

The Movement in Lalgarh

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Over the past few years, the West Bengal government and its law enforcement agencies used repression against the tribals in Lalgarh on the pretext of acting against the Maoists. This resulted in a genuine resistance movement since November 2008, which has reacted not only to state repression, but had also taken matters of livelihood and development into their own hands. Members of a fact finding team who visited Lalgarh in April 2009, before the centre and state government commenced military operations in the area, bring out the sequence of events that has led to the current situation.

(This article was written before the central government police action in Lalgarh.)

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Lalgarh, comprising Binpur I and some parts of Binpur II and Jharkhand blocks of the West Medinipur district, is located 60 kilometres from Medinipur town in West Bengal. The area is mainly inhabited by Santhal tribals apart from other people belonging to the scheduled castes (sc) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). People here depend on small landholdings and rain-fed subsistence agriculture for their livelihoods. The collection of *shal* leaves from the forest (used for making plates), a work done primarily by women, is a major source of cash income. The area has had a history of neglect and discrimination, with little to offer in terms of development and basic necessities for the people. To give just one example, there is only one doctor manning two non-functional primary health centres in Binpur I block. Even basic medical treatment is available only in Medinipur town.

The development paradigm of India has always ignored the concerns of tribal people, looking at tribal regions only as free sources of minerals and forest wealth. Lalgarh is no exception. And like many other tribal regions of the country, the poverty of the people and the apathy of the State have provided fertile ground for seeds of revolt to germinate and grow. The People's War Group – now the Communist Party of India (Maoist) (CPI(Maoist)) had been active in the Medinipur-Bankura-Purulia region bordering Jharkhand, also known as Jangalmahal, for the past 10 years. The activities of the Maoists have become a convenient excuse for the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front government in West Bengal to suppress all dissent and commit unspeakable atrocities against the people of the region.

'Let No One Speak Out'

People in Lalgarh and surrounding areas have traditionally supported the Jharkhand Party and Jharkhand Disham Party. Supporters of these parties have also been subjected to harassment by the local CPI(M) leaders and the police who, needless to

say, are hand-in-glove with the ruling party in West Bengal. The intolerance of the CPI(M) and the bias of the police is palpable from the stories of the people. Pashu Pant of Kantapahari village recounted

the police arrested 55 of us when there was a fight between Jharkhand Party and CPI(M) supporters at the filing of nominations for panchayat elections in 2006. They later released all the 17 CPI(M) supporters but kept us in custody for two days.

Not only opposing political parties, the CPI(M) has also targeted anyone who has dared to show dissent against their corrupt practices, misappropriation of funds and non-implementation of government schemes. Whether it is work under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) or funds allocated under the Indira Awas Yojana, it seems that local leaders of the party always grab a major share of the pie for their own cadres and supporters.

Any opposition to such malpractices carries the penalty of being labelled a Maoist and harassment for the person and his family. Prahlad Dahuriya, a vegetable seller, was arrested three years ago and kept in police custody for 12 hours. The police even attacked his wife and mother when they tried to ask why he was being arrested. Biswanath Khorkor, another villager was arrested one year ago and kept in custody for 45 days. According to Chhatradhar Mahato, 153 criminal cases have been filed in Lalgarh against alleged Maoists. Hundreds of people have been accused in these cases. Some individuals have 35-40 cases registered against them (Halder 2009). Women have had to bear the maximum brunt of police and CPI(M) violence. The women going to the forests to collect *shal* leaves are often frisked and body-searched by male police officers to "check" if they are carrying food or firearms for the Maoists.

Immediate Context

There was a landmine explosion attack on the convoy of West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya and Union Minister for Steel Ram Vilas Paswan on 1 November 2008 when they were returning from the inauguration of the Jindal Steel Works special economic zone at Salboni block (West Medinipur district). This started the familiar routine of foisted cases, arrests, torture and harassment in the

police bid to apprehend alleged Maoist suspects. Not surprisingly, police actions were concentrated in Lalgarh, an area where the CPI(M) did not enjoy popular support but which was 30 kilometres away from the scene of the incident.

From 2 November onwards, the police arrested four school boys, a schoolteacher and other villagers for "investigation". Deepak Pratihari of Kantapahari village was arrested on 3 November when he was coming back from the block office. The policemen reportedly kicked his pregnant wife on the abdomen when she tried to intervene. Eight people, including Gopal Sareng and Lakhiram Murmu, were arrested in this manner from different villages. On 5 November, the police beat up women in Chotapelia village when they were resisting the arrest of a labour contractor, injuring 10 women seriously and permanently damaging the eye of Chintamani Murmu.

By the morning of 6 November, as police atrocities continued unabated, the anger of the people reached a peak. Thousands of adivasi men and women gathered in front of the Lalgarh police station and blockaded it. At a rally on the same day, the people decided to forbid the entry of police in Lalgarh until they apologised for their actions. Since then, the adivasis of Lalgarh have been carrying on an extraordinary movement resisting the mighty and violent efforts of the State to break their resolve.

Movement in Lalgarh

For the past six months, until the recent action, no police or paramilitary personnel had entered Lalgarh. Vigil committees formed in each village by the Pulish Shantrash Birodhi Janashadharaner Committee (PSBJC, People's Committee against Police Atrocities) kept them at bay. Camps of the Central Reserve Police Force stationed at the Lalgarh Panchayat Bhawan and a local school building have been relocated due to the pressure generated by the movement. There was a newfound confidence amongst the people.

The PSBJC made several other demands to the state administration as well – removal of police camps from the area, compensation for victims of the violence and others.

The CPI(M) has not remained idle during these developments and has attempted

to crush the agitation. The local police has routinely made attempts to enter the area without addressing any of the demands of the PSBJC. They have been helped in their mission by the "Harmad Vahini" – armed cadre of the CPI(M). On 2 February 2009, CPI(M) supporters were taking out the funeral procession of Nandlal Pal, a CPI(M) zonal committee member who was killed the previous day, allegedly by the Maoists. When the procession reached Khasjangal village, it was stopped by a group of PSBJC supporters who were having a preparatory meeting for a rally. They objected to the police force which was accompanying the procession. The CPI(M) supporters were told that they could take the procession ahead but the police must go back. There was a clash between the two groups. Three supporters of the PSBJC – Rajaram Mandi, his son Lakhinder Mandi and Gopinath Soren – were killed in the indiscriminate firing by the police. Five people were also injured. Ramesh Murmu, whose thigh bone was grazed by a bullet, said "I was not even a part of the meeting. I was returning from the market. They started firing without any warning." He had not received any medical treatment or compensation more than two months after the incident.

The administration tried to negotiate with traditional tribal leaders and political parties in the area. The movement led by PSBJC refused to give up its demands. It derives its strength from the anger, determination and solidarity of the people. The following incident is just one such example.

On 10 April 2009, the PSBJC called a rally to protest the arrest of three persons from Bankura district. The Bankura police imposed section 144 of the criminal procedure code prohibiting the assembly of more than five persons. More than 100 police and paramilitary personnel (specially trained armed commandoes termed the STRACO) armed with lathis, shields, AK-47s and INSAS rifles stood ready to enforce order. The possibility of police action, however, did not deter the fearless men and women, young and the elderly, marching shoulder to shoulder, shouting slogans hailing the power of the people. They carried bows and arrows, axes and sickles, and even rusted swords. They were determined yet peaceful. The reverberating beats of *madol* – traditional drums – and

the sound of horns threw an open challenge. Inexorably, they moved towards the barricade set up by the police. The onward flow of the river of rebellion pushed back the helpless police force – and section 144 was successfully broken.

The confrontation now carried with itself the ominous possibility of violence. The police were not willing to yield further and allow the rally to move beyond the second barricade at the Bankura-Medinipur border. Leaders of the PSBJC stood eyeball-to-eyeball with the police force. Even as the lathi-wielding police got ready to get into action, the people heckled, cheered and argued. "What is the difference between you and me? Only the uniform..." said one voice. "You are one of us. Why are you following the orders of Buddha(deb Bhattacharjee) and Manmohan (Singh)?" shouted another. "Let us enter Bankura. We do not want violence", "Release our men immediately", "Pulish Shantrash Birodhi Committee Zindabad"... The air rang with slogans.

In the growing darkness after sunset, a brief meeting was held on the spot. Chhatradhar Mahato, spokesperson and leader of the PSBJC, announced a gherao of the Sarenga police station next day if the three men were not released. The rally went back and more than 1,500 men and women melted away into the darkness. Next day the three men arrested were released unharmed.

Every day brought with it fresh attacks and attempts by the police-Harmad Vahini combine to re-enter Lalgarh. On 11 April 2009, 20-25 armed policemen tried to enter Madhupur village in the morning. Defiant women came out of their homes carrying knives, sticks, axes and blades for chopping vegetables. They did not allow the khaki-clad personnel to enter the main village. Such was their determination that the police had to beat a hasty retreat. The entire village gathered and marched in

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the direction of the running policemen, waving sticks and shouting slogans.

A decision was taken to hold a rally immediately protesting against this intrusion. An urgent message was sent to neighbouring villages to warn them against possible attacks and calling them to join the rally. The beat of drums spread the word from village to village. Within an hour, men and women from different villages left their homes, kitchens, field and work and assembled in Madhupur. The rally went from Madhupur in Lalgarh to Memul, an adjoining village in the Sijua gram panchayat. News reached Kolkata late in the evening that Harmad Vahini cadre, who were hiding in the fields, had fired on the rally. The villagers, in turn, had retaliated with bows and arrows. This was not the first time Madhupur had been attacked, a fact finding team to Lalgarh was told. A fortnight earlier, on 26 February, the Harmad Vahini had attacked Madhupur with automatic rifles, and had engaged in arson with the police doing nothing to halt it. The people in Lalgarh assert that the police is always accompanied by CPI(M) activists and the Harmad Vahini, and there is little difference in their actions and intentions.

When parliamentary elections were to be held in Lalgarh in May, the tribals certainly wanted elections to be conducted, but not with the presence of the police. Alleging that the entry of the police into Lalgarh for conducting elections would be a ruse to continue their stay, they refused the entry without the state administration implementing the demands that they had made. Walls of mud huts were painted with the slogan: "We too want to vote, but not if the police come here". To resolve the impasse, the State Election Commission was forced to enter into negotiations with the PSBJC. It first offered to conduct elections with central government forces. This was rejected by the PSBJC. Finally, in a meeting on 22 April between Chhatradhar Mahato and chief electoral officer Debasis Sen, it was decided that polling booths would be set up outside Lalgarh and the district administration would arrange for buses to ferry voters from the villages to these polling booths.¹ The exercise of electoral democracy in our country, and the manner in which it is conducted, seldom requires the prior consent of the

people. This was a victory for the people of Lalgarh.

The voter turnout in Lalgarh on 30 April was below 13%.² There were many polling booths where not a single vote was cast. The boycott of elections was successful in the entire Jangalmahal region.

Present and the Future

Although the Lalgarh movement started with a spontaneous outburst of people's anger, it quickly assumed an organised form under the leadership of the PSBJC. In 91 villages of Lalgarh, 10 representatives from each village, which included five women, were made part of the village-level committees in November 2008. Two members were then chosen from each village-level committee to elect the 45-member central committee (Halder 2009). It is this central committee which has been spearheading the movement and taking all the important decisions. This form of organisation has given the movement a democratic character, and also the strength to resist the organised violence of the CPI(M).

The PSBJC did not allow any political party or individual to take over the leadership of the movement. It asked all leaders and activists to join the movement without the banners of their respective political parties. Women have been active participants in this movement. Not surprisingly, they were at the forefront of barricades, rallies and in the fight to prevent police from entering their villages. The Maoists have openly declared their support to the Lalgarh movement. The West Bengal government, meanwhile, has tried to delegitimise the movement by claiming that the PSBJC is led by the Maoists. Instead of acknowledging its mistakes and recognising the legitimate demands of the PSBJC, the CPI(M) chose the path of active confrontation and increased the scale of violence and repression.

The people of Lalgarh have launched a profound struggle for justice and the right to self-determination. Although the region faces widespread poverty and neglect, the primary demands of the movement are not economic in nature. Rather, the people are demanding the restoration of their dignity and apologies from state functionaries for their highhanded behaviour and atrocities. They have challenged the conventional

image of the infallibility of state agencies and the usual practice of getting away unpunished with crimes against the people.

Earlier, PSBJC and the people of Lalgarh have also decided to begin works of development in the region, something that had always been neglected by the "pro-poor" government of the state.³ The committee was constructing roads in three areas. A large pond has been dug for irrigation in Baropelia. Tube wells have been dug in several villages, and three embankments have been constructed in Baropelia in Lalgarh and Girulia in Salboni. Villagers are trying to improve agricultural productivity and cropping intensity by introducing proper irrigation. They are contributing their labour and resources voluntarily to these initiatives. Two health centres have been set up in Kantapahari in Lalgarh and Chakkadoba in Belpahari. The PSBJC has started teaching Alchiki, the written script of the Santhal tribals, in six schools of Lalgarh and Ramgarh, ignoring the norms of the state education department.

It is difficult to foresee the future of the rebellion that has been going on in Lalgarh for the past six months. But one thing can be said for sure – never again will the people tolerate police repression, and never again will the people suffer silently the reign of oppression.

NOTES

- 1 "Lalgarh Reluctant as Buses Lined Up to Ferry Voters", *Indian Express*, 30 April 2009.
- 2 "Boycott Call Keeps Lalgarh Turnout Below 13%", *Times of India*, 1 May 2009.
- 3 "Villagers Take the Place of Government in Tinderbox Lalgarh", *Indian Express*, 4 June 2009.

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