

LOOKING BACK

Jangal Mahal Situation

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KISHENJI, THE TOP MAOIST leader in Jangalmahal has been killed by the Joint Forces. The state government and the central paramilitary forces are claiming that there was an encounter and according to the Chief Minister's latest statement, the "Maoist guerillas had fired 1000 rounds on the security forces". How was it that not a single person from the security forces was killed or injured. It is highly probable that Kishenji was captured and killed. It may be that some others, too, were killed. The Jangalmahal had earlier witnessed the killing of Lalmohan Tudu and Sidhu Soren in fake encounters during the Left Front regime. A demand for judicial enquiry has been raised from many quarters. Mamata Banerjee, who as opposition leader had demanded enquiry into Azad's death should order a judicial enquiry.

What will happen to the Maoist movement in Jangalmahal after the death of Kishenji, people are asking. There is no doubt that it is a big blow to the movement. But the fact is that Kishenji's death is a consequence of severe weakening of the movement. The police had got specific information about his movements and it is highly probable that the information was leaked by insiders. But whether the movement will be able to overcome its weaknesses depends on many factors. Below is a brief look at how the movement started and developed.

In November 2008, there was a genuine people's uprising in Lalgarh and adjoining areas. The people came out on the streets agitating against police atrocities and withdrawal of police camps. Many social and political forces including Maoists, Bharat Jakat Majhi Marwa (a social organisation of the Santhals), various Jharkhandi parties and two Left parties [CPI-ML ND & CPI(ML) PCC] participated in it. In 2008 Panchayat election, Lalgarh Block (Binpur-1) was won by a combination of two Jharkhandi parties. Since 1980s, this zone which is part of Jharkhand cultural region had a strong support for the Jharkhand movement. After formation of Jharkhand state with only part of Bihar in it, there was disappointment in West Bengal part but the demand for autonomy did not die down. In the November 2008 uprising, the police barbarity was the immediate cause while the aspiration for autonomy and self-rule was the underlying current.

The Maoists had a different understanding of the movement. They tried to convert the area into a "guerilla zone" where no other political party would be allowed to function. They had a difference with the Majhi Marwas regarding the course of the movement. The Maoists decided to resolve this difference through murder of Majhi Marwa leaders. Sudhir Mandi, a Majhi Marwa leader and Chairman of Belpahari Panchayet Samiti during 2003-2008 was killed. This silenced the Majhi Marwas and they withdrew from the movement. Later on, the Maoists killed many leaders and supporters of Jharkhand movement, the latest being the murder of Babu Bose, a popular leader of Jharkhand Andolan Samanway Manch. After the Loksabha elections, the Maoists attacked our [CPI-(ML)-PCC's] mass-organisations in Lodhasuli area and

our office was closed. Two veteran peasant leaders Rajani Pal and Hariram Pal were severely beaten up and driven away from their village Gohira. Upansu Mahato, the leader of movement against pollution by sponge iron factories was driven away from his village. We had a trying time but we decided to avoid a confrontation and withdrew from the area. During this period, we approached many supporters of Lalgarh movement in Kolkata and Delhi and organisations like APDR and Bandi Mukti Committee and requested them to intervene but nobody cared. During 2009 and 2010, more than 300 activists and supporters of CPI(M) have been killed, almost all of them being poor Adivasis. In some cases the killings were committed with utmost brutality and the families of the dead were prevented from lifting and cremating the dead bodies.

When the Joint Forces were sent after the Loksabha election, the situation worsened. The Joint Forces resorted to large scale torture and arrest of villagers including rape of women. It further worsened after the CPI(M) set up armed camps with the help of Joint Forces. They captured many villages in Midnapur(Sadar), Salboni, Garbeta, Goaltore and parts of Lalgarh. People were forced at gun-point to give free service in the armed camps. The Sangrami Bam Samanway organised a Padajatra from Goaltore to Sarenga demanding closure of armed camps after which CPI(ML)-ND cadres were brutally attacked by the CPI(M) armed camps. The Maoist squads could not operate in these areas and they moved to new areas in Jhargram, Nayagram, Sankrail and parts of Gopiballavpur-II, where the CPI(M) organisation had collapsed and the Maoists got full support of the Trinamul Congress. Actually, the PCPA committees which were formed in these areas were Joint Committees of Maoists and TMC. This situation continued till the Assembly election of 2011. In the Assembly election, the Maoists supported Chhatradhar Mahato, who contested as an independent candidate in Jhargram Assembly seat (Lalgarh constitutes major part of this Assembly seat) and in all other seats in Jangalmahal they supported Congress-TMC combine. In Gopiballavpur, Nayagram, Salboni and Midnapur seats, they used their fire-power in support of TMC.

After the Assembly election there was a radical change in the situation. The CPI(M) units were totally demoralised, some of them leaving the area and some others, particularly the corrupt elements joining the TMC. Earlier, the TMC had a very weak presence in Jangalmahal. They could not win any one of the 23 Panchayet Samities in the Panchayat election of 2008. After the Assembly election, they thought that a golden opportunity had come to capture the area. Mamata Banerjee rushed to Jangalmahal with offer of some rice at cheap rate and some jobs in police and homeguards. Before the Assembly election, Subhendu Adhikary (Trinamul MP) was holding public meetings and processions demanding withdrawal of Joint Forces and release of political prisoners. Now they forgot about it and demanded that the Maoists surrender their arms and work under TMC umbrella. The Maoists refused to succumb to TMC pressure. Rather they tried to fill the vacuum created by the withdrawal of CPI(M) from the whole of Jangalmahal. But they failed to judge the mood of the people. The upsurge of 2008 had died down. Moreover, their line of indiscriminate killing and extortions had alienated the people. In some areas, there was spontaneous resistance to their activities or the people were

telling them politely to leave the area for some time. Some people were refusing to pay the levies imposed on them. The Maoists thought that a few more killings would create a favourable space for them. They killed Lalmohan Mahato, a popular person in Jhargram rural and Babu Bose, who had a valiant record of struggle against CPI(M) atrocities during Left Front rule. These murders further alienated them. Many squad members and PCPA leaders were young unemployed youths with no political and ideological training. Some of them had actually thought that overthrow of CPI(M) is the goal. Many of them started to surrender. The Maoists should have taken note of the Assembly election results when Chhatradhar Mahato lost his deposit in Lalgarh.

The real issues before the people of Jangalmahal are autonomy (Sixth Schedule to start with), individual and community forest rights (Community Forest Management in place of Joint Forest Management), scheduling of Kudmi Mahatos (who constitute more than one-fourth the population of Jangalmahal) as Scheduled Tribes, admission of Adivasi students in medical and engineering colleges, jobs, health-care facilities and irrigation etc. Mamata Banerjee has not yet addressed any of these issues. The Jharkhand Andolan Samanway Manch has been consistently raising these issues but many of their activists were killed or had to leave the area in face of both state-terror and Maoist terror. The only area which has withstood both terrors to some extent are Gopiballavpur-I and parts of Gopiballavpur-II blocks, where the people had gone through the historic peasant uprising of 1969-70. The people are trying to build a genuine mass movement on Right to Forests, 100-days' work, autonomy and other issues. The issues are also getting response in other blocks of Jangalmahal.

If the Maoists make reappraisal of their activities and unite with other Left and democratic forces, the Trinamul offensive can be resisted and a genuine mass-movement on people's issues can be built up. □□□