Chapter VI

_Peasant as Social Problem: Experience from West Bengal_

6.1 Introduction

This section begins with an ambitious statement: What passes off as a social problem is not a social problem at all. Though it is an ambitious statement, yet we have uncritically accepted what has been given to us as social problem. As if social problem is given. It has never been questioned the apparent neutral representation of social problem. However, the major theme of this section is on ‘social problem’. The question remains as to what social problem is. The famous book on social problem in the Indian context, written by Ram Ahuja (2003), cited or referred social problem as a "deviation from the social _ideal_ remediable by group effort" (Walsh and Furfey, 1961 [as quoted in Ahuja 2003: 1], emphasis is mine). Ahuja (2003) further quoted social problem as a "condition which is defined by a considerable number of person as a deviation from some _social norms_ which they cherish" (Fuller and Myers, 1941 [as quoted in Ahuja 2003: 2], emphasis is mine). He also refers to social problem as "a way of behaviour that is regarded by a substantial part of a _social order_ as being in violation of one or more generally accepted or _approved norms_ (Merton and Nisbet, 1971 [as quoted in Ahuja 2003: 2], emphasis is mine). The above-mentioned definitions hold some common feature of defining social problems. All these define social problem with respect to the social _ideal_ or accepted norms of the society. It shows that social problem has no autonomous definition. It depends on the definition
of the 'social'. Violation of the accepted or approved social norms defines social problems. It enjoys dependent definition. For example, 'underdevelopment' is a social problem, as it violates generally accepted or approved norms. The generally accepted norm or law of the nature is Capitalism, so far the Idea(l) of Development is concerned. Few questions surface out of this discussion:

- What is social idea(l). Does it exist objectively (structurally given)? Or, is it culturally constructed?

- Is there any continuum between the idea(l) of the social (approved norms of the society) and power-ideology?

- Does it mean that there are 'multiple synchronic realities'? Is 'multiple synchronic realities understood in Historical sense of 'pre' and 'post'? Is 'multiple synchronic realities' hierarchically ordered?

- If there are 'multiple synchronic realities’, why do we then come to believe that the understanding of social reality is singular or monolithic, or why do we cherish the idea(l) of the centristm (such as Capitalocentrism)?

- If antagonisms/contradiction is constitutive in social reality, why do we then (mis)recognize that social reality is the ONE? Does power-ideology continuum mask constitutive antagonisms/contradiction of social reality?

- Does power-ideology continuum repress/suppress constitutive antagonisms/contradiction of social reality and signify the image of social reality as the only ONE? Is violence constitutive in making social reality as the ONE?

- Do repressed social realities reterritorialize themselves as a social problem?

- Why do we consider other forms of social reality as pathological?
Does social problem legitimize existing dominant social order? Or, does the existing dominant social order create/raise social problem so that it can represent itself as the Idea(l) ONE.

Could we say that the naming/labeling of social problem, imposed by the existing dominant social order, is necessary because it functions as a resistant category?

Does the generalized norm of the society have a specific class, caste, sexual, gender character? Is it exploitative?

6.2 The Social Reality to social realities

Social reality or social fact, says Durkheim, is "capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations" (Durkheim; as quoted in Morrison, 1998: 155). Social fact, to Durkheim, is treated as thing. Social fact exists in its own right independent of its individual manifestations. Society has its pre-given structure that represents the essence of the society. The question remains as to how we come to know the essence of the society. Durkheim insists that sociologists should adopt detached stance and approach all social phenomena with an open mind, putting aside all moral preferences and searching for empirical indicators of theoretically conceptualized factors operating under the surface of events. Underlying social structure/social fact is a collective representation (concepts, ideas and beliefs) and relatively independent set of explanatory variables. Underlying social structure/social fact is "far from being a product of the will, they determine it from without; they are like moulds in which our actions are inevitably shaped" (Durkheim; as quoted in
Thompson, 2002: 155). Social fact represents general characteristic or average feature of the society. In other words, Social fact fixes the image/representation of social reality. Not only that. It is over and above the individual, and it determines individual action and decision. It prescribes individual as to what ought to be done and what not. Social fact, considers Durkheim "is endowed with power of coercion by reason of which they exert control"(Durkheim; as quoted in Morrison, 1998: 155). Durkheim talks about the constraining power of social fact on individual choice, action and decision, but he is silent on the question: Does the generalized attributes of social fact create barrier for materialization of other forms of social fact? Durkheimian understanding of the society is more concerned about the structural and synchronic analysis of the society. It focuses primarily on the aspect of general attributes of the society. This approach reduces social reality to generalized attributes. It ignores the nuanced differences and complexities that inhere within the society. Durkheimian understanding of the society has never asked the question of how the underlying structure of a particular society has been evolved over period. For Durkheim, it is objectively pre-given. Durkheimian understanding of social fact lacks the theorization of power, though he talks about the importance of power of coercion by reason of which they exert control. He, however, fails to theorize the link between power and the materialization social reality. He overestimates the underlying structure/average/general/collective sentiments of the society but never asks how the underlying structure/average/general/collective sentiment of the society gets manufactured or produced? Durkheim talks about the constraining power of social fact on individual choice, action and decision, but he is silent on the question: Do the generalized attributes of social fact set up a closure for materialization of other forms of social fact?
Durkheimian understanding of social problem follows the explanation of *social fact.* In his own words: "A social fact is *normal*, in relation to a given social type at a given phase of its development, when it is present in the average society of that species at the corresponding phase of its evolution" (Durkheim; as quoted in Thompson, 2002:68; emphasize mine). Social problem, for Durkheim, signifies abnormality of a society, because it deviates from *normal average social order at given phase of its development.* He further points out, "an act is criminal when it offends strong and defined states of the collective conscience" (Durkheim; as quoted in Thompson, 2002:77). In other words, an act or any state of condition is called as social problem when it violates *strong and defined states of the collective conscience.* Durkheim is a philosopher of *average.* Minority section of the society should follow the norms, laid down by the majority. But he has never dealt with the question: How the norms of the majority get produced and take the dominant form?

Weberian understanding of social reality primarily discarded the Durkheimian affirmation that treats social reality as a generalized social order. For Weber,"… absolutely 'objective' scientific analysis of culture or ... of 'social phenomena' independent of special and 'one-sided' viewpoints according to which — expressly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously — they are selected, analyzed and organized for expository purposes" (Weber; as quoted in Parkin, 2002:30). Weber is trying to point out that social reality is observer dependent. Social reality cannot be approached by letting the facts 'speak for themselves'. "This perspective highlights the fact that the social world, a human construct, has infinite possible meanings which cannot be exhaustively described by the rational methods of natural science" (Deshpande, 2003:3). The moral perspectives laden with value, through which we construct the social reality, prefix what is considered as social fact. Weber introduces the cultural aspect
in the discussion of social reality. What we generally perceive as our social reality is culturally constructed. Introducing value within the discourse of social reality, Weber undermines the Durkhemian claim that treats social fact as a thing existing independent of the observer/knower. For Weber, on the other hand, it is impossible to eradicate value-loaded preconceptions of the researcher. Social reality exists through concepts, employed by different knower/observers. Following Weber, we can perhaps arrive at the conclusion that there is no such thing as the objective value independent structurally given social reality. Instead, there is the choreography of social realities. Weber further comments: "It must be recognized that general views of life and the universe can never be the products of increasing empirical knowledge, and that the highest ideals, which move us most forcefully, are always formed only in the struggle with other ideals which are just as sacred to others as ours are to us" (Weber; as quoted in Parkin, 2002:32; emphasize mine). Weber invokes the question of power within the discourse of social reality. Weberian perspective not only stresses the relative aspects of social reality but also evocatively puts down the significance/importance of power in shaping social reality. Following Weber, we could perhaps extend our argument that although there "is a chaotic collection of contradictory beliefs and attitudes [always formed only in the struggle with other ideals]; but the prevailing power structure imposes a partial coherence on it by highlighting some elements and marginalizing others" (Deshpande, 2003: 3). In somewhat similar vein, Althusser comments," the whole class struggle may be summed up in the struggle for one word against another word" (Althusser 2006: 8). In addition, Weber comments that the social reality is observer dependent; it has come into existence through concepts, used by the knower/observer. If we further extend Weberian argument, we could say that the cultural character of the knower/observer
structures/shapes social reality. Social reality is always already a biased concept, prefixed by moral preferences of the knower/observer. In consequences, social reality may have gender, sex, class, caste ... character

As far as the question of social problem is concerned, what is the significance of the Weberian understanding of social reality? If we stick to Weberian relative understanding of social reality, it then hardly matters as to what counts as social problem. However, Weber imports the power question that undermines the relative nature of the society. Instead, it focuses on the existing power structure that enforces a limited unity on it.

6.3 Peasant as social problem

Nandigram, a previously unpopular rural location, is 150 km from Kolkata (Calcutta). A tranquil Muslim dominated habitation in East Midnapore district of the state of West Bengal, India, Nandigram came to the lime light when the CPI(M) led Left Front government decided that the Salim Group from Indonesia would set up a chemical hub under the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in the region. This led to a popular uprising against the West Bengal government. All the supposedly affected villagers united in a new movement with the name of 'Bhumi Ucched Protirodh Committee' (BUPC) (literally, Committee for the Resistance to Eviction from Land), and they took over the administration of the area. All the roads to the villages were cut off. The Left Front Government of West Bengal decided to break the BUPC's resistance at Nandigram and a massive operation with at least 3,000 policemen was launched on March 14, 2007. According to various press reports, a group of armed and trained CPI (M) cadres too wore police uniforms and joined the forces. However, prior information of the impending action had leaked within the BUPC and they
amassed a crowd of around 2,000 villagers at the entry points to Nandigram with women and children forming the front lines. In the resulting mayhem, at least 14 people were killed and hundreds were reportedly injured (Source:http://qasmi.sulekha.com/blog/post/2007/11/nandigram-turmoil-boiling-the-nation.htm, <Accessed on 22.8.2008 at 11.00 PM>).

But the question remains why this section has dealt with the issues of Nandigram incident. This chapter has taken up the issues of Nandigram as to show how this particular incident structures the mind set-up of the peasants of the other parts. In other words, peasants of the Nandigram have problematizes the naturalized legitimacy of the Capitalism. The peasants who put to question the normal order of the Capitalism are considered as social problem. This chapter on the other hand has questioned the very idea of social problem, premised upon the logic of normal order.

The researcher has noticed during the field survey that the Peasants of the Kakdwip and Memari I block have been largely influenced by the incidents of Singur and Nandigram. Their opinion and views are shaped by the incidents, took place in the Nandigram. These peasants have drawn their emotional support from the experience of Nandigram. Most of the respondents, interviewed by the researcher, have made their opinion that the money is not a motivating factor for selling out land. Respondents put forward the argument that their first priority is to ensure the family’s subsistence. The importance of money comes next. It is a secondary matter. Keeping in mind the experience of the Nandigram, peasants of these two blocks (Kakdwip and Memari I block) is also saying ‘NO’ to Industrialization. Against this backdrop, this chapter is trying to set up a critical engagement with the issues raised by the Nandigram incidents.
Perhaps we have forgotten the fact that one more time, well before 14th March, 2007, the issue of a particular/certain structure of 'Development' had been raised in Nandigram as the absolute remedy to the 'Anarchy'/normlessness'. It is apparent that before 14th March, 2007, the abnormal (pathological) condition existed in Nandigram. The place was lacking in 'Development'. In addition, this lack of 'Development' caused the place to exist in the state of exception. The region exists in the less-'Developed' condition. The state of exception signifies that the existing condition is deviated from the ideal normal order. Normal ideal order is nothing but it resides in its own right independent of its individual manifestations. The pre-given structure of ideal normal order represents the essence of society. 'Development', a historical journey from 'underdeveloped to 'Developed' stage, a historical journey from pre-capitalist stage to Capitalist stage, lays down the ideal normal order (foundation or essence) of the society. Nandigram emerged as a social problem because it violated strong and defined states of the collective conscience. Nandigram represents abnormal social fact. In Durkheim's own words, "A social fact is normal, in relation to a given social type at a given phase of its development" (ibid). Nandigram violates the normal average social order at given phase of its development. The law of the society is 'Development' that sets down the journey from pre-capitalist stage to Capitalist stage. The given social type at a given phase of its development means is to arrive at the Capitalism. This is not the question of personal choice, as if we are historically destined to arrive at the Capitalism. Nandigram is far behind the History. Nandigram sticks to agriculture. That the place sticks to certain form of agriculture envisages as a social problem; a specifically subsistence-based agriculture, isolated from any variety of capitalist moorings, is considered as a serious social problem. In Nandigram, there was a proposal for the construction of a Chemical Hub. Talks were
there regarding the need for the construction of a Special Economic Zone (SEZ). Materialization of this proposal required a good many acres of agricultural land. The intellectual and political heads felt Capitalism is the only road to 'Development' that would restore the ‘normal order’ in Nandigram. The questions, however, are:

- While deciding on this standard for development, had they ever held any talk with the rustic-farmers of Nandigram?
- Have the political leaders and intellectuals ever shown the slightest of patience to stop and listen whether these rustic-farmers of Nandigram have their own understanding of development?
- What forms the basis for the conception of the political leaders and intellectuals that only they possess the necessary knowledge regarding development?
- On what ground did they arrive at this conclusion that the rural people, who have been leading their lives through farming and cultivation, have absolutely no knowledge about development?
- Where is the assurance that the standard of development that they are deciding is beyond all questions?
- Only the political leaders and intellectuals possess all necessary knowledge regarding development, and the rustic-farmers are very ignorant – What is the logic behind this assumption?
- Why could not the political leaders and intellectuals, for once, think that the people, who have been leading their habitation through farming and cultivating in the villages, too can construct some other rendition of development?
Suddenly we are reminded of a written piece by Ashish Nandy. He comments:

I cannot resist quoting the confession of a development expert from Guyana, who works for the United Nations, about the world’s poorest region, sub-Saharan Africa: For the last several years, my professional life has been focused on answering a question that has troubled me for some time: ‘how can you ask someone who is hungry now to care about the future generations?’ In thinking about this, I stumbled over even more basic questions. Who are the poor? What does it mean to call people poor? … My first insight was a personal one. I never knew that I was very poor until I learned the definitions of poverty put forth by economists such as the World Bank. I got the same reaction from many agropastoralists with whom I worked in Africa. … Local nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) have said the same thing: many communities did not know that they were poor until development agencies told them so (Nandy, 2004: 96-97).

He narrates that a person from Guyana in sub-Saharan Africa had once said that prior the commencement of the several programs by the World Bank, he did not know that he was ‘poor’. In similar lines, it may also be that the rustic-farmers of Nandigram did not have the least idea that they were leading life in ‘anarchy’ and that they were actually ‘under-Developed’, had the place never been brought to ‘normal order’ – development that is – as per the standards set by the political leaders and intellectuals.

Weberian understanding of reality, on the other hand, defies the received naturalized rendition of Capitalist Development. Recapping Weber’s comment justifies this position. He says, "Absolutely 'objective' scientific analysis of culture or ... of 'social phenomena' independent of special and 'one-sided' viewpoints according to which —
expressly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously — they are selected, analyzed and organized for expository purposes" (Weber; as quoted in Parkin, 2002:30). Capitalist Development, for Weber, is not structurally given but one-sided viewpoint. The concept of 'Capitalist Development' that sets down the journey from pre-capitalist stage to Capitalist stage is, for Weber, culturally constructed. The concept whereby 'Capitalist Development' is regarded as the law of society that exists independent of the society is always already a biased concept, prefixed by moral preferences of the knower/observer. Weberian understanding opens up the possibility of different renditions of development that has hitherto been unthinkable from the naturalized History driven understanding of Capitalist Development. In addition, Weberian understanding restricts us to classify/categorize the other as abnormal. It also reminds us that there is no such thing as the Development; there are development(s). Not only that, it also puts into question the dominant mode of thinking where 'I' is the Subject of Knowledge and the 'you' is represented as the object of knowledge; where 'I' poses questions (knowledge) and listens to 'you' simply in order to judge his or her epistemological horizon. To Weber, 'I' and 'you' both possess different understandings of knowledge of development. Berger and Luckmann further substantiate this position. They mention:

Social order is not part of the "nature of things," and it cannot be derived from the "laws of nature." Social order exists only as a product of human activity. No other ontological status may be ascribed to it without hopelessly obfuscating its empirical manifestations. Both in its genesis (social order is the result of past human activity) and its existence at any instant of time (social order exists only and insofar as human activity continues to produce it), it is a human product (1966: 51).
This comment implies that the so-called aberration or deviation from Capitalism is no deviation at all. Rather, it is an-other rendition of social order – it is the result of past human activity.

We have remained overwhelmed in some particular sense of History. We still have agreed to the notion that development invariably means Capitalist Development and cast our decision in its favour. Why have we repeatedly pointed towards capitalist development while talking about development? Why could we not mention any other standpoints? Why have we never questioned this particular sense of History? Why do we have to understand this multicoloured assemblage in respect of Capitalist idea(l) only? These questions repeatedly keep returning to us.

A certain section of the people is today being uprooted from their land, home, and way of life in the name of development or capitalist ideal. It appears that the options are limited – either leave land for global capital, or get hooked to global capital as an appendage. Either way, the options are tied to global capital – be a wage laborer within global capital or be a peasant tied to global capital. Global capital is thus the center or the axis in terms of which the peasant has to consider the future. It reduces the complex social and the contradictory textuality of personhood into the language of Capitalocentric-Orientalist Development — understood in terms of the centrism of the categories Capital and the West — understood in terms of the abstract individuality/subjectivity. It may be that they do not want to go along with this ideal of capitalism. It may be that they want to live a life based on land and cultivating; live within an alternative relation. Who, in that case, are we to decide that their mode of life is wrong and that it is time they left all their agricultural activities and went in
search of a capitalist development? Who are we to uproot these different forms of life?

History has remained to be our basis for justifying this violence down the ages. It is this history, which has taught us the definition of treading the path as: ascent from feudalism to capitalism. The only subject for discussion, then, will be how far that reality lags behind the idealised capitalist stance. That social reality will thus be mentioned as the ‘derogatory other’ of capitalism; this will be its identity. We will start considering ourselves as backward. The prism of capitalism will reflect that social reality to be feudal only. With this equation, we can now continue surveying in innumerable fields and, in support of this equation, will establish necessary facts to prove that farmers in the villages are not ‘well’; they are subject to feudal exploitation. We can also collect facts to prove that farmers are no more willing to continue with their farm-based works; that they want to leave such works and are eager to take up works at factories. We can show that they want capitalist development. We can forward an endless series of facts to prove how the reactionary feudal force is blocking the way to capitalist development and driving the ‘un-conscious’ farmers to the wrong way.

We notice a certain sense of time and space – a certain sense of history. This sense teaches us that treading the path is like the steps of a staircase; treading the path means ascent from pre-capitalist arrangement of the society to the capitalist society. We are deep into this particular sense of history. Our psyche is overwhelmed with this temporal-aspect of history. This forms the reason why we may term the atrocities of police in Nandigram as barbaric but cannot help ourselves from considering capitalist development as the only possible model of development there. Peasants of
Nandigram, though temporarily, have halted the process of capitalist development. If we review the history of development in India, we may conclude that the received model of Capitalist Development enhances economic inequality in all respect. Nevertheless, we have accepted the model of Capitalist Development as a Historical compulsion. Capitalist Development claims that it will eliminate poverty, but we have noticed that it produces poverty and economic inequality. History of Capitalism proves that its basis is premised on exploitation, plundering, destruction and colonization. The question remains: Why have we not yet considered Capitalism as a social problem? The ‘ignorant’ people of Nandigram have expressed their desire to disagree to the capitalist history of exploitation, plundering, destruction and colonization. In lieu of their lives, their bodily violation, they have succeeded in opening a window for the imagination of an alternative model of development.

Peasants of Nandigram put to question the naturalized History driven understanding of Capitalist development. Perhaps they wanted to uphold their mode of being-in-the-world. They were not willing to judge themselves as per the standards set by others (read standards set by the political leaders and intellectuals). They could not agree to identify/classify/categorize themselves as ‘underdeveloped’-'backward'-'third world' subject imposed from above. They wanted to resist the violence of naming, enforced from above. May be, they were attempting to create a new language of development. The political leaders and intellectuals did not like this attempt by them. The big names in power classified them as ‘terrorists’. On March 14, they sent police to Nandigram. Perhaps this was the first time that the people of Nandigram realized that there can be nothing as natural order. Natural order serves the interest of a certain class, a certain gender, a certain sex…
The *rustic-farmers* of Nandigram wanted to shift focus towards the prejudices of the political leaders and intellectuals who were in favor of naturalized Capitalist Development. Their resistance grew against this apparent naturalized *norm*. May be, they were trying to say that the standards set by the big names in power are always prejudiced. It is unfortunate that their speech failed to become language. They remained unspoken.

They remained unspoken, years back, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak (1988) had asked: *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Butler points out, "Spivak does not mean by this claim that the subaltern does not express her desires, form political alliances, or make culturally and politically significant effects, but that within the dominant conceptualization of agency, her agency remains *illegible*" (2003: 36; emphasize mine). Peasants of Nandigram as subaltern expressed their desire, formed political alliance *but that within the dominant conceptualization of agency* their agency remained *illegible*. Their agency is labeled as a threat to social order. Their agency is acknowledged, but acknowledged as a social problem with respect to the given social order. In that sense, their agency is conceptualized as *illegible* abnormal action. The only agency, which is counted as *normal* legible, is Capitalist form of action. Agency other than motivated by Capitalism "as such is not repressed, but it is organized, controlled, channeled, made forbidden, submitted to correction, and so on" (Schehr, 1995: 5). Subaltern agency is substituted as a social problem that needs to be *organized, controlled, channeled, made forbidden, submitted to correction*.

In her recent interview, Spivak recapitulates her experience as to demonstrate that how subaltern agency remains *illegible*. She says:
About 15-16 years ago, we got some money from an Indian company for cutting away a dry river bed so there could be lift irrigation. They showed a great deal of reluctance. They were treated in a kind of infantile way, just as kind of lazy. The work went on and they did it very well. Some among them went up to be trained and so on. Much later, I said to Mahasweta Devi (a fiction writer) that what was actually itself was the age-old cultural and ecological resistance to cutting into the breast of the river. No one acknowledged it. They just thought the aboriginal is lazy. The subaltern could not speak, in that metaphorical sense. They showed their reluctance but no one recognized it as resistance, not even the activists, the urban activists (2006: 73).

The peasants of Nandigram also showed their reluctance but no one recognized it as resistance rather it is substituted as a social problem. They showed a great deal of reluctance but their reluctance is not recognized as resistance.

6.4 Conclusion

We could say that the social reality is premised on antagonism and social-ideological fantasy masks this inherent antagonism. The role of ideology is twofold: social-ideological fantasy represents social reality in such a way that it is complete in itself; second, in order to prove its wholeness, social-ideological fantasy represses antagonisms that is constitutive in society. In that sense, the role of social-ideological fantasy is violent, as it represses different voices that are constitutive in society.

The ‘foolish’ peasants of Nandigram have brought the indisputable obviousness of Capitalist development to some questions.
Their ‘foolish’ questions:

- Development always means capitalist development – why will we have to agree with this?
- Can there be other concepts of development?
- Why is it being assumed that their agro-based works are forcing them to lead a ‘bad’ life?
- What forms the basis of the assumption that the relation of nature-land-animals-ants-man-woman that exist there is necessarily exploitative?

This has never been mean that the villages in West Bengal are in a romantic halo. We, never for once, mean that villages are free from all sorts of domination, exploitation, pain, agony, and the like. However, it will be a mistake to think that the villages in West Bengal necessarily mean only exploitation, agony, and tales of woe; and that capitalism necessarily means the triumph of progress, of joy, of contentment.