

Lalgarh: Questions to the Left

Lalgarh poses questions that the two main streams of the Left in India have to answer.

The Left Front led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) has just suffered its worst ever defeat in parliamentary elections since Independence. The reasons for the defeat, particularly in West Bengal, had much to do with the way the CPI(M) went about implementing policies that alienated its core support base – the rural poor.

The post-poll incidents in Lalgarh in Paschim Medinipur district confirm both the alienation and the anger against the ruling party as well as the degradation of the Left Front. But the manner in which activists of the Communist Party of India (Maoist), present in the region for years, have unleashed their own violence reveals the Maoists' immaturity. The reprisals by the central and state governments that have followed will surely result in the suppression of the local adivasi movement that was striving to assert the rights of the Santhalis in the region. Caught in the three-pronged attack by the CPI(M), the Maoists and the State, the Lalgarh tribals are, sadly, now doomed to further subjugation.

While the adivasis have for years struggled to be heard, it was the mine explosion, allegedly by the Maoists, in November 2008 on the route of the visiting West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, which set off a series of events culminating in what can only be described as a military operation that is being followed and reported on by a sensationalist media that has little time for the Santhalis of Paschim Medinipur. The reprisal by the state police after the mine explosion, which targeted villagers in Lalgarh for supposedly harbouring Maoist activists, was so brutal that a spontaneous movement was launched by the tribals in the area.

The Police Santrash Birodhi Janasadharaner Committee (PSBJC) was formed to protest against police atrocities and called for an end to frequent police raids in the area. The state government did nothing beyond withdrawing certain police camps. The adivasi movement then resolved to keep the state administration and the police out of the lives of the local community and erected barricades around the area. The adivasis went on to transform their movement from merely being grievance-driven to trying to implement livelihood and welfare programmes on their own – two examples were the setting up of primary health centres and building minor irrigation facilities. This naturally further angered CPI(M) activists and officials.

Eventually, the fact that mainstream politics chose to ignore the Lalgarh movement opened the door for the Maoists to voice

adivasi demands and exercise control over the PSBJC. After the 2009 Lok Sabha rout, a weakened CPI(M) found itself the target of Maoist violence in Lalgarh, leading ultimately to the state government bringing in central government forces.

The ongoing state action – mobilisation of paramilitary forces, removal of blockades, banning of the CPI(Maoist), arrest of Maoist spokespersons and the general environment of reprisals – has killed a movement and now adivasi alienation is complete. The adivasis and the PSBJC have demanded talks with the state government and so have the Maoists, but the ban on the CPI(Maoist) and the decision to persist with paramilitary action have indicated that the government has no desire other than to continue with the military option.

Questions have to be raised to the Maoists as to why they continue with tactics such as assassination and what political motive this may have. For all the political dividends that they may claim to have gained in Lalgarh, it is the opportunist sections of the West Bengal polity – mainly the Trinamool Congress – that have benefited from the Maoist actions in Paschim Medinipur. Besides, by inviting state repression, the Maoists have betrayed the adivasis' cause and by their tactics have legitimised the paramilitary action against "Maoist mayhem".

Compared to other regions in West Bengal, land reforms have not materially altered the socio-economic realities in Paschim Medinipur. The region suffers from a lack of irrigation resources and the state government has done little on the health and education fronts. Added to this is the gradual conversion of Left Front hegemony – though it is the Jharkhand Party that has traditionally been the winner in the area in the assembly elections – into a patronage system at the local level favouring the Left Front cadre, which has led to a sharpening of antagonisms. The organisational deficiencies of the Left Front – local corruption, patronage and entrenchment of violence – are all consequences of the failures of the state government and the ruling alliance to transform the rural countryside in West Bengal beyond implementing tenancy reform. The anger of the adivasis in Lalgarh against malfeasance by the CPI(M) cadre and sympathisers in the region is symptomatic of this phenomenon.

All in all, the sandwiching of the adivasis in Lalgarh between the Left Front administration and the Maoists poses questions to both these entities.