

## THEY CALL IT DEMOCRACY

A delegation of the Bandi Mukti Committee (Committee for the Release of Prisoners), West Bengal visited on 23 October 2007 several areas of the Labhpur Block of the district of Birbhum, where, on 29 September, the police had fired on the public who had been agitating over the non-availability of necessities from ration shops. The delegation consisted of Alope Mukherjee,, Prof Manas Joardar, Prof Debabrata Panda, Prof Amit Bhattacharya, Swapna, Sailen Misra and Tapu Hati. The purpose of the delegation was to enquire into the reasons for the grievance and the allegation of police atrocities. The delegation talked with a large number of people of five villages, namely Langalhala, Bakul, Boprstikuri, Kurumba and Sian. On 24 October 2007, the delegation held a press conference, met the SDO and visited the Bolpur Sub-jail. A prisoner reported that he owned a furniture shop quite at a distance from the place from the BDO office. But he was arrested while going to his house for his mid-day meal and after severe beating, implicated in the case of ransacking the BDO office. Another fellow, who worked in a Photostat center, said that he had been arrested from his shop and beaten mercilessly. After visiting the villages, the delegation drew some conclusions. First of all, grievances against the anarchy in the public distribution system had been accumulating for long, and the spontaneous outburst of the grievance was seemingly natural and just. Secondly, the police forces tried to suppress popular grievances and did not pay any heed to the official regulations. They fired upon the public in order to kill. Ayub Sheikh of Langalhata was killed because his head had received a bullet. Nobody on the part of the administration informed Ayub Sheikh's family of his death, nor any compensation was paid. The villagers told the delegation that the people living above the poverty line had not got any commodities from ration shops for more than a year. Those living below the poverty line also did not receive their dues with regularities and in stipulated quantities. The villagers also informed the delegation that even the panchayet was not informed about the allotment of cereals to the ration shops. What further came to light in course of the investigation was that nobody received work for 100 days in a year that was stipulated under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. Many complained that they did not get work for more than two or three days during the year 2006-07. Cases were reported that the job cards were not with the card-holder but with the local panchayet member. This is clearly illegitimate.

The delegation placed a few demands before the administration asking for (a) impartial enquiry into the widespread corruption in the public distribution system and punishment of the blackmarketeers, (b) exemplary punishment of the guilty policemen, (c) proper compensation to the family of Ayub Sheikh, (d) unconditional release of the participants in the democratic movement and grant of the status of political prisoners in the intervening period, (e) proper implementation of the public distribution system and National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme everywhere in West Bengal.

Whether the persons in authority are listening or not is yet another matter. Then they call it the biggest democracy of the world!

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## THE RIAZNUR SHOCK

The 'mysterious' death of Riaznur Rahman, a teacher of an institute of the IT sector after his marriage with a girl, Priyanka Todi, the daughter of a wealthy businessman of Kolkata, has caused quite a sensation, and even after one and a half months of the incident, there is no sign of abatement. The literate sections of the Muslim community in general, and many other democratic persons, along with a section of the media, have condemned the role of Asok Todi, Priyanka's father, and some police officers of Kolkata. Of course, there are forces who are trying to fish in troubled water, but that does not in any way lessen the importance of the incident. Riaznur's body was found on a railway track not too distant from the Sealdah station on 21 September. The extent of the stir can be gauged by the fact that this issue has reportedly played an important role in shaping the outcome of the Students' Union elections in Jawaharlal Nehru University, the alma mater of Mr Prakash Karat, in which the CPI(M) controlled Students' Federation of India has drawn a blank.

The reason why the death has received so much publicity is the brazen role played by some senior IPS officers in helping the Todis and the palpably hypocritical role of the state government. They intimidated Riaznur in every possible way and tried their utmost to break the marital relationship. When this role was brought to light, thanks to the commendable effort by the APDR and its spokesman Sujato Bhadra—APDR and Bhadra have been consistently emphasizing that it was a case of murder—there were interesting reactions from the police and politicians.

The role of the then Police Commissioner of Kolkata, Mr Prasun Mukherjee, who is also the President of the Cricket Association of Bengal, could only evoke indignation and hatred. This person, ostensibly with the bid to influence the process of investigation, declared that it was a case of suicide. To add to it, he boastfully claimed the right on the part of the police to meddle in such affairs and tried to justify the reaction of the Todis. To put it bluntly, the Police Commissioner was claiming the right for illegal activities on the part of those who take fat salaries every month for the maintenance of law and order.

The Chief Minister, even after angry public protests, preferred to keep silent. Only after the High Court's strong remarks against Prasun Mukherjee did the Chief Minister take the step of transferring him. It was an act of transfer, not suspension or leave. Prasun Mukherjee's subordinates who did the business of threatening and intimidation were also transferred, but not before the High Court's order of a CBI probe was issued, along with its declaration that the CID probe ordered by the Government was not in accordance with law. It is perfectly clear that the persons in authority were not at all in favour of taking action against these officers. The state government ordered a CID probe, presumably because the CID is easier to control than the CBI (This is not, however, to suggest that the CBI is always an upholder of truth). What they finally have done is only what could not be avoided, although the common man's sense of justice demanded far stronger action.

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## THE DAY OF GREY HOUNDS

On 20.8.07 at 6 am a team of Grey Hounds Police entered the small village of VAKAPALLI in Paderu constituency of Visakhapatnam District of Andhra Pradesh. In the guise of combing for naxalites, they attacked the entire village, ransacked the huts, smashed the household materials and raped 11 tribal women. The brutes caught some of the women in their huts and others in the open fields and gangraped them. One of the women was delivered a child 4 days back.

After the incident, the villagers along with the Media and people's civil rights organisations highlighted the incident. But, without ascertaining the facts, the Home Minister Sri Jana Reddy and DGP of AP gave a clean chit to the police. Further, they stated that the incident was concocted by Maoists to demoralise the police and to stop the combing operations.

The molested women even went to the Human Rights Commission and met the Chief Minister also and demanded justice. Though, a case was registered under SC/ST Atrocities Act, the culprits were not arrested. The delayed report of medical examination of women was a farce as it tried to shield the Grey Hounds Police establishment.

8 of the molested women along with two others have been on indefinite hunger strike demanding justice and punishment of guilty policemen.

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