

Pollution-induced Industrialization in Durgapur: Underlying Political Dimensions

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Abstract: *The threat to life and livelihood on earth by environmental pollution, on one hand, represents self-destruction of human beings, on the other hand, reveals their unlimited greed and unquenchable self-interests. The paper, with this admonition, focuses on the issue of environmental pollution in the name of industrial development in the industrial town of Durgapur in Paschim Bardhaman district of West Bengal. It argues that this kind of pollution receives indulgence as a part and parcel of industrialization on the ground of generation of livelihood of people in this industrial region. In this sense, the industrialization process in Durgapur can be called pollution-induced industrialization. Given this context, this paper opts to explore the functioning of certain forces who indulge and are involved in environmental pollution. In brief, it aims to understand the politics that underlines industry-induced pollution in the study area. The chief argument is that certain decisive forces in Durgapur, namely, the entrepreneurs of the micro and small scale industries, the local level administration and the local level organizations of the political parties function in an organized tactful manner in creating and encouraging environmental pollution. It concludes that pollution of the environment is subject to political calculations and understanding among these forces as a consequence of which the question of environment protection remains subordinate to the concern for livelihood generation. The paper is based on an ethnographic study that was conducted in Durgapur from 2010 to early 2013 on rapid development of micro and small scale industries.*

Keywords: *Environmental Pollution, Entrepreneurs, Local Level Administration, Political Parties, Industrialization.*

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Introduction

Human beings have had utilized nature for own existence as well as for improving their living conditions on the earth. The modern civilization that is characterized by triumph of science and technology thrives on immense exploitation of natural resources. As such, the balance in the ecosystem and the resources and beauty of nature are in jeopardy. The alarming danger has been sparked off in present times, in the name of socio-economic development, by the processes of liberalization, privatization and globalization (LPG) that nourish unlimited human greed and consumerism without caring its adverse impact on environment and other living beings. Therefore, in the present world, the destruction of environment in the name of development reveals unlimited human greed and self-interests, leading ultimately to their self-destruction. In this backdrop, this paper is an attempt to critically look at what is being promoted as 'development' by means of industrialization at the cost of environment.

The first section throws light on chief objective and basic argument of the paper. The second section is on research methodology by which the study was conducted in Durgapur. The third section introduces the study area. The fourth section presents an overview of environmental pollution over there. The fifth section reveals the political dimensions underlying the process of industrialization in its relation to environment, followed by the conclusion.

Chief objective and argument of the paper

In the quest for critical exploration of industrial development at the cost of environment, broadly speaking, the chief objective of the paper is to delve into the politics underlying environmental pollution created by the modern industries. Therefore, this study focuses on the issue of environmental pollution in the name of industrial development in the industrial town of Durgapur in Paschim Bardhaman district of West Bengal. It shows that pollution is an unavoidable condition without which industrialization is unthinkable. In this sense, current trend of industrialization in this industrial belt can be considered as pollution-induced industrialization. Precisely, the study aims to investigate the forces rather the modus operandi of certain forces who indulge and are involved in creating and encouraging industry-induced pollution in the study area. These forces include the entrepreneurs of the micro and small scale industries, the local level administration and the local level organizations of the political parties. The chief argument of the paper is that pollution of the environment receives indulgence and encouragement as a part and parcel of industrialization in Durgapur on the ground of generation of livelihood of local unemployed section and the retrenched workers. The decisive forces, as mentioned above, function in an organized tactful manner in creating and encouraging environmental pollution in the name of economic development of the region. In brief, the paper addresses the issue of environmental pollution from political perspective by revealing the political dimensions underlining the question of environment and its pollution within the course of rapid industrial growth and development in Durgapur.

Research Methodology

The study was conducted by the method of ethnography from 2010 to early 2013 on industrialization in Durgapur. Ethnography is a qualitative method of research basically in anthropology that aims to find out the understanding, views, beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviour of the people by directly interacting with them. So, the chief tools of ethnographic research include informal and friendly discussions with the subjects, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, focus group discussions, and last but not the least, intensive observation. The study is expected to be conducted for a considerable period of time, not less than six months. Driven by the urge to find out how industrialization in the study area is leaving its impact on working class and environment, this empirical research was undertaken with focus on political dimensions of industrialization to understand the functioning of the decisive forces that are responsible for environmental pollution.

Introducing the study area

Durgapur is situated in Paschim Bardhaman district of West Bengal. It is reputed as a steel zone of the country because of development of heavy industries in this region, basically iron and steel, during the period of planned economy in India in the 1950s. But it came under the grip of de-industrialization in the late 1960s that continued till the 1980s primarily due to militant trade unionism. However, the likelihood to overcome this dismal phase appeared when the then Left Front government of West Bengal began rejuvenation of this industrial belt with new gusto in the new market-led economic phase of the country in the 1990s. The new industrial policy of West Bengal welcomed private capital for investment in the State. Durgapur with all its ready infrastructural resources, a vast reserve of cheap labour force (both skilled and unskilled) and an easy access to profitable markets began to be seen as one of the preferred zones to the private investors for their industrial ventures. In the period of economic liberalization, Durgapur is characterized by the presence of a large number of private capital-led micro and small scale industries, basically relating to iron and steel production. While these industries thrive on informal labour process, the large scale units of Durgapur too have introduced informality within their boundaries by outsourcing their production and labour processes to the small firms and labour contractors respectively. So, it is quite evident that Durgapur has become a hub of industrial informality.

Environmental pollution - An overview

This ethnographic study shows that the prevailing form of industrialization in Durgapur excludes from its ambit serious environmental concern. In other words, while mushrooming of private capital-led industries has been helping Durgapur to revive its lost industrial glory as well as creating employment opportunities for the local people, simultaneously, pollution

has been taken for granted as an indispensable outcome of industrialization. In a sense, this kind of industrialization can be called pollution-based or pollution-induced industrialization. One would experience different shades of environmental pollution after reaching the region. Both in urban and rural parts of Durgapur, the industries are concentrated in several areas. While passing by these areas, thick smoke, flying dust and pungent odour of sulphuric acid are strongly evident. During interviews and discussions with the local residents in the morning, I witnessed thick layer of coal dust, covering the living premises of those who reside in the surrounding areas of the iron and steel and chemical industries. Repeated requests, complaints, grievances of the suffering people to the industry owners yielded no result. Consequently, not just environment but health of the local people are at high risk. During interviews, the local doctors expressed grave concern for increasing respiratory diseases among their patients. Simultaneously, skin diseases are very common. Besides, the workers of the industries who were interviewed, complained of multiple health hazards in the workplace in absence of health safeguards like eye gears, hand gloves and masks. Overall, there is no denying of the fact that rapid industrialization in Durgapur is inseparable from pollution of environment and degradation of human health.

Industrialization and pollution- the political dimensions

Given the environmental conditions of Durgapur, indulgence in pollution by the entrepreneurs of the industries, the local level administration and the local level organizations of the political parties constitutes the kernel of this study. These decisive actors function in an organized tactful manner in creating and encouraging industrial pollution in the garb of employment generation. This network starts functioning since the beginning of establishing industries to full-fledged operation of the production processes. To begin with, the Directorate of Micro and Small Scale Enterprises, Government of West Bengal provides an exhaustive formal procedure to be followed by the entrepreneurs to set up any industry within the State. Deviation from this formal process clearly represents eco-destructive industrial system. During the time of establishing industries in Durgapur, as per formal rules, every entrepreneur will have to acquire locational clearance and trade licence from Durgapur Municipal Corporation in case of urban areas and Gram Panchayat in case of rural areas. This is followed by acquisition of clearance from Pollution Control Board (PCB) of the region. Simultaneously, the entrepreneurs must register their units at the Offices of the Deputy Labour Commissioner (DLC) and the Inspector of Factories, Durgapur.

However, outside this terrain of formalities, a distinct reality exists. The collusion between the local level administration, the entrepreneurs and the local level organizations of the parties often takes place for setting up industries. Precisely, bypassing the formal regulations, in practice, many investors set up industries if they manage to get support and

cooperation of the local party leaders. Thus, these noncompliant investors violate the industrial and environmental laws and start operating without official permission from the concerned authorities like the PCB, DLC and the Inspector of Factories. The existence of several informal industries outside the purview of state regulation is confirmed by all the quarters in Durgapur, from local level administration to the common people. The deal between the entrepreneurs and the party leaders can see the daylight because the local level administration remains silent vis-à-vis illegal establishments in a climate of weak regulations. For instance, local people expressed that the entrepreneurs manipulate the grass root level officials by adopting various unfair means, ranging from monetary/non-monetary gains to pressure from the top level of the administration or ruling party in order to obtain clearance for industries like the one from PCB. The role of the administration to earn extra-legal income by favouring the industry owners can be condemned by following Jan Breman that the market mechanism is not limited only to the sphere known as free enterprise, but extends to the state apparatus¹. The argument can be substantiated by referring to rapid growth of sponge-iron industries in Angadpur and Kamalpur areas of Durgapur. These industries are marked as polluting industries by the PCB although several such industries exist in the guise of pollution-free iron and steel industries by manipulating the local administration. An elderly experienced entrepreneur who established his industry in 1971 over here, critically expressed that *“anno rajyo jemon U.P theke jeguloke khediye diyechhe karon pollution chorrachhilo okhane sponge-iron industry kore, segulo sab West Bengal-e eshe juteche”* (those who were driven away from the other States like Uttar Pradesh because they were polluting by establishing sponge-iron industries over there, all of them have come over to West Bengal). So, an embedded relationship is evident among the three decisive forces in Durgapur with respect to industrialization at the cost of environment.

Once the industries are established, the production and labour processes therein are regulated by an organized process of negotiation between the entrepreneurs and the local level party organizations through their trade unions. Settlement of wage rates of the workers, their social security benefits and bonus- all are outcome of negotiations between the entrepreneurs and the trade unions. Interestingly, protection of environment does not feature as an important issue in this negotiation process. The economic issues like wage rates, bonus overpower the non-economic concerns like clean non-hazardous environment. As a corollary, safeguard of health of the workers at the workplace does not merit primacy to the union leaders, not to speak of the health issue of the residents living around the industries. This bilateral extra-legal arrangement receives tacit approval of the local level administration since the administrative officials do not interfere into it on the ground of “stable employment generation” in the region. Further, the ethnographic study finds that the existing environmental laws are blatantly violated by the industries by means of non-operation of emission control devices. The units often switch off electrostatic precipitators (ESPs) at night resulting in heavy pollution. While some units have

installed pollution control system but do not operate it for cost-effective production, some others do not install it at all. It implies administrative failure in ensuring compliance with environmental standards. Similarly, state ineffectiveness is evident in enforcing laws relating to land acquisition for industries and therefore, shows its inability in protecting the health of the local residents from pollution. For example, next to sponge-iron industries in Angadpur and Kamalpur lie the residential settlements. But, without caring guidelines on distance between industries and residential areas, these units have come up and pollute the surroundings. No doubt, it reveals that although laws are being made at the higher tier of the state, the implementing organ of the state at the lower tier violates them. Again, the legal obligations of the entrepreneurs relating to the health safeguards of the workers at the workplace are mostly contravened. Empirical findings on the basis of field visits to several industries reveal that the occupational health protection of the workers from hazardous work and polluting worksite is hardly a reality. In fact, health safeguards of the workers is contingent to an elusive criterion of 'heavy' or 'light' work that is determined by the entrepreneurs in tune with their profit margin. This revelation brings the role of the Inspector of Factories under serious criticisms who is responsible to ensure health of the workers and healthy working conditions.

Lack of commitment on part of the local level administration to check environmental pollution refers to inadequate monitoring of the industries. The PCB confesses that lack of manpower is an obstacle to enforcement of laws. However, the local leaders and local people grumbled that the PCB officials, during their official inspections of the industries uncritically issue clean chit to the errant units by overlooking violation of environmental and labour laws. One entrepreneur confessed that the role of the PCB resembles "*dhori mach na chui pani*" (non-committal attitude towards their responsibilities). Thus, the entrepreneurs are tacitly encouraged to infringe laws without caring harmful consequences of production process for nature. In return, entrepreneurs' appreciation is expressed in terms of assured allegiance that ranges from electoral loyalty during election, funding the electoral process for the incumbents to the personal offerings of any kind to the officials. Hence, entrepreneur- administration relationship thrives on a quid pro quo basis that Judith Tendler defines as a "devil's deal"²². This concept of "devil's deal" was introduced by Tendler in the context of her study on rapid development of informal sector in Brazil that flourishes due to collusion between the small firm owners and the state. However, in practice, when any party or trade union lodges complaint against any unit, the local level authorities of Durgapur pay heed to the case. But the punitive step remains confined either to a meagre amount of penalty or simple warning to the errant entrepreneur. The local level leaders complained that the entrepreneurs directly contact the higher level party authorities and the state administration to 'take care' of any local level political hindrance. As such, the political troublemaker at the grassroots level is either warned by the higher-level authorities or strict punishment or penalty is meted out to remove the

obstacles. This fact exposes political party as a 'contradictory resource' because its relationship with the entrepreneurs oscillates between co-operation and conflict, depending on its political interests. Nevertheless, in Durgapur, the three decisive forces share a basic understanding and relationship that acts as a strong base of industrialization.

Conclusion

It is crystal clear from the study that the issue of environment protection remains subordinate to the interest of livelihood creation for the people in Durgapur. In actuality, in the name of employment generation, pollution creating industrialization serves the economic and political interests of the decisive forces for which they form an organized network on the basis of their calculations. No doubt, irresponsible selfish attitude of human beings destroys environment and ultimately, threatens human existence. According to Robert Goodin, as no one owns the natural resources by individual right, there is indiscriminate abuse of environment by the stake holders of development. Exploitation, pollution and destruction of nature are not only legally wrong but morally a misdeed.³ Goodin views this misdeed as a problem of free-riding on part of human beings in the sense, we shrug off our responsibilities towards nature and exploit it for own purposes. It is nature that bears the burden of eco-destructive development projects. Therefore, it can be concluded that at present, it is our first and foremost duty to preserve and protect environment for the sake of own survival, otherwise, extinction of human race is not far away.

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