

AN ODE TO LALGARH

Ranjit Sau

Whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly becomes ours, wherever they might have their origin. I am proud of my humanity when I can acknowledge the poets and artists of other countries as my own. Let me feel with unalloyed gladness that all the great glories of man are mine. —Rabindranath Tagore.

On 2nd November 2008, a remote-controlled landmine blast on a convoy of official dignitaries returning to Kolkata after the ceremony of laying the foundation stone of a large steel plant in Shalboni, was startling. Prima facie, the pattern of assault points to the Maoists, whom the prime minister had not long ago called the highest threat to the nation's internal security.

Police began raids, day or night, on Lalgarh and villages nearby, some 30 km away from Shalbani. Detention and arrest plus alleged misbehaviour with women followed. By the 8th, in protest against police "highhandedness" the villagers cut trenches and placed logs across highways to shut police out. Scores of unarmed villagers squatted on the blocked roads at night, watchful of police movement.

Pavitra Hembrom wrote from Kolkata (*The Telegraph*, 21.11.2008): 'In a manner reminiscent of the colonial times, the government of West Bengal continues to treat tribal communities with disdain. Over the years, the authorities have repeatedly taken advantage of the simple, peace-loving *santals* by withholding from them the barest of human *dignities*. No wonder the uprising in Lalgarh assumed such violent dimensions. It was evident that the chief minister's convoy was attacked by extremists and the villagers had very little role in it. But the administration remained in denial, refusing to take the police and intelligence agencies to task for their inexcusable glitch. To cover up their double failure—first, to avert the attack on the convoy, and then to arrest the real culprits—the police resorted to inhuman torture of innocent school-boys and women. In such circumstances, how does the state government expect the *santals* to quietly put up with the mounting insult?' Hembrom continued: 'the tribals deserve an unconditional apology from the government. They have always got a bad deal from the elected representatives, and continue to be economically depressed, and lack basic education and healthcare facilities.'

The tribals of Lalgarh had announced a 13-point demand, of which the top two read as follows. (1) The Superintendent of police has to say "sorry", holding his ears. He must say "From today I shall stop arresting and victimising common people, particularly the women." (2) The guilty police officers who had physically assaulted women in the Chhotopeliya village, on 5th November, 4:30 am, will have to come rubbing their noses all the way from Dalilpur chawk to Chhoto-peliya village.

In the eye of universal civilisation, Lalgarh—literally, the Red Fort—stands as a proud bastion of human dignity.

Among all countries of the world comparable to India by and large, none has so much of graded division and fragmentation in society; none has constitutional categories such as "scheduled castes", "scheduled tribes" who are ostracised and left at the edge of civilisation; none has about half of its population treated de facto as untouchable.

Some three thousand years ago, in Athens, Cleisthenes abolished the tribes and rearranged everyone to ten units often, thereby transforming a tribal city into a city-state that grew into the strongest military, commercial, artistic, and intellectual power along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Virtually the same reform would produce even more astonishing results for the Mongols on the steppe of inner Asia.

Aeon ago, the Chinese were taught that man was perfectible with education and emulation of the sages; he was by nature good and had an innate moral sense. In ancient times, China had faced repeated invasions from nomadic tribes of the steppe at north. By mid-twelfth century, Genghis Khan united all Mongol (aka Mughal) tribes into one nation. 'Under Genghis Khan, cowherds, shepherds, and camel boys advanced to become generals and rode at the front of armies of a thousand or ten thousand warriors.' They would 'overrun everything from the Indus River to the Danube, from the Pacific Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea.' During the last thousand years, North China had been ruled more than half the time by invader tribes. Even today the Chinese state assigns to the "autonomous regions" of minorities more land area than to the Han Chinese majority.

Although the cultural glories of ancient Athens were real, the women, slaves, and aliens were denied freedom and right. Aristotle even attempted to justify slavery as a matter of nature. But Greeks were known to have asked the right questions but given all wrong answers. The more the aristocrats boasted of their own grandeur the less respect did they show to the women and slaves; their social divide kept on widening, eventually to the breaking point.

In China, likewise, the Confucian glorification of classical scholarship *ipso facto* degraded those who could not afford it owing to poverty. Chinese is a character-driven language, not so easy to learn. Each symbol represents a meaningful unit of the language. Of some 50,000 characters, an average Chinese is expected to master 7,000, which would take about three years. Poverty and illiteracy go together, making a vicious circle. A peasant is poor because he is illiterate, and vice versa.

A parallel phenomenon occurred in India. Buddhism was a revolt against priest-craft and ritualism, and against the degradation of any human being. But unwittingly its doctrines led to a contrary outcome. Buddhism's emphasis on non-violence considered the tilling of soil a lowly occupation, for it often resulted in destruction of animal life. Peasantry thus descended in the social scale. It would be wrong to make Buddhism responsible for this fall of vast numbers of tillers, for it had no such effect elsewhere. There was something inherent in the caste system which took it in that direction (Nehru, *Discovery of India*, p 178).

It follows that human dignity is indivisible; you cannot truncate and parcel it for others. Unilateral progress of one group in a society begets derision to others; the others in turn feel an aggravated sense of deprivation and resentment. A vicious spiral of national disintegration sets in. Here is a social theory of relativity.

People expect India won't test this theory of relativity the hard way. It would rather enable all to be glad with "all the great glories of man." □