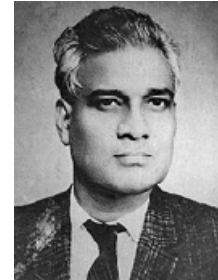


A Relook into the Mission of the Man Behind Vidyasagar University: An Autoethnography



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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I have tried to pay my tribute to Professor Anil Kumar Gayen, the founder of Vidyasagar University in erstwhile Midnapore district of West Bengal. Gayen was a Professor at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur and he did his Phd in Statistics at Cambridge University. His vision was to establish a non-traditional university in a rural area, which would cater to the needs of the underprivileged people, particularly tribals through research and teaching. Vidyasagar University was established in 1981 with Gayen's mandate having a Department of Anthropology, although the university gradually

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turned into a traditional affiliating institution of higher learning. I taught at Vidyasagar University during 1985-2016 and conducted researches on the displacement of agricultural communities in erstwhile Medinipur district. During my tenure at Vidyasagar University, I also became curious about the founder of my university who was a forgotten personality. I tried my level best to revive our founder in public memory. This article is the result of my self-reflection wherein I found myself carrying on with the vision of our founder through the narratives around my researches on development caused forced displacement.

INTRODUCTION

I felt greatly honoured when I was invited to deliver the Birth Centenary Memorial Lecture of Professor Anil Kumar Gayen, the founder of Vidyasagar University in 2019.¹ Let me strive to visualise the dream of a dedicated scholar who founded the university. His dream was to establish an institution of higher learning where the production of knowledge would benefit the masses, particularly the people of the countryside and the teaching-learning process would be non-traditional in nature. Have we been moving in the right direction? Being one of the founder teachers of Vidyasagar University, who had to struggle hard against many odds to dig up the name of Professor Gayen as the founder from the deeper layers of forced amnesia,² I would only say that we have no other option left before us by the man behind this institution, but to act at the local level without forgetting the global scenario.³ Given the dream of Gayen, a teacher can only bow down and think aloud her/his experience in learning through the researches on the ground realities for the benefit of the underprivileged and the marginalised. Ergo, in the rest of my paper, I will try to do that task in the form of two case studies. In the first, I would look at my own university as a site of my non-conventional research, which I termed as ‘campus anthropology’ and in the second, I will deal with my own method of deconstruction of land grab in West Bengal or ‘behind the front of land acquisition’. Through these two narratives or should I call them autoethnographies,⁴ I got the gratifying sense of fulfilling the assignment of Anil Kumar Gayen, who founded this unique university, and in the process gave birth to us who have gathered here in this august assembly on the occasion of his birth centenary to evaluate and

reevaluate our own deeds against the splendid dream of the brilliant man who traversed a long voyage from Khejuri through Cambridge and back to his motherland to make it global.

THE FIRST NARRATIVE: CAMPUS ANTHROPOLOGY

Prologue

The term ‘campus of anthropology and sociology’ is not yet in existence in the literature. A latest book by one of the leading and senior sociologists on the universities in India and the West does not contain any observation on the interactions of the subalterns and the elites of the university (Béteille 2010). Can an anthropologist study her/his own university campus by employing the methods of fieldwork and use of data from the archives? The questions are largely empirical. In this article, I have tried to narrate my anthropological endeavors to study a small university in which I taught anthropology, located on the margins of the habitations of indigenous populations in West Bengal, India. The situation offers a unique opportunity for the micro-level observation of frictions between the elites of the society and the underprivileged sections of the country labeled as ‘tribes. I borrow the metaphor ‘Friction’ from a recent book by Anna Tsing in which she viewed friction for the diverse and conflicting interactions that make up our contemporary globalized world (Tsing 2005:6). The campus of a university in India is not also devoid of frictions. The friction becomes detectable at many levels, which I attempt to describe ethnographically, in the form of narratives flowing out from the discourses of elites and the downtrodden. The attempt to study universities as

anthropological subjects may lead to a new subdiscipline of 'campus anthropology' which may have immense cross-cultural implications. Let us begin with the brief history of the university which I have studied. Its name is Vidyasagar University, which was established in the name of Pandit Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, a famous nineteenth century Bengali intellectual and social reformer who fought for the emancipation of the women and the downtrodden of the society during the British rule in India.

History

Vidyasagar University was established in the erstwhile Medinipur District of West Bengal in the year 1981 as a non-traditional university. At present the university is located in West Medinipur which is a new district since 2002. The chief aim of this non-traditional university was to conduct interdisciplinary research and teaching in the various applied subjects in order to contribute towards the development and welfare of the tribal populations of the region. With this aim, the university began its career with six subjects of which Anthropology was one of the most important one. To fulfill its aims and objectives, the location of the university was chosen almost at the heart of a tribal area in the MedinipurSadar Subdivision. Within a radius of ten kilometers of the university campus one can find villages inhabited by the Santal, Munda, Oraon, Lodha and Kora tribes at different levels of techno-economic and sociocultural existence. In fact, the university campus is located within the common property resource base of a village inhabited by the Munda and the Oraon group of people. With the peopling of the campus by the employees of the university and the encircling of the same by a boundary wall, conflict between the local tribals and the university authority began which took many forms. The locals broke the wall at many places to reestablish their traditional rights over common pool resource uses, which ranged from rites of passage, grazing of cattle, collection of leaves and grasses and the like. The university authority on the other hand instead of initiating any participatory activity adopted the policing approach, which further alienated the tribals for whose development and welfare the university was established. Here, I have tried to write an auto-ethnographic account of the dynamics of university-locality interaction based on my 20 years of

participatory experience.

Universities have become inseparable from the sociopolitical reality of a nation-state. They bring in varieties of socioeconomic groups within the campus cutting across region, class, caste, religion and gender but at the same time universities also marginalize some people particularly the underprivileged by a kind of elitism, which is built into the structure of the university. Ironically enough, these centres of highest learning also champion high ideals regarding the elimination of poverty, illiteracy and various forms of social inequality. The university campus is one of the physical symbols of the elitism of a university. The campus is an enclosed space often encircled by boundary walls, which separates the university from its surroundings. The university administration makes sincere efforts to protect their campus with high walls and security forces but not through participatory management by involving the local inhabitants. Under this background, let me describe the case of the establishment of Vidyasagar University in the erstwhile Medinipur district of West Bengal.

Vidyasagar University was established by an Act passed in the West Bengal State Legislative Assembly in the year 1981. The University Grants Commission (UGC) recognized this University on condition that it should develop in a non-traditional line incorporating subjects, which would have rural development-oriented bias. Accordingly, departments like Economics with rural development, Political Science with rural administration, Anthropology with tribal culture, Commerce with farm management, Applied mathematics with oceanology and Library and information science were introduced in 1985-86 academic session. The Vidyasagar University Act in its section entitled 'The University and its officers' mentioned in its clause 4(2) that the institution shall have the power 'to organize specialized diploma, degree or post-graduate courses... in such subjects as Tribal languages, habitats and customs, rural administration forestry... regional resources planning, ecology and environmental studies (The Vidyasagar University Act 1985). The clause 4(5) in the Act is more remarkable, which emphatically stated that the University shall have the '*power to make such academic studies as may contribute to the*

improvement of economic conditions and welfare of the people in general and the tribal people in particular' (Ibid)[emphasis mine]. With this pro-poor and pro-tribal legislation passed in the state assembly of the Left Front Government (LFG) of West Bengal and taking its name after the famous nineteenth century social reformer Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, the non-traditional University started its journey by affiliating 30 undergraduate colleges from Calcutta University within the administrative jurisdiction of the erstwhile Medinipur district. This was a sufficient load on this new University in terms of routine works related to examination and others to detract it from the stated objectives enshrined in its Act. This also reveals the populist policy decision of the then Left Front Government, which passed a progressive Act in the state assembly without giving any serious thought towards its implementation.

The campus and its environs

The location of the Vidyasagar University campus was also selected on a non-conventional site at a distance of about 3 kilometers from the Medinipur railway station (about 34 metres above the Mean Sea Level) on the Western side of the Medinipur town under the municipal ward 21. This ward and its adjoining one, ward 20, represent the recent municipal extensions of the town into the rural areas characterized by vast open land, agricultural fields, woodland and lesser number of administrative offices, residential houses as well as trade and commercial activities. The National Atlas and Thematic Mapping Organisation (NATMO) calculated the densities of population in wards 20 and 21 as 12.84 and 23.65 persons per hectare respectively in 1981, while the town's average population density was 47.50 persons per hectare (NATMO 1992: 32).

The administrative, academic and residential buildings of the University are built on the vast open 130 acres of uncultivated lateritic upland (*tanr* land in local parlance) donated by the state government. Formerly, this land, which was probably regarded as 'non-agricultural waste' by the colonial administration was owned by one revenue paying zamindar belonging to the illustrious 'Khan' family of Narajole of Paschim Medinipur district. The big palace of the Khan family and its adjoining garden lie on the south

west side of the Vidyasagar University campus and the palace has become the Raja Narendra Lal Khan Women's College which is affiliated to Vidyasagar University. The campus of the N.L. Khan College provides a marked contrast in terms of the vegetative cover on this lateritic and undulating landscape. The campus of the College harbours a wide variety of indigenous fruit bearing and other kinds of big trees like Mango (*Mangifera indica*), Jackfruit (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*), Arjun (*Terminalia arjuna*), Neem (*Azadirachta indica*), Wood-apple (*Limonia acidissima*) Kul (*Ziziphus mauritiana*), Guava (*Psidium guajava*) and Lemon (*Citrus limon*). The Vidyasagar University campus on the other hand, still looks like a forest department office with Krishnachura (*Delonix regia*), Sirish (*Albizia lebeck*) and Debbaru (*Monoon longifolium*) trees and patches of Eucalyptus and Akashmoni plantations. There is also an area measuring a few acres, which contain some Cashewnut (*Anacardium occidentale*) trees. Recently, some well-protected gardens containing Mahogany (*Swietenia mahagoni*), Sal (*Shorea robusta*) and Segun (*Tectona grandis*) have been developed within the campus. And that is all. No systematic attempt has yet been made by the University authority to plant and protect a good number of local varieties of fruit and other kinds of trees on this vast open land since its inception. Till today only some ritualistic gestures have been made by the University authority (sometimes by the units of the National Service Scheme) to plant some indigenous trees during the onset of the monsoon. But a large number of such trees are eaten up by the grazing cattle of the surrounding settlements which include the tribal village named Muradanga. Even some Eucalyptus and Akashmoni trees which the grazing animals do not eat have been felled by the local villagers who used them as fuel wood. But despite all these kinds of uncomfortable interactions of Vidyasagar University with its neighbours, the myth of the non-traditional and rural University catering to the needs of the local people survived at least in the initial stage. The myth however began to pass through a process of deconstruction over the years. The published statements of the Vice-Chancellors of Vidyasagar University revealed that the University is gradually deviating from its mandate. Let us examine the

narratives in some detail.

The discourses of the elites

The idea of developing a non-traditional University in a rural milieu having a substantial number of tribal communities was placed before the policymakers not by the anthropologists but by Dr. Anil Kumar Gayen, a professor of Mathematics and Statistics of the Indian Institute of Technology at Kharagpur. The University Grants Commission approved the idea of Dr. Gayen but unfortunately the chief planner of Vidyasagar University passed away before the establishment of the University in 1985. After the establishment of the University, Professor Bhupesh Chandra Mukherjee, a former history teacher in Presidency College and an administrator in the state education department was appointed as the first Vice-Chancellor of this non-traditional University in West Bengal. Professor B.C. Mukherjee published a communication in the UGC'S *Journal of Higher Education* in 1987-88 entitled 'Vidyasagar University: Its Objectives and Character' (Mukherjee '87-88). Let us look at what he wanted to communicate about the aims and objectives of this University. In his communication, apart from reiterating the VU Act regarding the upliftment of the 'backward areas and removal of regional imbalance' and the rationale behind the establishment of the University, Professor Mukherjee stated

The overall emphasis of the university is not to perpetuate the traditional nature of other universities but to emerge as a distinctive entity with a special nature of its own having an orientation towards non-traditional and specialized teaching and research (Ibid).

Interestingly, just after seven years of difficult run owing to fund shortage and non-availability of capital grants from the UGC, another Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Satyanarayan Ghosh, in the First Convocation Address delivered on 9 January 1995, frankly admitted

The university started with the objective of teaching and developing non-conventional subjects, but had later to stray a little away from this original idea in the case of some subjects which did not find ready employment. A brief but disenchanting experience more or less forced some of the departments to revert to teaching what is called traditional or conventional subjects (Ghosh, '95).

It appeared from the statement of Dr. Ghosh that the university has already made enough innovative experiments in developing along non-traditional lines and its students have been refused jobs and/or fellowships for pursuing the original objectives of the institution. Suffice it to say that nothing could be far from the truth about the pursuance of the ideals and the real spirit of the University as depicted in Dr. S. N. Ghosh's narrative quoted above.

The next Vice-Chancellor of the University, Professor Amiya Kumar Deb in his Second Convocation Address on 4 April 1997 did not mention the words 'non-conventional' or 'non-traditional' like his predecessors. Professor Deb had a different kind of answer to the problem. Throughout his speech, he went on narrating the tale of opening new undergraduate and postgraduate courses by the University which have both application and job for the students. In his own words

Our interest in vocationalist and application orienteers of education has also led us to giving affiliation to a course in Master of Social Work.... (Deb, '97).

In another place of his Convocation Address Professor Deb elaborated his arguments in the following manner

In pursuit of the third dimension of university education, we have set up an extension centre in which self-financing certificate and diploma courses are going to be given from the coming academic session in such fields as Computer Application, Laboratory Technology and Seed Technology to begin with. The courses are being designed in such a way as to impart full application oriented training to those who offer them in search of a career or for the sake of career improvement. This is only the initiation. We plan to fare further, in answer to the developmental and career needs of the region (Deb, '97).

The narratives produced by these three Vice-Chancellors of Vidyasagar University over a period of twelve years show the evolution of the deconstruction of the myth of a non-traditional University constructed by the Leftist Government, which found its expression in the Vidyasagar University Act of 1981. Over the years, at Vidyasagar University, 'non-conventional' meant opening of self-financed and distance education courses by which the University could generate its own funds and

resources. The trend was set during the tenure of Professor Amiya Kumar Deb. Not a single experiment was conducted by the University to directly involve its faculties and students towards the upliftment of the weaker sections of the region, some of whom lived right under the nose of the University community and regularly visited (viewed as 'encroachment' by the university authorities) the campus in search of fuel and fodder.

Vidyasagar University campus: a common pool resource of the subaltern

The 130 acres of non-agricultural land on which the Vidyasagar University campus was constructed is still being perceived by the inhabitants of the neighbouring villages as a reservoir of common pool resource on which they have been enjoying customary usufructory rights for several generations. The adjoining villages named Muradanga, Tantigeria and Phulpahari are inhabited by poverty-stricken Munda, Oraon and other Scheduled Caste people. On the northeastern side of the campus there is a small settlement of after cure leprosy patients belonging to Scheduled Tribes and Castes who live a highly marginalized existence in the town and represent one of the weakest sections of the locality. Closer observation reveals that the people around the campus of Vidyasagar University do not present a homogeneous entity in terms of economic and sociocultural features but they share at least three interesting characteristics, which are important for the present discourse. These characteristics are enumerated below:

1. All these groups of people used to enjoy *usufructory rights* of grazing, firewood and other non-timber forest product collection and rights of passage through this land without getting any resistance from any quarter before the establishment of Vidyasagar University. The present campus land was a kind of open access resource and /or common pool resource to these groups of people.
2. Since the establishment of the University all these groups of people are experiencing resistance from the University although the responses towards this resistance are not

similar for all the groups.

3. All these groups of people distinguish themselves from the University community, although no specific term has been found to emerge yet in the vocabulary of these people to designate the paired opposition: "University Community" vis-à-vis the "Local Community". The Levi-Straussian binary opposite does not seem to be very much helpful in this context. (Guha 2001)

Autoethnography

Under this broad background let me present my own interactions with some of the tribal villagers of the locality for whom our campus is their commons. Let me begin with an old Munda villager of Muradanga. His name was Raghunath Singh. He was about sixty years old when I first met him in the year 1987. He was a dark-skinned lean man who was strong enough to pedal a three-wheeled cycle rickshaw with passengers in its seat in Medinipur town. It was his occupation since he could not engage himself in cultivation. Raghunath was a man of wit and humour. He used to tell stories of the past. He narrated his childhood when this Gopgarh area was covered with big sal and other trees and people from the Medinipur town did not dare to come to this place even during the daylight hours. This was a heaven for the large snakes, wolves and jackals and occasionally also used to roam in this area. 'The land of your university was never used for cultivation'. Raghunath went on saying 'It is the grazing field of our cattle, our women collect fuel from your ground and our children play here. The Rajas of Gop gave this land to us. We defended our village from the attacks of the robbers with our bow and arrow and village unity.' 'But' Raghunath used to continue 'now your guards are creating problems for us'. He frequently lamented over the rapid weakening of the collective strength of the inhabitants of his village. I later learnt that Raghunath's sons did not look after him properly. After four or five years, he suddenly became much older and could not pedal the rickshaw anymore. Raghunath started to beg on the streets of Medinipur. Every Sunday morning, he reached our campus limping with the help of a stick and collected some coins from the residents of the University quarters and then used to go to the town.

After not seeing him for some weeks, I enquired with a young man of Muradanga and came to know that Raghunath had died a few days ago. In 1997, few years after the death of Raghunath, the university authority employed a Calcutta based private security agency to protect and guard the campus from the 'encroachers'. The university authority had also started a plantation of *Akashmoni* (*Acaciaauriculiformis*), *Eucalyptus* (*Eucalyptus globules*), *Sirish* (*Albizialebeck*) and some fruit trees on the western residential side of the campus. The cost of employing the security agency was Rs. 4,80,000/- not a negligible amount for the University. The main task of the security guards was to drive away the grazing animals of Muradanga and Saltola. The people of the neighbouring villages adopted interesting strategies to continue the grazing of their animal on this traditional common pool resource base. One strategy was to play a hide and seek game with the security guards and the other was to send the grazing animals in night to the campus land when it was very difficult for the security men to locate the animals. The proposed plantation of the University however did not materialize due to various reasons. For example, the grazing animals ate up many saplings; some were also taken away by the villagers and some died for the lack of proper care and protection. There was no attempt on the part of the university to involve the tribal villagers in the protection of the plantation of the university although a specific proposal was submitted by the Anthropology department of the University in this regard.

I would now narrate the anecdote of 'Saltola', which is the name of the settlement of leprosy-affected patients who have been living by the side of the boundary wall of the University on the east. If one comes through the metal road of Tantigeria to reach Vidyasagar University in the night one may not even know the existence of this group of people who have planted a good number of indigenous varieties of trees. They do not have electricity, latrines and supply of safe drinking water from the municipality. They are of course voters and their settlement is known to the general public and the district administration as a settlement of lepers or '*Kusthapally*'. They also graze their cattle and collect the fuel from the University campus. In course of my anthropological encounters,

I came to know about the indigenous name of this settlement. The inhabitants of this place call their settlement by two interesting appellations, one is '*Thutapara*' which means 'a hamlet of physically handicapped people' since 'thuta' in spoken Bengali means a person whose limbs, particularly the hands have become non-functional. '*Thuta*' symbolizes a person affected by leprosy. This has a derogatory connotation and many people of the town designate this colony by this term and the inhabitants also use it in their daily conversation although they would not usually mention this name of their settlement to a newcomer. The other name by which the inhabitants refer to their settlement is 'Saltola'. Saltola means 'a hamlet where one can find *sal* trees' (*Shorearobusta*). And here comes the anecdote. In one evening, while I was discussing the problems of getting *patta* (a deed of right over land awarded by the state government to landless and poor families) for the families of this settlement with its inhabitants, a very energetic cultivator, Nagen Ari who belonged to the Sabar tribe narrated an incident. Let me translate Nagen's narrative in verbatim: "When I came from Gokulpur to this area there was a very big *sal* tree at this place. We used to enjoy its cool shadow and our children played beneath its huge canopy. It was about twenty years ago. But one day few men from the Tantigeria panchayat office came to this place and told that they would hack down the tree for using its wood to make the furniture of their office. We objected by saying that you won't get much wood from this tree because it has already been bored by the termites." Nagen continued, "The panchayat men didn't care since they were unable to understand this from outside. They brought their men and felled the tree but not much wood was obtained. Our prediction was correct." Then Nagen said with an emphatic smile. "You see, although the tree has gone but we call this place 'Saltola', which meant that this was the abode of the huge *Sal*." Three years ago, the district administration made a move to rehabilitate the inhabitants of Saltola in another place in Tantigeria, which is about 1 kilometer from Saltola. The district administration seemed to be more interested to shift these families from near the University campus than giving them *pattas* on this land and the general attitude of the University community was not also

favourable to these after cure leprosy patients although, we have not found any individual in Saltola currently affected by the disease. We carried out a socio-demographic survey at Saltola and another adjoining colony in 1995 among the 74 households in collaboration with an NGO who runs a hospital for the leprosy patients. We have found that there were 100 deformed persons (47 males and 53 females) who were once affected by the disease and no individual below twenty years of age was neither found to be deformed nor affected by leprosy (Bhuniya, Guha and Das 1996). With the effort of the district administration 12 families from Saltola were shifted in a resettlement colony and all these families now lament for leaving Saltola since in the resettlement colony they could not continue the village life of Saltola. Moreover, very recently in 2004, the district administration has given land *patta* to the families whom they could not resettle. Here we may recall one interesting incident regarding the attitude of the university community towards the marginalized families of Saltola. In the year 1997, the members of the University community decided to organize a procession on the occasion of the **celebration of the 50th year of country's Independence** and they had also resolved to distribute some fruits and sweets to the poor people of the locality. Interestingly, neither Muradanga nor Saltola was selected for this purpose. Someone suggested the name of Saltola but it was rejected on the ground that many members of the University community might not like to visit a 'leper colony' on such an occasion. On 15th August 1997, the procession, under the leadership of the then Vice-chancellor Professor Amiya Kumar Deb passed by the side of Saltola (I also participated in it) and traveled some important parts of the Medinipur town and finally donated the fruits and sweets to the authority of the district hospital for its distribution to the patients.

This in brief constitute the deconstruction of the myth of the non-traditional University at Medinipur in West Bengal. The narratives of Muradanga and Saltola signify how the process of disempowerment and marginalisation of the rural tribal and the poor families have been taking place in and around Vidyasagar University which was established to contribute to the improvement of the socio-economic conditions of the rural poor and particularly the tribals

of the region (Guha 2013).

From policing to participation: a prelude to campus anthropology

During 1995-96, Vidyasagar University got about 40 acres of land from the District Land and Land Reforms Department on the Western side of the residential campus right within Raghunath's village Muradanga. The University executive council decided to utilise the plot (this land has been designated by the university authority as the "third plot") through the extension of some of its academic departments and accordingly suggestions were invited from those departments. The Department of Anthropology submitted a proposal to involve the tribal people of this village for this purpose (Dept. of Anthropology '97). I reproduce here a summarised version of the said proposal.

Anthropological enquiries revealed that the tribals of Muradanga still perceive the plot given to the University as their common pool resource. The tribals of this village were basically agriculturists who depended upon monocrop rain fed cultivation, collection of non-timber forest produce and daily wage labour in the neighbouring township. The basic needs of the people of Muradanga revolved around supply of water for irrigation and pasture for their cattle. A canal dug by the state irrigation department runs through their village, but it remained dry throughout the year. It was found through interviews of some villagers and field observations that the 'third plot' was also being used by the people of Muradanga as grazing field as well as for the collection of minor forest produce. It was reported that some families of the village also occasionally cultivated paddy on this plot. On a more intimate level, the villagers have expressed their grudge towards the irrigation department for not being able to supply water for cultivation of their subsistence crop. They were not also found to be happy with the District Land and Land Reforms Department for not distributing *patta* lands to the families of the village who really needed it. This is the wider context under which the huge plot of common land (which is legally placed within the domain of State property) was given to Vidyasagar University.

Under this background, the Department of Anthropology strongly felt that it would be more economic as well as in tune with the needs and age-old customary rights of the people of Muradanga, if the academic departments of the University could involve the villagers in the protection as well as sustainable development of the third plot. This could be done by extending the twin principles of (i) benefit sharing and (ii) social fencing as enunciated in the 1985 National Forest Policy of The Government of India. This will be also in line with the objectives of Vidyasagar University.

A detailed plan for the participatory management of the third plot was also worked out in the proposal that ran as follows.

Benefit sharing and social fencing could be done through a step-by-step gradual process. In the first step, an area of grazing field may be enclosed within the third plot where the villagers would graze their cattle and attention should be given to grow sufficient fodder on this area. In lieu of this gesture the villagers may be motivated to take part in developing a garden for the University outside the enclosed area based on the principles of joint forest management since this is a well-known phenomenon for the villagers. In the next stage, the University may involve the villagers to harvest rainwater in ponds and start pisciculture and the latter could also use the water in irrigating vegetable gardens. In order to do this kind of participatory management of the “third plot” the various departments of the University may conduct empirical studies on the different dimensions of the socio-economic life of Muradanga and its surroundings. These empirical surveys would require good rapport and interaction between the University community and the villagers and would also help in gaining the confidence of the people who have been marginalized by the establishment of the University.

The proposal of the Department of Anthropology was submitted to the University authority in July 1997 and the authorities admired the proposal and shelved it in the proverbial red file and the villagers are using the ‘third plot’ as a common land till today (Guha 2004 & 2008). In the recent past, the district administration had again taken over the plot of land at Muradanga from the university, since the latter could not use it for any purpose for a long period of time.

Postscript

In this connection, it may be relevant to mention the case of Manomanium Sundaharnar University in the Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu. According to a report published in a national daily, this small and young University has set an example in conducting action-oriented research projects by involving the local people in many rural development schemes which included organic farming, wasteland development and aquaculture. Dr. N. Sukumaran, Head of the Centre for Environmental Sciences of this University said in a training-cum-seminar programme in the Agricultural Science Centre at Kappari in West Medinipur: ‘The key to our success lies in the fact that the faculties and the students of the centre regularly meet the locals to understand their problems and solve them’ (*The Statesman* 1998). Interestingly, two faculties of Vidyasagar University from its Botany and Zoology Departments were sent to M.S. University to get an exposure on organic farming through vermiculture in collaboration with the Centre for Women’s Development Studies, New Delhi during the tenure of the Vice-Chancellor Professor Amiya Kumar Deb. Ironically, neither the tribal women of Muradanga nor the women of Saltola were involved in developing vermicompost by the Botany and the Zoology Departments of Vidyasagar University.

THE SECOND NARRATIVE: BEHIND THE FRONT OF LAND ACQUISITION

The Standing Committee Meeting

I was among the members of Parliament (MP) from different parts of the country at the Parliament Library building, New Delhi, on 17 June 2008. I was feeling nervous, although I was invited as an expert to give suggestions towards the reforms to be undertaken on the century old Land Acquisition Act of India by which the government’s power of *eminent domain* was used to be exercised to acquire land for ‘public purpose’ in lieu of monetary compensation given only to the land titleholders. The Deputy Chairman began the discussion by asking me to highlight the major points which I recommended to insert in the proposed bill. I talked at length trying to convince the MPs about those subjects which I thought were downplayed in the bill. I emphasized on

the recognition of local self-governments while getting consent of the affected people for land acquisition, protection of food security at the household level and exemption of agricultural land from the scope of land acquisition for private profit-making industries. The Deputy with a smiling face reacted by saying that I have raised certain 'basic issues and philosophy' behind the Act and there was no dispute on the idea, which I mentioned but the question was, one could not avoid land expropriation since private companies were already purchasing huge chunks of land in the rural areas of the country. It seemed to me that the Standing Committee might not be interested in increasing the role of local governments, household level food security and all other issues which I had been observing as a field anthropologist in cases of acquisition of huge chunks of fertile farmland in some of the villages of erstwhile Medinipur district of West Bengal where the peasants did not agree to sell their land to the big industrialists. The MPs advised me quite politely to send the suggestions in writing. My frontal encounter with the policymakers ended.

Peasant resistance in Medinipur villages: a decade before Singur and Nandigram

The protests launched by the landowning farmers of the Gokulpur-Amba (two of my study villages) against land acquisition took many forms, even though these did not last for a long period as it happened recently in Singur in the Hooghly district of West Bengal. (Guha, 2007) Several peasants took up the statutorily available means/instruments to put up their objections against land acquisition under section 5A of the Land Acquisition Act during December 1995. A Government report dated 21.06.96 vividly recorded the objections and described in detail how the latter were overruled by the District Collector.

The objections submitted by 342 land losers contained the following points: (i) The acquisition of agricultural land would affect the farmers seriously by throwing them out of employment, (ii) the land losers will not get compensation at the rate they expect and (iii) the proposed acquisition is against public interest and is beyond the purview of the Act. It is interesting to observe how the concerned officials of the Land Acquisition Department overruled all the objections raised by the farmers. Before rejecting the

objections, the officials, however, recognized the severity and magnitude of the acquisition. I quote from the report

It is a fact that since large quantum of land is being acquired and the people chiefly subsist on agriculture many people will be seriously affected in earning their livelihood and avocation" (Departmental Report, '96).

But this was the only sentence in the whole report which upheld the interests of the peasants. The rest of the 3-page report was devoted to justify the acquisition through the elaboration of some arguments. The arguments of the officials centred round the low agricultural yield of the lands which are monocrop in nature. Moreover, the report also mentioned about the merits of the location of the land, which provided important infrastructure facilities for the industry like nearby railway line and the national highway. It is learnt from the report that during the hearing of the objections the petitioners could not "specify their individual difficulty in parting with the land" although the same report said that "most of the objectors submitted that they have no objection if employment is assured to them, in the company in favour of whom acquisition is being done." It is not clear from the report why the authors of the same could not understand the nature of "individual difficulty" in parting with the land which is their main source of livelihood. Three points raised in the report are quite significant and shows the insensitive way of dealing with such an action on the part of the Government which was going to have a severe impact on the subsistence pattern of a group of rural cultivators in a monocrop region. Firstly, at one place the report mentioned: "It is worthwhile to point out that objections have been received only from 342 landowners for the acquisition of 526.71 acre which will affect at least 3000 landowners, if not more." It seems the official position rested on the logic that as the overwhelming majority of farmers would not face any difficulty (*at least there was no record of objection under the Land Acquisition Act*) so there was no need to record any objection against this acquisition. Secondly, after citing the locational advantages of the land, the officials overruled objections regarding the question of earning a livelihood by saying that the proposal had been approved both by the screening committee and by

the state after considering all aspects. Incidentally, the screening committee for the approval of any project comprises the *Sabhadhipati* (Chairman) of the Panchayat Samity (the second tier of the statutory local self-government) and the Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) of the locality. It was obvious at that time that these people's representatives who were members of political parties of the LFG would not object a proposal which had *already been approved* by the cabinet and the concerned ministries of their own Government. The temporal order of consultation and approvals appear important. Thirdly, the report dealt with the point 'job for land' simply by saying that the Land Acquisition Act does not provide any relief except compensation. But the Government may take up the matter with the company particularly for those farmers who would become landless and would be devoid of any source of earning a livelihood. After having overruled all the objections, the procedure for land acquisition made headway.

Beside, recording objections within the legal framework of the Land Acquisition Act, the farmers of this area also took recourse to extra-legal means to fight against the acquisition of their agricultural land which is narrated below. The information on this part of the peasant protest have been collected from interviews of the leaders and participants of this movement as well as from press reports and the various written memoranda submitted by the villagers to the district and state administration. In the following section the succession of the important events of the peasant resistance has been described.

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE PEASANT RESISTANCE

The vast rural area which lies between Medinipur and Kharagpur townships was dominated by the two left political parties of the state, namely, CPI and CPI (M), which are also the major partners of the Left Front Government. The Congress, which was the then opposition party in the state, had some followers in the area. This party being the major supporter of economic liberalisation did not raise any objection when the news of industrialisation in this area came to be known. In fact, Congress welcomed this decision of the Left Government. They only raised doubts

about whether the industrialists would at all choose West Bengal as a suitable site for industrialisation. In the study area Tata Metaliks was established on about 200 acres of agricultural land during 1991-92. Before the establishment of Tata Metaliks, the leaders and cadres of CPI (M) and CPI organized meetings and continued individual level campaigns on the bright possibility of getting jobs by the land losers in the industry. But when the Tata Metaliks started production, the promise for providing jobs was proved to be a false one and the peasants also experienced the lengthy as well as tedious process of getting compensation from the district administration. All of these caused sufficient disillusionment among the peasants who were once hopeful about the positive effects of the establishment of an industrial estate in this region.

The decision of the state government to acquire agricultural land in the same area for Century Textiles Company was taken under this background. The pessimism created among the peasants owing to the establishment of Tata Metaliks inspired some of the inhabitants of this locality to agitate against the acquisition of land for another pig-iron unit. The movement gained popularity under the leadership of Trilochan Rana [a former CPI (ML) leader] during 1995-96 who joined the trade union wing of the Congress Party and put considerable pressure on the district administration.

Two interesting incidents may be mentioned in this regard which would throw some light on the reasons behind the popularity of this movement among the farmers. The first incident took place in the month of May 1995 when Trilochan Rana organised a good number of peasants to put a deputation to the Tata Metaliks Company authorities demanding some compensation for the damage caused by movement of trucks carrying goods for the company over unacquired agricultural fields (there was no crop in the fields at that time) of those farmers. The trucks damaged the dykes of the fields (*ails*) and the soil. Under the pressure of the peasants the company had to pay compensation in kind to 75 peasant families in presence of the *pradhan* (elected head of the lowest tier, i.e. gram panchayat of the statutory local self-government) of Kalaikunda GP. Some amount of fertiliser was given to those peasants

whose lands were damaged.

In the second incident Trilochan Rana put a deputation to the district administration about the damage caused to the unacquired agricultural fields of some peasants for putting pillars to demarcate acquired lands for Century Textiles Company in Kantapal, Mollachak and other adjoining villages. Those cement pillars were fixed by digging at about 4 sq.ft. of land to a depth of 3-4 ft. and became permanent structures right on the agricultural fields of the peasants whose lands were not acquired. These pillars served as the boundary of the acquired land for CTIL. About 24-25 such pillars were constructed in early 1996. The peasants argued that cultivation of fields over a much wider area around those pillars was not possible owing to physical obstruction (Guha 2007).

The district administration had to agree with this demand of the peasants and arranged for payment of Rs. 420/- as monetary compensation to those families affected by the construction of those pillars. This compensation payment continued for 2 years but with the decline of the movement the administration discontinued this compensation.

Both these incidents reveal that under the pressure of an intelligent and organized peasant movement the company authority as well as the Land Acquisition Department had arranged compensation for peasant families having no provision under the existing legal and administrative framework.

The movement reached its peak from the later part of 1995 up to April 1996 during which the farmers even resorted to violent means. In the first week of January 1996 hundreds of farmers in the Kalaikunda area stormed into the tent of the engineer who was conducting soil testing and land survey on behalf of Century Textiles Ltd. A leading national daily reported on 10 January 1996

Land Survey and soil testing work in Mathurakismat Mouza in the Kalaikunda gram panchayat area of Kharagpur rural police station undertaken by Century Textiles – a Birla group of Industries – had to be abandoned following stiff resistance from villagers last week.... The farmers also blocked Sahachak for nine hours yesterday... They also lodged a complaint with the police against the firm (*The Statesman* 1996:6).

On 22 March 1996, the same national daily reported about a mass deputation by a group of

peasants of the Kharagpur region before the district administration (*The Statesman* 22 March 1996). In this deputation, the peasants demanded land for land or a job for the members of the land loser families. They also demanded a compensation of 3 lakh rupees per acre of agricultural land. After this deputation, about 100 farmers came to the district headquarters at Midnapore town on 10 April 1996 and submitted a memorandum to the District Magistrate declaring that they would boycott the ensuing parliamentary election to protest against the acquisition of fertile agricultural land for industrial projects. The farmers stated in their letter that this acquisition would disturb the local economy and destabilize the environmental balance of the region and this event was also reported in *The Statesman* on 2 May 1996. It is important to note in this connection that neither the state or district level Congress leadership, nor any MLA of this party showed any interest in supporting this movement of the peasants in Kharagpur region. The local CPI(M) leadership and the elected panchayat members of this area not only remained silent about this spontaneous movement of the peasants but they also made every attempt to smoothen this agitation by labeling it as a disturbance created by Congress to stall the progress of industrialisation under Left Front Government. Without getting support from any opposition party and facing stiff resistance from the ruling left parties and lacking a coherent organization, this localized peasant movement against land acquisition gradually lost its intensity. The land losers also tried to organize themselves by refusing to accept compensation money for a very brief period under the leadership of a few local leaders but this effort too did not last long and the movement finally lost steam in the Kalaikunda region.

In the district Land Acquisition Department

The first systematic attempt towards creating a database on land acquisition for different categories of projects had been made by the Land Acquisition Department of the erstwhile Medinipur district in April 1993. The results of this maiden effort have not yet been published, but a typed copy in the form of a report is available in the Land Acquisition Department of the Medinipur District Collectorate. The report which was entitled "*Land Acquisition Cases of Midnapore: Present Status, Problems, Future*

Strategy” (1993) was prepared to fulfil two important objectives, viz. (i) to create a database for all the pending cases of the LA Department at Medinipur and (ii) to supervise and monitor the calculation of interests for all the pending cases under Act-II in order to reduce Government liabilities. The findings of this Government report presented an “alarming picture” in terms of pending LA cases as well as the Government’s financial burden with regard to the interest incurred due to the delay in the payment of compensation after the acquisition. Under the subsection entitled “Present Status”, the report mentioned quite emphatically “*that 293 cases have not at all progressed after handing over of possession to the requiring body (RB)*”. The LA Department had sent estimates for 80 percent payment but the RBs did not show any interest over the land after taking possession of the same. No action has yet been taken by the LA office for many years.

The report categorically stated

action is being taken to send estimates to R.B. as the Govt. liability is mounting. In certain cases where estimates have been sent, there is no response from the R.B. and they express their inability to place fund as it is not included in their respective budget for that year. With the increase in the value of land the liability of the Govt. is increasing in a very alarming manner in addition to the deprivation suffered by landlosers due to non-payment (P.1).

It should be noted in this connection that the compensation money has to be deposited by the requiring body i.e. the Department or Company which needs the land. It may be a Government department (e.g. irrigation or electricity departments) or a private company (e.g. a private hotel or industry) which shall be responsible for placing the fund with the LA Department from which payment of compensation would be made. The case of acquisition of land for various Government Departments in Medinipur which were pending at the time of the preparation of the aforementioned report showed a huge financial burden on the Government itself.

The report considered another grave aspect of the problem of land acquisition in Medinipur. Under a section entitled “Implications” (pp.3-4) it noted that in case of the pending cases where the R.B.s did not seem to be interested in their finalisation, most of them had actually constructed a building, road or

irrigation channels which made it impossible for the land to be returned to the PAP’s. It is true that there was a provision for de-requisition of land requisitioned under Act-II, but for all practical purposes this rarely happened. I quote from the report

...for most of the requisitioned lands the land character has been changed to suit the objective for which the acquisition was made. A completed irrigation project or an industrial estate or a hospital project on a requisitioned land cannot be de-requisitioned. (p.3)

The report further observed that even if it is assumed that all the R.B.s have placed their respective funds with the Collector for making compensation payment to the PAP’s (in the report however this phrase was never used) by 31 March, 1994, then also it would not be possible to make a payment of Rs. 26 crores since Medinipur Land Acquisition Department with its existing strength of skilled and specialised staff, working at the normal rate, could make a yearly payment of Rs. 4 crores only. At this rate, the district Collectorate could complete the pending cases within 5-6 years in an ideal situation

The version of the district administration on the present status of land acquisition in Medinipur district not only revealed its “alarming” and “severe” condition, but it also acted as an “eye-opener” (a phrase used in the report itself) for those in the administration. The report, however, was lacking in certain important aspects of land acquisition which are mentioned below:

- 1) It only calculated the burden of the Government in monetary terms for making compensation payments under pending Act-II cases. There is no statistics on the total amount of land acquired so far in Medinipur district for any given period or year. There is also no figure on the amount of land acquired under different categories of projects in the district.
- 2) The report never made any attempt to estimate the number of persons or families who have been affected by land acquisition under the pending Act-II cases in different areas of the district. Except for mentioning the plight of the owners who turned into landlosers in the pending cases, nowhere in

the report was found any estimate or statistics about the number of PAP's in Medinipur.

- 3) It did not also give any list of pending cases of land acquisition for private companies or joint sector business enterprises in Medinipur district. It only dealt with cases of land acquisition for various Government Departments

The Government report on land acquisition prepared by the Medinipur district Collectorate in 1993 meticulously recorded land acquisition in terms of its constraints and shortcomings. Despite its various lacunae, which have been described above, the report revealed how difficult and complicated it was to acquire land for development projects. It also gave an indication about the fact that there was very little hope to arrange for all the compensation payment within five to six years. Under these circumstances, one can only imagine the kind of harassment caused to the project affected families who have received compensation for the acquisition of their cultivable land, nor have they been allowed to cultivate the land requisitioned by the Government, but lying unutilised.

Huge chunks of fertile agricultural land were selected by the Companies and the Cabinet Committee of the West Bengal Government gave approval to this selection. Even a casual travel through this area from Medinipur towards Kharagpur would reveal the presence of a huge tract of undulating lateritic non-agricultural land on the western side of the south-eastern railway track lying on the north bank of the *Kasai river*. The landlosers of this area, during our fieldwork repeatedly pointed out that the Government should have acquired the non-agricultural land for the industries instead of taking their agricultural land. When this point was raised before the officers and employees of the Land Acquisition Department of the District Collectorate they simply stated that it was the decision of the Government which the concerned Department at the district level had to execute. One very experienced and veteran Asstt. Land Acquisition Officer once commented to me: 'Well, the screening committee at the district level may turn down a proposal coming from the Writers' Building in Kolkata. But I have seen through my experience that whenever Calcutta wants acquisition Medinipur simply obeys the order. There is hardly any exception' (Free

translation by me from Bengali). This comment epitomised the power of the *eminent domain* of the state in case of land acquisition for development projects in a pro-peasant state like West Bengal.

The story of the sharecroppers

In the context of land acquisition, the recording of the rights of the bargadars is very much important since unrecorded bargadars are not entitled to get compensation from Land Acquisition Department. In our study area, an interesting case of a group of unrecorded bargadars has been found whose claim for getting compensation against acquisition of land for CTIL was summarily rejected by the Department in the middle of 1996. The data have been collected from the Land Acquisition Departmental files referred in the earlier section.

A petition bearing memo no. 737/Ban-O-Bhumi dated 23rd May 1996 was made by the then Savapati of the Kharagpur I Panchayat Samiti to the Special Land Acquisition Officer of the district. In the letter the Savapati requested the Special LAO to issue compensation notice to 20 unrecorded bargadars and 65 pattaholders who have been affected by land acquisition for CTIL. The Savapati also alleged the Block Land and Land Reforms Office, which failed to record the names of the bargadars. The petition enclosed the individual applications of the affected bargadars along with the details forwarded by one Ms. MallickaMudi, an elected member of the Kharagpur I Panchayat Samiti. All the individual applicants (most of whom were illiterate persons and gave their thumb impressions) stated in their petitions that since they are poor cultivators they could not register their names as recorded bargadars so they are not supposed to get compensation for the acquisition of the land in which they cultivate as sharecroppers. The hapless applicants, therefore, requested their elected Panchayat Samiti Savapati to enter their names as recorded bargadars after proper enquiry and decide for getting land acquisition compensation. Within seven days of the submission of the said petition, The Special LAO wrote a letter (memo no. 730/LA dated 3.6.96) to the Savapati of the Panchayat Samiti. In that letter the LAO categorically stated that compensation to unrecorded bargadars could not be awarded under the LA Act and the Land

Acquisition Office has already obtained a report from the concerned Block Land and Land Reforms Office containing an exhaustive list of bargadars. The LAO further stated that under the circumstances, no further claim of compensation in respect of bargadars could be legally entertained. So, the matter ended at this stage. Interestingly, when the author of this paper shown this letter of the Savapati to the LAO and a group of officials in the LA Department and raised the issue of the non-payment of compensation to unrecorded bargadars one officer instantly commented: "I agree that the BLRO failed to record the names of those bargadars as alleged by the Savapati. But could the elected Panchayat evade its own responsibility in motivating the bargadars to record their names? What the Panchayat have been doing in that area?" The spontaneous reaction of one Land Acquisition Officer epitomized the recent ground realities of the rural areas of West Bengal regarding the declining pace in recording the names of bargadars, which has been perceptively observed in Mukarji & Bandopadhyay as well as West Bengal Human Development Report. Our case study shows the endangerment of the unrecorded bargadars in the face of a State sponsored eviction of bargadars under the Leftist Government in West Bengal

West Bengal Assembly Proceedings: The Cyclic Ritual of Quarrel

Since independence, besides the colonial Land Acquisition Act of 1894, there existed another State Act entitled West Bengal Land (Requisition and Acquisition) Act, 1948. The latter Act is no more applicable in West Bengal since 31 March 1993 by a decision of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly. In fact, when this particular piece of legislation was first enacted in the State Assembly it was stipulated that the Act has to be renewed in the Assembly by a majority decision every five years since this is a very powerful and coercive law. The Government opinion was that the State of West Bengal, which had to receive millions of refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan just after Independence, needed huge amount of land for various developmental purposes. For this reason, the Government needed an Act, which was more powerful than the colonial Act in acquiring land from the private owners. By West Bengal Land

(Requisition and Acquisition) Act the Government could first requisition a particular piece of land for which the payment of compensation may not be made before acquisition while in the earlier LA Act of 1894 the Government could not take possession of any land without payment of compensation.

From the records kept in the Assembly Library it has been found that the Act was placed 17 times in the house and got the assent of the President well within a period of 2 months. Another important fact in this regard is that voting on the amendment of the Act had taken place only twice—once when the Congress party was in power (on 20 February, 1973) and at another time when the left parties were in the Government (on 28 March 1967). On both the occasions, the parties which were in power won by a majority vote (Assembly Proceedings Vol. 54; 1973 and Vol. XLIV; 1967).

The Year 1967

The Minister in charge of the Land and Land Revenue Department, Mr. Harekrishna Konar of the CPI(M) placed the W.B. (Req. and Acq.) Amendment Bill for extending its tenure in the 44th session of the Assembly on 28 March 1967. During the debate, Mr. Siddhartha Sankar Roy of the Congress Party who became Chief Minister of West Bengal later, strongly opposed the bill on legal grounds by saying that in many cases regarding land acquisition in West Bengal the High Court had passed judgements against this Act. He used a Bengali word in a sentence in English to give an added emphasis. To quote Mr. Roy: "This Act is an oppressive and *jabardast* (Bengali word meaning 'overbearing') piece of legislation. He also pointed out the arbitrary nature of the phrase "public purpose" in the Land Acquisition Act. After the speech of Mr. Roy noise and shouting among the members supporting and opposing the bill started and ultimately voting had to be organised by the Speaker. The bill was passed by a majority vote with 131 members voting in favour of the amendment and 72 members against it (Assembly Proceedings Vol. XLIV, 1967).

The Year 1970

The Minister Mr. Harekrishna Konar of the CPI(M) introduced the bill for the extension of Act II

and frankly admitted that he had nothing to say on it. He only stated that this Act is necessary for quicker work. No debate took place and the bill was passed in the 50th session of the State Assembly on 29 January 1970 when the United Front Government dominated by the left political parties was still in power for the second time in West Bengal (Assembly Proceedings Vol. 50; 1970).

An exception to the rule

A lengthy question-answer session was found to take place in the Assembly on 21 August 1963 regarding the acquisition of cultivable land for the construction of Haldia port in the erstwhile Medinipur district (admitted question No. 1050). The questions and their replies revealed that about 955 acres of fertile agricultural land had been acquired by Land Acquisition Act, 1894, but it remained unutilised at the time when questions were raised in the Assembly. In course of the questioning by a number of members belonging to the ruling and opposition parties (e.g. Sushil Kumar Dhara of the Congress party and Birendra Narayan Roy (Independent supported by CPI), it was revealed that some of the farmers had started to cultivate paddy on their acquired lands and the elected members were trying to elicit some statement from the Minister in favour of these farmers. The Minister, however, tried to evade from making any kind of commitment on this particular issue and passed on the responsibility to the port authority for whom the said land was acquired. He, however, admitted that the Government would not have any objection if the farmers could make an unofficial arrangement with the port authority for the cultivation of acquired land where no construction work had yet been started. The Minister finally assured the House by saying that priority would be given to provide jobs to the persons whose lands had been acquired for the port (Assembly Proceedings Vol. XXXVI; '63).

The old man of Kantapal and his political bullocks: autoethnography again!

I started with a description of how the members of Parliament in India looked at the problem of land expropriation and found how in the opinion of policy makers land grab was viewed as inevitable under the market forces. In the rest of my description I narrated

how as an anthropologist I became involved in the ethnography of land grab and the protests and bargains of the peasants around it at Medinipur through my fieldwork in the village and also by delving into the archives of the government. I observed and, unlike the members of the Parliament, that peasants did not give away their lands only under the market forces. They put up viable resistances, made bargains with the state and finally surrendered to the state power. I will end my story with an anecdote from my field, which made a nice contrast with what the MPs at New Delhi implicitly communicated to me.

The event occurred near Kantapal village from where the huge chunk of land acquired for Century Textiles could be seen. The author was engaged in a discussion with the locals about the condition of the small dykes ('*ail*' in the local parlance) raised by the farmers to demarcate the plots of land possessed by different owners within the acquired area. Since no cultivation could be taken up for three successive seasons in the whole area it had turned into a grazing field and the dykes had started to break down. Two consequences of this situation followed. Firstly, farmers who still had unacquired land in the vicinity of the acquired area were facing difficulties in protecting their agricultural plots from the grazing cattle. Earlier there were other farmers who also shared the responsibility of driving out the cattle from the fields during agricultural season. Driving out the intruding cattle in paddy fields is always a collective affair in rural areas. After acquisition, the numbers of farmers have decreased in this area. Moreover, cows and buffaloes of the milkmen of the urban areas of Kharagpur town have also ventured to exploit this huge chunk of land.

Secondly, after the breakdown of dykes the poorer people of the area who used to collect a good quantity of small fishes of various types from those agricultural plots as a common property resource, are not getting any fish in those plots. In the discussion three to four persons including one middle-aged woman and old man were present. All of them were denouncing the Government for the takeover of the fertile agricultural land for Century Company which had not yet been established. When the question arose that if people of this area had started to dislike the ruling party and the Government, then why did

they cast their votes at the panchayat and assembly elections to the same party every year? The reply came from the old man which is reproduced here verbatim:

Look babu, we poor people always have to ride on some animal almost blindfolded. After the ride for sometime we start to realize whether it is a tiger or a bullock. But very often we have to twist its tail in order to keep it in proper direction. (*Translated by the author from Bengali*).

All of us including the old man burst into laughter but soon we realized that the joke symbolized the gap between aspiration of the helpless local peasants in West Bengal and the *distant* policy makers at New Delhi.

CONCLUSION

The lesson which I have learnt from the two case studies was plain and simple. The lesson was, Professor Gayen dreamt of minimizing the distance between Raghunath Singh, Nagen Ari and the old man of Kantapal on the one hand and the Vice-chancellors, teachers, students and the ministers on the other. Should we move towards Gayen's dream or in the opposite direction? The choice is ours!

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I must express my indebtedness to the villagers of Muradanga and Saltola from whom I first got the inspiration to look at Vidyasagar University campus from a different perspective. I am greatly indebted to the late peasant leader Trilochan Rana who again inspired to study the peasant movement against land grab by the government in the vicinity of my university campus. I must express my deepest words acknowledgement to Professor Ranjan Chakrabarti, the Vice-Chancellor of Vidyasagar University for making it possible to give due honour to Professor Anil Kumar Gayen as the founder of Vidyasagar University. I am indebted to my students and colleagues, particularly, Professor Kaushik Bose, Professor Madhumangal Pal and Professor Amiya Kumar Panda, Professor Sibaji Pratim Basu, Dr. Amal Kumar Bhunia and Dr J.K.Nandi for organizing the A.K.Gayen Birth Centenary Memorial event in the most befitting manner. I am greatly indebted to Professor Jaydip Sen, editor of *South*

Asian Anthropologist and the reviewers for their comments on the paper. This article could not have been written without the dedicated and committed efforts of the aforementioned persons. I owe a lot to all of them and many others who could not be mentioned name by name just for the want of space. Last but not the least, I owe my debts to my wife Priti for untiringly listening and questioning me about my stories of Vidyasagar University campus and the land grabs of Gokulpur and other adjoining villages.

Notes

- 1 Anil Kumar Gayen was a renowned scholar in the fields of Mathematics and Statistics. He was awarded Ph.D degree in 1950 in Statistics from the University of Cambridge. Professor Gayen obtained his Ph.D under the supervision of Prof. Henry Ellis Daniels, F.R.S., then President of the Royal Statistical Society, U.K. and the co-formulator of the famous Parry-Daniels Map. Gayen was Professor of Statistics and held the Chair of the Head of Mathematics Department at the Indian Institute of Technology at Kharagpur during 1954-1978 (<http://www.vidyasagar.ac.in/About/AKGayen.aspx>). He dedicated his life towards the foundation of Vidyasagar University. I first found the reference of Anil Kumar Gayen as the founder of my university in an article of Professor Bhupesh Chandra Mukherjee, the first Vice-Chancellor of Vidyasagar University (1981-1986) published in the UGC Journal of Higher Education (Mukherjee 1987-88:125-126).
- 2 On 01.02.2012, I sent a detailed proposal to the vice-chancellor of Vidyasagar University about how to honour Professor Anil Kumar Gayen as the founder of the university. My proposal was accepted by the Executive Council of Vidyasagar University, although I had to submit documentary evidence before the Anil Gayen Memorial Committee that Gayen was the founder! The article of Professor B.C.Mukherjee referenced in the previous footnote helped me a lot in this task.
- 3 *The Statesman*, a leading English daily reported on the celebration of the birth centenary of Professor Anil Kumar Gayen on 3rd February 2019. Please visit: https://www.academia.edu/38426101/News_items_Statesman_A_K_Gayen_Birth_Centenary_Lecture_PDF_pdf
- 4 Autoethnography is a form of qualitative research in which an author uses self-reflection and writing to explore anecdotal and personal experience and connect this autobiographical story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings. Autoethnography is a self-reflective form of writing used across various disciplines such as communication studies, anthropology, social work, sociology, history and psychology (<https://>

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autoethnogy accessed on 15/08/2020

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