

The November Uprising

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In November 2009, A popular uprising began in Lalgarh, West Medinipur district of West Bengal. The immediate reason was the grievance of the masses against police terror. Besides, there was the simmering grievance that had piled up over the years. It was the product not only of poverty and deprivation, but of some deeper reasons also. In order to comprehend them, one must have little knowledge of the features of that region.

Lalgarh (Binpur-1) and Belpahari (Binpur-2) are two areas within the Jhargram subdivision of West Medinipur. The three districts, West Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia, actually form extensions of the Chhotanagpur plateau. This region is different from the plains of Bengal not only in respect of geographical location, but in regard to language, culture and community-wise composition as well. The capacity of the laterite soil of this region to contain water is relatively less. Barring some areas on the two sides of the Subarnarekha and Kangsabati rivers, the soil is not at all fertile, and owing to lack of irrigation facilities, agriculture is dependent on monsoon. This region was once rich in forest resources. The forest region used to provide the people with flowers and leaves, and various foodstuffs including fruits, vegetables, mushrooms etc. The colonial forest policy of the British period robbed the people of the right to forests, and there was considerable erosion of the forest covers also. Uncertain and less productive agriculture, coupled with fall in the output of forest products at their disposal, the people of the area began the practice of going to more fertile regions during busy agricultural seasons. These regions are known to them as '*namal*'. The poor of Purulia go to Burdwan for working in paddy or potato fields, but the poor of Burdwan do not go to Purulia. From Burdwan, Hooghly or Kolkata, some people go to Jhargram, Bankura or Purulia as white-collar workers, but not as day labourers. This difference must be understood. In West Bengal, agricultural workers constitute 25 percent of the working people, but in Jhargram subdivision, their share is 50 percent.

The second feature of the region concerns its linguistic, cultural and ethnic composition. In the Jhargram subdivision, scheduled tribes form 31 percent and scheduled castes 20 percent of the population. Among the other caste-groups, there are communities like *Mahato*, *Kumbhar*, *Teli*, *Tanti*, *Bagal*, *Raju*, *Khandayet*, *Tambuli* etc. The *Mahatos* constitute the largest caste group. It seems that in Jhargram and Purulia, they form one fourth of the total population. Till 1935, the *Mahatos* were reckoned among scheduled tribes, but now they are considered as among other backward classes. Among the scheduled tribes, Santals form the largest group, followed by Mundas, Mahalis, Lodha-Shabars and others. Each of these adivasi groups has its own language, and in respect of nationality, none of them can be called Bengali. The principal scheduled castes are Bagdi, Jele (fishermen), Mal, Dom, Bauri etc. In the villages adjacent to Subarnarekha, they speak in a language called Hatua, and elsewhere they speak in Kurmali, which is the common language of all non-*adivasi* groups. This same

language is spoken over a wide area ranging from West Singhum, East Singhum, Dhanbad, Giridi, Bokaro and Chandil of Jharkhand to Purulia, West Medinipur and a part of Bankura. Bengali chauvinist 'babus' try to portray it as a sublanguage of Bengali, much in the same fashion as their characterization of Kamtapuri.

The customary rituals, songs and dances of this region are also of a different nature than those of the plain lands of Bengal. The principal festival of the Bengalis is Durga Puja, i.e. worship of the mother goddess Durga. In the census report of 1961, it was found that in the entire Gopiballavpur area, nowhere was this festival observed. The main festivals of this area are *Makar Bandhna*, *Sarhal* etc.

This area has a much greater resemblance with Jharkhand and Mayurbhanj, an adjacent region belonging to Orissa in respect of geographical constitution, language, culture and ethnicity. It definitely forms an inalienable part of the Jharkhand cultural region. All the *adivasis* and original inhabitants of this area bear the Jharkhandi identity regarding their nationality.

CONTRADICTIONS

The backwardness and poverty of the people cannot be accounted for by geographical reasons only. There are class exploitation and national suppression as well.

In the sixties and seventies of the last century, this area was heavily burdened with semi-feudal exploitation and oppression by various categories of landlords. The people had often to work for one kg of paddy per day, or even to provide unpaid labour service. Besides, there were usury and various other exploitative practices. The big landowners were mainly Utkal Brahmins. There were also some substantial landowners and moneylenders among the intermediate castes like Teli, Sadgope, Raju and Khandayet etc, although the population belonging to these caste groups was dominated by poor and middle peasants. The Santals were mainly poor peasants, Bagdis almost exclusively farm labourers and among the other scheduled castes farm labourers were numerically larger than others. It was against this semi-feudal exploitation and oppression that the historic peasant uprising of Gopiballavpur was built up. The peasant movements of the entire decade of the seventies and particularly the tide of peasant struggles in the wake of the ascent of the Left Front to power in 1977 substantially lessened the influence and domination of the old landowning classes. But the CPI(M) began to use this struggle for consolidating its narrow partisan interests, and by the mid-eighties a bureaucratic apparatus struck roots in the countryside of West Bengal. This apparatus, led by the ruling party, drew the panchayets, local police officers, ration dealers and block development officers into its fold. In the Jhargram subdivision, sometimes the Jharkhand Party won in some panchayets owing to the influence of the Jharkhand movement, but they too came to be parts of the same bureaucratic apparatus. Young men of old landowning families deserted the Congress to join the CPI(M) and succeeded in getting the work of teachers, contractors etc. This gave a new shape to the pattern of semi-feudal exploitation, which may be called semi-feudal bureaucracy. This bureaucratic class or layer, in order to keep the people in submission, began to use police repression as well as its private armed men. In the Jharkhand cultural region, the people are subject to

not only class exploitation, but to a national suppression also. The vast majority of the people of this region are not Bengalis in respect of nationality. Their children are deprived of the right to education through their mother tongue. The adivasis are deprived of their quota of reservation in respect of jobs as well as education. For example, the admission of scheduled tribes into the medical colleges of Bengal have almost stopped since 2001. In the *Paschimanchal* region, the adivasis, i.e. scheduled tribes, constitute 30 percent of the population, but they are given only 6 percent reservation in teachership or other government jobs because that is the average of West Bengal as a whole. The outcome is that in the adivasi-dominated areas, those who are appointed as schoolteachers are mostly non-tribals who do not understand the language of children. Nor can the children understand their language. The upshot is almost a Chinese wall between the teacher and the taught.

The scheduled castes of this region, namely *Bagdi, Mal, Bauri* etc are so backward that they are unable to compete with advanced scheduled castes such as *Namasudra, Poudra, Sunsri* etc in the bid for reserved government jobs. The other castes are enlisted as OBCs, but grant of reservation facilities for the OBCs began much later and that too is only 7 percent. The OBCs have no reservation in higher education. It is worth pointing out that among the major states of India, West Bengal is the only one that does not provide any reservation for the OBCs in higher education. All these elements have combined to form a situation in which the participation of the people of *Paschimanchal* in government and semi-government jobs in this region is extremely low, leading to a lengthening of the distance between the officers in charge of administration and development and the people. Those officers who come to this region as public servants seldom treat the people as real human beings. Class and national contradictions are intermingled here. The two combined to form a deep-seated sense of injury that regarded the police and the official administration as 'external enemies' and refused them to enter the area.

MASS CHARACTER

At the start of the uprising, the Santals constituted the main force but other tribes like the Mundas, Shabars, the scheduled castes and the Mahatos also participated. *Bharat Jakat Majhi Marwa*, a social organization of the Santals was at the forefront of the movement. The movement took the form of blockade of roads and spread to Belpahari, Jhargarm and Bankura. After a few days of blockade, the leadership of the Majhi Marwa had a talk with the administration and decided to withdraw the blockade. The administration conceded some of the demands, among which the main ones were such: the police won't enter the villages at night, during their entry, the headman or the local panchayet member would accompany them, an investigation would be held regarding police repression etc. In this phase, the youth force participating in the movement refused to budge and continued the blockade. A Lalgarh-centric organization named People's Committee Against Police Atrocities was formed, and it continued to lead the movement. The Maoists had been working for a long period in Belpahari and Lalgarh, and they formed organizations in the uprising. They were very much active in the uprising. The Committee Against Police Atrocities had in the beginning persons of various political opinions, but the Maoists were

the dominant force, owing to their persistent work in Balpahari and Lalgarh. All said and done, the committee had a mass character.

It was that mass character that formed the basis of the power of the struggle. That power was so formidable that the state had to step aside and wide areas of these two regions virtually became independent. It has also to be kept in mind that for the last two years a strong popular movement came to be built up against forcible acquisition of land by the state government and the one-party terror of the CPI(M), which forced the government to withdraw. The setback in the Panchayet polls and the defeat in the Bishnupur and Nandigram assembly bye-elections pushed the CPI(M) to the back seat. In consequence, the government was not in a position to undertake any risky venture for establishing its authority in Lalgarh and Belpahari on the eve of the Lok Sabha polls.

In short, the mass movement of Lalgarh took advantage of the favourable situation in the state as a whole and acquired a victory. Steps could be taken to consolidate it. In the panchayet polls held shortly before, the CPI(M) lost the Lalgarh panchayet samity and somehow scraped a win in Belpahari. In the past, the panchayets functioned in a bureaucratic manner and they had as a result become corrupt. In the new situation, pressure could be successfully applied to them for functioning democratically.

It was possible to call meetings of *gram samsads* in villages and to prepare lists regarding BPL cards, recipients of benefits of the Indira Abas Yojana, old age pension, widow pension etc. Various irrigation projects and other schemes could also be undertaken through such meetings. The panchayets could be brought under pressure to implement the decisions taken by the gram samsads and in the event of refusal, their resignation and reelection could be demanded. Besides, demands could be placed for more economic and administrative rights (right to the forest produce, right to restrain the police, right to introduce education through the local language) to the panchayets. Such a broad programme could have united more than 95 percent of the people of that region and isolated the bureaucratic party leaders and bad gentry. This would definitely have strengthened the mass uprising.

But the Maoists who were at the leadership of the Committee Against Police Atrocities did not want it; on the contrary, they sought to use the uprising for establishing their own rule. That made it necessary for them to wipe out the various political and social organizations functioning in this region. That was what they attempted through the use of guns. Some differences arose with organizations like the *Bharat Jakat Majhi Marwa* and it is also true that a trend developed among leaders of this organization to put reins on the movement. But that did not make it necessary that the contradiction with them should be turned into an antagonistic one. A big blunder was committed by circulating a leaflet threatening to try Nityananda Hembram, the President of the Majhi Marwa in the 'people's court'. A similar blunder was committed by killing Sudhir Giri of Chakadoba. This was the first incident of murder after the start of the uprising. Sudhir Giri, who was the President of Belpahari Panchayet Samity was not a 'viciously corrupt' person, because even after his five-year tenure in office, he did not even have a tiled roof in his house. His 'offence' was to refuse to join the blockade after the Majhi Marwa's decision to withdraw and to object to the process

of forcing the people to join processions. After the withdrawal of police camps, virtual rule of the Maoists was established in the area in the name of the Committee. Their squads imposed onerous taxes on every family, and even a female anganwari worker earning Rs 1500 per month had to pay a tax of Rs 500. Activities of other political parties were banned. In the Lok Sabha polls, A Kisku of Jharkhand Party contested. On the day of his submission of candidature, the flags of the CPI(ML) New Democracy and Jharkhand Party were pulled down from their vehicles. Now it is a legitimate question whether the rule of the Maoists shall allow universal suffrage, existence of opposition and the right to express opinion. Sincere and genuine practitioners of Marxism take lessons from the Paris Commune, the first struggle of the working class for power in this world. Marx has shown how these lessons have to be learnt. The Commune, though defeated within three months, left for the future a model of the rule of the working classes. The features of that rule were :

(1) Dissolution of the standing army and its replacement by workers and peasants; (2) Building up the Commune as an institution for the formulation and implementation of law; (3) Election of the members of the Commune through universal suffrage and their accountability and revocability; (4) Dissolution of the judiciary and the police that were meant to serve the bourgeoisie, and their replacement by elected and revocable judiciary, police and administration; (5) Bringing down the salaries of all office-holders including members to the level of the ordinary workers.

Nearly one century earlier than the Commune, the people of France established universal suffrage through another great revolution. Bourgeois democracy, in order to protect bourgeois property rights had restricted universal suffrage. Through the Paris Commune, the working class overcame the bourgeois restrictions to democracy and transformed all sorts of institutions, including the judiciary and the executive, into responsible and revocable organs elected on the basis of universal suffrage. Marx wrote that deviation from the principle of universal suffrage would have violated the spirit of the Commune.

In India, the people have been enjoying for about six decades various bourgeois democratic rights e.g. freedom of the press, freedom to form parties, freedom to elect and to be elected, along with universal suffrage, although in a truncated and restricted form. Under these circumstances, they will desire an expansion of these rights, not their contraction. This is a vital issue that Indian revolutionaries must keep in mind. Through the Lalgarh uprising, the power of democracy was developing in contradistinction with the power of bureaucracy. But as the Lok Sabha polls drew near, the Maoists completely negated the democratic content of the movement and forcibly prevented the people from exercising their franchise in about 90 booths. They wanted to show outsiders that the people had supported their line of boycott. One may call the polling process in Jhargram parliamentary constituency a peaceful one, but the people of the region knew how voting was jeopardized by means of terrorizing the voters. The Maoists also refused to consider that Chatradhar Mahato, whom they were seeking to project as a mass leader, was being pushed to a farcical position through this process. Finally, after the Lok Sabha polls, the Maoists, through press conference and public meeting, announced openly that it was they who were running the

Lalgarh movement and the movement would follow their instructions. So Chatradhar Mahato became a persona non grata. This facilitated state intervention. The Central Government cast aside the centre-state conflict and intervened. When the joint forces were entering the place, the Maoists offered some resistance by planting landmines, but no mass resistance was to be seen. The people, in order to escape participation in such resistance, vacated villages after villages to flee. Now, although the CPI(M), by using the joint forces, are trying to recover their lost ground, the people are so aggrieved at their single-party terror in the areas hitherto dominated by them that this effort by the CPI(M) has met only with marginal success at best.

Those who have been trying to build up movements in *Paschimanchal* by combining class struggle and struggle relating to identity fulfilment are now faced with a hard and complex situation. This situation demands opposition to state terrorism and clear demarcation from the CPI(M), and at the same time severe criticism of those practices by Maoists that are impairing democratic unity and harming the movement. The single-party rule that the CPI(M) is perpetrating by force in areas like Jamboni, Garbeta, Keshpur and elsewhere must be opposed, and it must be propagated vigorously that the CPI(M) is the main hindrance to democratic struggle over the whole of *Paschimanchal*. On the other hand, just as the people should oppose the ban on Maoists, they should also be unsparing in their criticism of the Maoists in putting a virtual ban on the activities of other political parties in areas dominated by them. The argument that such criticisms will strengthen the CPI(M) is patently wrong.

It is not possible to oppose effectively the CPI(M)'s (and in some places Trinamul Congress's or the Congress's) single-party terrorism without criticizing the undemocratic practices of the Maoists. It is also not possible to build up a mass movement on the basis of the principle that all sections of the people, irrespective of party and political affiliation, are entitled to the basic rights of food, housing, education and health as well as to the basic democratic rights. Regarding the Lalgarh Movement, it must be said that its continuity can be maintained only by building up a strong movement for the autonomy of the *Pashchimanchal* region. □□□