

Debate concerning the Lalgarh movement

The ongoing Lalgarh movement in West Bengal has accomplished many things. It has taken people's movement on to a higher stage where resistance against state repression in various forms is tied up with the struggle for the development of the adivasi languages and script, a new pro-people model of development and a determined fight not to hand over the natural resources of the region to foreign and domestic big capital for plunder and loot in the name of 'industrialization'. This historic movement has also led to controversy as to its nature, the nature of the involvement of the Maoists in it, the relation between the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities and the Maoists and the problems faced by the civil rights bodies and various sections of the people in responding to the movement in the different stages of its development. Many articles have been published in the dailies from Kolkata, most of which are not available to people in other states. Since the debate is rich in content, we felt that the arguments and counter-arguments should be circulated among as many people as possible. This debate is good for the functioning of democracy, for dispelling wrong notions and helpful in forming/changing/modifying/strengthening one's opinion. We have picked up three articles—all written in the form of open letters and responses. The first article is captioned 'An Open Letter to the Maoists' written by Sujato Bhadra, a well-known civil rights activist from West Bengal. The second and third articles are responses to that. One (the second) is captioned 'Response from Jangal Mahal' and written by Kishenji, the well-known and much talked-about Maoist leader now in Jangal Mahal; the other is captioned 'Violence and Non-violence' and written by Amit Bhattacharyya, Professor of History, Jadavpur University, Kolkata and human rights activist. These were published in the Bengali daily *Dainik Statesman*. The first came out on 26 September 2009, and the second and third came out in a single issue, that of 10 October 2009. The following is a free translation from the Bengali originals.

An Open Letter to the Maoists

Sujato Bhadra

The present writer is an Indian citizen, associated with the civil rights/human rights movement in West Bengal for some decades. You are probably aware of the fact that recently in this state your armed activities and the more violent and more cruel repression subsequently adopted by the state by making your activities as a pretext has given rise to a debate.

As you know, the civil society became vocal in its criticism of police repression and terror in the Jangal Mahal area including Lalgarh in last November (2008). The charter of demands placed by the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities got the wholehearted support from the civil society and many organizations. The civil society was conscious about the happenings that took place since 18 June; it raised its voice time and again against repression perpetrated by the joint

forces, stuck to the demand for the withdrawal of joint forces and placed demand to the government for sitting in a dialogue with all the parties. We have strongly opposed the 'terrorist' tag being affixed to your organization (by the state). The dissident part of the civil society was also much vocal demanding the repeal of the UAPA. In a nutshell, the position of the civil society against state repression and terror is zero tolerance. Many of us are in no way subscribers to the 'Ticking bomb situation' model.

The basis of our protest is our adherence to democratic values, consciousness emanating from humanitarianism and morality. Such elements, we feel, should also become part and parcel of politics guided by class outlook. It is these thoughts that have made me feel that some of your activities suffer from lack of logical thinking. Some events even severely hurt out consciousness and gave us pain.

Your party was confronted with such questions earlier also. You have replied to the open letter from the 'Concerned citizens' of Andhra Pradesh, I have also gone through your reply to the questions raised (centring round Chhattisgarh) by some eminent persons (Ramchandra Guha and others). At that time you worked as an underground party. Recently, after the promulgation of the ban on you and the draconian black law, the situation, no doubt, has become more difficult for you. Now there is no legal avenue for us to know your views and to respond to them from our side. We appreciate the fact that you have to carry on in the face of such a suffocating atmosphere and state terror. While sharing your anguish, I bear doubts about some of your activities. I am placing those things, keeping in mind the difficult situation you are in. My request to you is to give these (critical observations) some consideration.

In one of your leaflets on 'Maoist violence', the following is stated: "...violence has a class-orientation, it is never neutral...only armed struggle and people's war would develop and spread people's democratic struggles...our work in not violent, it is people's violence to get rid of violence, which is part of people's war" (dt.18-07-09).

I do not subscribe to this political view. I am not even opposing this standpoint from an alternative political outlook. I, on the contrary, would raise questions by keeping myself within your logical structure: one can talk about notion of violence and deal with it at the theoretical plane; problems crop up at the time implementation and the social impact that necessarily follows from it. It is related to the intense reaction that has been generated within the supporters of Lalgarh and other democratic movements.

Why only you, many philosophers throughout ages had clearly maintained that justice could be established through violence only(?). For example, Sartre has written: "Violence is acceptable because all great changes are based on violence" (*The Aftermath of War* p.35). He forgot to add that history itself had shown that a society created through violent means could not live for long. Whether anything good can be achieved through violence is also very much doubtful. The concept "End justifying the means" rejects the notion of justice and morality; and the result is that "the means outweigh the end".

You have declared in quite unequivocal terms that the heroic people of the area (Jangal Mahal) under the leadership of the CPI(Maoist) conducted trial in people's courts and meted out to those lumpens (hermads of the CPM) the punishment they deserved for being police informers (Press Release dt.16-08-09).

Our opposition is over the question of this capital punishment. Many people and civil rights bodies throughout the world including India mustered public opinion for the final abolition of capital punishment (legalized murder). As a result, the majority of the countries in the world (224 countries) have abolished death sentence. The reason is that as a form of punishment, this practice is barbarous and cruel. Over and above, it also does not act as a deterrent. Beheading does not allow the victim any chance to rectify oneself. Not only that, there could also be possibility of error in judgement. If it is found after carrying out the punishment that the condemned person was innocent, nobody can return his life. On the contrary, such violent punishment makes the society more inhuman and more violent. Long time back, Tom Paine remarked: "The people by nature are not violent, they only reproduce the cruel methods used by the state". We strongly oppose this cruel method/means adopted by the state. Side by side, we also hold that if notions such as 'eye for an eye' or 'life for a life' take root in the minds of the oppressed people in this unequal and deprived society, then there is the outburst of violent mentality from the side of the people; this is happening now. You represent the advanced elements striving for social transformation. What should be your role as the vanguard? Will you submit to that violent emotion, or will you uphold advanced democratic values and guide the people under your influence along that path?

What is the organizational structure of the 'people's courts'? Is it that the accusers themselves are judges and they themselves are the butchers? It is important to remember that in the judicial system set up by the state, there are certain recognized stages, judicial procedure, regular and separate judicial structure, a higher court of appeal and the right to clemency in the hands of the president. Despite all these, we demand abolition of the system of legalized killing. How can we thus and from what democratic, human rights or the values of just trial accept such trials in 'people's courts' and the meting out of punishment?

The armed forces in Jammu and Kashmir and the north-east think that all the people living there are 'suspect'; they raise big hoardings to declare 'Suspect all'. Are you not acting in the same way? In your judgement, each and every CPM supporter or individual is part of the hermad gang and engaged in spying for the police forces. Unless they surrender to the people, they would be given death sentence. Such a method could be the manifestation of your power; but it is devoid of sense of values. You have already meted out death sentence to many 'informers'; nobody knows how many more will have to meet the same fate before the rest of the lumpens would surrender to the people. This is because everything depends on what you think about it. You have stated: "To set those lumpens free would mean handing over the struggling and revolutionary masses to the joint forces' (Press Release dt.16-08-09). Let us state in the light of what the psychologist Christopher Bolas has said: "Every time the killer strikes, it

is his own death that he avoids". It means that such attacks come from a sense of fear and apprehension. The question is: if you have a social base in the area, then it is possible to socially isolate the informers. On the other hand, if your political opponents carry on ideological struggle, and they are physically liquidated by branding them as such, then it will appear that some type of acute 'irrationality' pervades throughout your activities. In reality, Lalgarh has become a valley of death, and from there the message of death is travelling round. Is there no way to combat espionage other than liquidating them? Could not the people adopt the method of exposing those informers under your leadership? Marx had to close down his *Das Capital* write a whole book named *Herr Vogt* in order to expose espionage. And Mao was in favour of beheading only a few.

In that case, propaganda and exposure will, on the one hand, not exert any negative social reaction, and, on the other, the state will also not be able to get any illegal but apparently social sanction to 'liquidate' you. If that is not done, then we will be faced with a terrible situation: unmoved, indifferent human mass. In a situation attended with violence, counter-violence, repression and counter-attack, it will not be possible to mobilize democratic people and raise the voice of protest. We belonging to the third force (those who are neither with the state nor with you ideologically) would find ourselves in a helpless situation. Had we been able, as an alternative, to unite and create a tide of democratic movement against the ruthless state repression in Lalgarh, then we would have found in our ranks that civil society which was imbued with democratic values and inspired by the teachings of Singur and Nandigram, and thus would have ensured the victory of the weak over the strong. In the initial period (November '08 to June '09), it was in fact achieved.

You have passed your judgement on some eminent persons and decided to mete out death sentence to them. As you stated, it was the demand of the people. There was an attempt on the life of the chief minister through the Salboni blast. It is true that the chief minister is accused of committing genocide. It is also true that after 14 March massacre in Nandigram, posters and placards were raised demanding 'Hang the chief minister". But all of us realized that such outbursts were the manifestation of immediate intense emotion. But if that is interpreted as the serious, logical demand of the people to kill him, then, I am forced to state, this is totally childish. To brand someone as 'authoritarian' and then to attempt to kill him, is equally ludicrous and manifestation of anarchist philosophy. Let us remember that Marxist philosophy was established in the world by negating anarchist philosophy. Whether there is any philosophical or theoretical recognition of such individual-centric attack from Marxism to Maoism is not known to me.

Mao Tse-tung's favourite military strategist Karl von Clausewitz wrote that like politics, war also has a specific aim; but that war at the same time negates that politics; the contending parties get busy parading their forces. War and annihilation bring destruction, but that not only to the enemy, but also inflict severe damage to your own side. And there is also no end to this war.

Friends and foes act always by treating each as a 'unholy force'. The question is; while getting rid of the unholy, we ourselves are getting influenced by that force. We should not forget that great note of caution: 'Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And when you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you' (*Beyond good and Evil*). Counter-violence, counter-attack—these are the natural reactions of human beings. That does not require any special kind of philosophy. Philosophy, on the other hand, can control that reaction with logical thinking, can make human values and notions about morality indispensable elements in formulating policies. I feel that you suffer from serious limitations on this issue.

In the recent period, the police arrested two of your important members, but did not produce them in the court in time. Through your press release, you had quite rightly claimed that the police had violated law by not producing them in court within 24 hours and appealed to civil rights bodies for intervention. You have rightly thought about fake encounters. In the face of a public outcry, the police were forced to produce them in court. Before that, you have also made appeals to the intellectuals to come to Lalgarh to see with their own eyes the barbarity perpetrated by the joint forces in Lalgarh.

By doing so, you have admitted that if, even within this structure, the process of 'rule of law' is kept operative in the proper manner and if democratic voice is raised in its support, then it is possible to resist in some cases the illegal, anti-human rights activities and bad intentions of the state. Should it not be our task to strengthen all democratic forums of this type, so that it is possible to ensure the implementation of state-declared commitments to safeguard civil rights of the people? The more such space widens, the more will it be possible to prevent fake encounters, the killing of struggling people and to isolate and defeat the 'Culture of impunity'.

If instead of doing so, we kidnap someone, oppress him and after that kill him and throw his body in the streets, then we ourselves become oppressors like the state. You will have to accept responsibility for the trauma that the children undergo when murders take place before their very eyes. Such a brutal method of murder can never be accepted by the sensitive people. How can thus we be able to enable people to dream of a society based on human values in place of the ugly face of the state? How can that dream be fulfilled by following the same condemnable, mean method?

You have claimed that Jangal Mahal has posed the questions to the whole people: "Would you support the repression by the joint forces in Lalgarh, or would you support the resistance and protest movement of the heroic people under the leadership of the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities against the joint armed forces and the resistance forces including the hermits?" (Statement dt.16-08-09). You have made appeals to all to stand by the side of the Lalgarh movement.

Many of us have consistently been supporting the movement against police atrocities and the demands of the Lalgarh people unconditionally. That is not the question. Many of us also do not consider your extension of support to that movement to be unjust.

The problem has started with the transformation in the character of the movement. It relates to your practice of violence. Needless to say, you have been using the typical Marxist 'binary' model of seeing it as a contradiction between the two—either one is on this side or on that side or on the side of the enemy; none among you is prepared to accept the fact that there could also be third, fourth or fifth position and stand by the movement. Scholars have written so many things on this 'history of seeing'!

We are condemning the continuous state violence and the repression perpetrated by the main ruling party in this state. Along with it, we have also felt that that your declared presence has pushed into the background the focus of the direction of people's upsurge and movement under the leadership of the People's Committee. On the other hand, there are some negative elements inherent in the armed resistance under your leadership that stand in the way of getting mass support against state violence. Whether you realize it or not, we do not know. While standing in the 21st century—an era of human rights consciousness, in any resistance movement, particularly those with arms, certain universal unchallengeable notions, which we may call 'minimal absolutist view', should have to be recognized. Discarding those notions as 'bourgeois' at the time of formulation principles would only be suicidal.

Response from Jangal Mahal

Kishenji

The human rights movement in Bengal started in the early 1970s after the setback of the Naxalbari movement. The next few decades were one of vacuum in the revolutionary movement; it was in that context that human rights movement developed.

The human rights movement played a glorious role for four decades, standing by the side of oppressed masses. In those days, Sujatobabu stood in the forefront of that struggle. Civil rights movement in those decades took some shape. That model was the model of standing by the side of the oppressed masses.

However, as there was a resurgence of revolutionary movements in Andhra Pradesh and erstwhile Bihar in the 1980s, civil rights movement, by degrees, was beset with a crisis. That was the time when the masses rose to shake off the image of 'oppressed masses' and asserted their identity as the 'resisting warrior masses'. Thus old model of civil rights movement could not fit in the new situation. The state started clamping down on human rights activists to keep the movement within specified limits. That gave rise to debate and contradiction within human

rights movement. The glorious representative of human rights movement at that stage in Andhra Pradesh was Ramanathan R. Purushottam.

Human rights movement in Bengal still remained untouched by that crisis. This is because revolutionary movement in Bengal, as yet, had not regained its relevance in the political scenario.

Today the movement in Lalgarh-Jangal Mahal has raised a question before the human rights movement. Will the civil rights activists, who are accustomed to stand by the side of the 'oppressed masses', equally not be successful in standing by the side of the 'resisting warrior masses'? The movement in Lalgarh-Jangal Mahal has brought to the fore two main questions:

- 1) Should the people's movement, in the last analysis, be allowed to be exploited to make room for mainstream leaders/lady leaders? Or will the people be able to channelize it in a way that helps in the resurgence of the people themselves?
- 2) Should the people fighting against fascist rule be satisfied with saving their skin by holding the hands of leaders/lady leaders along the constitutional path? Or will the people protect themselves by destroying the fascist fortresses like that of Bastille?

Violence or non-violence? This had never been an 'issue' in Indian politics. What is called 'democratic politics'—the practice of violence in that mainstream constitutional politics far surpasses the practice of violence in revolutionary politics. Thus in the language of law, this is a 'non-issue'. It is to bury the two main issues raised by the Lalgarh movement that the state policy-makers' circle has put forward this 'non-issue'.

The right to self-defence is recognized even in bourgeois law. The right to kill the attacker for self-defence is recognized, though that right is used as pretexts to kill revolutionary masses and revolutionaries in the hands of the state. But when the oppressed masses turn into resisting warrior masses and come forward to exercise that right, the whole context changes.

What is meant by fascist rule? It is rule by a coterie of a handful of political leaders and bureaucrats. At the grassroots level, it takes the form of combined terror perpetrated by state forces and Gestapo forces of the party.

Let us keep in mind that fascism is a well-organized centralized system. Even if there is any loophole, then fascist system would penetrate through that loophole into the village and bring with it murder, rape and destruction of houses by fire. The right of self-defence of the masses demands that no shadow of the hermad exists in the villages, no loophole is allowed to be created through which they could penetrate any time. Today we are witness to the hair-raising serials associated with genocide, terror, rape and house-burning like Hitler's Gestapo forces in the wake of the emergence of 'salwa judum' in Chhattisgarh, 'Nagarik Suraksha Samiti' in Jharkhand and 'hermad forces', 'ghoskar bahini', 'Santras Protirodh Committee' in the Jangal Mahal area of Bengal. These are part of everyday life--the operation by the joint forces, the setting up 80 to 90 bunkers, big hermad camps, with modern weapons like LMGs under police

protection around Keshpur and Gorbeta to recapture Jangal Mahal. All these are known thanks to the media. On the other hand, the state is moving with moneybags from one village to another to create an informer and covert network, the police forces are creating a terror by beating up people indiscriminately, all the schools have been converted into police camps and thereby a war situation is being created. In such a war situation, can the yardsticks of just principles remain the same? Can the yardstick be the same for a normal situation and a situation when fascism rules? Civil war and fascism bring changes in human lives. The notions and yardsticks about just principles also undergo changes temporarily.

In order to tire out informers, the people are adopting a number of methods. On the other side, the state is also trying everything in its power to whet their greed. Thus the number of informers being killed is also mounting. Had there been some proper system in Jangal Mahal today, the number of informers getting killed would have been far less. In different parts of Dandakaranya, informers are being detained in people's prisons.

As long as the joint forces did not enter the area, no need was felt to liquidate the spies in such a large number. After the intrusion of the joint forces, the situation has changed. Likewise, the notion of self-defence has also changed.

We are also opposed to death sentence. However, the notion of just principle in a normal situation is different from that in a war situation. In the war situation, freedom of thought, consciousness, initiative and innovation is much limited in scope.

Sujatobabu has observed: "Your pronounced and armed presence has pushed the focus of the speed and movement of people's upsurge led by the People's Committee to the background".

Sujatobabu! The state has snatched away your right to openly enter Jangal Mahal area with only one objective. That is to indulge in disinformation campaign. Had it been otherwise, you would have been able to see that everyday thousands of people have been taking part in processions, mass gatherings, gheraos and demonstrations in every nook and corner of Jangal Mahal. Despite repression by joint forces, the system initiated by the People's Committee is giving inspiration to the people. The creativity of the masses has increased even after the arrest of Chhatradhar Mahato. You would have seen how irresistible people's movement has become. The inherent strength of the people's movement, people's initiative, their intense consciousness have truly been instrumental in writing the epic of struggle. If you are willing, we are ready to arrange everything for your visit to Jangal Mahal and provide security. Come, see with your own eyes, put them in writing, change your outlook. And turn upside down the frontier of human rights movement.

When the decision to form central coordination to take steps for curbing the Maoist movement and to silence 100 top leaders is taken and when the retired DG of the BSF, Prakash Singh openly expresses his displeasure with such a move, it shows that the state has been waging war, and war has to be fought in some particular way. In order to counter the decision of the

state to silence top 100 revolutionary leaders (Prakash Singh himself has explained what it means in police parlance to make one 'silent'), the need to take military action against top leaders of the state arises.

Sujatobabu, has stated that no change achieved through violent means has ever been long-lasting. We are not giving his remark much importance. We do not feel that he himself seriously believes in it. Most of the epochal changes in history could not be accomplished without violence. It was through violence that the ruling dynasties of the medieval age came to an end. Let me conclude by citing one example—that of slave Dred Scott against American slavery, the defeat in which made the civil war inevitable. It is the lust for power and property that made violence inevitable in all ages.

Violence and Non-violence

Amit Bhattacharyya

In the letter of 26 September (2009), captioned "An Open Letter to the Maoists" written by Sujato Bhadra, human rights activist, the author has completely messed up the cause and effect of the Lalgarh movement. In Lalgarh or Jangal Mahal, state repression was not the outcome of the 'armed activities' of the Maoists; rather, it was state repression, deprivation and sense of humiliation and years of pain and exploitation that has forced the people to support the 'jungle party', to become Maoists and to adopt 'armed activities' as the means of resistance and the realization of demands. What is actually implied in the author's statement is that since armed resistance or counter attack would invite more severe state repression, it is better not to get armed at all.

The author then referred to the application of violence and the meting out of death penalty through trial in people's courts. Here he has harped on several issues.

What transpires from his statement—and that I also the view of many others—is that 'democratic' struggle should be peaceful, and, if takes a 'violent' turn or gets 'armed', then it would lose its 'democratic' character and become an undemocratic one. The question is: is it a fact that only peaceful movements are 'democratic'? And if it is 'armed' and 'violent', then it becomes 'undemocratic'? What do History and practical experience tell us? Generally every person (barring the ruling clique and their faithful servants) wants peace, wants to have food and clothing and live in dignity; nobody wants violence or bloodshed. It is the repressive state that forces them to take up arms.

One of the main features of the Lalgarh movement is armed resistance (with firearms and traditional weapons) in the face of violent attacks launched by the state. There the state is waging a war against the people and the people in their turn are keeping up resistance to the

best of their ability. Some CPM cadres and hermdads have been killed. The Maoists declared that all of them were police 'informers'; that they were warned before, but did not listen, so they were given death sentence in people's courts. Whether they were police 'informers' is not known to the present writer. However, what is quite clear is that during the last 32 years, the gap between the ruling CPM and the police administration has vanished into thin air. Two years back, when female members of the Nari Mukti Sangha had been sticking posters in the Bagha Jatin railway station, they were encircled by CITU/CPM cadres, taken to the party office and then handed over to the police. During the same period, the members of the women's wing of the CPM and some cadres tried to hand over five members of the Matangini Mahila Samiti residing in Jadavpur, Kolkata to the police. These mean attempts prove that the CPM cadres were playing the role of police informers.

The author is against death sentence. I believe, why only he, many people are generally against death sentence. His question is: as 224 countries have abolished death sentence, why should the Maoists still keep it as a form punishment? Here the author has committed a major error. This question is reasonable to countries and established governments; but how can it be applicable to those who do neither have any country nor an established government? The present writer is in total agreement with Sujato on one point: there should be thorough investigation before making any move; the loss of lives on the part of and damage to innocent people is totally undesirable.

In the opinion of the author, 'a society formed through violent means is short-lasting'. My question to him is: Where at all has fundamental social transformation taken place and that too became long-lasting? Granted that in countries like Russia and China, where society was changed through violent means, there was change in colour. However, was the application of violent means responsible for those societies being short-lasting? Or was it due to the inherent contradictions in the new societies? History teaches us that fundamental social transformation did never take place without war and armed uprisings.

The author has raised the question of the social impact of violence. Why should he speak here only of some urban intellectuals who are detached from the struggle? What about the impact on the people of Jangal Mahal, those adivasi students who have been daily subjected to state violence? Would he not also talk about the resistance struggle by the people, of those people of the area who, like the people of Nandigram, have been spending sleepless nights and standing up to the challenge of the hermdads and the joint forces?

The problem with the human rights activists is that they never challenge the existence of the state; on the contrary, they accept its legitimacy and demand that it should 'put into practice its declared commitment'. Influenced by post-modernist thinking, they see only the tree, but fail to see the forest; to them, the Lalgarh movement is just a conflict between state repression and counter-violence perpetrated by the 'armed opposition group'. But the lalgarh movement is at the same time a struggle against the plunder of the country's natural resources by foreign capital and domestic comprador capital, a struggle for attaining pro-people development

(setting up of health centres, construction of roads, dams and water reservoirs, implementation of land-to-the-tiller programme etc through people's initiative and voluntary labour).

On 16 September last (2009), the English daily from Kolkata *The Statesman* organized a discussion on a theme captioned 'Surely the Maoist is not one of us'. There in his speech, Prof. G.Hargopal said: "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, organized a group of about 25,000 people, killed the landlord and ended up being Maoists" (*The Statesman* 17-09-09).

History teaches us that violence, murder—all these existed in the past and will continue to exist at present. All of us individually want peace; nobody wants violence or murder. Despite this, these will continue to stay irrespective of our wishes, and would influence the direction of History and leave behind their negative or positive imprint on the way.