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Status of Environment in West Bengal

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Special Feature:

Land Acquisition Resettlement and Rehabilitation Bill

Abhijit Guha¹

What happened to the land acquisition law? (pp. 262-273)

Introduction

In the First Citizen's Report on the *Status of Environment in West Bengal* published by ENDEV in 2008, I observed

Any generalised macro-level hypothesis regarding economic development should take into consideration the micro-level realities of the field of its application. That land reform prepares the ground for industrialisation may be true in some specific situations but industrialisation without a down to earth policy of rehabilitation through the generation of employment and skill development could be a self-defeating endeavour.(Guha, 2008a).

In the Second Citizen's Report on the *Status of Environment in West Bengal* published in 2013, I described in detail how the much awaited new land acquisition law(at that time it was in the form of a bill) later enacted as *The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act 2013*(hereafter LARR, 2013) despite its various merits downplayed the Constitutional Local Self Governments(LSG) and I also argued that this devaluation of LSGs might have finally affected the much lauded social impact assessment clause of the LARR, 2013. I wrote

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I will now come to the definition of the “Appropriate Government” as enunciated in the Land Acquisition Act 1894 and Land Acquisition and Rehabilitation and Resettlement Bill of 2011. Under subsection 3(e) of the LAA 1894 and subsection 2(e) (i)-(iv) of LARR 2011, the expression “Appropriate Government” means only the Central and State Governments. Both ignored and bypassed the 73rd Amendment Act of the Constitution which empowered the panchayats to function as institutions of self-government. The issue of “Appropriate Government” is vital to any discussion on social impact assessment as enunciated in the LARR 2011 Bill. In Part II of the Bill entitled “Determination of Social Impact Assessment” under subsection 3(1) we read: ‘Whenever the Appropriate Government intends to acquire land equal to or more than one hundred acres for a public purpose, a Social Impact Assessment study shall be carried out in the affected area in consultation with the Gram Sabha at habitation level or equivalent in urban areas, in such manner and within such time as may be prescribed (LARR 2011: 9). This paragraph clearly reveals the superior status of the Appropriate Government” over the local self-government, i.e. Gram Sabha.(Guha, 2013b).

While writing for the Second Citizen’s Report, I however, could not imagine that more dangers were lurking beneath the surface around the implementation of the new law. Within eight months after coming to power, the National Democratic Alliance(NDA) Government on 31 December 2014, came out with a new Ordinance that amended the Act of 2013, which was passed in the Parliament by the United Progressive Alliance Government in its second term. The Press release by the Press Information Bureau of the Government of India, on 29 December 2014, simply stated that ‘many difficulties are being faced in its [the Act’s] implementation’ and it further declared that ‘in order to remove them, certain amendments have been made in the Act to further strengthen the provisions to protect the interests of the “affected families.”’ Accordingly, a list of amendments was inserted in LARR, 2013 and they also were duly signed by the President of India. The two main planks of the amendment are stated below.

In the first place, the government’s argument in favour of the Ordinance was that it wanted to apply the provisions of compensation and rehabilitation and resettlement to the laws that had been exempted under the Fourth Schedule.

In the second place the the Government wished to create a new category of projects which would be exempt from seeking the consent of the affected families. Furthermore, these projects would also not be required to be tested on parameters laid down in the Social Impact Assessment Process. This new set of categories (inserted by a new Section 10A) included infrastructure projects (including Public-Private-Partnership projects) along with projects involving rural electrification and housing for the poor. This move by the NDA Government has been viewed as

ominous to the future of land acquisition and rehabilitation in scholarly literature as well as in the print media.(Ramesh and Khan,.2015; Iyer, 2015).

So, where do we stand now? How at present lands are being acquired ? In how many cases the Social Impact Assessment and the Consent clauses are being exempted or applied? To the best of my knowledge, there is no comprehensive empirical database created either by the government or any non-governmental organisation on these crucial issues related to land, which is one of the vital resources of our country.

Under this national background, *firstly*, I will narrate the recent history of land acquisition in West Bengal after a decade of the famous Singur episode.

My *second aim* would be to understand the public image of land acquisition before and after the Singur episode which may be regarded as one of the landmarks in the history of land acquisition not only in West Bengal but also in India.

My *third aim* of this article is to discuss the arguments which are advanced by various stakeholders(academics included) to justify governmental land acquisition and their fallacious nature.

My *fourth aim* is to make an attempt to derive some lessons from the recent events around land takeover in the state of West Bengal.

A decade after Singur

Both media and the civil society became silent after the historic Supreme Court judgment of 31 August 2016, which ordered the West Bengal government to return the 400 acres of fertile disputed land acquired by the then Left Front Government to the farmers in Singur for the Tata Motors Company. Are the farmers really cultivating on the land which was virtually transformed into non-agricultural wasteland after the takeover? What happened to those farmers who were subsisting on the absentee landowners' land within the 400 acres? What about the recorded and unrecorded sharecroppers who were cultivating 2-3 crops in a season in the land area supposed to be returned by the order of the apex court? No one seems to be interested in the ground realities of Singur now after a decade of the turbulent 2006-07 in West Bengal. This kind of unconcern for the peasantry is not new among the Kolkata based academicians and intellectuals who represented West Bengal to India and the world since the colonial period.

There are of course some exceptions which proves the general rule. In 2016, a four-member team of *Women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression, West Bengal (WSS, WB)*

comprising Nisha Biswas, Swapna Bandopadhyay, Sharmishtha Choudhury and Swapna Gayen - visited Singur and noted that Singur was a perfect example of purchasing dissent and the report of the team was published in *Frontier* and posted in the website Sanhati.com in 2016. I quote from the concluding part of the report.

Perhaps the saddest feature of Singur today is the retrogression of women. Shyamali, Tapasi, Krishna were not only valiant warriors but were also mass leaders a mere 9-10 years ago. Today they have humbly, silently and unresistingly gone back to home and hearth, content with the government's dole and their role in housekeeping. Their public lives are now a distant memory and private chores fully make up their present. This casual dismissal of women from the political space and public domain is even more ironic under the chief-ministership of a notoriously firebrand woman.

Another exception is a report by an International Fact Finding Mission led by Biplab Halim in 2017. I again quote from the Report

However, the land, which was being returned to the farmers, became uncultivable and the State Government is leaving no stone unturned to convert it into fertile agricultural land as before..... While the land is not fully fertile while the quality compared to a decade ago has degraded due to the use of cement and other products used in building factory infrastructure, the return of agriculture is still a successful story of an anti-land acquisition movement. Farmers in Singur planted paddy saplings on land taken away from them ten years ago. Mr. Becharam Manna, a farmer who afterwards became the State Minister of Agriculture in first term of the new government in the state, is among those who sowed the paddy saplings in Singur. Mr. Manna said the protest that began in the year 2006 was finally successful after a decade long struggle and a legal battle which resulted with the Supreme Court order to return lands to the farmers of Singur.

The aforementioned Report however does not contain any data on the missing farmers of Singur who were subsisting on the absentee landowners' land within the 400 acres and it also did not describe the condition of the sharecroppers of the area.

Let me now go back to the recent history of land acquisition during the pre-Singur period in West Bengal.

During 1994-2005, I conducted my doctoral research based on anthropological fieldwork supplemented by a search in the archives of land acquisition department in the erstwhile Medinipur district and West Bengal Assembly Proceedings of West Bengal. At that time no one, even those opposed to the then communist led leftist government in West Bengal was interested to discuss on the maladies of the colonial land acquisition law, rehabilitation and related issues.

My first popular article titled 'Land of our Fathers' on the maladies of land acquisition was published in *The Statesman* in April 1998, and it was the lone and the first article which revealed the ground realities around land acquisition in a left-ruled state, which was not only predominated by landless agricultural workers, small land owning peasants and sharecroppers but also expressed its commitment to land reforms and *panchayati raj* system.

In my field area under Kharagpur I block in the then Midnapore district large scale acquisition of farmland for the Tatas took place in the early 90s with very poor rates of compensation.(Rs.20,000/- per acre). The farmers also resisted land acquisition and finally large amount of land acquired for a Birla Group of private industry remained unutilized for several years. But virtually nobody (Mamata Banerjee, Mahasweeta Debi and Medha Patkar included) raised voice against this acquisition. I compared this incident at a much later period of my research with the happenings of Singur in 2006 in an article entitled 'Singur on the Kharagpur track' published in this newspaper in December 2006. In all respects, there were sufficient reasons for Kharagpur to gain national and international recognition like Singur. But it did not happen. The reasons behind the silence of Kolkata-based intellectuals and the then opposition parties over the land acquisition for the Tatas and Birlas by the Left Front Government at Kharagpur in the early 1990s were more than one.

First, anti-Left Front political parties and human rights groups were not much interested in the land acquisition issue during that period when the Left Front-driven industrialisation was at its nascent stage, with promised huge industrial investments by private companies in the state.

Second, though the farmlands acquired in Kharagpur provided food security to vegetable growers of one of my study villages named Gokulpur those were mono-crop in nature. I found among those who are opposed to the acquisition of multi-crop farmlands a notion which ran like this: 'Well, mono-crop land may be acquired since we need to have industrialisation in the state, but a multi-crop land should never be allowed to be acquired for non-agricultural use.'

There was hardly anyone in the anti-Left Front lobby who demanded the upgradation of mono-crop land into multi-crop ones, which should have been the government policy. I often heard from the advocates of this anti-acquisition lobby: 'Why isn't the government building industries in Purulia, Bankura and Midnapore (West)?' So as the opinion ran if industries came up in these backward districts, the poor would have benefited.

Third, despite the spontaneous but weak protests and resistance by farmers of Kharagpur during the mid-1990s, no opposition party lent any solid support (as they have done in Singur) to them. The media did report the adverse effects of farmland acquisition and the protests of farmers but these did not attract the attention of Kolkata-based intellectuals and human rights groups. They were at that time busy with other issues.

Public image of land acquisition before and after the Singur episode

Pre-Singur phase

Since I began my research on development caused forced displacement with a special emphasis to land acquisition on a particular locale, I also tried to collect public opinion outside my field area. I talked with people of other places who were not affected by land acquisition. For example, I talked, listened and debated with my colleagues, friends, relatives and strangers on the streets and public transport systems on the justification of land acquisition. The people with whom I talked were mostly middle class educated women and men of Bengal. I found most of them had very little idea about the adverse consequences of land acquisition, let alone the intricacies and delay towards the payment of compensation to the landlosers. Moreover, whenever land acquisition for industrialisation took place most of the urban and educated women and men were found to hold the view that industrialisation, after all was the sign of progress that would create employment for the staggering number of unemployed youth of Bengal. For many people, Bengal's declining economic growth was due to the lack of industrialisation. I found very few people who also praised the success of Bengal in agricultural production. Even when somebody showed hopes for agriculture they talked in terms of high yielding varieties of seeds and chemical fertilizers. The Bengali mind was preoccupied with an image of high technology and growth oriented development whether it was industrial or agricultural. And, probably for that reason Bengalis are still found to admire the state of Gujrat when it comes to industrialisation and they praise Punjab when it is about agricultural growth. I hardly found a Bengali educated person who showed any interest for the success of cooperative farming in Gujrat or small-scale industries of Punjab. So, for the typical ordinary educated urban middle-class citizens, West

Bengal needed large industries and since industries could not be established without acquiring land, the impact of industrialisation in terms of displacement was not viewed as major problem.

Post-Singur phase

The scenario however changed after the massive resistance of the farmers against land acquisition in Singur and Nandigram during 2006-8. During this short period a large number of articles, interviews, opinions, debates and news items were published (and it continued) in the newspapers and journals on the development caused forced displacement in West Bengal. Economists (including the Noble Laureate Amartya Sen), journalists, social activists (like Medha Patkar) and politicians began to write and talk vociferously on the justification of land take-over for private industries in West Bengal. Editorials and several articles by academicians and activists, were published in *Economic and Political Weekly*, which is one of the of the most widely circulated journals of the country during 2006-7 (Patkar 2006; EPW Editorial 2007; Banerjee et.al 2007; Bhaduri 2007; Sarkar 2007; Bose 2007; Patnaik 2007; Bhattacharya 2007; Mishra 2007; Karat 2008; The Telegraph 2007). Websites named *sanhati.com* and *counterviews.com* were launched in the cyberspace. Development caused forced displacement and resettlement in communist ruled West Bengal state of India became *the* national and international agenda for debate and discussion. Out of this plethora of literature, I have made an attempt to find out the major arguments which provided justification of land take-over for industries in West Bengal, which till the other day was a state famous for the implementation of pro-farmer land reform and decentralised rural development policy.

The pro-acquisition arguments and their fallacious nature

Out of the aforementioned plethora of literature, I have made an attempt to find out the major arguments which provided justification of land take-over for industries in West Bengal, which till the other day was a state famous for the implementation of pro-farmer land reform and decentralised rural development policy.

First set

During the early 1990s the ruling LFG leaders argued that since land reform is a very successful endeavour in the state which raised the agricultural production and also the purchasing capacity of the peasantry, the state is the ideal ground for the establishment of capital intensive heavy and medium industries(WBIDC: 2000). One may name it *industrialisation-through-land reform argument*.

The second line of argument came from more theoretically oriented Marxists of the ruling parties, who claimed that industries would be able to absorb the extra labour force engaged in agriculture in disguised form and also owing to the introduction of mechanization in traditional means of cultivation. The proponents of this line of argument also stated that agriculture owing to land fragmentation caused by inheritance of property rights and hike in input costs have already become non-viable for many small and marginal farmer families. This argument may be termed as *employment-through-industrialisation* (Mishra 2007). It may be noted here that the land reform initiated by the LFG resulted in pattaholders having small plots. Needless to say that both these arguments were not supported by any empirical survey done in real situations of industrialisation in West Bengal either by the government or by any independent researcher. On the contrary, the two substantial government reports, one prepared by Nirmal Mukarji and Debabrata Bandopadhyay in 1993 and the other by Jayati Ghosh in 2004 showed with a lot of data collected from government sources that land reform and sharecropper registration still remained incomplete tasks and landlessness had been increasing in West Bengal (Mukarji and Bandopadhyay 1993). The Jayati Ghosh report did not mention a single line in favour of industrialisation as a development strategy for West Bengal in its long list of recommendations. The report suggested better land reform and formation of active cooperatives as well as more government responsibilities towards the creation of improved marketing facilities for the rural cultivators. The empirical findings of government's own reports by experts were largely ignored by the government and huge investments for capital intensive industrialisation was encouraged and justified by the aforementioned macroeconomic arguments(WBHDR: 2004). My empirical findings showed that land reform could be pushed back by land acquisition by dispossessing the pattaholders as well as sharecroppers(Guha, 2006b).

The third line of argument may be termed as the *historical necessity of industrialisation*. This argument was advanced by the Nobel Laureate economist Amartya Sen which he expressed in

his long interview in a newspaper in 2007. But there are other less famous followers of this argument. The proponents of this line of argument claim by citing examples from the pages of the history of Western Europe that industrialization is an inevitable stage after agriculture and accordingly, the farmers of Bengal have to give away their agricultural land for the establishment of industries.

Second set

At a later stage, when acquisition of huge tracts of fertile agricultural land began to take place giving rise to peasant resistance in a number of districts in West Bengal which culminated into Singur and Nandigram crises, another line of macroeconomic argument came into existence. In this argument it was stated with facts and figures that since all the land for proposed industrial investment for the coming years was only a very small fraction of the total amount of cultivated and cultivable land, so there would be no food crisis in the state if those lands are acquired. This set of argument justified land take-over for industrialization and could be labeled as the *no-food-insecurity-by-industrialisation* argument. It should be noted in this connection that in standard macro-economic theory and practice, food security is measured in terms of bigger administrative and political boundaries, viz. the state or the country.

Thus, in 2006 when about 1000 acres of the three crop land of Singur in West Bengal was acquired by the government for building an automobile factory of a private company owned by the Tatas, Dr. Abhirup Sarkar a distinguished economist of the Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata, in one of his articles 'Development and Displacement: Land Acquisition in West Bengal' in the prestigious journal *Economic and Political Weekly* argued

Suppose West Bengal requires 1, 00,000 acres of land for building up infrastructure, industries and a modern services sector. That will be less than 0.7 percent of the total agricultural land in the state. It is highly unlikely that if this miniscule amount of land goes away from the agricultural sector, total foodgrains production of the state is going to be substantially reduced(Sarkar 2007:1438).

This kind of macro-economic approach failed to distinguish between food security of a state and the food security of the farmers' household.(Guha, 2013: 797-814). The same kind of optimistic viewpoint as regards industrialisation on agricultural land was found to be expressed by well-established economists like Maitreesh Ghatak of the London School of Economics and Parikshit Ghosh of the Delhi School of Economics in their joint article published in *Economic and Political Weekly* as late as 2011. I quote the authors

That industrialisation may lead to food shortages is an alarmist view. The fraction of agricultural land required for industrial production is too small to make more than a dent on overall food production. (Ghatak and Ghosh, 2011: 65-72).

Dr. Abhirup Sarkar in his article from which we quoted, however sensed the pitfall of his own argument regarding the risks of food insecurity caused by land acquisition for the establishment of industries in West Bengal. Just after few paragraphs while championing the necessity of industrialisation for development he stated:

There is, however, a very serious microeconomic problem. Acquisition of land entails displacing people from their land and livelihood and therefore if the acquisition exercise is not handled properly, social and political unrest will emerge which will gravely endanger the industrial process itself (Ibid).

In the rest of his article, Dr.Sarkar could not produce any data to elucidate the ‘serious microeconomic problems’ he referred to in the above sentence; he only alluded to ‘social and political unrest.’

Let me recall the field data collected and analysed by me with my doctoral student at Kharagpur villages wherein a grim scenario prevailed after land acquisition for a Tata group of industry.

Our field data clearly revealed that the farmers dependent on crops produced by them were suffering from food shortage. In order to understand the magnitude of food insecurity at the household level we have collected data on the purchase of staple food crop (rice) by the villagers from the market since it is one of the most important indicators of food shortage in a farmer household. We relied on the views of the affected people as regards the ‘cause’ of the food shortage, being fully aware of the fact that there may be other factors, like fragmentation of large families causing family labour shortage. But it is also true that fragmentation of families in this area was found to be associated with land acquisition (Majumder & Guha 2009:77-84).

From our field observations and interviews we learnt that almost all the farmers of the studied village used to consume the paddy they grow in their land. We have not come across any farmer who sold their paddy in the market. Purchasing rice for consumption was viewed by the members of a farmer family as derogatory and was regarded as a dishonourable act for a *chasi* (farmer). Owning cultivable land was viewed as socially prestigious for the farmer families of this area. A ‘good farmer’ in this area was one who could feed his family with the paddy grown in his field throughout the year. A popular maxim in this area which we collected during

fieldwork was ‘Arthe maan / Khote dhan’. Freely translated it meant: ‘Money gives prestige/’Fertilisers yield paddy.’ In almost all our conversations the members of the landloser families always blamed acquisition of land by the government as the ‘root cause’ (*mul karan* in Bengali parlance) of food shortage. They also expressed hopelessness whenever they talked about the number of months during which they purchased rice from the market for domestic consumption. The table shows a larger number of families in the post-acquisition period. This was owing to the fact that a number of families in the pre-acquisition period had been fragmented over time.

Table 1 Changing Pattern of Dependence on Staple Food (paddy) in the Market among Land loser Families

Months	Number of the families	
	Pre acquisition period	Post acquisition period
0	28 (56)	45 (45.45)
1-4	22 (44)	11 (11.11)
5-8	-	31 (31.31)
9-12	-	12 (12.12)
Total	50 (100)	99 (100)

Figures in parentheses represent percentage out of column total.

Let me return to the original point. We found that in the pre-acquisition period 56 percent of the total number of the cultivator families was self-sufficient in terms of domestic paddy consumption while this percentage declined to 45.45 percent in post acquisition period.

Furthermore, in the pre-acquisition period there was no family who purchased rice for more than 5 months in a year. But in the post-acquisition period, we found 43.43 percent families had to purchase rice for 5-12 months of the year. This showed that expropriation of rain fed, monocrop land acted as one of the major causes of domestic food insecurity among the majority of landloser families in the village 15 years after the land acquisition for the Tata Metaliks (Majumder and Guha 2008: 121-133).

There is still another line of argument in favour of the recent industrialization move of the LFG and this is the last in the list. Interestingly, this argument is often leveled by the opposition leaders of present day West Bengal. The followers of this argument advocate industrialization on uncultivated or monocrop land in the relatively arid districts of the state, viz., Purulia, Bankura and Paschim Medinipur in order to protect the highly fertile multicrop lands in Hooghly, Bardhaman or Purba Medinipur. This argument may be termed as *industrialisation on uncultivated land* (Guha 2008a).

Third set

This set of argument was developed under the disguise of market principles. The proponents of this class of argument stated that the government should not acquire land for industries. In other words, land should be exchanged between the farmer and the industrialist by the principle of 'willing- buyer-willing-seller'. A variant of this argument proposed that there should be a 'land bank' created by the joint effort of the government and the industrialists from which land would be purchased or leased out to the requiring bodies on the basis of some market principles. We may term this set of argument as *forced acquisition under disguise* since it did not take into consideration the already existing differential bargaining power of the heterogeneous group of landholders in terms of the quality and size category of arable land in possession of the farmers.

While identifying all the above classes of arguments in favour of industrialization, one should keep it in mind that these arguments do not form rigid watertight compartments. Most often, the supporters of industrialization utilise a combination of the argument classes to strengthen their positions. For example, *employment-through-industrialisation* argument is often combined with *historical necessity of industrialisation*. Likewise, *industrialisation through land reform* may be mixed with *employment-through-industrialisation argument*.

Basically, all the arguments have missed the micro level ground realities which the anthropologists and sociologists have discovered through their painstaking fieldwork. Moreover, none of the arguments dealt with rehabilitation of the displaced farmers or with the violation of constitutional provisions which empowered the local self governments to implement development programmes within their jurisdictions (Guha

Second, all the arguments were based on some form of fallacy. For example, the first set of arguments did not look into situations of land acquisition which would pauperize the land reform beneficiaries and drastically reduce their purchasing capacity. In fact, this is a self-defeating logic. The second line of argument under the first set also did not take into consideration the fact that in a land scarce and high population density state like West Bengal, modern capital intensive and technologically advanced industries might not absorb the so-called extra labour force. The third line of argument was the weakest among the others simply because comparison between Western Europe during industrial revolution and present day West Bengal was nothing but an infantile exercise by one of the best brains in economics (Guha 2008b).

The second set of argument totally ignored the fact of household level food insecurity and lowered purchasing capacity of displaced farmers which was a common feature of every case of land acquisition whether it had taken over monocrop or multicrop farmland under the present legal arrangement of providing only cash compensation without any sustainable measure of rehabilitation like benefit sharing. The other variant of the third set though apparently looks like a pro-peasant argument is actually anti-poor because it supported acquisition of uncultivated and/or monocrop land as if people did not depend on those lands nor do the departments of rural development and irrigation had any responsibility to transform those lands into multicrop and cultivable lands.

The third set though apparently favoured a non-coercive mode of land take-over was basically coercive to actual cultivators. The absentee holders of land might be 'willing' to sell the land even at a lower price at the cost of displacing sharecroppers and unrecorded actual cultivators of their land who might have been 'unwilling' towards the sale of the land on which the livelihood of the latter depended. More fundamentally, the proponents of this school of thought have totally ignored the fact that in India a large amount of land is being used by the rural poor customarily

as common property resources for which there is no provision for compensation to the users in case of acquisition under the existing law(Guha, 2009).

Lessons learnt or in lieu of a conclusion

The failure of the land acquisition at Singur by the LFG could neither generate a labor force freed from agriculture nor created enthusiasm and hope for the capitalist investors. The Bengal leftist government's neo-Marxist theory of riding on the shoulders of land reform to achieve a successful capital-intensive industrialization finally proved to be a self-defeating exercise since the *praxis* sabotaged both past land reform and future industrialization. (Guha, 2017). On the other hand, the TMC government's enthusiasm to generate capital and employment either through legal means or by the play of market forces seemed to be mere populist political rhetoric for contesting election battles in West Bengal. Take for example, the idea of land bank floated by the TMC. If such bank exists then why land will be given from the bank to the industrialists only not to displaced farmers who would be losing land for industrialisation? This is the macro-theoretical lesson one can learn after a decade of the Singur episode in the state of West Bengal under liberalization.

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Acknowledgements

I am greatly indebted to Dr.Asish Ghosh for inviting me to write this article for the *Status of Environment in West Bengal* 2018.