

Notes on a Dying People

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The political movement that came up from among the people of Lalgarh in November 2008 cried out for help and support from the civil and democratic society – for basic human rights, for a right to all decisions about what belongs to them alone: their water, land and forest. The movement negotiated with the intransigent Left Front administration of West Bengal for months, without much success. Their peaceful movement now lies in tatters, because of the violent intervention by the Maoists who have done incalculable harm to both the objectives as also to the people of Lalgarh and by the armed retaliation from the centre and state governments.

Post-election West Bengal is, indeed, a gloomy, even alarming place. With the first ever defeat of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) CPI(M) after decades of virtually one-party rule, leftists all over India had hoped to see the beginnings of a new and democratic political culture. Especially after Singur, Nandigram and multiple other movements of resistance have shown how much popular defiance can accomplish even against the combined might of an entrenched state power, multinational corporates and an autocratic party. Instead, we now see a politics of reprisals: CPI(M) political practice seems to have left an indelible mark on all organised politics in the state.

There are many outcries against Maoist and Trinamool (Congress) violence. Even though they do sometimes exaggerate the scale of retaliatory violence, basing themselves on highly selective and dramatised media reports, the larger point they make is more or less justified: the precious time for thinking about and acting on democratic alternatives may just be frittered away in this manner. At the same time, there is the opposite danger of swinging over to the other extreme in this mood of disenchantment: of forgetting the immediate past, about state and party terror and, above all, about the way in which ordinary and poor villagers live in West Bengal, especially in the tribal belt.

We refer to Lalgarh, a place much in news these days and destined to be the centre of attention as the site of sensational media reportage on police and paramilitary troops on march through jungles. What the reports do not show is the abject poverty of villagers, their prolonged efforts to seek help from all possible quarters before the Maoists built themselves a base within their movement, and the crude and brutal police and cadre intimidation they face on an everyday basis. They are not the happy, uninhibited tribals of Bengali movies, but men and women

and children without viable livelihoods, minimal medical help or basic education, often without food, clothes and shelter, dragged into police custody and flogged, mostly for unknown offences. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) is unknown in this area and no state venture for ensuring survival ever developed, let alone plans for development. The landscape of bleak wretchedness is dominated by the bizarre splendour of the party offices of the CPI(M) and the houses of local party leaders: apparently “wholetimers” on a pay of Rs 1,500/a month and without any other ostensible means of livelihood.

The media does not talk of the peaceful resistance that tribals had built up in an open and democratic manner over the last six months or so which got little attention from opposition parties, or from Kolkata-based middle class groups or “civil society” groups as they call themselves these days. Of course, there are many notable exceptions: the Lalgarh Sanhati Mancha, a group of cultural and political activists has given them all the help it could and has tried its best to mobilise a wider and influential support base for them. By and large, however, public attention has not been forthcoming. There have not been any non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working there, nor groups of local activists trying to ensure livelihoods, protection from intimidation, basic human rights. In this regard, they are worse off than even Chhattisgarh or Madhya Pradesh tribals. Bengali newspapers and television channels have written about and shown some scenes of indiscriminate torture and flogging that the central and state forces now engage in. National media blanks it out altogether.

When public response to their desperate predicament came at last, it came as violent condemnation – often grossly uninformed – after Maoists started presenting themselves as the real face of the movement. We think that both the opposition and the civil society groups have to answer the unanswerable now. In this hopeless situation which has continued for decades even as they turned in vain from one party to another, asking for some relief, what would we have liked them to do? To keep

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on dying? Obviously, that is so, that would have been the decent thing for them to do – to be seen only in ways we like to see them, and not be heard.

Harm Done by Maoists

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, inevitably, into shady transactions with rich and corrupt power brokers at different levels. The typical pattern of their activities is curious. 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. One wonders how and why the so-called leader Bikas could arrange the entire media – press, state and national tv channels – to gather around him as he claimed to represent the Janasadharaner Samiti and not have any state forces to be around as he spoke.

It is also curious that even though Chhatradhar Mahato, the Samiti leader, has disowned all violent action, the forces and administration swear they will arrest him. It is very clear that it is a democratic popular upsurge that is the real target and Maoists are an invaluable resource for the state for they help branding it as Maoist. State terror and Maoist terror seem to be strangely interdependent, both working for the same results: the brutal end to a democratic popular struggle.

We also need to remember that until last week the West Bengal had not yet banned the Communist Party of India (Maoist), even though the Maoists make no secret of their commitment to violence: so such politics does enjoy a legalised existence in the state which, then, has little moral right to act surprised at what they do. Moreover, when the ban comes into force, as it surely will now, it is quite clear that the real victims targeted by the state would be civil and human rights groups: the more committed, democratic and open they are like the Association for Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR), the more they are at risk. The incarceration of Binayak Sen has taught us that people who want to instill a sense of human rights and

dignity among the wretched of the earth are the enemies of the state. West Bengal will be no exception. Its record in human rights violations is among the worst in the country as is its record for the utter neglect of tribal belts. In fact, the moment the CPI(M) was assured of central government help, they began a campaign about Trinamool Congress links with Maoists, hoping to kill two birds with one stone.

But the matter has gone well beyond West Bengal. The prime minister has always been absolutely frank in saying that he considers Maoism the greatest internal danger: not poverty, social injustice or the absolute levels of deprivation among certain categories of people which create a space for Maoism. He has also said recently that the mineral-rich areas of the country should be opened up to multinational investment on the easiest of terms and that he wants a climate of investment that brooks no obstacles to it. Many of the marked areas are the tribal belts. And wherever the poor and the dispossessed stake out claims to livelihood, land and dignity, the climate for investment is endangered. Lalgargh is, therefore, only the beginning of a national mission: our land, our coastline, our water, forest and agricultural resources and our poor people are but the playthings of the corporate world. The Indian State has learnt from Sri Lanka.

Times are very strange. Left Front critics of the Congress and of Manmohan Singh in particular, who a few days back were thundering out revenge on him for his defiance over the nuclear deal, calling him “Mr Unclean”, politicians who wanted to topple the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) at any cost, are now on their bended knees, asking for the maximum number of troops to march against and destroy the poorest people of Bengal. The Bengal administrative personnel have summarily dismissed the Samiti and even Maoist pleas for a dialogue, for addressing the basic problems of the people of this area.

Destruction of Possibilities

Before a hundred years of silence descends on this area, let us recall that what the state and the Maoists have brought about on Lalgargh was not the only story. There were other possibilities, a rich political

experience and experiment that came up from among the people of Lalgargh who have, for decades, cried out to everybody for help and support and who conducted a peaceful struggle for basic human rights, for a right to all decisions about what belongs to them alone: their water, land and forest. They and other mediators patiently negotiated with the administrative authorities and the process dragged on for seven months as the administration would not cede an inch. Nor would the state authorities try and work for minimal improvement of the tribal quality of life, even after the peaceful agitation started and went on peacefully. Now, their aspirations for basic protection from intimidation, torture, livelihood, lie in ashes.

In March 2009, a friend from Kolkata was visiting us. Since he is a leading member of the Sanhati Mancha, we asked him to describe the movement. Even as he celebrated the richness of the movement in the interview, he told us that he was deeply worried about the isolation of Lalgargh from mainstream politics, about the dangers of a Maoist infiltration. Janasadharaner Samiti is a loose federation of local elected bodies and anyone could join, but without any party banner. No electoral party ventured forth as they had nothing to gain. Maoists, therefore, may have a free field for their operations, he feared, even though the movement from its inception had been remarkably open and peaceful. We transcribe the interview below.

Interview with activist Sumit Chowdhury in Delhi, early March 2009.

Question (Q): Describe the locale of Lalgargh:

Answer (A): Lalgargh is in West Medinipur, located in a block on the borders of West Bengal and Jharkhand, adjacent to Kata Pahari. It is a part of the so-called “Jangalkhand” which includes parts of Bankura, Kamapurulia and West Medinipur: so-called because it is heavily forested and hilly, populated largely by

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tribals, especially Santhals, but also some Mundas, Shabars and Lodhas. Most of them are below the poverty line. They live by gathering tendu leaves and other forest produce. They also work as labourers migrating to other parts of Bengal. Lalgarh grows only one crop, which is paddy. The land is mostly rocky with hardly any irrigation. Forests are government property, leased out to Bengali and Marwari contractors. All local landlords are Bengali. Amlashol, notorious for starvation deaths in West Bengal which largely go unreported, is in the adjacent block of Belpahari.

There is very little social stratification among tribals, although Mahatos enjoy a high status within their communities. Both men and women are equally present in all occupations. Very few primary schools exist in the entire area, and a handful of tribal students have graduated, against great odds. These graduates provide leadership in the movement. They are unemployed, especially because West Bengal hardly fills up the scheduled tribe quota. Public hospitals barely exist in the entire area. People suffer from very poor health and they are prey to constant and many diseases. They are seriously malnourished, often at starvation levels.

Q: Why are Police Atrocities Mentioned by Tribals so Often and with such Anger?

A: In the name of suppressing Maoists in the locality, there have been from the early 1990s large-scale and indiscriminate arrests and arbitrary and frequent floggings of local people. More than 1,500 people at present languish in police custody without trial.

Q: How did the Present Movement Start?

A: On 2 November 2008, the Union Steel Minister, Paswan, and West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, went to inaugurate a steel plant at Salboni, the first industrial venture in the area. The tribals are distrustful of it and see it as an encroachment on their lands and forests. When the ministers were on their way back, a landmine blast occurred at Kalaimundi, fairly close to Medinipur town. According to the local people, the blast happened half an hour after the convoy had passed through. It is amazing how landmines could have been set up so

publicly without the police noticing what was going on. It is even more surprising because the whole area had been combed very thoroughly and had been under heavy police surveillance for a week before the blast, and that particular locality is a CPI(M) stronghold. The blast remains a mystery. Four constables were badly injured in the blast though nobody died. Instantly, the police and the party, without any investigation, alleged that this was a Maoist conspiracy and that plans had been hatched at Kata Pahari under Shashadhar Mahato, a known Maoist in Jangalkhand. (Subsequently, Maoists have claimed to be the authors of the blast, not the Samiti. The Samiti leader denounced the blast and disowned all violent action.)

Q: Tell Us Something about the Maoist Operations in That Area:

A: Lalgarh itself has had no record of Maoist violence, but in adjoining Purulia and Bankura some CPI(M) functionaries have been killed and police stations attacked since the mid-1990s. Party cadres and police attacks as retaliation had been far more frequent and comprehensive. The government alleges that Maoists come and go from the Jharkhand forests. Shashadhar Mahato, a Maoist, comes from Lalgarh but his brother Chhatradhar, who has no connection with the Maoists, has emerged as a spokesman of the present

People's Movement or *Janaganer Andolan*. There is quite a lot of popular support for Maoists at Lalgarh and Bankura-Purulia, where they are seen as pro-poor. But local people generally have not joined in any violent activities.

Q: What Happened after the Blasts?

A: From 4 November 2008, a huge police contingent under the superintendent of police, West Medinipur, raided Chhotopeliya village, where a local Muslim CPI(M) activist, a labour contractor by profession (Reza ul-Karim) was spending the night. The police mistakenly tried to arrest him as a Maoist. Santhal women came out to protest the arrest and the police went on the rampage, beating up the women very badly and injuring 11 of them. Chitamoni Murmu lost both her eyes as a result of the flogging, and a pregnant woman was viciously assaulted. Two schoolboys, 11 and 14 years old, were returning from a *jatra* show nearby. They too were beaten up and a local headmaster was flogged and arrested.

Such indiscriminate police aggression is a routine affair in the tribal belt since the early 1990s, even though no incident of Maoist violence has occurred at Lalgarh. However, this time, on 5 November, about eight to 10,000 people from 50 villages gathered at Doloipur Chowk at Katapahari, and formed the *Polishi Santrosh Birodhi*

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Janasadharener Committee (the People's Committee against Police Violence), and decided to blockade all roads leading to Lalgarh. Roads were dug up and trees felled, and within a couple of days the blockade spread to all of Jangalkhand, and even to the tribal areas in North Bengal, Bankura, and Purulia. Tribals came up with a 13-point charter of demands, the chief of which was that the SP must come to Lalgarh, publicly apologise and do sit-ups as penance for his misbehaviour, while constables who were active in the raids must rub their noses in the dirt.

Q: If Raids Like this Have Been Common for the Last 15 Years, Why Is It That There Was Such a Reaction This Time?

A: Because, in the last few years, rural West Bengal has been in a state of great turmoil: Singur and Nandigram apart, there have been rural uprisings against corruption in the public distribution system which have been extremely widespread across several districts. A new culture of resistance is now very visible, encouraging organised responses to atrocities by party cadres and the police, which have been ceased to be accepted as normal and routine features of everyday life.

Q: How Did the Movement Progress?

A: The movement spread and the blockade continued for 32 days. It was lifted after the administration – the district magistrate, subdivisional officer and block development officers – began to negotiate. Initially, the administration accepted all their demands except the sit-ups. A written agreement was drawn up, but till now none of the terms have been implemented. The movement now continues in the form of a social boycott of the police and the administration. Administrative and police personnel are denied entrance to villages; local shops do not sell goods to them; barbers and washermen withhold their services. These are traditional village penalties against social offenders, as well as Gandhian modes of protest. Eight police camps were set up in the Lalgarh area, but villagers came and broke them up. However, there was no incidence of violence against persons in the process. The police now remain virtually confined to the thana buildings.

From the first week of January, a new six-point demand charter was added to the first one. These points were much broader in nature. They affirmed tribal rights to water, land and forests (*jal, jangal, jami*) in the entire area. The Kanshabati river flows through this area but since the government “owns” the river, the community cannot use the water resources: for instance, they cannot dig canals to irrigate their lands. Also, much of the water has been diverted to dams associated with the Kanshabati project, which had been set up against tribal opinion.

Tribals now claim community-based rights to all forest produce which had been alienated by the colonial Forest Act of 1870. The UPA government had passed an act giving individual land-purchase rights to tribals in tribal localities. However, the community as a whole was not given any collective rights, which is what the tribals actually wanted. Communities also assert their collective rights to agricultural land.

Tribals are resentful of *ghorar dimer unnayan* or “non-sensical/mare’s-egg development”. They do not want industries, roads or power plants to be built in the areas inhabited by their communities. They explain that roads will enable more frequent police raids, and projected Coca-Cola and power plants will be a waste of energy, since they have no use for such things. Since they do not have irrigation facilities, they do not need power. Industries are not going to give them employment, but will take away their land and livelihood.

Instead, they want a different form of development whose terms they have formulated. They want schools, supply of drinking water, primary health centres. They also assert their cultural identity, which is denied to them. Santhali, they say, should be the medium of instruction up to high school levels in their area, and Santhali programmes should be introduced on the radio and TV networks. They want the further development of the Alchiki script for Santhali language. Up to now, the Santhali script uses the Bengali language, but the Alchiki script has been slowly developing for the last hundred years, and Santhals identify with it.

They also want autonomous hill council administrative units, but so far they have

no plans to secede from the state of West Bengal. The local Bengali population in the area consists mostly of schoolteachers, employees in government offices, and petty traders. On the whole, they are sympathetic to the movement. The movement, therefore, is not narrowly tribal, but is based on an alternative development paradigm that encompasses an entire region.

Q: What Are the Characteristic Forms of the Movement?

A: Each decision related to the movement is taken collectively at gatherings that are 15-20,000 large. Tribals gather from distant villages at an appointed central place. These are open meetings and no party banners are allowed, although occasionally members of opposition parties have attended them without banners. Local mass organisations are also not allowed to bring their banners. The only banner that is allowed is that of the Lalgarh Andolan Sanhati Mancha, because this represents the movement.

The movement now encompasses more than 200 villages, and involves more than one lakh people. Village committees have been set up through open deliberations reached in mass meetings in Bankura-Purulia-West Medinipur. Districts have separate loose coordinations that include local committees without, however, embracing a highly centralised structure.

The entire movement has a single spokesperson, Chhatradhar Mahato. He has no political affiliations and comes from a family of local cultivators. He is a graduate of the Vidyasagar University in West Medinipur. He was elected as the leader at the Doloipur Chowk meeting. At that meeting, 45 village committees came together to elect him. There are other committees that function separately, but they have a loose form of coordination with all others. Different committees have different names: the Balarampur Committee of Purulia is called *adivasi-mulavasi* (rooted) *Janasadharener Committee*. Each is constituted in an open meeting of about 15,000 people. At these meetings, even outsiders can have their say, and be a part of the final decision-making process.

There are frequent rallies that are organised by the committees. These are colourful and festive affairs, brandishing

traditional Santhal weapons like bows, arrows and spears, and there is also much beating of Santhal drums and blowing of horns. People dressed in their best dance all the way to the meeting: women ululate, dance, wear green saris and flowers, and carry stacks of earthen pots on their heads. At the meeting areas, sugar cane juice, toys, snacks, tea and balloons are sold. Children and even babies are brought in by their parents.

Q: Do Women Merely Attend Them, or Do They Have a Political Voice?

A: Each committee has to have an equal number of men and women. At times, it has been sympathetic outsiders who have insisted that women should come up on the makeshift stages on the meetings and address them. Women then came up and spoke, although somewhat shyly. In the internal meetings of the committees, outsiders are not allowed. I was allowed to attend a few as an observer, and I found that even though women hesitate in the open meetings, they are extremely vocal in the village-based committee

meetings. Committee meetings where I have participated in as an observer consist mainly of the initiative of younger people, though older people are also present. Young people are mostly graduates but they live in their villages. Committee-level women activists, in contrast, are uneducated. At Purulia, some of these women are health workers, with local NGOs and anganwadis.

Q: What Else Struck You in the Movement?

A: I found two kinds of posters on the mud walls of most village houses. One would be printed containing the 13-point charter of demands. These are signed by PNBGSC. Others are handwritten, containing slogans such as: *Adivasi Hool Chalu Aachhe* or “the tribal uprising continues”. At the same time, a formal call for a hool has not been given, though the threat of a vast tribal uprising is held out. Let us recall the celebrated anti-colonial Santhal hool of the mid-19th century. Handwritten posters are signed just by “Janasadhan” or “masses at large”. No organisational names are used. This is

therefore reminiscent of “the people decide” slogans of the Zapatistas in Mexico. On a day to day basis, villagers on the streets greet each other with *hool-johar* (Long live revolution).

We have not visited Lalgargh ourselves. However, we checked the points raised in the course of the interview with other activists from Kolkata who had visited Lalgargh during the movement or had gone there as part of enquiry teams and had investigated both local conditions and the culture of protest. They confirm all these points without any reservation. A distinguished professor of anthropology, who has written extensively on Paschim Medinipur on the basis of his ethnographic work, also talked at length about the subhuman state of existence among the tribals, the decades of total neglect by all political groups, the squandering of panchayat and local welfare resources by the CPI(M) and the self-enrichment of cadres. He also talked about the atrocious police and cadre intimidation and brutalities that are a part of their everyday lives.



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