

Revolt in Jangalmahal

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November 2, 2008. There was a land mine blast on the VIP convoy, in which the chief minister of West Bengal was travelling from Salboni to Kolkata after inaugurating a Steel Plant of the Jindals. Land for the plant was supplied partly from government vested land and a part was bought directly by the Jindals. So, there was not much resistance at the time of land acquisition. A few days before the inauguration of the plant the state government declared that it was to be a SEZ. There was a statement from the Maoists that they had blasted the land mine as a protest against SEZ.

Whether a SEZ can be stopped by land mines is an altogether different matter, but the state government ordered wholesale attack on the surrounding villages to find out the persons responsible for the blasts. Night Raids were ordered. From the days of the British Raj continued through the Congress regime to the present Left Front rule in West Bengal, the meaning of Night Raid has remained unchanged. It means all out attack on whole villages, whole localities and communities to which a suspect belongs. Children, Women or old, none is to be spared. If there is one Mahato in the police list, then the whole Mahato Community is targeted. If there is one Murmu, then the entire Santhal Community is to be blamed. So the order from the persons in authority was obediently carried out by the police at district and thana level. There were indiscriminate arrests, beatings and abuse of women.

The people did not take it for granted. They rose in revolt in a mighty wave which spread like a wildfire from Lalgargh to Binpur, Jhargram, Beleberah, Gopiballavpur, Nayagram, Kesiary and adjoining areas in Bankura. Adivasis living in far off places like Burdwan and Hoogly blocked roads and railways in solidarity with the people's struggle in Lalgargh against police atrocities. The immediate cause of the revolt was the police atrocity associated with Night Raids, which acted as a detonator to the grievances of the tribal people accumulated over years.

In order to understand the nature of the people's grievances, one has to know the specific features of this region. Jhargram Sub-division which has eight blocks including Lalgargh is a case in point. The other blocks are Binpur, Jhargram, Jamboni, Gopiballavpur I, Gopiballavpur II, Sankrail and Nayagram. Some other blocks of West Midnapore and Bankura adjoining Jhargram and the district of Purulia have the same characteristics as Jhargram.

In Jhargram sub-division, 30% of the population are Scheduled Tribes (Santhal, Munda, Lodha, Mahali, Kora, Bhumij etc) and 18% are Scheduled Castes (Bagdi, Dom, Kaibarta, Mal etc). Among the others overwhelming majority are now listed as OBC (Kudmi Mahato, Kumbhar, Tanti, Teli, Bagal, Raju, Khandait and others). There is no specific figure for OBCs because the Census does not enumerate them. But the STs, SCs and OBCs may constitute more than 90% of the population in Jhargram and the adjoining areas according to unofficial estimates. Among them, the Mahatos are a very large community who had been treated as Scheduled Tribes till 1935 and who share a common culture with the Adivasis. This is true to a large extent to other Mulnivasi communities of the region. Bengali is not the mother-tongue of the people. They are Santhali, Munda, Kudmali, Hatua and others. Only a handful of people living in Jhargram town have

Bengali as their mother tongue. The festivals, songs, dances and food-habits of the people of this region are same as that of adjoining Jharkhand. So, the region may be properly called Jharkhand cultural region.

The permanent settlement land lords and Mutsuddis of East India Company called the people of this region as "chuar" (meaning uncivilised, barbarians). The great revolt of the people of this region in 1799 was called the *Chuar Rebellion*. To the Bengali Babus, the Santhals are a "upajati", "upa" meaning some one below or inferior. Even the Left Front Government is not ashamed of using the term "upajati" to describe the Adivasis. They might use the words Adivasi or Janajati as Bengali equivalent for Tribe as is used in Hindi and other Indian languages.

Actually, the mind-set of the Bengali Bhadralog is to look down upon the Adivasis and other Moolnivasis of the region as inferiors, as a community fit for employment only as migrant agricultural labourers, earth diggers and brick makers in inhuman working conditions.

Among the main workers, agricultural labourers constitute 25% of the workforce in West Bengal as a whole but in Jhargram sub-division they are 50%. The rate of literacy is lower. The wage of agricultural labourers is much lower and many of them have to go to "Namal" (low lands) as migrant workers every year.

The Adivasis are in a specially disadvantageous position in education. The Adivasi children have to overcome the "language barrier" in schools. The Santhali language has been included in the eighth schedule of the constitution but it has not yet been introduced as a medium of instruction in schools. Moreover, in many Adivasi - villages the teachers are non-Adivasis who do not understand the language of the students. The refusal of the West Bengal government to give reservation to SC/ST in the employment of para-teachers has aggravated the problem. The Adivasis are entitled to get 60 seats in medical education but since 2001, they have not been getting more than 5 seats due to a discriminatory policy of the West Bengal government.

The scheduled castes living in the region are so backward that it is impossible for them to compete for a SC-quota job with SCs like Nama-sudras in Bengal.

The Mahatos are now recognised as OBCs. But reservation in jobs for the OBCs is nominal (only 7% in the state) and there is no reservation in higher education for OBCs in West Bengal. West Bengal is the only state in the country, which does not provide reservation to OBCs in higher education.

As a result of this, the inhabitants of this region have very little presence in government or semi-government jobs. There are many villages in which one will fail to find a single person in any government job. Along with the cultural difference, this aggravates the alienation of the people of Jharkhand cultural region. It is because of this alienation, that the Jharkhand movement has always found a following in the region. Is there any way to address the grievances of the people? There is but the government of West Bengal and the Bengali society will have to change attitude. They should concede that the people in the Jharkhand cultural region are not inferior and take the following steps. First, the executives who ordered Night Raids be removed from their post and the government should seek apology to the people. Second, large number of political prisoners who are in jail for years together without any trial be released immediately. Third, Jhargram and the adjoining areas should be reorganised as an autonomous area under sixth schedule or Art 244 A of the constitution with suitable amendments so as to guarantee effective control in the hands of the *Gram Sansads*. □□□