

Lalgarh Revolts

[Following is a slightly shortened version of a statement issued by an all-India fact-finding mission consisting of ten distinguished persons, including Amit Bhaduri, Gautam Navlakha, Colin Gonsalves and Aseem Srivastava. The team visited the area on 10th and 11th of April, 2009 and talked to the police, political party members, community leaders and local people.]

Lalgarh, in the West Midnapore district in West Bengal, and the adjoining districts of Purulia and Bankura, have been the locale of an adivasi movement of historical proportions since the last five months. The movement had begun in November as a spontaneous uprising of the adivasi people in the Lalgarh area in response to the brutal assaults by police on adivasis, including women and children, in the wake of a land-mine explosion purportedly targeting the chief minister. In a reign of terror unleashed in 35 villages encompassing the entire tribal belt of Lalgarh, the police brutally beat up, kicked, hit with rifle butts and indiscriminately arrested numerous members of the adivasi communities. Women were especially targeted for beatings and humiliation. Police oppression is nothing new to the adivasis of the Bankura-Purulia-Midnapore area but the unprecedented atrocities inflicted by the police in this single week in November, especially the wanton attack on women, wore out their patience, and they rose up in revolt.

What began as rumblings of protest soon took the shape of a spontaneous mass uprising. Adivasi men and women, armed with traditional weapons, came out and blockaded the roads. 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 movement spread to all the adivasi-dominated areas and became a symbol of adivasi dignity and aspirations. Although the immediate trigger for the movement were the police atrocities, the basic issues of lack of development which are at the core of the grievances of the people, also resonated strongly. The adivasis recognize that the state terror, which they have been subjected to from the colonial times, is the “shock therapy” used to subdue them in order to dispossess them of their resources, their water, forests and land (which contains important minerals). They proclaimed that they were fighting for their right to these resources, with which their lives are intimately connected, and for their right to live in dignity. They demanded the development measures which are totally lacking in the adivasi areas, health services, schools free of police camps, food through the public distribution system, jobs for their educated youth, implementation of rural employment guarantee schemes etc.. The demands of the adivasis have been placed through a charter of 13 demands, the main amongst which was the demand for an apology from the police officials who had led the assaults, and which has become the rallying point for the movement.

Another remarkable feature of the movement has been the new forms of participatory democracy and gender equality that it has generated. The entire movement was without conventional leadership, and the villages that have been touched by this movement have done away with all traditional political leaders and tribal elders and elected a People’s Committee against Police Atrocities comprising five men and five women. All decisions are taken at public meetings

attended by all men and women. Political parties are not welcomed. The movement has been completely non-violent and democratic, as it has depended on mass mobilizations of tribal people, and it has been difficult for the state to brand them as 'Maoists'.

The movement has been going on in various forms for the past five months. In the last two months, ominous developments have taken place which have the potential to throw the entire adivasi-populated area into a spiral of violence. Unable to control the uprising through the police, which has been socially boycotted, the administration, with the active help and collusion of the ruling party, floated a number of organizations styled after the *Salwa Judum* of Chattisgarh. These vigilante groups, composed of adivasi youth, and armed by the state and the ruling party, were set up purportedly to resist the "Maoists" but have been used to attack the adivasi agitators. At least four people have been already killed. Attacks are happening every day. It has also become an attempt to drive the adivasi movement onto violent paths so that it could be justifiably suppressed with violence. There is grave concern that the civil war-like situation in Chattisgarh and Jharkhand is being reproduced in West Bengal with the aim of fracturing the adivasi resistance and drawing the region into a prolonged, and violent, conflict that will result in the destruction of the normal life of the adivasis and disrupt all developmental efforts in the area. □□□