

## BEHIND THE 'DEVELOPMENT' HEADLINES

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THE WEST BENGAL government has openly adopted a carrot-and-stick policy to combat the struggle of the people of Jangal-mahal against state repression and exploitation. On one hand, the operations of the joint forces are continuing, resulting in raids on villages, arrests of people, especially youngsters, and brutal beatings being meted out to villagers. Just last week, twelve students, belonging to the students organizations Jharkhand Students Federation (JSF), Chatrasamaj and USDF, who had been campaigning in the villages regarding a convention which they were holding in Kolkata, were picked up by the joint forces from a house where they were staying near Jhargram, and brutally beaten up. The SDPO of Jhargram himself kicked a couple of students in their abdomen. They were released only in the afternoon, once the news of their detention became public in Kolkata and protests were held. Three days back, Raju Hansda, a student belonging to the JSF from Ramgarh in Lalgarh area, was picked up from his home and charged with eighteen different murder cases. As this juggernaut of state repression rolls on, the mainstream media is rife with speculation about when the "actual" operations against the Maoists are going to begin, as if this was not enough to bring misery to the life of people in Jangalmahal.

As this repression continues on one hand, on the other the government is trying to present a "human" face to win the hearts and minds of the people, with the chief minister Mamata Banerjee unleashing a "tide of development" in her words in Jangalmahal. She has declared a slew of measures in her recent meeting in Jhargram, which are aimed at bringing "development" to Jangalmahal and weaning the people away from the resistance. Although some of these measures, such as the recruitment of ten thousand youth for the post of special police constables on a no work-no pay basis, sound ominously like the formation of a Salwa Judum type of force, others such as providing fifteen kg rice at Rs 2 per kg per week to every below poverty line (BPL) family sounds quite innocuous and designed to win popular support. However, even these measures are proving to be something quite different on the ground. Reports from Jangalmahal indicate that these "development" measures are giving rise to a new wave of corrupt practices, and entrenching a new set of intermediaries in the villages, affiliated this time to the Trinamool Congress.

There is indeed a great demand for the rice at Rs 2 per kg, especially as the last two years have witnessed both successive droughts and disruption in agricultural work due to the occupation by the joint forces. However, the ground reality is that numerous families in the ninety-nine village panchayat areas in West Midnapur do not have the wherewithal even to afford Rs 30 per week to lift these fifteen kilograms of rice. Many families in the dirt poor Belpahari, Pukhuria or Jamboni areas might never even have seen thirty rupees together in their lives. Under these circumstances, a new breed of intermediaries has shown up in the villages. These people, borne on motorbikes, are visiting the villages and giving the thirty rupees to the

villagers who cannot afford that money. The villagers are going to the public distribution system (PDS) shops and getting the fifteen kg of rice. However, they are keeping about 5-6 kg of the rice for themselves and are handing over the rest to the people who had initially given them the thirty rupees. In this way, this subsidized rice is finding its way into the black market, and a new "rice mafia" is entrenching itself in the villages. Significantly, this system seems to be working the best in the areas where the ruling Trinamool Congress has established its power, and this mafia is working under the patronage of local Trinamool Congress leaders.

No one dares to lodge a complaint with the BDOs, although Mamata Banerjee has given extraordinary powers to the BDOs in a recent meeting of BDOs and SDOs in Kolkata to control corruption in the panchayats. Interestingly, the picture is quite different in the 40-odd village panchayat areas where the Maoists hold sway. Here also the poverty is stark, and the need for the rice is intense due to the failure of the crops over the last two years. The Maoists have not called for a boycott of these development measures; rather it is the Maoist squads, or various peoples' organizations in these areas such as the PCPA or the Nari Ijjat Bachao Committee, who have taken up the task to collect the money to get the rice four times a month. The organized presence of these forces is ensuring that the rice reaches the needy, and the state seems to be inadvertently strengthening the hands of these organizations in these areas.

The other source of corruption and patronization seems to be the process of enlistment of BPL people. In many gram panchayats, the poorest people are not even aware that the enlisting process is taking place and that photographs are being taken in the panchayat office for the BPL cards. Apparently, the panchayat authorities are making the announcement of the photography sessions from mobile vans late in the mornings, when most of the daily labourer families have left for the fields. Reports suggest that it is mostly the affluent who are getting photographed to get the BPL cards and there are widespread grievances about this. The general understanding is that in order to get enrolled in the BPL list, it is necessary to go to the local Trinamool office and request the party leaders.

It is therefore quite apparent what a flood of corruption Mamata Banerjee's "tide of development" is bringing to Jangalmahal. Corruption in the CPI(M)-led panchayats had become one of the major issues in the Lalgarh uprising, and the people used to point out with anger how CPI(M) bosses had fattened with money from schemes such as Indira Abas Yojana or NREGA. The Trinamool Congress, which is walking the same way, is going to make itself an object of public wrath in a similar manner.. □□□

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