tests in Rajasthan to show the country's military might, the Left-front government of West Bengal decided to settle once and for all the problems of the region by proposing a nuclear power plant in the Sundarbans. According to left protagonists, a nuclear plant for the purpose of generating electricity meant putting such technology to positive use. This became clear when I interviewed Radhika Pramanik, a CPI-M Member of Parliament (MP) from the Sundarbans and one of the brains behind the proposed power plant. According to Pramanik, those protesting against the power plant could hardly distinguish between nuclear power and the nuclear bomb.

Those protesting against the power plant claimed that the nuclear power plant was only a ploy for making nuclear bombs. This was suggested because nuclear power plants produce plutonium—a radioactive waste—which is used for making nuclear bombs. Environmentally sensitive groups like the Development Forum expressed concern over possible radiation and its impact on the region. The BJP government's nuclear tests at Pokhran in Rajasthan testified to the country's nuclear preparedness, but what went unconsidered was the fact that the impact of the nuclear explosion was such that the houses in the vicinity of Pokhran showed signs of irreparable and permanent damage. I will revisit some of the arguments for and against the proposed power plant when I provide an account of the Forum's anti-nuclear campaign in the next section of this paper.



What makes the present proposal particularly significant is that this time the place considered for the setting up of such a plant is the Sundarbans, which ranks among the select few heritage sites. The Left-front government's decision to install a nuclear power plant in the Sundarbans was surprising in view of the fact that the same government once evicted the refugees of Marichjhahpi island in the name of conserving the delta's rich wildlife. In this context the Marichjhapi incident is worth mentioning. Ever since the partition of India in 1947, refugee rehabilitation had been an issue that confronted the Government of India. Many East Bengali refugees who came to India from Bangladesh were settled by the central government in Dandya Karanya, a place that is part of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. Before the Communist Party (CPI-M) came to power in West Bengal the refugees were given to understand that once the party came to power they would be settled in Bengal. On coming to power the Left-front government found that the refugees had taken them at their word and in 1978 some 150,000 refugees arrived from Dandya Karanya (Mallick 1993: 100). Most of these refugees were forcibly sent back. However, about 30,000 refugees managed to cross the riverine delta area and settle in Marichjhapi, an island

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lying to the northernmost forested part of the West Bengal Sundarbans. The state government declared the occupation of Marichjhapi an illegal encroachment on Reserve Forest land and on the state and the World Wildlife Fund sponsored tiger protection project (Mallick 1999: 115). When persuasion failed the government started an economic blockade, deploying police launches to cut off their supplies. To clear the island the police opened fire killing 36 people. A further 43 died of starvation, 29 from disease and 128 from drowning when their boats were sunk by the police (Mallick 1993: 101; for details see Chatterjee 1992: 291-379; and also Mallick 1999). The government that once declared refugee resettlement in the Sundarbans illegal and did not hesitate to evict the refugees in the name of protecting the forest reserves, now seemed to be ready to install a power plant and risk the much-vaunted resources of the Sundarbans.

With the above serving as a background, this paper seeks to analyse the nuclear episode as it unfolded in the Sundarbans, highlighting the engagement of the Development Forum with the issue. The possibility of a nuclear power plant and the organization's protest against it present us with the case of an environmental movement. However, how do we study this movement? Do we subscribe to the standard environmental narrative in South Asia that tends to view the colonizers, the market, and the state as the agents of ecological degradation, while indigenous peoples are nature's natural conservators (Scott 2000: viii)? Movements such as Chipko and Narmada⁵ (in India) have led to the increasing recognition that the critique of top-down development is writ large in the actions of those marginalized by development (Baviskar 1995). Vandana Shiva's study (1986, 1988, 1991) of the Chipko movement is a case in point. Her portrayal of poor peasant women of the Himalayas hugging trees to prevent their felling has become a global icon of popular protest against the degradation and exploitation of nature (Sinha, Gururani and Greenberg 1997: 66). According to this perspective, popular protests or the 'Luddite wars' (Alvares 1988) against environmental degradation that have started taking place in 'developing countries' envisage the arrival of a non-exploitative and counter-modernizing ethos. In the words of Visvanathan:

'What we are witnessing today is a civil rights movement against development-as-terrorism, based on the recognition that the modern state... has become the prime anti-ecological force in the world. What development projects like big dams or nuclear reactors... reveal is the necessity of new concepts of civil rights... one needs a return to the sacred, where a community recognizes its moral responsibility for its environment. The Chipko movement is a superb example of such consciousness. The recent raids by peasants on forest nurseries in Karnataka where they uprooted thousands of eucalyptus seedlings represent another example of such a will to ecology' (1988: 285-86).

Thus, environmental movements—as reflected in protests against big dams or large-scale deforestations—are viewed as expressions of people who are beginning to establish control over nature and their natural resources; a control that seeks to contest

⁵ The Chipko movement, which started in the Himalayan region of Uttar Pradesh was a popular movement against commercial exploitation of forests. The Narmada movement is a popular upsurge against the building of a big dam on the river Narmada that involves massive displacement of tribal population.

the hegemony of the commercial economy and centralizing state (Guha 1989, 1994; Visvanathan 1988).

The present paper provides an account of the anti-nuclear movement, which is in opposition to state policy. However, I will argue against the 'standard narrative'. The problem with this narrative is that the state emerges as a discreet entity and centralized agent of ecological degradation, while the people are represented as the natural conservers of resources. Not only are the marginalized made to appear as if they constitute a homogenous category (Guha 1989; Shiva 1988), but they are depicted as having a unitary subject position and clearly discernable world view derived from their long-standing harmonious relation with nature. This relation is portrayed as combining reverence for nature with the sustainable management of resources (Baviskar 1995), and is conveniently resonant with their protests against the hegemonic science pursued by the state ('public interest science' versus 'vested interest science'. For details see Shiva and Bandyopadhyay 1986).⁶ What seems to inform this perspective is an assumed correspondence between the activities of the trans-local state and the local-level negotiations in which the state is implicated. In contrast, this paper looks at the politics of pro-nuclear and anti-nuclear campaigns emphasizing local-level negotiations in the wake of a power plant; negotiations which render problematic such polarized notions of state and society.

Approaching the state as a trans-local entity, made visible in terms of its everyday bureaucratic practices and local power structures, has increasingly become a recognizable trend within anthropology and to this end there has emerged a significant body of literature (Handelman 1981; Abrams 1988; Brow 1988; Nugent 1994; Gupta 1995; Fuller and Benei 2001). This body of literature carefully interrogates dichotomous constructions of state and society and tends to show how the state, from being a spectacular, mysterious and distant institution, has become something vast, overextended yet extremely familiar in its sordid everyday structures (Fuller and Harriss 2001: 25). It is this body of literature that provides the basis for my understanding of the nuclear episode as it unfolds in the Sundarbans. By highlighting the different dimensions of the anti-nuclear campaign I will problematize the understanding of the state and people as unitary entities.

I start by introducing the Forum, indicating the rationale behind the emergence of this organization. This will be followed by an account of the Forum's anti-nuclear campaign. Here I focus not only on the Forum's anti-nuclear pamphlet, but also on newspaper reports, to show the relevance of the larger public debate centring on the proposed power plant. An exploration of the regional and local-level news reports also helps to unravel the dynamics of local politics. By touching upon Jharkhali (a newly-formed island in the Sundarbans) and its significance as one of the possible sites for the setting up of the power plant, I show how the CPI-M and the RSP, the constituents of the left regime at the state level, are found to be at loggerheads at the local level. An understanding of the complexities of local politics remains incomplete without an account of the Forum's own involvement in it. By drawing attention to an event in Canning, where this organization is based, and to the members' negotiations with the local left leadership, I show how the Forum, despite carrying out its anti-nuclear

⁶ Public interest science is born of environmental movements that has ecology as its prime component and runs contrary to profit maximization, whereas profitability and commercial interest are what inform vested interest science.

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campaign, had diverse interests and loyalties at stake in local politics. In other words, I show how the state as an initiator of the power plant and the Forum as a protestor against it are themselves deeply implicated in local politics. Finally, I conclude the paper by tying up the primary arguments. In the light of a specific case study the concluding section draws out the larger theoretical issues raised in the paper.

The Forum and its anti-nuclear campaign

This section will focus on the Forum's anti-nuclear campaign. As already mentioned, apart from focusing on the organization's anti-nuclear pamphlet, attention will be drawn to newspaper reports and their role in constructing a public debate around the proposed power plant. My reason for using news reports as significant social texts is twofold: to situate the Forum's campaign in the larger debate centring on the power plant and secondly, to see these reports as revealing the contingent nature of local politics in the Sundarbans. By using regional and local newspapers I will show how enthusiasm and consent for the power plant were manufactured at the district and local level.

The Forum, a part of a wider network of such associations (broadly called the rationalist association) elsewhere in West Bengal, came into being in the 1980s. The members call themselves 'rationalists' because they eschew emotion in favour of reason in matters concerning everyday life and respond only to the call of science (hereafter I will refer to the members of the Forum also as rationalists). The purpose behind the emergence of these groups is to popularize science and expose the so-called 'con men'⁷ who are believed to cast spells and deceive people through their magical practices.

In July 2000 the Forum published its pamphlet against the proposed nuclear power plant entitled *Nuclear Power Plant in the Sundarbans: We Don't Want this Development*.⁸ Its cover page was quite suggestive, as it portrayed a tree without a single leaf on it, standing in a barren land. The tree, a victim of radiation, had a bat flying over it, symbolizing death. The pamphlet highlighted the problem in the following manner:

'Have you all heard that our West Bengal Government has decided to set up a nuclear power plant in the Sundarbans? For the past ten to fifteen years we have been trying to make the government aware of the need for the development of the region... it seems that the government has finally heard us. The good news is that people will soon have light in their huts. The nuclear power plant will provide people with jobs, trigger industrialization in the delta and soon there will be no more problems in the region!' (Development Forum 2000: 1; author's own translation from Bengali).

⁷ Illustrated references to the work of rationalist movement in exposing 'con men' can be found in T. Shah's *Sorcerer's Apprentice* (1998). Although the book recounts mainly the author's experiences as an apprentice to a sorcerer, it does touch on the inescapable issue of the rationalist movement (see pp 213-4).

⁸ Author's own translation from Bengali.

The organization couched its anti-nuclear campaign in a sarcastic and provocative language. It started by congratulating the government for its decision but then went on to remind people:

'Are you all happy that the Sundarbans will have a nuclear plant? If you are, then you are in for a big shock. We all know that a nuclear power plant is another name for disaster. Therefore, by setting up a power plant the government wants to sow the seeds of destruction. We will not only die of radiation but will become crippled, maimed and handicapped. So protest before it is too late!' (*Development Forum 2000: 1-8; author's own translation from Bengali*).

The pamphlet questions the very basis of the government's decision in a place like that of the Sundarbans where so many problems have remained unaddressed.

Here we turn our attention to the broad discursive field opened up by the possibility of a nuclear plant in the Sundarbans. I will focus on newspaper reports to show how arguments have been made for and against the proposed power plant. The Calcutta-based newspapers had headlines such as 'Nuclear Power in a State: A Menace for All' (*Anandabazar Patrika* 6.5.2000), 'By Applying Abandoned Technology of West Left-front Government Wants to Set up a Nuclear Power Plant' (*Bartaman* 12.5.2000) and 'Nuclear Power Plant in the Sundarbans: No, Never' (*Aajkaal* 6.5.2000). Public attention was drawn to the already existing nuclear reactors in India. The Tarapur reactor in Maharashtra, which was set up in the 1960s, was reported to be the greatest pollutant in the region (*Bartaman* 12.5.2000). It was further reported that by the 1970s the reactor had to replace its existing labour force because the workers were victims of radiation (*ibid*). Radioactive waste from the Narora reactor in Uttar Pradesh was also reported to have contaminated the water of the Ganges (*ibid*). In March 1999, the Chennai power plant accidentally released about six tonnes of radioactive heavy water. Such release was considered fatal for plants and other living organisms (*Anandabazar Patrika* 25.5.2000). Public attention was also drawn to the Indian Nuclear Energy Act of 1962 whereby the government was given absolute power to deny people's access to the nuclear activities of the state in the name of the security and integrity of the country. However, such secrecy was questioned on the grounds that it violated the basic postulates of democracy. Since it is the common people who suffer and bear the brunt of any disaster, they have the right to be informed about the policies and activities of the state (*ibid*). The crux of the arguments presented in these different news reports was that such a power plant would be a disastrous decision on the part of the Left-front government. The instance of Chernobyl was cited as an example to bolster misgivings about nuclear energy. In sum, the Left-front government was blamed for its insensitivity and populist electoral strategy.

The articles and news reports suggested that in the public sphere there existed an organized anti-nuclear discourse that had an impact on the way the rationalists approached their anti-nuclear movement. The rationalists drew heavily on this discourse to prepare their pamphlets and launch their campaign against the proposed power plant. The newspapers also provided the protagonists of nuclear energy with an opportunity to argue their case for the proposed power plant. Radhika Pramanik, the CPI-M MP from the Sundarbans, argued in a newspaper in support of the power plant asking people not to pay heed to rumours (*Anandabazar Patrika* 28.3.2000). In the light of India's fast depleting coal reserves, nuclear energy seemed to Pramanik to be the most sustainable source of power generation (*ibid*). There were also news reports based on interviews with nuclear energy experts from different research centres in

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India suggesting that a nuclear reactor was not only the safest of the sources of energy production, but also ecologically sustainable (*Anandabazar Patrika* 18.5.2000, *Ganashakti* 18.5.2000).

However, the press was doing more than merely ventilating arguments for and against the proposed power plant and thereby constructing competing notions of safety and sustainability. The newspapers also drew attention to the district of South 24 Parganas and carried reports indicating that the CPI-M District Committee was instrumental in generating enthusiasm among the people for the proposed power plant. A report published in a Bengali newspaper was significant:

'The CPI-M South 24 Parganas District Committee is involved in a campaign in favour of the power plant. There has already been protest against the proposed power plant, but anticipating further opposition from within the party the CPI-M District Committee is mobilising the local party machinery to finalise a suitable site for the power plant. The District Committee Secretary feels that those protesting against the power plant want to prevent the development of the region' (Aajkaal 28.4.2000; author's own translation from Bengali).

The District Committee's local endeavours need also to be understood in the context of the secretariat-level activities of the government in Calcutta. A Calcutta daily quoted the Nodal Officer of the secretariat level task force set up for selecting sites in other districts of West Bengal as saying that priority would be given to South 24 Parganas in view of the long-standing demand for a power plant from that region (*Bartaman* 9.5.2000). Thus, although the proposal for the setting up of the power plant came from the state government, the main initiative, it seems, always rested with the local district CPI-M leadership. Nowhere was this more clearly highlighted than in a news report that stated:

'Last Wednesday the District Committee convened a meeting in support of the power plant in Canning... Dulal Ghosh, a local CPI-M leader... said that the place [most] suitable for the nuclear power plant is Sagar island. But we might have to ask people to evacuate the island before such a power plant can be set up. The members of the [Development Forum] present at the meeting expressed strong dissent against the statement made by Ghosh (Aajkaal 18.5.2000; author's own translation from Bengali).

If the regional newspapers based in Calcutta drew attention to the local-level mobilizations and the way in which these influenced the secretariat-level resolution for a power plant in the region, reports published in a local newsletter in April and May 2000 gave a further twist to the nuclear power episode. The reports were significant in that they came out in *Ba-dweep Barta*, a local fortnightly newsletter published by members of the Development Forum. The first report, published in its April edition, stated that although the state government had not yet finalized the site for the power plant in the Sundarbans, reliable sources suggested that the site selection unit of the District Committee had Basanti in mind, for there was plenty of government land and water available in that block (*Ba-dweep Barta* 16-30 April 2000). The next edition of the newsletter in May carried another report, which sought to explain why Basanti was considered suitable for setting up a power plant.

'Although the CPI-M district committee is still silent about the possible sites for the installation of the plant, among the areas considered in the coastal Sundarbans, Basanti is of crucial importance. Jharkhali in

Basanti Block has a vast tract of government land under the control of the RSP. On the pretext of setting up a power plant the CPI-M will now wrest this land from the RSP and will realize their long cherished dream' (Ba-dweep Barta 1-15 May 2000; author's own translation from Bengali).

What I have attempted above is a brief account of the Forum's anti-nuclear campaign in the Sundarbans. I have highlighted the principal arguments of the organization's anti-nuclear pamphlet and tried to situate its campaign in the larger debate around the power plant, thus capturing the complexities of the local-level power politics. The newspaper reports presented and analysed above make it difficult to represent the state as the sole imposer of a power plant, especially when we have seen that the CPI-M District Committee played a pivotal role in mobilizing local support in favour of the power plant. The significance of Jharkhali, as revealed in the local newsletter published by the Forum, also suggests that the left leadership at the local level is far from homogeneous and has conflicting loyalties and interests. Our understanding of the dynamics of local-level politics will become clearer as we move to the next section.

Jharkhali and the nuclear power plant

The mention of Jharkhali in the local newsletter draws our attention to another significant dimension of the nuclear episode. By focusing on Jharkhali and its importance as one of the possible sites for the installation of the power plant, this section will throw light on the local politics. I will present here the local RSP leaders' views on the power plant and by juxtaposing their views with those of the members of the Forum I will explain why control of Jharkhali was so significant from the point of view of both the CPI-M and RSP. My objective in this section is to provide a fragmented view of state politics in the Sundarbans.

Jharkhali is a newly-formed island in Basanti block—a stronghold of the RSP—where the RSP had settled migrants from Bangladesh in an attempt to create the party's vote bank. The RSP's dominance in Jharkhali is believed to have posed a threat to the local CPI-M leadership. Although the CPI-M was keen on establishing its control over Jharkhali, it could not make much headway because Basanti was the electoral base of the RSP. Political skirmishes often took place between the two parties over the control of their respective territories.

The possibility of a nuclear power plant in the Sundarbans provided the CPI-M with an opportunity to wrest Jharkhali from the RSP. The CPI-M saw in the nuclear power plant an opportunity to grab the land on the pretext that the newly-formed land was government property. Realizing that installing a power plant in Jharkhali would mean uprooting the migrants who had been settled by the party, the RSP conducted meetings in Basanti and Gosaba to convince people that a power plant would be disastrous and how it would cause the displacement of settlements. While in Gosaba I managed to get hold of the pamphlet published by the Development Forum protesting against the proposed nuclear power plant. As I was buying the pamphlet another huge poster pasted on the outer wall of the shop caught my attention. It was that of the RSP, which read: 'Join us in our fight against the proposed nuclear power plant; RSP a symbol of healthy and radiation free Sundarbans.'

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During my conversation with some of the RSP party and *panchayat* (local self government) leaders at the party office in Gosaba I asked them why they had launched a campaign against their own government's decision for a power plant. Kanai Bera, one of the senior leaders, said, 'Just because we are part of the coalition government, does it mean we should accept all the decisions of the CPI-M? In the past we launched a "Save the Sundarbans Movement" and now it is time for us to link this anti-nuclear issue to other issues that have remained unaddressed.' I asked if they had any plans to join with the Development Forum in Canning protesting against the power plant. The leader and others present there reacted very strongly saying: 'This issue is part of our wider movement, we have been addressing bigger issues like embankment, agriculture etc. So the possibility of linking it with the agenda of some *local clubs* or *associations* does not arise.' When I asked the members of the Forum why the RSP was reluctant to become part of their anti-nuclear campaign, they said it was because the RSP had to couch their protest in generic terms even when their intention was mainly to protect Jharkhali. Thus, if the RSP had joined the rationalist camp it would have conveyed the message that it was desperate to protect Jharkhali. The rationalists further added that the RSP's protest would continue until the next Assembly elections when they would realign with the CPI-M and conveniently forget about the power plant.

The above discussion reveals the complexities of local-level politics. It is clear that the considerations involved in the setting up of a power plant are many and more than mere electricity generation. If the local CPI-M leadership had reasons to select Jharkhali for the installation of the power plant, the local RSP leaders had their own electoral considerations at stake. For both RSP and CPI-M the nuclear power plant was a ploy to pursue their immediate interests. The conflict of interests over Jharkhali is significant in that it provides a fragmented view of state politics; a politics that is marked by disjunction and disunity rather than uniformity and coherence (Gupta 1995). The state that is found implicated in the local-level negotiations can hardly be seen as an extension of the state that emerges as a policy maker at the top. If the Left-front government had evicted the settlers of Marichjhapi island on the grounds that their settlement had violated the Forest Act, the parties constituting that government have also forcibly settled people on the newly-formed land in order to create vote banks.

The Jharkhali issue once again shows how difficult it is to establish a correspondence between the statist politics at the top and the local-level negotiations and factionalisms in which the state is instantiated. The state that figures out in this discussion is no longer the unified monolithic state imposing a nuclear power plant on the rest of the society. Rather, by focusing on the local-level considerations driving the government decision in favour of the power plant, I have sought to break down the state to show that the CPI-M and RSP, which together constitute the government at the state level, were found to be working at cross purposes at the local level.

The Forum: local negotiations and a trans-local campaign

Amidst all this it is interesting to see how the rationalists position themselves in local politics and also embark on their anti-nuclear campaign at the broader level. To understand how the rationalists position themselves in local politics, this section will draw attention to an incident in Canning that involved one of the members of the

Forum. By highlighting this event and the resultant negotiations that took place between the rationalists and the local CPI-M leadership I will show how difficult it is to analyse the so-called civil society organization as a uniform monolithic unit. My objective in this section is to show that despite having an apparently unified anti-nuclear campaign, the rationalists had diverse and conflicting interests at stake in local politics.

It was through some of their colleagues who happened to be CPI-M sympathizers that the rationalists came to know how the local CPI-M leadership was using the power plant issue as a ploy to wrest land from the RSP. By publishing this in their local newsletters the rationalists antagonized a section of the local CPI-M leaders and cadres. According to the rationalists, the hostility of the local leadership was apparent during the District Committee's public meeting in Canning. The party cadres present at the meeting ridiculed the rationalists when the latter expressed their dissent. 'This infuriated us', said Sameer, a member of the Forum. 'Our decision to publish this pamphlet came after we attended a meeting in Canning. We thought it was high time that we exposed the hypocrisy of these leaders.'

At this point let us turn to an event in Canning and see how this shaped the orientation of the rationalists involved in their anti-nuclear campaign. Gopal, a van-rickshaw driver and a member of the Forum, paid a price for his membership by being denied access to the Canning van-rickshaw stand, situated near the Canning ferry, which van-rickshaws connect to Canning railway station. Gopal said,

'Early in the morning when I went to the ferry ghat [jetty] in search of passengers, other van drivers already present told me not to park my van there. I asked them why not. They said they do not know the reason. One of the drivers came near me and asked me to meet him in the evening.'

When Gopal met him later he said that on the day before, one of the local CPI-M leaders had come to the stand and instructed the drivers not to allow Gopal to park his van.

Gopal's association with the Forum dates back to the early years of the organization when the rationalists embarked upon science literacy campaigns and conducted magic shows to expose con men. During my conversation with Gopal he reminisced about the old days when his van-rickshaw was hired by the members of the Forum who were organizing magic shows in Canning. Gopal was attracted to the Forum's magic shows and ensured that his van was available to its members. Gradually his association with the organization deepened and he became a member. As a member of the organization, Gopal actively participated in the Forum's anti-nuclear campaign. He took his van-rickshaw to villages surrounding Canning town and circulated anti-nuclear pamphlets among the people. Gopal confessed that he was no nuclear scientist, but by keeping track of news reports and hearing the experts who came to speak in Canning he felt convinced that a campaign such as the one carried out by his organization was needed. However, despite his participation in the anti-nuclear campaign, his van-rickshaw was his source of livelihood. Therefore he was desperate to regain his lost place in the van-rickshaw stand.

On being denied access to the van-rickshaw stand, Gopal informed the other members of the Forum, who were also CPI-M activists, of this incident and sought their help in this matter. According to Gopal, the only way he could regain his place in the van-rickshaw stand was to contact people who wielded clout in the local CPI-M leadership circle. What followed then was a series of negotiations between the local influential

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CPI-M leaders and those rationalists who also belonged to the party circle. At the insistence of his colleagues who were negotiating on his behalf, Gopal had to visit the local leaders several times to pursue his case.

When I asked some of the rationalists, who were acting on behalf of Gopal, how they dealt with his case they seemed to take pride in narrating the tricks they used to tackle the problem. On hearing Gopal they did not go straight to the leader who had denied Gopal access to the van park. Instead they made contact with a more powerful leader who was in close contact with members of the party's District Committee. They also made contact with a few veteran CPI-M leaders in Canning hoping that they would cut to size the leader who had tried to throw his weight around. In their meetings with the leaders they convinced them about their credentials as CPI-M party workers. To quote the rationalists,

'We are as much a part of the party leadership in Canning as the other leaders and members are. We launched our anti-nuclear campaign against the state government. Let us assure you that we are not against the party leaders in Canning. Therefore, why trouble a van-rickshaw driver when we all know him?'

The incident involving Gopal throws light on the need to disentangle and retrieve fragmentary and peripheral events from the grand narratives of protest and participation. Gopal was an integral part of the Forum's anti-nuclear campaign. However, apart from his experience as an anti-nuclear campaigner Gopal had other stories to share, stories that seemed of peripheral importance to a more compelling narrative of campaign and protest. While the Forum was protesting against the proposed power plant, Gopal struggled to regain his lost place in the van-rickshaw park. For him, his claim to a place in the van-rickshaw stand was as important, if not more, as his participation in a movement that envisaged a radiation-free and a sustainable future for the Sundarbans.

I have also focused on the rationalists' handling of Gopal's case to show how the members negotiate their diverse subject positions even when their anti-nuclear campaign had a unified goal; it also demonstrates how they changed the course of their campaign in response to the shifting dynamics of local politics. They focused on the activities of the local leaders, highlighted local party considerations in favour of the power plant and their resentment against the local leadership to show how the state's decision for a power plant was actually manufactured at the local level. From that point of view their campaign was also against a state whose presence could be felt in the local political processes. However, the incident involving Gopal resulted in a shift in the focus of the rationalist campaign from a state that was implicated in local politics to a more abstract notion of the trans-local state as the initiator of a nuclear power plant. This tightrope walk helped the rationalists in two ways. On the one hand, by invoking the notion of a trans-local state as the implementer of such a decision, the rationalists continued with their campaign against the power plant; on the other, by utilizing their identities as party sympathizers, they attempted to forge a semblance of solidarity with the local leaders, a solidarity that was necessary for their survival in local politics.

I have presented Gopal's case to show that he had his predicaments and anxieties apart from his role in the Forum's anti-nuclear movement. I have touched on the rationalists' negotiations with the local CPI-M leadership to suggest the difficulties involved in analysing the Forum as a monolithic entity having uniform identities and

objectives. If in earlier sections I had shown how local-level factionalisms and conflicts of interests make it difficult to conceptualize the state as a discrete and monolithic entity, by highlighting the incident involving Gopal and his colleagues I have shown how studying ‘civil society’ as a unified seat of protest is equally problematic.

Conclusion

The nuclear power episode in the Sundarbans is certainly a link in the growing chain of ecological movements in India in recent times. I have discussed how the rationalists warned people against the possible nuclear disaster awaiting them in the region. I have also shown how newspaper reports drew public attention to the existing nuclear reactors in India to show how they caused environmental degradation. The case of Chernobyl was also cited to inform the wider public of the potentially disastrous consequences of a nuclear reactor.

The proposed nuclear power plant and the rationalists’ campaign against it can be used to highlight a number of issues at stake in the recent debates around knowledge construction in the human sciences. In the introductory section I discussed how environmental studies about the subcontinent have prioritized the perspective whereby the state emerges as an agent of ecological degradation and the people as the natural conservers of resources. Accordingly, environmental movements have been characterized as expressions of people’s protest against the state; as expressions of people struggling to reinvent a non-exploitative past; a past marked by a symbiotic relation between human needs and properties of nature.

However, the story of the nuclear power plant as it unfolds in the Sundarbans enables us to examine the frequent characterization of such movements as essentially giving rise to a vibrant society against a state that does violence in the name of development. The lessons gleaned from the Sundarbans suggest that it is no longer the case of a unified top-downist state unilaterally imposing a power plant on the region. I have provided an account of the Forum’s anti-nuclear campaign and also analysed the regional and local newspaper reports to reveal the complexities of local power politics. I have shown how the District Committee of the CPI-M not only mobilized people’s support for the power plant, but even became the main pivot around which much of the enthusiasm for the power plant revolved. The Jharkhali issue further complicates our understanding of the local-level power politics. I have highlighted the Jharkhali issue to suggest that the left is far from a unified entity at the local level. The reports in the local newspapers showed how the District Committee’s prime objective came into conflict with the interests of the RSP, one of the constituents of state power in West Bengal. For the local RSP leaders, the power plant not only meant displacement of people, but displacement of their vote banks. The strategic significance of Jharkhali not only signifies conflict of interests between left factions, but also provides a fragmented view of the statist politics at the local level.

If factionalisms and complexities of the local-level manoeuvres render theorizing the state as some kind of unit problematic, our experience also suggests that the ‘civil society’ organization is no unified monolithic entity. I have shown this by highlighting the complex negotiations that ensued between members of the Forum and the local CPI-M leadership following Gopal’s eviction from the van-rickshaw stand. Gopal’s case suggests how important it is to retrieve and document narratives that

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seem of marginal importance to the grand narrative of campaign and protest. These peripheral narratives are significant in that they reveal that an individual may have multiple and even incommensurable subject positions. To regain his entry into the van-rickshaw stand Gopal had to come to terms with and please the same local leadership against which he launched an anti-nuclear campaign. Equally significant were the strategies adopted by Gopal's colleagues in dealing with the local CPI-M leadership. The negotiations that followed are indicative of the nexus that rationalists had with the local CPI-M leaders. The way they handled Gopal's case shows that the members had diverse interests at stake in local politics even when their anti-nuclear campaign had a unified goal. My case study also makes it possible to interrogate carefully a romanticized notion of locale as a seat of unified movement and protest; a recurrent theme in the standard environmental narrative on the subcontinent. In the introductory section I have shown how the Chipko movement and other protests against big dams are viewed as expressions of people beginning to exert control over their social space and escape the tentacles of the centralized state. However, in the light of the political negotiations as they unfold in the Sundarbans, can we still subscribe to this romanticized notion of locale as being devoid of political networks and vested interests?

The question that arises at this point is how to approach the relation between state and society. Should we continue to treat them as polarized entities and dichotomous categories? In recent times there has emerged a vast body of literature approaching the state from the point of view of how it functions in the wider society. The state is no longer viewed from the point of view of the oppositional model of state-society relations, but from a perspective that encompasses the dimensions of cooperation and conflict in state-society relations (Nugent 1994). The question that recurs in this body of literature is one of how to approach the state that is manifested in everyday bureaucratic practices or local power structures. Breman (2000), in his study of state policies for the welfare of the rural proletariat in Western India, has provided a rich and insightful ethnography of the activities of the government labour officer charged with surveying and documenting cases of underpayment among the rural labour force. The officer's dealings with the villagers—employed as agricultural labourers by major landholders—during his visit to the surveyed areas demonstrates how the state is minutely textured into the wider society. Ruud's (2001) study of the role of politicians of the ruling CPI-M party in a village in West Bengal shows how the leaders use their clients and cadres to manufacture the consent of the villagers, a consent that seems of crucial importance to the legitimacy of the leftist state. Following the lead provided by this current shift in focus on the state, I looked at the leftist state as it was manifested in local left factionalisms and conflict of interests. It is these diverse manifestations of the statist politics at the local level that problematize studying the state and society as unitary entities.

Instead of viewing contemporary ecological movements as giving rise to a vibrant society against a top-downist state I intend to view the ecological movements—in the light of the one studied here—as unfolding networks of power as a result of which both state and society appear to be increasingly fragmented and negotiated realities. One encounters a situation where the people or the locals—conventionally portrayed as the marginalized or indigenous possessing a clearly discernable ethno-scientific world view—operate within multiple networks of collectivities (such as members of the Forum, as leaders and cadres of the CPI-M and the RSP, as worried settlers of Jharkhali but active followers of the local RSP leadership) pursuing their diverse and

incommensurable interests. These diverse interests, political affiliations and multiple layers of local negotiations militate against any attempt to understand the state or society as unitary and monolithic units.

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