

NOTE

Whither Jangalmahal?

A B writes:

WHAT NEXT? THE QUESTION is being asked by ordinary people everywhere. The death of Koteswar Rao alias Kishenji at the hands of the joint forces operating in the jangalmahal region of West Bengal has revealed a curious turn of events. From what has appeared in the press about the circumstances of Kishenji's death, along with the fact that the different statements and comments made by the Chief Minister and various high-level police officers do not add up, it seems probable that Kishenji was captured and killed in cold blood. Some police officers and some colleagues of Mamata Banerjee are arguing that the human rights activists do not shed tears when policemen are killed. These hypocrites do not mention that when a policeman is killed—whatever are the killers—the state takes the responsibility of his family by providing fat compensation money and suitable job to the nearest relative. But when the police kills somebody, the family of the killed has no such consolation. The reason is that whenever the police murder somebody in cold blood, a tale of 'encounter' is woven around the episode. It is too fresh in the memory of those who have followed the situation in jangatmakal since the popular revolt of 2008 with some interest that Ms Mamata Banerjee and her party had been clamouring for the withdrawal of joint forces from this region ever since these forces were sent at the request of Buddhadeb Bhatta-charya. These forces were deployed by Buddhadeb Bhattacharya's government sometime before the last Lok Sabha polls of 2009. Mamata Banerjee clearly made somersault after coming to power. It is also well known that in August 2010, Mamata Banerjee raised the demand for an independent probe into the killing of Azad, the Maoist leader, at a public rally in Lalgarh. Azad was killed along with a journalist and no person honestly believes the fantastic tale told by Chidambaram that he died in an encounter. But Mamata Banerjee later preferred not to repeat the demand even once, because she needed an alliance with Manmohan-Chidam-baram & Co and revelation of truth would have been embarrassing to her electoral and ministerial allies, who presumably prevailed upon her not to press the issue any further.

On the other hand it should be emphasized that the Maoists, who had been at the leadership of the Lalgarh movement decided to eliminate all other forces that were in the movement in one pretext or another. They resorted to physical torture, extortion and killing in order to maintain their hegemony, and in some areas, their cause was taken up by lumpen elements. They even made other Naxalite organizations their targets. This caused a breach in the movement and the state, finding the opportune moment deployed the joint forces. The joint forces went not only after the Maoists, but the people in general, indulging in torture, rape, intimidation and other tactics. Some Maoist leaders were killed in cold blood, although the then state government tried to brazen it out by concocting tales of 'encounters'. The CPI (M) used the joint forces to recapture their strongholds and set up *Harmad* camps, one outcome of which was the barbaric Netai episode. After the joint forces had launched their operation in full vigour, the Maoists thought it more prudent to set up an alliance with the Trinamul Congress

and despite repeated warnings from other thinking pro-people elements, they did not mend their ways. They played the main part in recruiting men for attending the public rallies of Mamata Banerjee and other Trinamul leaders. They even joined forces with the Trinamul Congress in eliminating the CPI(M) supporters from dalit background, ignoring class considerations altogether. During the last assembly polls they did not allow any other political outfit except the Trinamul Congress to function in areas under their control. The expectation was that if the Trinamul Congress won the electoral battle, the joint forces would be withdrawn, and the CPI(Maoist) would get a freer hand.

After the installation of the ministry led by Mamata Banerjee, the opportunistic alliance was broken. The Trinamul Congress leaders had expected that by using the Maoists, they would be able to prepare the ground for the capture of the area. Many earlier CPI(M) elements too found in the new party in power a fresh pasture. A demoralized CPI(M) on the other hand did not have enough bones and muscles to build up their armed forces, because the poll reverses had robbed them of the necessary strength. But the Maoists presumably did not oblige the new ruling party. They, on the other hand, did not change their line of action and hence refused to accept a more democratic approach in handling what they declared to be the cause of the people. They even killed Rabindranath Basu and Lalmohan Mahato. Two prominent organizers of the *Jharkhand Samannay Mancha*, thus causing further splits among the ranks of the people. This virtually suicidal course of action only helped the joint forces. The Maoists did not realize, despite warnings from many quarters, that alienating the masses in general and confronting the huge might of the state could not go together. The killing of Kishenji can be said to be a culmination of this process. The joint forces, now a weapon in the hands of the Trinamul Congress, are tyrannical, and the demand for their withdrawal is just. But this demand is unrealizable if the Maoists do not take lessons from the death of their leader and continue with their old line of action. Again, peace cannot return to the jangalmahal area, nor can any worthwhile mass movement addressing the needs of the people be built up unless the Maoists desist from imposing their one-party hegemony. The Lalgarh movement had immense possibilities for advancing the just demands of the deprived people and a combination of all sorts of struggles and movements could pave the way for at least partial realization of these demands. The main responsibility of the non-fulfilment of this prospect must lie with the CPI (Maoist), and the scars that have been left will not easily be healed. □□