

JANGALMAHAL DEBATE

'Running Commentary Of A Death'

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DEATH OF WHAT! A PERSON, a leader, a movement! With Kishenji aka Mullojulla Koteswara Rao's death in an 'encounter' (as claimed by security forces) in Jungle-mahal, one may jump to the conclusion that this writer is referring to the death of the Maoist leader. But in these uncertain times, words lose certainty, and with Kishenji's death in a 'fake encounter' (as claimed by his niece and civil rights activists), death of a people's movement may also be signified.

The police raid in the villages, the assault on women and children, and the unique resistance based on a unique demand and the mass participation of women in the movement had inspired a large number of urban activists. This writer was even part of groups that kept going to Junglemahal to express support and feel the pulse of the extraordinary movement. There was an incomparable mass movement far beyond leftism in both theory and practice.

AMLASHOLE

In June 2006, the media was full of news about deaths in tribal families due to hunger. A correspondent reported, "five tribals had recently died because of lack of food in Amlashole village in Belpahari block in West Medinipur district. An allegation not heard of since the 1942 Bengal famine, the report of starvation deaths seems to falsify official boasts of great success with agrarian reforms, agricultural boom in the state and equal success with the public distribution system."

The news did make some noise, but couldn't raise the level of anger to what Singur-Nandigram-Lalgarh would later generate. A research study carried out in a village in Medinipur (then undivided)—first survey in 1993 and repeat surveys in 1995 and 1998—revealed a food calendar—should one call it 'hunger calendar'—which showed that the time-span of tribal people going hungry had been increasing rather dangerously. Earlier it used to be seven months, and now it was extended to practically nine months of the year. With more and more community land being acquired by government for social forestry, increasing government restrictions on collection of twigs, fruits, leaves and other minor forest produce in government land and rapid dwindling of aquatic livestock like small fish due to increasing use of pesticides had largely contributed to the extension of the season of hunger.

The calendar, as this writer wrote in an article, is analogous to the one described in the medieval Bengali classic *Chandimangal* by poet Mukundaram (circa 1579), an analogy still valid after 435 years. Mukundaram portrayed the hunger calendar of Kalketu and Phullara, the

animal-trapper couple and their mother Nidaya. Animal-trappers were typically tribal people who remained geographically isolated from the mainstream. Usually, SCs and STs are clubbed together to describe the 'marginal' population. It disregards the spatial isolation of the tribal people, which is the major contributor to their deprivation. The SCs, living on the fringes of upper-caste Hindu society, could become conscious of their deprivation and unite to raise voices, but such awareness took a much longer time for the tribal population. Perhaps, that's why extremist politics found a fertile ground among them. But the point to note is that while Amlashole failed to unleash public anger, police excesses in Lalgarh did.

FOR LALGARH

24 April, 2009. Civil Rights Activists walked proudly in the streets of Kolkata, they walked in support of Chhatradhar Mahato, the leader of the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCPA) and the people of Lalgarh for resolutely continuing with police boycott. They greeted them because what they dreamt of doing themselves, the remote villagers have actually done that. As someone said, 'They've taught the police the right lesson!'

IN LALGARH

In Lalgarh Andolan Sanhati Mancha (LASM), social activists came together believing that PCPA was truly a unique people's organisation, though rapidly coming under the Maoist influence. When, in April-May 2009, reports of serial killings of CPI(M) workers, summary trial and punishment in so-called 'people's court' and extortion in Lalgarh and other pockets of Junglemahal started appearing in the media, intense debates broke out amongst the supporters of Lalgarh agitation. A large number of LASM activists made it clear that they were expressing solidarity with a unique people's movement, not the political agenda or strategy of a political party or group. A team was constituted to visit the area and assess the situation.

In truth PCPA was found to be a broad-based organisation, as even BJP supporters were active part of it. In fact, that was the uniting plank of PCPA—anyone could join it but without any party banner or affiliation. That, to some extent, explained why they had refused CPIML(ND) or Santosh Rana's group. Rana, of course, has a different version for the turn of events. PCPA, according to him, was the outcome of a joint effort by Bharat Jakat Majhi Marwa, a group of tribal heads, and various Jharkhand Party and CPI(ML) factions; later, Maoists took control and created a totalitarian atmosphere in which no other political organisation could function.

Civil Rights Activists visited some of the families who had faced trials in a people's court. When asked whether they could accept the trial in and the verdict of the people's court, one of the respondents retorted, 'Did ever an accused accept punishment?' Another respondent lamented that the only 'sin' his son performed was to cast false votes during elections, and for, that he was driven out of the village. When PCPA leaders Chhatradhar Mahato and Lalmohan Tudu were questioned about such complaints, they assured that in the people's courts, the majority opinion was not in favour of capital or any other violent forms of punishment but

sometimes excesses did happen. Newspapers reported that Gopinath Murmu was beaten to death since he refused to participate in the PCPA rally in Kolkata. Gopinath's widow however claimed that her husband died of excessive drinking.

At night, team members used to walk up to Kantapahari to sleep in a building meant clearly to be a police barrack but now turned into a hospital managed by PCPA. From early morning, patients from far away places—mothers with their babies—crowded its tiny rooms for free treatment and medicines. A couple of local women had picked up nursing and basic medical aid from the doctors coming from Kolkata and other places. Also there was a 3-km road being built by villagers with voluntary labour. When asked why they were not asking the administration to pay wages under NREGS for such labour, Chhatradhar looked indifferent saying the people were fed up and had no faith in the administration.

Regarding media stories about extortion, PCPA leaders were quite categorical that officers at BDO and SDO offices, with whom they maintained regular liaison, could ever complain about them demanding ransom. Perhaps, miscreants were using PCPA's name.

Well, there were a lot of wall-writings calling for election boycott. As all the Lok Sabha seats in Junglemahal had been won by Left Front in the elections held a month ago, the then Opposition accused 'Maoists and Mahatos' of aiding the left victory through their poll boycott call. Chhatradhar, however, denied the charges saying PCPA was never opposed to elections; in fact, it'd itself have contested in the polls had all the opposition parties agreed on a common candidate. At the end, there were eight candidates against CPI(M) which got the villagers annoyed and confused; and, they opted to abstain from voting. Besides, the Election Commission failed to provide adequate transport for the voters while the pick-up points were too far away from many villages; it also didn't inform the voters about the location of the booths. All these were agreed upon during talks with the Commission a week before the polling day.

The LASM team ended up a divided lot. There was no single opinion on Maoist-PCPA relationship or the mindless violence frequently being resorted to in the name of the movement. Some began to feel choked by the contraction of democratic space such violence always brings about. Even Chhatradhar's explanations, at times, sounded like justifications.

SHRINKING DEMOCRATIC SPACE

Maybe, Chhatradhar was right—media was out to malign PCPA and the Lalgah movement. But as stories of more and more violent actions in Junglemahal filled the news-pages, Maoist take-over of the movement seemed imminent.

A particular incident was shocking: a little girl, daughter of a CPI(M) functionary, was forced to beg for her father's life by writing a poster that he'd have no further track with the party. When the picture of that girl writing that poster appeared in the newspapers, everybody was shamed. This writer wrote a piece slamming the intolerance of dogmatic ideology and

expressing concern over the shrinking of democratic space and the shutting up of pluralism. The moot question was whether one couldn't belong to a political party of one's own choice. Yes, CPI(M) had been making armed attacks on people but silencing their voices by force would lead to a grave situation. What was to be noted was that in these cases both the perpetrators and the victims of violent action belonged to the poorest of the poor.

Debates within LASM over Maoist violence intensified after they openly boasted that they were behind the Lalgarh upsurge and now leading the movement. One view was that Maoist violence would only aggravate the State's counter-violence. But those sympathetic to the Maoist cause were not prepared to concede an inch and a stalemate ensued. Soon after, to broaden the solidarity campaign, make it more inclusive and break out of the Maoist domination, the idea of Lalgarh Mancha (LM) was floated.

A booklet published at that time, angered those in LASM who supported PCPA but not Maoists. Stating that those objecting to the use of violence couldn't follow the class nature of violence, it added, "And these people do not find any regular forum to give vent to their feelings and political opinion, they try to utilize these broad forums to air their feelings." This was clearly hitting below the belt! The fact was that activists who came together to uphold the Lalgarh struggle were not mere 'forum-seekers' but were prepared to go to any length and make any number of sacrifices. Since they came from a diverse range of backgrounds, accommodating every view and uniting on the basis of a common perception would have strengthened the movement. Sadly, such wisdom was missing on those whose sole argument was *arrogance*.

It was said that in Jungelmahal, because the State had declared war on the people, the people had no option but put up an armed resistance. Many however, felt that it'd eventually get ordinary villagers caught in crossfire between the State and Maoist squads. While the squads would be able to protect themselves, villagers would have to bear the brunt of the State's violence. But those endorsing armed resistance were not willing to listen; so, those who joined LASM/LM out of conscience, held independent views and had no armed 'vanguard' to defend the solidarity movement out of sheer frustration.

Some even proposed that while speaking from a public platform, views might be critical of the violence. The proposal was rejected as it was felt that diversity of views would 'confuse' the audience. People, of course, see various channels, read a multiplicity of newspapers, and yet form their own opinion—this argument, too, was lost on those who championed armed, and *only* armed, resistance.

Meanwhile, violence kept escalating in Junglemahal. And the movement's support base kept dwindling at a rapid pace.

IGNORED ETHNICITY

The jungle corridor from Maharashtra's Gadchiroli to West Bengal's Janglemahal (and including vast stretches of Chhatisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and Jharkhand), where Maoists mainly operate in, is the tribal heartland of the country. Addressing ethnicity issues in these areas is as vital as dealing with issues of poverty and deprivation. That Maoist politics never seriously took up the question of ethnic identity came to surface when Jalamsai Sadmek of Gadchiroli, Hemal Mandi of West Medinipur or Gurucharan Kisku of Purulia, all Maoists, slammed the leadership for ignoring their cultural identity.

They felt that urban, educated Maoists, mostly from Andhra, were actually in control and they were insensitive to the tribal concerns. It's curious that Maoists, like the conventional left, are unwilling to take up any other identity but 'class.' Religion, gender, race, region or culture rarely finds place in their theories of emancipation. Naturally, Maoists passed it off as ranting of expelled cadres turned police spies. But concerned citizens on the other hand, were pleased that someone, police spy or not, had spoken the truth.

Of the printed material produced during this period, none touched upon the distinctive needs of the tribal population. Only a leaflet brought out by the Jharkhand Andolan Samannay Mancha (JASM) (Jharkhand Movement Coordination Forum) raised certain specific demands: Santhali, Kurmali and Mundari language as medium of teaching in primary schools; 75% of forest revenue to Forest Committees and free auction of forest produce; forest rights for tribal communities; filling up ST vacancies in higher education; ST status for Mahatos and Bagals; and so on.

Babu Bose, one of the most respected leaders of Janglemahal and the leading light of JASM, was killed by Maoists on September 25, 2011.

DISCONTINUED TALKS

Once Lok Sabha elections were over in April-May 2009, state government invited the PCPA leadership for talks to find ways to end the police boycott. The first and the only round—there had been talks with EC as well as several rounds at block or district levels before—in which this writer represented LASM, took place on 13 June at Medinipur circuit house. The discussion was quite amicable, government accepted the immediate 5-point demands and, therefore, road blockades were lifted. It was decided to resume the talks a month later.

Five days later, state police and Central paramilitary forces were sent to Lalgarh.

PEOPLE'S FESTIVAL BRINGS JOINT FORCES

June 14 : Television showed the people of Lalgarh in a state of fury. Hundreds had taken over and were demolishing the palatial building in Dharampur, Anuj Pandey, CPI(M) local committee secretary, lived in. Several news channel OB vans were there to record the historic event.

Though all felt good at what was on screen, many were apprehensive of how the State would respond. Everybody feared a bloodbath. A few did disapprove of the act but their feeble voice got submerged under the strident rejoicing of the others. A ‘people’s festival’ was how they looked at it.

On 18 June, joint forces arrived and ‘Operation Black Soil’ was launched with great intent. One wondered whether it was meant to pre-empt a mass movement from earning the path-breaker’s identity.

ARRESTS UNDER UAPA

On 26 September, during Durga puja, CID detectives who posed as media persons arrested Chhatradhar Mahato. There were instant protests, despite the festival mood. Questions were asked, even by Left Front partners, about the method of arrest and the ethics of it. The then Director General of West Bengal Police, Bhupinder Singh accused Chhatradhar of being a Maoist and LASM a Maoist front. In a press briefing, he named ‘one university professor and one lady college teacher’ as Maoist associates. Quite expectedly this writer’s name was mentioned. As a precautionary measure, this writer went into hiding for a couple of days.

A few days later, Raja Sarkhel, Prasun Chatterjee of GPM and Swapan Dasgupta, editor, *People’s March*, were picked up from their homes. Gour Chakrabarty, Maoist spokesperson in the state, had been picked up from a television studio earlier. All four of them were charged under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA). While Raja, Prasun and Gourda are still languishing in jail, Swapan Dasgupta died in custody from lack of medical care.

All these arrests were a big blow to Maoist organisational efforts and fissures surfaced within.

MEDIA’S KISHENJI

A few days before the arrival of joint forces, Maoists had come over-ground in full glare of the media. After Chhatradhar was sent behind bars, Kishenji hogged the limelight. The Maoist leader’s gamchha-covered face and his beloved expression ‘jenegen’ (meaning ‘janagan’, the masses) in Telugu-ised Bengali became a hit with the media. But people helplessly searched for answers to several questions. Some re-read K Balagopal’s articles, who had felt the same dilemma when confronted with the question of violence as a revolutionary strategy. Through Kishenji, the experience of Andhra seemed to be replicating in Bengal.

Balagopal’s writings didn’t give activists an alternative but helped them take a distinctive stand against the use of guns. Others found the answers in Himanshu Kumar, the Gandhian, whose Adivasi Chetana Ashram in Bastar was demolished not by Maoists but by the Indian State.

BRUTALISATION OF JUNGLEMAHAL

There has been too much bloodshed in Janglemahal since the area had come under paramilitary operations. If the State has been engaged in cruel repression, Maoists have been continuing with sabotage, mine-blasts and unnecessary killings. The Gyneswari derailment which killed and maimed hundreds, the massacre in Shilda, the killing of Lalmohan Tudu, Sidho Soren and Sasadhar Mahato, Umakanta Mahato in so-called 'encounters', the death of Swapan Dasgupta and continuing incarceration of Chhatradhar and so many ordinary folk go to show that Janglemahal is bleeding.

When will all these end?

CANDIDATE FROM JAIL

May 2011 : when the time came for holding elections to the state assembly, Chhatradhar Mahato decided to fight from jail, not as a PCPA candidate but representing a new forum formed in Medinipur jail. A whole lot of human rights movement decided to support his candidature. Expectedly, debates broke out over whether Chhatradhar had done the right thing. Some well-known personalities also extended their wholehearted support. 'It proves,' they said, 'Chhatradhar has faith in the Indian Constitution.' There were unconfirmed reports that some people, known as champions of human rights, had approached him in jail to withdraw his candidature in favour of the TMC candidate. So much for human rights neutrality!

Chhatradhar polled 20,000-plus votes. It's a considerable figure, particularly when TMC storm was sweeping across the length and breadth of the state. Chhatradhar is still languishing in jail, in spite of pre-poll promises of release by those who are now in power.

AN INEVITABLE DEATH

CP(M) regime has gone and TMC is now in power. Chhatradhar, Raja, Prasun et al continue to be in jail while joint forces are continuing with their raids, arrests and 'encounter' killings. There are also reports that PCPA, USDF and MMS will be banned as Maoist setups. The new government had appointed a group of civil rights activists as interlocutors who'd work for peace in Janglemahal by persuading Maoists to lay down arms and come for talks. One was perplexed, because where was the credibility of the interlocutors? Who did they represent? Did they forget how Azad was killed? Government was never serious about peace. How serious Maoists were, nobody knows.

That Kishenji would be killed in 'encounter' was, therefore, a foregone conclusion.

Who actually died—PCPA, a unique people's movement or Kishenji? □□□