

Is Lalgarh Showing the Way?

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The Maoists have been at the helm of the movement in Lalgarh right from its inception. Even as they organised the resistance to state repression, they put in place, at a rudimentary level, an alternative programme of development based on the people's initiative and their voluntary labour. But when the joint forces of the central and state governments moved into the area, the organisation of a people's militia became an imperative. There is a need to trace the roots of the armed resistance. The grudging Bengali urban literati need to understand that questions as to who is to lead and guide the movement and the form it should take are to be decided by the sons of the soil themselves, and not by those who keep a safe distance from it.

The ongoing struggle in Lalgarh, nay, Jangal Mahal has already completed one year in early November 2009. This struggle is totally different from any other recent movement in our country. If Singur faced the initial experience of defeat, Nandigram could take pride in having tasted victory in the course of a long bloody battle against the Left Front (LF) government and the terror perpetrated by the "hermads" backed by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)]. The struggles waged in both Singur and Nandigram were directed against the land-grab movement resorted to by domestic big comprador capital and foreign imperialist capital. In both Singur and Nandigram, the parliamentary parties played some role, and in the case of the latter, the Maoist party also intervened. In the case of the Lalgarh movement, on the other hand, the parliamentary parties were rejected by the people and the Maoist party played a major role.

The Lalgarh movement began in a different context. It started as a response against the brutality perpetrated by the police on 5 November 2008. It was, at the same time, a fight against age-old deprivation and humiliation and for the assertion of dignity and the rights of the people. However, the landmine attack on the West Bengal chief minister on 2 November 2008 as a mark of protest against the Jindal special economic zone (SEZ) at Shalboni also possibly acted as a catalyst that initiated a snowballing process. In that sense, it also resembled those in Singur and Nandigram.

The Lalgarh movement can be divided into five phases: (1) from 5 November 2008 to the day the dates for parliamentary elections were announced; (2) from the following day to 16 May 2009 when the election results were declared throughout the country; (3) from 17 May to 17 June, the day before Operation Lalgarh began; (4) from 18 June 2009, when the joint forces started moving into Lalgarh, to 26 October, when decisions were taken by

the People's Committee against Police Atrocities (PCAPA) to form the people's militia; and (5) from the formation of the Sidhu-Kanu Gana Militia on 27 October 2009 till date. Each of these phases has its distinctive features. If one studies the movement, one will see that it was not just a movement against land grab or just for the assertion of the rights of the adivasis or against humiliation suffered by the tribal people; it was more than that. And that broader aspect gradually unfolded as movement rolled on. One of the major aspects of the movement is the PCAPA's advocacy of a pro-people new model of development – a model that shows the imprint of the Maoist party. This aspect of the movement hardly received any attention from the urban intellectuals.

New Model of Development

The model of development the Indian ruling classes and their political representatives have adopted ever since they came to power in 1947 was the policy of dependence on foreign capital and technology, which led to the selling out of our country's economy, water, land and vast natural resources to foreign imperialist capital and domestic comprador big capital. It was the Naxalbari movement and the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) led by Charu Mazumdar that first raised the demand for radical land reforms, opposition to and confiscation of imperialist capital, and, at the same time, formulated the blueprint for an alternative model of development. That programme could not be implemented by the communist revolutionaries of the first phase of the struggle for reasons we need not get into at present. At a later period, the Maoists put into practice an alternative development programme in the Dandakaranya area covering some mineral-rich states. The main elements of this programme are self-reliance, equitable distribution of resources and property among the people, distribution of land to the tiller, all-round development in the countryside based on people's initiative and voluntary labour, and the weeding out of foreign influence and control over our economy, society, culture and politics.

As in Dandakaranya, such attempts are being made at the rudimentary level even in the Jangal Mahal area of

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West Bengal. This is evident from the following newspaper report captioned "Welcome to India's Newest Secret State" by Snigdendu Bhattacharya (*Hindustan Times*, 10 June 2009):

Here across a 1,000 sq km area bordering Orissa in West Medinipur district, the Maoists over the last 8 months have quietly unleashed new weapons in their battle against the Indian state: drinking water, irrigation, roads and health centres...carefully shielded from the public eye, the *Hindustan Times* found India's second 'liberated zone', a Maoist-run state where development for more than two lakh people is unfolding at a pace not seen in 30 years of 'Left Front' rule. Apart from taking over the organs of the state and most notably the executive and the judiciary, the Maoists here have built at least 50 km of gravel paths, dug tube-wells and tanks, rebuilt irrigation canals and are running health centres, with the help of local villagers.

Another daily (*The Telegraph*, 24 June 2009) reported under the caption "Lalgarh Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (Maoist): Rise and Rot of a Rebel 'State'" that the People's Committee-Maoists began the following schemes: Jobs for landless – work in development projects in lieu of Rs 60-80 per day; building kutchra roads, culverts and water reservoirs and digging deep tube wells; bringing medical teams from Kolkata; lending money to repair and build cheap houses.

The first attempts were made by the PCAPA soon after it was born. It set up village committees each of which consisted of five men and five women, where decisions were taken on the basis of mutual discussion. That was followed by the formation of women's wings and youth wings of the committee. These were democratic bodies some of which bear the imprint of the old adivasi society and some, particularly the women's wing, are new and signify the true empowerment of women.

In June 2009, before the deployment of the joint forces in Operation Lalgarh, a team comprising students affiliated to the Democratic Students' Union (DSU), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, and journalists visited Lalgarh and adjoining areas for an on-the-spot investigation. That report throws some light, even if at a rudimentary level, on the development programme initiated by the people. Since then, many new steps were taken in this

direction, as is reported by different sources. Let us state some of the features.

Agriculture and Land Distribution: Anyone going to Jangal Mahal would be able to realise that the much trumpeted land reform programme of the LF government does not have any presence there. In areas where trees have been cut to introduce land reforms, nothing has been done and vast tracts have been allowed to be converted into wastelands. Although the West Bengal government, through an Act of 2004, vowed to distribute these lands among the landless adivasis, nothing has, as yet, been done. On the contrary, the LF government and the CPI(M) that leads it had decided to hand over thousands of acres of those lands for the setting up of an SEZ to the corporate house of the Jindals. Faced with such government apathy and deprivation, it was quite natural for the people of Jangal Mahal to organise under the banner of the PCAPA to initiate a genuine land reform programme.

The Committee initiated a programme to ensure full rights of the adivasis over forest land to the landless with adequate facilities for irrigation. Opposing the government policy of welcoming multinational seed companies, the PCAPA opted to form seed cooperatives through the promotion of organic fertilisers prepared with either forest ash or cow-dung.

Another important step is land distribution. The village committee decided to ensure one bigha of land for the landless and 15 kathas for peasants with less land and no land for those having five bighas or more. The JNU student team visited Bansheria village and were witness to a land distribution meeting. However, one problem was that land was not in an arable condition due to the senseless plantation of eucalyptus trees by the state government as part of its "social forestry" project that was promoted by the World Bank. The plantation of eucalyptus trees was aimed at drying up the land so as to facilitate future extraction of mineral resources from the region. It is a nefarious anti-people conspiracy deliberately hatched by corporate foreign and domestic capital with the backing of both the central and state governments. In order to undo the damage to the soil, the people decided to grow fruits

and vegetables there for at least two seasons before it becomes fit, hopefully, once again, for paddy cultivation. Side by side, it was also decided that the lands of the "new landlords" such as those of the CPI(M) leaders like Anuj Pandey, Bimal Pandey or Dalim Pandey – the rural bosses-rogues-cum-moneylenders who had amassed millions by expropriating the wealth and land of the poor peasants, as also by swindling money from governmental projects, would be confiscated and distributed among the real owners.

Irrigation: In the dry Jangal Mahal belt, where rainfall is scanty, special attention is needed. However, one cannot see anything of the sort. The government has built a huge canal that runs from Mayurbhanj in Jharkhand to Midnapur town so as to provide water to the fields when the rainy season is over. However, because of faulty construction, the canal remains dry throughout the year and the pipes that open to the fields remain completely choked. The PCAPA, in response to this governmental mal-development, started building small check dams and lock gates that would store the water during the monsoon and preserve water flowing down from natural streams. Such a check dam was in the process of construction at Bohardanga village when the DSU team visited the place.

Construction of Roads: If one goes to the Lalgarh villages, one will be struck by the absence of roads worth the name. During the monsoon the roads are muddy and water-logged and virtually impossible to walk on. Transferring patients, pregnant women or dead bodies become difficult tasks. The villagers of Adharmari complain that the transportation facilities are pathetic and during the monsoon, the village gets totally cut off from the world outside. The same is true for many other villages as well. The PCAPA took up this issue and constructed roads with red-stone chips, which are locally available at an affordable cost. The construction was done through voluntary labour, as in the Dandakaranya region. It is an example of participatory development where human resources are mobilised for developmental work for the people.

During the Yen-an phase (1937-45) of the Chinese revolution, this principle of Mao Zedong was applied in many regions and helped in unleashing the creativity of the masses. In villages such as Korengapara, Shaldanga, Bahardanga, Papuria, Darigera, etc, it was the villagers themselves who took part. This was unlike the earlier government projects where they helplessly witnessed from a distance their development funds being siphoned off by the corrupt CPI(M) members and government officials. According to Chhatradhar Mahato, the spokesperson of the PCAPA, unlike the state which builds a km of road spending Rs 15,000, the Committee could build 20 kms spending only Rs 47,000.

Water, Shelter and Health Facilities: A dry and arid region that Jangal Mahal is, it is difficult to get drinking and irrigation water. The committee took the initiative to set up mini tube wells and install submersible pumps. The people also extended their voluntary labour to facilitate irrigation. The PCAPA took steps to ensure that government projects like the Indira Awaash Yojana reached those who needed it most. There was hardly any medical facility in the whole zone. The committee took the initiative to set up health centres at Kantapahari, Belpahari and Chakadoba with an ambulance van and a team of doctors from Kolkata. Nearly 1,500 persons visited the centres everyday for treatment. These health centres are now under the occupation of the joint forces and have been converted into paramilitary camps.

Education, Culture and Social Awareness: In the charter of demands placed by the Adivasi Moolbasi Janasadharaner Committee and published from Purulia, the adivasi people demanded promotion and spread of the Santhali and Kurmali languages and alchiki script. In fact, a large number of indigenous languages has gone into oblivion due to the domination of one or two languages. Quite naturally, demands have been raised for the recognition of the Santhali language. The 21st of February – observed as Language Day in both West Bengal and Bangladesh – was observed as a Black Day. It was an expression of protest against the cultural domination by the Bengali language. In fact, as a

result of globalisation and the domination of one language over another, thousands of indigenous languages had already gone into oblivion all over the world. These developments take place before our very eyes, but we hardly pay any attention to them. In fact, the Lalgarth struggle has put forward the demand for the restoration of the near extinct languages of the people. The reality is that in areas where people's struggles are very strong, the possibility of the regeneration of local languages is a reality, and the local artists, writers and singers make their mark in their respective fields of activity. In this way, near-extinct languages are revived. Dandakaranya has had the same experience.

Traditional weapons comprise an integral part of the adivasi culture. Thus, if any restrictions are imposed on the display of such weapons by the government, the adivasi people would treat it as an infringement on their traditional culture. On 5 June last year, the Kolkata police put a restriction on the display of such weapons at a proposed rally to be organised jointly by the Committee against Violence on Women, an all-India women's organisation, and the women's wing of the PCAPA. The women's wing has also initiated campaigns against the consumption of liquor, superstition, pornography and domestic violence. The Matangini Mahila Samiti had earlier taken steps in this direction in Nandigram.

People's Court: The system of justice that prevails in our country is, needless to say, meant to serve the ruling classes. In Lalgarth, the people set up their own court – the People's Court. Here decisions are taken by the people and punishment, if any, is meted out. There was much criticism from some quarters (civil rights activists and others) against such a system of justice.

Fight against Environmental Pollution: The PCAPA has also taken up the issue of environmental pollution. The people of Jhargram had long been airing their grievances against pollution caused by a sponge iron factory run by a branded cement group. Apart from damaging crops, plantation and vegetation in surrounding areas, the amount of carbon pollution generated by it can be gauged from the predicament

faced by the students of Bikash Bharati School, located close to the factory. The carbon dust makes their white uniforms black every day. The water in the ponds turns black too. Acute respiratory tract infection and asthma among people are common complaints. So severe is the pollution that it imperils human beings and other creatures. And saal leaves, which are collected and sold in the market, become black, depriving the people of an important source of livelihood. Yet, the State Pollution Control Board did not order the closure of the factory. There was a mammoth gathering of more than 12,000 people on 7 June last year at Lodhashuli village near Kharagpur town where decisions for the boycott of this unit and two other such factories were taken. On 19 December, when all other avenues failed, this sponge-iron factory was burnt down by the people ("PCB stirs after Blaze of Wrath", *HT Kolkata Plus*, 20 December 2009).

It is clear that the PCAPA had integrated local day to day issues with the broad struggle against state repression. Needless to say, this would not have been possible without the active participation of the Maoists. This has been an entirely new experience in the history of West Bengal. It did not happen in the first phase of the Naxalbari struggle.

Intellectual Reaction

The intellectual response to the Lalgarth struggle is basically different from what we had seen during the Singur and Nandigram struggles. Those who came forward at the early stage later retracted and kept mum. Meanwhile, the tide was blowing for a "change"; the isolation of the CPI(M) got reflected in the elections, and one section among the intellectuals found it more attractive to keep closer to the prospective winner – the Trinamool Congress – in the approaching elections and receive bouquets and cushy jobs as *biddwajjans* (learned personalities). We would like to discuss the response of the urban literati towards the Maoists in the Lalgarth struggle.

According to a section of the intelligentsia, the people of Jangal Mahal had been continuing their movement quite well until the Maoists entered the scene from outside and derailed the movement.

In their view, it is the violent activities of the Maoists that brought joint forces into the scene. The result is that the people are now said to be being “sandwiched” between state terror and gun-toting Maoists or “non-state” actors. The most bitter attack, however, came from the two Delhi-based historians – Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar. They wrote (EPW, 27 June – 10 July 2009):

Maoists have done incalculable harm to the movement. Their activities and intentions are shrouded in mystery, their secret terror operations express total indifference to human lives, their arms deals lead them...into shady financial transactions with rich and corrupt power brokers...They come into an already strong and open mass movement, they engage in a killing spree discrediting the movement, and then they leave after giving the state authorities a splendid excuse for crushing it.

In the opinion of this section of the intelligentsia, it is the Maoists who have derailed the movement towards a violent and undemocratic path.

Maoist Presence

The reality, of course, is that the Maoists did not fall from the sky; the Maoist Communist Centre and the CPI(M-L) People's War had been active there from the 1980s and 1990s and fought over day to day issues by the people's side, and suffered persecution, molestation and incarceration for years together. Their social roots lie in the soil of Jangal Mahal, however disturbing it might sound to these historians and sections of “learned personalities”. Thus the statement that the Maoists are external to the movement, that they have entered the scene all on a sudden and taken control of it, does not have any factual basis at all.

As to the “sandwich” theory, the advocates of this theory have actually been portraying the masses in a way that these “ignorant” people are devoid of any initiative of their own, that they are like unthinking, unfeeling robots, which can only follow, but cannot lead.

What Breeds Armed Resistance?

The Lalgarh movement has given rise to debates that are old in states such as Andhra Pradesh, but new in states such as West Bengal. Such issues had come up

time and again from within human rights organisations and “civil society” whenever armed resistance developed or revolutionary armed struggle gained in strength. According to some intellectuals, the democratic struggle should be peaceful, and when it takes a violent turn and the people get armed, then it loses its democratic character. To them, “democracy” is identified with order and peace, and if there is disorder and violence, then it becomes un-democratic. Needless to say, such ideas have been very carefully and successfully planted by the state propaganda machinery.

History, however, proves otherwise. It is not the people but the state which is armed to the teeth, and it is the state again which uses all conceivable methods of violence to keep people under subjugation. Peace-loving people are thereby forced by the state to raise the banner of armed resistance, as the real perpetrators of violence leave behind for them no option other than that. History is replete with many such examples. The slave revolt under Spartacus in 73 BC, the peasant rebellion in Germany under Thomas Munzer in the 1520s, the Taiping peasant rebellion in the mid-19th century China (1851-64), the Great Revolt of 1857 or those by Bhagat Singh, Surya Sen and others. All these armed rebellions represented the genuine interests and aspirations of the people and were just and democratic in character.

In the class society of today, class contradictions, conflicts and sometimes, class wars are inevitable. The ruling classes had always exploited the majority, killed and maimed them, perpetrated terror and, in this way, extracted the sole right, the legitimacy to perpetrate terror against the people whom they pretend to serve. The “Greyhounds”, “Cobras”, and many other state-trained police-butchers only betray the violent character of the Indian state. Whenever, in response, the oppressed people themselves take up arms, break that state monopoly over the means of violence and “legitimacy” enjoyed by the state to control the masses, the ruling classes raise the bogey of law and order and utilise that legitimacy to drown people's movements in pools of blood. If anybody calls the resistance struggle “terrorism”,

then that “terrorism” definitely is of a different character.

The Lalgarh struggle has posed a serious problem to a section of civil rights activists and urban intellectuals. When the masses were attacked and tortured, the city-bred intellectuals stood by their side, as in Singur and Nandigram. But the Lalgarh story was entirely different. Here the urban literati are confronted with the emergence of the resisting warrior masses and, in their presence, are at a loss as to what position to take.

On 16 September last year, an English daily organised a discussion in Kolkata with the caption “Surely the Maoist is not one of us”. Most of the speakers sought the genesis of the Maoist movement in the “failure of the system to deliver”. Let us quote a few lines from the report (*The Statesman*, 17 September 2009):

When a landlord takes away a villager's wife, keeps her in his house to sexually abuse her and orders the husband to go away when he pleads with him for returning his wife to him and his two children, what is he supposed to do? Mouth platitudes about non-violence and peace? Or take up arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them? In one such case a youth in Andhra Pradesh went straight into the jungle, organised a group of about 25,000 people, killed the landlord and ended by being Maoists.

This is part of the speech delivered by G Hargopal of the University of Hyderabad, which only corroborates the view that it is the oppressive state that breeds armed resistance

The struggle in Jangal Mahal is not a spontaneous movement; it has been a politically conscious movement, as is clear from its very unfolding. By now, it is obvious that the Maoists have been playing a major part in it. Without their active role, the movement would not have taken such a shape and spread to newer areas. This constitutes its

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main strength. The urban literati should not grudge it, because who is to lead and guide the movement, what form that movement would take is to be decided by the sons of the soil themselves, and not by those who keep a safe distance from it.

Many of us still do not know who to look forward to for guidance and leadership;

but what many of us do feel is that how we live today is far removed from how we ought to live, that the present system has already outlived its utility, has been failing to deliver and that some fundamental change is necessary in the interests of the majority of the people. Is Lalgarh showing the way?

It is high time that we raise our collective voice against this unjust war waged by the central and state governments against our own people, demand complete demobilisation of the paramilitary forces and reallocation of resources from the means of destruction to the tasks of creating a new society fit for human living.