

Democracy Remains Elusive

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BENGAL'S 'JUNGLEMAHAL' denotes the area roughly covering Bankura, Birbhum, Purulia and the western part of West Midnapur. I used to visit many places in this zone for years together. Our West Bengal Khedia-Shabar Kalyan Samiti has office at Rajnoagarh in Purulia. Of course, tribals are there. But non-tribal population also has a substantial presence in Junglemahal. Hindus and Muslims as well as other communities are living together here for generations.

West Bengal is territorially small in comparison to other states. Inside this state, the laterite land of Junglemahal is pregnant with mineral resources. The sylvan forest of Sal, Mahua and other trees on the surface has been the cradle of local community lives for centuries. If my memory is not failing me, the erstwhile Left Front government had virtually sold out a substantial area of such land to Jindal group and some other industrial houses. The poor tribals and non-tribals in the area who had toiled hard to cultivate the largely arid land for generations did not know about the wealth stored in the womb of mother earth since time immemorial.

Though officially it was a long-term land-lease to Jindals, the 'people's government' practically sold out huge amount of land, originally vested in the government for redistribution among landless or to be used for state-run public projects.

The Left Front government did not bother either about the area or its people. Instead, they invited Jindals to exploit the resources of Junglemahal.

The colonial legacy of expropriating tribals and police-administrative repression on them has continued even during the Left rule. Their alienation from land and agriculture in one or the other way has compelled a good section of them to migrate from Junglemahal to rest of West Bengal and other states in search of a livelihood as low-paid and most-exploited wage labourers over the decades. The migration, both seasonal and long-term, has reduced the size of the tribal population in comparisons to others in Junglemahal.

I don't know which government will take care of the never-ending exploitation of the people of Junglemahal and when it will deliver.

But the resistance movement led by Chhatradhar Mahato and his fellow travellers in the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities has to be judged in this backdrop. Regarding Chhatradhar, I want to know how long he would be kept behind bars.

I am asking this because the very issue of release of political prisoners has been put on backburner after the assembly polls. The regime has changed and a new government is in

power. When we think what the earlier government did not do and what we expect from the new one, the issue of release of political prisoners comes to mind naturally.

I am not a political worker. I have tried to share the sufferings of Junglemahal and helped in my humble ways as a writer. Once I did not know much about the Naxalite movement in the seventies of the last century. Later, gradually I came to know about it and realised that the concerns for common people was the mainstay of the movement. I don't know much about Maoist activities in Junglemahal. I have not visited the area in recent times.

But I know that the new government in Bengal had initiated a peace process with the Maoists. We want to know from the government whether the talks took place. What is the outcome? If it has failed, why? Kishenji was killed during the peace initiative. Now it is being suspected by many quarters that he was actually gunned down in a 'fake encounter'.

We want to know the truth because we too want peace in Junglemahal.

It is my humble request to the new chief minister: it's time to release all those who have been jailed in connection with the Junglemahal agitation.

Why is there a need to deploy 'joint forces' or other forces in Junglemahal? How does it solve the perennial problems that people of Junglemahal have been facing? We want the return of democracy. The people of the state have invited the new government. People did not like one-party rule in the name of democracy. One should not forget that the CPM-led government had to go because of people's opposition to forced hegemony.

I will also ask Maoists to shun the politics of killing. Whether it's the government side or those in Opposition, we don't want politics of killings but real democracy.

In the meantime, I would like to remind both sides about what interest me more: problems that the residents of Junglemahal face in their daily lives. I have always cared about the issues that affect the common people. I have come to know about the following problems through my interaction with them.

- Are there enough roads fit for vehicular movements and otherwise in the area? Roads increase mobility and communication. I know enough has not been done in this regard during 34 years of Left Front rule.
- Is there enough supply of safe drinking water? Is there enough irrigation facilities for those have cultivable land?
- Is there enough number of primary schools?
- What are the other moves to spread education? There is a need to take new initiatives based on the new generations of educated locals.
- Is there any sustained and effective effort to make girls literate?

- Has the new government ensured doctors' presence, at least in some villages? I am referring to it in view of the abysmal condition of state-run health care system during the earlier regime.
- Afforestation drive is a must in view of the fast depletion of forest in Janglemahal. The unique beauty of the land and its forest as well as environmental balance has to be preserved. I don't know whether the sylvan Sal forest near the Jhargram town of my childhood memory is still there with its serenity and magnificence intact. □□□