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## Mass Uprising in Tribal Bengal

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The events that have been happening during the last one month in the adivasi (tribal) belt of West Midnapore district in West Bengal are so unprecedented that the authorities do not know how to respond to them, and the media doesn't understand their significance.

Even the political parties and civil society are at a loss trying to come to terms with what is happening. What had started off as protests against police brutalities have turned into a full scale uprising against state oppression and dispossession. Nothing like this has been witnessed in West Bengal in living memory.

The entire chain of events started after the 2nd November land mine explosion targeting the convoy of West Bengal chief minister Buddha-deb Bhattacharjee and union steel and mines minister Ram Vilas Paswan as they were returning from the inauguration of the Jindal Steel Works special economic zone (SEZ) in Salboni in West Midnapore district.

Around 5,000 acres of land have been acquired for this project, of which 4,500 acres have been handed over by the government and 500 acres have been purchased directly by the Jindals from landowners. Reportedly, a large portion of this land was vested with the government for distribution amongst landless tribals as part of the land reforms program and also included tracts of forests. Moreover, although the land was originally acquired for a "usual" steel plant, last September Jindals got SEZ status for the project, with active help from the state government, which dispensed with the requirement for following most regulations for building and running the plant, including crucial requirements such as doing an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). The government was, and is, not bothered about the setting up of an SEZ having a polluting steel plant in the middle of a forested area, dispossessing tribals from their land and endangering their means of survival. Understandably, there were major grievances amongst the tribals against this, although the mainstream media had constantly portrayed a very rosy picture of the entire project.

The land mine explosion was blamed as usual on the Maoist insurgents allegedly active for a long time in Salboni and the adjacent Lalgarh area. According to press reports, the Maoist movement is active in twelve police station areas in the three adjoining districts of West Midnapore, Bankura and Purulia. Three junior-level policemen were suspended and show-cause notices were served on a few senior officers for negligence of duty.

Usually, the police harass and arrest tribal villagers after every Maoist attack; this time in order to hide their own failure in providing security to its political masters, and to save their skin from the wrath of the government, the police went on a rampage in the tribal villages. Having no clue about the real perpetrators of the land mine explosion, they started beating up and arresting people indiscriminately. Among the first to be arrested were three teenage students, Aben Murmu, Gautam Patra and Buddhadeb Patra, who were returning from a village festival during the night. They were charged with sundry charges including waging war against the state, conspiracy, attempt to murder, using dangerous weapons and obstructing justice. Then during the day on 4th November, an armed police party arrested Dipak Pratihar of Kantapahari village while he was buying medicine from a chemist's shop in Lalgarh for his pregnant wife Lakshmi. In the process the police brutally beat up Lakshmi and threw her to the ground. She had to be subsequently hospitalized. Ten people were arrested during the police raids and beaten up, including a retired teacher Khsamananda Mahato and a civil contractor Shamsheer Alam from Chotopeliya village, who was visiting the area for a day for some construction work. Although these two people were subsequently released, as the police could not formulate any charges against them, the rest were kept in police custody.

The police and CRPF, led by the officer in charge of Lalgarh police station, Sandeep Sinha Roy and the superintendent of police of West Midnapore district, Rajesh Singh, unleashed a reign of terror in 35 villages encompassing the entire tribal belt of Lalgarh. In raids throughout the night of November 6th, women were brutally kicked and beaten up with lathis and butts of guns. Among the injured, Chitamani Murmu, one of whose eyes was hit by a gun butt, and Panamani Hansda, who was kicked on her chest and suffered multiple fractures, were later hospitalized. Chitamani lost one of her eyes because of the injury. Eight other women were badly wounded. These police brutalities soon reached a point where the adivasis had no other option but to rise up in revolt.

The adivasis of India are one of the most oppressed and downtrodden groups of people in the country. Police oppression is nothing new to the Santhal adivasis of the Bankura-Purulia-Midnapore area. But the unprecedented atrocities inflicted by the police, especially the wanton attack on women, wore out their

patience. On the night of 6th November they assembled near the Lalgarh police station and surrounded it, effectively cutting it off, and the policemen inside, who had been rampaging in villages the previous night but had now locked themselves inside the police station, did not dare to venture out. Electricity to the police station was disconnected and all the lights were broken.

What began as rumblings of protest took the shape of a spontaneous mass uprising the next day. On 7th November, when the ruling CPI (Marxist) was "observing" the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution throughout West Bengal, ten thousand Santhal men and women, armed with traditional weapons, came out and obstructed the roads leading to Lalgarh, disconnecting it from Midnapore and Bankura. Roads were dug up and tree trunks were placed on the road to obstruct the entry of police vehicles, in the same way as it had been done in Nandigram.

The police jeep and the CPI(M) motorcycle have long been symbols of oppression and terror for villagers throughout West Bengal, so this digging up of roads, besides actually inhibiting the movements of these agents of oppression, has become a symbol of defiance and liberation. Towards the night of 7th November, the people also disconnected telephone and electricity lines, virtually converting a vast area into a liberated zone. The apex social organization of the Santhals, the *Bharat Jakat Majhi Madwa Juan Gaonta*, took up the leadership of the struggle, although the leader of the organization, the "Disham Majhi" Nityananda Hembram, has himself admitted that the organization has no control over the movement; rather the movement is controlling the organization.

Smaller organizations of the tribals, such as the *Kherwal Junit Gaonta*, that have been playing active roles in the struggle have openly called for armed resistance, stating that there is no other way for the survival of the adivasis.

The demands of the adivasis were so "earthy" and original that the administration did not know how to respond. The demands were that the superintendent of police Rajesh Singh should publicly apologize by holding his ears and doing sit-ups, a traditional way of punishing errant youngsters, the guilty policemen should crawl on the streets of the villages where they had tortured people, rubbing their noses on the ground, again another traditional way of humiliating wrongdoers, and Rs 200,000 compensation for the injured and assaulted. The demands were marked by the total reliance of the adivasis on their traditional systems of dispensing justice, and not looking up to the formal judicial process which they have realized is by nature weighted against the poor and marginalized. Although these demands have since been modified to an unconditional oral apology from the police superintendent and punishment for the policemen involved in the raids, the administration has arrogantly refused to accept these demands, although they have said that the demand of compensation can be considered.

However, the adivasis have been in no mood to accept this "offer" and the upsurge has spread over an even wider area encompassing Dahijuri, Binpur, Jhargram and Bandowan.

The administration has virtually disappeared from these areas. On 10th November, adivasis led by the tribal social organizations set up new roadblocks in the Dahijuri area. When the police lathicharged the assembled people and arrested some of the leaders of the *Gaontas*, the situation turned explosive. The tribals surrounded the police officials present and a crowd of few thousand adivasis, armed with bows and arrows, axes and daggers, and led by women wielding broomsticks, chased the police for four kilometers along the road leading to Jhargram. The police were forced to retreat from the area and release all the leaders of the social organizations they had arrested.

The movement has been continually intensifying during the past few weeks and spreading over a larger area.

The slogans emanating from the movement have also been changing and now the adivasis are demanding that the dispossession of tribals from their land, forests and water in the name of development and industrialization has to stop. The struggle against state oppression is turning into a bigger struggle against dispossession and marginalization.

The state has been helpless in front of this upsurge and has been trying to "negotiate" with the tribals. But what has been frustrating their efforts is the essentially democratic nature of this upsurge. Although the administration has been holding multiple all-party meetings with the dominant political parties, CPI(M), Trinamool Congress, Congress and the Jharkhand Party, the leaders of these parties have openly admitted to their inability to exert any influence on the adivasis.

The adivasis are not letting any political leaders access to the movement, including tribal leaders like Chunibala Hansda, the Jharkhand Party (Naren faction) MLA from Binpur. They are demanding that any negotiations be carried out in the open rather than behind closed doors. Even traditional leaders like the "Disham Majhi" Nityananda Hembram and other "majhis" are having to talk directly with the adivasis before talking to the administration. Villagers of the ten villages in Lalgarh have formed ten village

committees with one coordinating committee to negotiate with the administration. This democratic nature of the upsurge has frustrated all attempts by the administration to "control" the movement till now, and while forcing the political parties like the local Trinamool Congress to come out in support, although the state leadership of the party is strangely silent about it.

The state and the CPI(M) have not dared to respond with overt violence yet, although there is news that a motorbike-borne militia is being assembled nearby by Sushanta Ghosh, the redoubtable CPI(M) minister, and Dipak Sarkar, the CPI(M) district secretary. The state has been forced to accede to the bail of the three teenage students arrested by the police and has also sent Sandeep Sinha Roy, the notorious OC of Lalgah police station, on extended leave. There are also reports that, being unable to quell the resistance, the state government has requested the central government to send paramilitary forces to help in their efforts.

What people are witnessing in the tribal belt of West Bengal is of historical moment. A long oppressed people have risen up and are daring to confront their oppressors and question the logic of "development" that destroys their lives and livelihoods. It is interesting to observe that the nature of confrontation with the state, exceptional in scale and intensity, seems to be inspired by the popular resistance at Nandigram—thereby providing some sort of continuity to the possibility of an emerging people's struggle against state repression.

The West Bengal government has been alleging that the movement is being organized and led by the Maoists, and that the Lalgah area has become a "liberated zone" for them. These are common ploys used by the CPI(M), the government and its sympathizers to brand and delegitimize popular movements. The mainstream media, a faithful ally of the state in such matters, has been repeating the same allegations and lamenting that such acts, which are being dubbed anarchic in nature, has resulted in the breakdown of civil authority. In this manner, attempts are being made to dissociate the urban civil society and intelligentsia from the movement, who have not yet been able to formulate a response to the upsurge. Moreover, using such rhetoric, the state is perhaps also trying to legitimize whatever steps it wishes to adopt in overcoming the resistance.

It is quite expected that radical political forces would have been active among the adivasis as the latter have been the most downtrodden people in India and it is their land and resources which are being handed over for corporate plunder. However the presence and participation of the Maoists or similar forces in no way delegitimizes this seemingly spontaneous, and democratic, expression of people's anger. This is amply expressed by what Arati Murmu, a woman who had been assaulted by the police, and who had gone to block the Lalgah police station, had to say :

"Whenever there is a Maoist attack the police raid our villages and torture our women and children. For how long will we suffer this oppression by the police? All of us are Maoists, let the police arrest us. Today we have come out." □□□

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