

The State and its Interactions: A Weberian Perspective

*Suchismita Das

(Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, India)
Corresponding Author: *Suchismita Das

Abstract: This paper engages with Weber's concept of state and power and its scope in the context of anthropological works based in the village of Singur, West Bengal. It tries to understand the state as embodied and imbibed by the population rather than transcendent to it. This paper also contrasts the moral economy and subsistence ethic of the peasant with the logic of neoliberalism in the context of ethnographic works on Singur to reveal the complex empirical reality which helps expand the scope of such theoretical perspectives.

Keywords: Moral economy, Neoliberalism, Singur, State, Weber.

Date of Submission: 15 -07-2017

Date of acceptance: 26-07-2017

I. INTRODUCTION

The question of the state has been a subject of much debate among various schools of thought. An element which has survived through all such debates and amid all the varying perspectives is that of 'power' – power which forms the basis of all political thought and activity.

From the classical sociological perspective, Weber has critically engaged with the concept of power to help reveal the factors which help perpetuate and legitimize power in the form of authority. Taking from Weber's concept of power, politics and state, this paper attempts to understand the scope of these concepts in the context of the Indian state, and specifically in contemporary West Bengal and its rural political field.

This paper is not just an attempt to discuss and understand the state in West Bengal through a Weberian lens but also to qualify one's understanding of the state with the help of anthropological works, and to understand the interplay of forces of neoliberalism alongside the possibilities of emergence of what James Scott has referred to as the 'moral economy' of the peasant (Scott, 1976), that may emerge in the field.

One of the most recurrent issues throughout this paper will be the notion of the state as not simply transcendent to the individual but rather embodied by the population. This paper will attempt to view the state – replete with all its contradictory tendencies and orientations – as largely imbibed by the people. This imbibing is not viewed merely in the sense of 'hegemony' whereby the people are unaware of having been hegemonized to follow the dictates of the state. Rather, it will try to understand how the rural population has displayed an ability to pragmatically engage with the state and devise – for its own benefit, on several occasions – strategies in relation to the state.

Weber defines the state in terms of the means it employs rather than the ends it accomplishes. This leads Weber to qualify the state as a 'human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory' (Weber, 1946).

Taking from this strand of Weber's thought and subsequently moving forward, this paper contextualizes Weber's arguments and perspectives in the case of the state in West Bengal. It also tries to understand how the state could be the sole wielder of not just physical violence but also violence of economic and social kinds especially through its policies and their implications. In this context, the focus will majorly be on the issues of land acquisition.

In trying to understand the logic of neoliberalism at work in Singur, this paper also contrasts it with the concept of moral economy of rural existence which offers a pre-colonial challenge and alternative to neoliberalism. However, it also discusses the peculiarities of Singur which nuance the theory of moral economy.

II. WEBERIAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE STATE

Weber's notion of the state, as noted before, argued that the state is a community which wields legitimate monopoly over physical force. This view, in certain respects, differed from Marx's view of the ideal state in the ultimate, communist stage of evolution of human history. While Weber's view on the state offered a more empirically grounded image, Marx offered a greater philosophical and political possibility for imagining a state which would eventually work for the perpetuation of a classless society. Marx's view however, was also

largely limited by its own sense of possibility. Marx, in adopting a prescriptive direction, also limits himself to a speculation lacking in material actualization.

To grasp Weber's understanding of the state, it would help to begin with his perspectives on politics: Weber begins with the notion that politics consists of distribution, maintenance and transfer of power. Weber then shows how domination is justified and thereby legitimized through three ways: traditional domination, charismatic domination and rational legal domination (Weber, 1946).

While all three forms of domination would be pertinent in most contexts, the idea of rational legal authority becomes especially important while discussing concepts such as the state. In the context of Singur, one finds the persistent existence of what Weber calls 'organized domination' leading to continuous administration and obedience. Thus, to justify the domination of the state, simply a notion of legitimacy of the state is insufficient – one must also take into account, the obedience that both, the agents of the state and the larger population, owe to the larger body of the state (Weber, 1946).

The modern state, according to Weber, organizes domination and monopolizes the legitimate use of physical force as a means of domination in a territory. The state therefore bestows the material means of organization in the hands of its leaders (Weber, 1946). This argument has often been further elaborated by scholars such as Charles Tilly, for instance, who expose the state as simply a machinery to legitimately practice violence, war, and material appropriation (Tilly, 1985).

Weber's work therefore offers a range of points from which one could begin a discussion on the state in West Bengal, and specifically, Singur. The notion that the state in West Bengal wielded monopoly over physical violence – in the land acquisition issues of Singur and Nandigram – has been largely acknowledged by several scholars and activists (Bandyopadhyay, 2008) (Banerjee, 2006-2007) (Sau, 2008).

While a section of scholars contend that the acquisition of land was a conspicuous and unashamed display of the state's ability to wield legitimate neoliberal violence, a section of the anthropological literature on the other hand helps to expose the more nuanced realities of what had occurred. Rather than viewing the protests against the land acquisition in Singur as simply a challenge to neoliberalism, they can be interpreted as attempts to ensure equitable social distribution engendering a trickle-down effect (Nielsen, 2010).

Taking from Weber's concept of the state therefore, one may argue that while the state can exercise a monopoly over physical and even economic violence – here, in the form of land acquisition and subsequent eviction of erstwhile peasants from their livelihoods and homes – the state does not operate in a transcendental sphere beyond the individual. Rather, the state operates from within the individual and the case of West Bengal exemplifies such an embodiment of the state by the individual: the impeccably percolating strategies of the CPI(M) in West Bengal – such as creating a perpetually informal economy dependent on the state – ensured that the state was indeed imbibed and embodied by the people for years to come (Sarkar, 2006).

The Weberian notion of the state's monopoly over physical force has been discussed further to reveal the three components which help to justify the state's monopoly – however, a fourth component that only marginally manifested in Weber's arguments was the role of the people themselves – the people who represent the embodiment of the state. Although Weber briefly refers to this category in his discussion on charismatic leadership – where he talks about charisma as bestowed on the leader by his people – nonetheless, the embodiment of the state by the people remains a rather neglected arena in his work.

In the context of West Bengal, as several works show, the state was not always a force directly antagonistic to the demands of the people but rather, a body to be constantly negotiated with, leading to a mutual co constitution of both the state itself and its population. This is not in any way to present the state as a benevolent patron but rather to show how the concept of state, in practice, must go beyond simply its legitimate monopoly over force; to show how it must, in order for its own survival and perpetuation in time, appeal to the masses it governs and more importantly, percolate into them and get irrevocably and inextricably enmeshed in them.

Thus, the fundamental attempt here is to take from Weber's concept of state and power and engage with its limitations to push it further and explore its latent potential. Rather than constraining the sources of legitimacy of the state to solely traditional, charismatic and rational legal forms of authority, the argument here tries to include the role of the most principal determining factor: the people being governed. Without the consent of the population, the state would invariably lose its legitimacy. Again, this does not imply that the people alone have all the power to decide what consists of the state. The state too exercises degrees of influence on the population thereby creating a space of interactions and networks which extend in both directions. A study of these networks and interactions would also help to break the illusion of a monolithic image of the 'population' or of the 'state.'

As Nielsen clearly shows, even those who opposed the land acquisition in Singur, were not a monolithic category. The people were not simply motivated by a unitary goal or desire. Sections of the population pragmatically oriented themselves to certain aspects of the state's acquisition of land while protesting certain other aspects. In every conceivable way, therefore, the issue was complicated (Nielsen,

Contesting India's Development? Industrialisation, Land Acquisition and Protest in West Bengal, 2010). Not only was there no monolithic state versus population, there was also no monolithic support versus protest/opposition. The fragmentation and minute divergences existed therefore not only among the people but also within the actions and activities of the people. Practices and strategies themselves were fragmented to accommodate the myriad approaches and tactics employed by the various sections of people and the ways in which they embodied the state.

Nielsen's work helps to expose these nuances and fragments: he shows how while more than eighty five percent of the population refused the state's compensation in exchange for their land, most individual families did not even own much land nor depended on agriculture as the primary source of income; again, while people were willing to exchange their mono crop lands, they were staunchly against abandoning their multi crop lands; on the other hand while both landowners and landless alike wanted the Tatas to stay and provide them jobs in the factory, many of them viewed these jobs more as a supplement to agriculture but not as a substitute; while on the one hand the move towards industrialization received unambiguous support of intellectuals and economists such as Amartya Sen and Pranab Bardhan, while on the other hand the Trinamool Congress (TMC) opposition received support from several other intellectuals and activists against the establishment of the factory; even the most vocal opposition leader herself was ambiguous in her stance with regard to industrialization as she maintained a fine balance between her support for and opposition to industry (Nielsen, *Contesting India's Development? Industrialisation, Land Acquisition and Protest in West Bengal*, 2010).

Thus the realities of negotiations between the state and sections of the population are fraught with ambiguities, possibilities and fragments. While Weber's notion of state as the wielder of monopoly over violence nonetheless holds true in most of the cases, one must think a little further to note that this monopoly does not float in mid-air. It is negotiated between the state and the people, it is mutually co constituted between these parties and several other stake holders involved in this system of networks. The state should therefore be understood not only as a repository of powers of the human community which practices its functions from a sacrosanct, unattainable platform but also as a substance consciously embodied by every citizen, often even manipulated and used by these citizens to strategize for their own ends.

III. ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE STATE IN WEST BENGAL

A brief review of the available anthropological literature on Singur reveals the various minute factors which play significant roles in contributing to the complexities of the field. When these factors are brought into dialogue with the Weberian strand of thought on politics and the state, they help in the emergence of concepts which would help to acquire a more transparent lens with which to understand these events.

Nielsen for instance, elaborates the importance of the 'everyday politics approach' to understand the nuances of everyday socio-political relations and dynamics. More importantly, he exposes their role in organizing and promoting leaders and the voices that these leaders eventually prioritize or marginalize. As a methodology therefore, this approach is quite useful in unearthing the plethora of political meanings which hold a significant value in remoulding and constantly reconstituting political practice (Nielsen, *The Everyday Politics of India's 'Land Wars' in Rural Eastern India*, 2016).

The investigative nature of a Weberian perspective would allow for this kind of a methodology to thrive. Weber's approach is mostly aimed at exploring a social phenomena rather than offering prescriptive potential to it. For this reason, it could facilitate an anthropological and ethnographic methodology which allows for it to ground itself in empirical reality and also constantly struggle with its own limitations and thereby expand its own scope.

Dayabati Roy's work on Singur and the larger political scenario in rural West Bengal traces a historically grounded trajectory of the protests against the land acquisition. The vivid and detailed descriptions she offers of the protests and the ways in which they were organized, help to bring out the less conspicuous but equally important rivulets of power networks that help sustain a state and a movement against that state. Her ethnography helps break the common assumption about the rural being necessarily agrarian. Instead, she shows how people from varying occupations were involved in the movement and how agriculture could be one's occupation without necessarily limiting him or her from engaging in other professions at the same time. People were also involved in work outside the village thus adding to the layers of complexities at work in this context (Roy, 2014). Roy also discusses how even people of professions other than agriculture were directly at stake because of the land acquisition. For instance, the rickshaw pullers who transported potatoes from the fields to the local cold stores based their livelihood on the yields though they were not directly farming the fields or getting directly involved with agriculture in any other way. Others were sceptical about whether they would be able to adjust to the new, industrialized ways of life having lived in a certain non-industrial rural atmosphere for generations (Roy, 2014). Most importantly, both Nielsen and Roy's ethnographies reveal two fundamental characteristics of the rural populations: their fragmented, plural socio-economic positions and their ability to pragmatically strategize to reach their own ends. Both these works show how the rural population was

suspicious of certain local branches of the government – which they were previously not uncomfortable with – during, and because of, the land acquisition; on the other hand, they also show how sections of the villagers strategically forged new relationships to aid their cause. These works help to ground our analysis in the complex mesh of real relationships of power and patronage. It helps locate our theoretical perspectives in a more palpable field.

Here the Weberian perspective on ‘organized domination’ (Weber, 1946) becomes quite relevant in this context. This concept could be brought into dialogue with the idea of the state as embodied and imbibed by the various sections of the population. If one imagines the logic state as consciously imbibed by the citizens, one could then argue that organized domination and such embodiment of the state are actually two sides of the same coin: in order for the state to successfully perpetuate organized domination, the fundamental principles of the state would have to be consciously accepted, acknowledged and obeyed by the larger populations being governed.

As revealed by the ethnographic works above, the populations cannot be said to have simply been hegemonized by the state nor can they be said to be constantly revolting against the state. What is evident, instead, is the fact that the citizens have the ability to consciously engage with the state by deploying their pragmatic strategies to selectively support or oppose the policies put forward by the state. The Weberian notion of organized domination is made possible to the extent that the people themselves consciously acquiesce to such a domination.

IV. MORAL ECONOMY AND NEOLIBERALISM

In the context of Singur, the acquisition of land for industrialization is seen as an unambiguously neoliberal move favouring industrial development. In this case, industry, neoliberalism and acquisition of land from the peasants form an almost synonymous whole. The logic of neoliberalism employed here could be contrasted with the logic of the ‘subsistence ethic’ as proposed by James C Scott (Scott, 1976).

Scott speaks of the subsistence ethic as the accepted rural norm by virtue of which there existed relationships of patronage and interdependence which helped to protect the poor peasants from abject poverty and starvation on the one hand and helped to supply the wealthier landlords/ patrons with the labour of the peasants on the other. According to Scott, this moral economy gives the rationale and the affective and emotional value to peasant movements which seek to redress their grievances. (Scott, 1976).

In the case of Singur, the moral economy that helped sustain the village economy and society was a significant element in propelling the peasant uprising against the land acquisition since it disturbed the moral economic fabric. This phenomenon thus works completely in consonance with Scott’s predictions and arguments. However, interestingly, in the case of Singur, as both Nielsen and Roy show, the relationships of patronage and interdependence did not necessarily continue with the same sets of people. While several landlords were eager to sell their lands, the peasants – now left without patronage or protection – sought new forms of political patronage in the opposition party, NGOs, political activists and so on.

Thus, while relationships of patronage did significantly aid the cause of the peasant movement in Singur, one would need to delve deeper to realize who these patrons were and how they were in fact different from the erstwhile patrons under the rural, agrarian economy. On the same note, while generally, the moral economy of the peasant is neatly contrasted with the logic of colonialism (Scott, 1976), in this case, this contrast cannot be simply imported against the logic of neoliberalism. For as the anthropological works reveal, the neoliberal force itself was fragmented and scattered; accepted and rejected by uneven chunks of the population. It is thus not a simple case of subsistence ethic versus neoliberal ethic but rather a situation where both the subsistence ethic and the neoliberal ethic pose as possibilities for the peasants and other sections of the rural population. The two offer varying potential in varying directions and although the moral economy does drive the protest against neoliberal forces, it is not an unambiguous flow of energy.

V. CONCLUSION

The realities of the state and its relationship with its population in the context of West Bengal and specifically Singur is therefore infinitely fragmented and complex, irreducible to any one theoretical model. This paper tries to understand the state as not transcendent to the individual but rather embodied and imbibed by the population. This paper has been an attempt to understand this complexity with the help of anthropological works. It also attempts to engage with Weber’s perspectives on state and power in the context of the issue in Singur. This paper thus uses anthropological works to push the boundaries of Weber’s concept of state and power and understand the scope of his theory. Finally, a discussion on the moral economy of the peasant and the logic of neoliberalism help to expose further nuances that play a role in forming the realities of peasant struggle in West Bengal. Once again, the anthropological works offer a ground on which to expand the scope of the theoretical ventures and thus create greater conceptual possibilities with which to understand this social phenomenon.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Bandyopadhyay, D. (2008). Singur: What Happened, What Next and Time to Pay the Cost. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 13-16.
- [2]. Banerjee, S. (2006-2007). Peasant Hares and Capitalist Hounds of Singur. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 5296-5298.
- [3]. Nielsen, K. B. (2010). Contesting India's Development? Industrialisation, Land Acquisition and Protest in West Bengal. *Forum for Development Studies*, 145–170.
- [4]. Nielsen, K. B. (2016). The Everyday Politics of India's 'Land Wars' in Rural Eastern India. *Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, 105-118.
- [5]. Roy, D. (2014). *Rural Politics in India: Political Stratification and Governance in West Bengal*. Delhi, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- [6]. Sarkar, A. (2006). Political Economy of West Bengal. *Economic and Political Weekly*, -.
- [7]. Sau, R. (2008). The Ballad of Singur: Progress with Human Dignity. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 10-13.
- [8]. Scott, J. C. (1976). *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in South East Asia*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- [9]. Tilly, C. (1985). War Making and State Making as Organized Crime. In D. R. Peter Evans, *Bringing the State Back In* (pp. 169-187). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [10]. Weber, M. (1946). *From Max Weber*. (H. H. Girth, & C. W. Mills, Trans.) New York: Oxford University Press.

IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

Suchismita Das. "The State and its Interactions: A Weberian Perspective." *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)* 22.7 (2017): 56-60.