

Finding Way Out?

Debashis Bhattacharya

NOT A MILLION DOLLAR BUT a few thousand rupee question is : will peace come back to Junglemahal?

This question arises as 23 blocks of Purulia, Bankura and West Medinipur became disturbed from the fag end of 2008 and remained same till November 2011. This tribal area had been a hotbed of Maoist activities. Maoists had secretly organised some youth earlier. During 2003-2004 armed Maoist squads were coming from neighbouring Jharkhand and ran away after killing some CPI(M) activists. It was known as hit and run tactics. Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the then chief minister of West Bengal had told this at the legislative assembly as well as his party rallies for months. Most heinous act was committed at the dead of night of the December 31, 2005, when a group of Maoists raided Rabindra Kar's kuccha house at a village in Bandwan Block. Maoists killed Rabindra Kar and his wife. This writer visited the house on January 9, 2006 to see the wreckage with his own eyes. Rabindra Kar was neither a class enemy nor an agent of the class enemies. He was honest and modest enough. Yet he was murdered. Why? Kar was a very good organiser. Maoists killed him as to get foothold on the hilly terrain of Jharkhand-Bandwan-Jhargram area.

Has any Human Rights Organisation visited the spot to enquire? Not. Such organisations visited Gopalpur in Nadia, Karanda in Burdwan, Surul in Birbhum and demanded arrest of murderers because in all those three cases victims were Naxalites and murderers were CPI(M) men. Such human rights activists correctly condemned the barbaric atrocities and violations of human rights committed by the police at Lalgarh from the evening of 3 November 2008. But they kept mum about the Maoist attempt to kill Bhattacharjee and two other Union Ministers before the police onslaught.

Since then Maoists under the leadership of Kishenji fought the police at Junglemahal. Following points are to be noted :

1. Maoists got some foothold and succeeded in recruiting cadres at Junglemahal. Why? It can't be denied that during the tenure of first and second Left Front Government, or even to say till 1989, developmental activities were experienced at Junglemahal. The rural tribal poor got the taste of the development. They could differentiate between post-1977 changes and the conditions which prevailed in earlier decades in terms of basic living standard. Politically, CPI(M) became very strong in that area as the local leaders of the party were honest and dedicated enough.

2. With the passage of time the majority of local leaders of CPI(M), better to say, leaders of the committees from district committees to local level became corrupt, arrogant and non-political also. Many of them were elected at various levels of three tier Panchayet system. Panchayet Samity and Gram Panchayet Pradhans huddled at zonal party committee offices and confabulated how to utilise the funds for local development of MPs, MLAs as well as funds of Panchayet department. Funds for Central government-sponsored numerous schemes also flowed in. The CPI(M) leaders spent 60 percent for the development and embezzled the rest of amount. Party leaders, panchayet pradhans and contractors made a triangle to swindle the money.
3. By the first half of 1990s the CPI(M) leaders built up the zonal committee offices with lavish means. By the second half, even the offices of local and branch committees exhibited the signs of party's ill-gotten opulence. With the entry of Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee at the helm of affairs at Writers' Buildings, the local leaders began the work of building their own palatial buildings in the midst of hundreds of poor households. The poor people of Junglemahal saw this vulgar show of wealth with their own eyes and could gauge from where the money came. Dealers of Hero Honda, Bajaj, TVS were gladdened with the number of sales of motor bikes at Junglemahal during this time. The buyers were mostly the new rural rich with the ruling party connections. The people were firstly disillusioned, then angry with the leaders of CPI(M). But out of fear, they could not open their mouths.
4. Yes, the astute Kishenji could feel the pulse of the people as well as the ripening objective situation for his party's offensive. The topography or geographical position of the area and, obviously the jungle cover suitable for his armed activities, drew his attention. He emboldened the disgruntled youth to fight CPI(M). The youth who were angry with CPI(M) leaders rallied behind Kishenji. He didn't waste time to give them political education but asked them to swoop down on the CPI(M) local leaders and cadres. Actions immediately followed instructions. Guerilla squad of four or five youth began murdering CPI(M) activists and fled away to Jharkhand by taking the jungle cover while avoiding highway. About 300 CPI(M) members and sympathisers and ordinary villagers were killed dubbing them as police informers. Some were killed following the verdict of extra-judicial kangaroo courts.

On November 3, 2008, the then CM, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's convoy was targeted. The incident shook the state and central administration. Police action followed. But the coverage of jungle area gave the Maoists advantage to escape security crackdown. The police were at a loss what to do in the jungle area. The LF government deployed paramilitary forces from June 18, 2009. More than five thousand paramilitary personnel were pressed into action. The joint forces began their operation. The CPI(M) cadres showed joint forces the way to Maoists' hideouts. Even armed CPI(M) cadres were organised in fortified camps to launch attacks on Maoists. The presence of such camps of armed CPI(M) men became a topic of debate between Bhattacharjee and Union Home minister. As spirals of violence continued armed CPI(M) cadres who were known as 'Harmads' killed 9 poor

villagers at Netai on January 7, 2011. CPI(M) was exposed before the people of the entire country.

Why the Junglemahal became turbulent and violent? Some people were of the opinion that underdevelopment and socio-economic factors were the main reason. This opinion was wrong. Jalangi and Domkol blocks in Murshidabad district were more underdeveloped than any block of Junglemahal area. But Maoists could not make a dent in Murshidabad. Actually the presence of jungle coverage which suited the Maoist concept of ideal terrain for waging guerilla warfare motivated them to make Junglemahal as their base.

5. Kishenji deftly gained the support of TMC supporters, subdued under CPI(M) rule, at Junglemahal during 2009-2010. He even issued press statement intending to see Mamata Banerjee as the next Chief Minister of Bengal. That intelligent statement helped Kishenji to win the TMC supporters who were needed to ensure food and shelters for the fugitive Maoists. Kishenji used the media from his hideout with dexterity. The abduction of OC, Sakrail police station and Kishenji's speech under the glare of television cameras before the release of the hostage officer proved this.
6. In the Assembly Election CPI(M) was almost whitewashed from the Junglemahal. The anti CPI(M) voters could exercise their franchise freely for the first time due to full proof security arrangement of the Election Commission.

On May 20, 2011 the new government under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee was formed. The paramilitary forces were kept in the barrack. The harmads absconded. Peace was restored at Junglemahal.

7. On July 7, 2011 Mamata Banerjee entrusted six interlocutors including this writer to mediate between the government and Maoists. This writer thinks that Mamata Banerjee had seriously wanted to solve the problem amicably. But unfortunately Maoists began to kill one after another from the last week of September 2011. Popular leftist leader like Babu Bose, TMC leader Lalmohan Mahato were killed without any reason. The people of Junglemahal and particularly the TMC supporters became furious with such murders.
8. Maoists failed to assess the mood of the people after the change of political scenario. Even Kishenji failed. The people of Junglemahal were disillusioned with the CPI(M) cadres. With the change of government those CPI(M) cadres either left the village or became inactive. TMC supporters were found in large number. But TMC supporters could do nothing wrong at least within the first 100 days. It was not possible also. So the villagers were happy with TMC supporters as well as Mamata Banerjee, the new chief minister. This change of situation was not taken into consideration by the Maoists. Kishenji also failed to understand that the villagers now wanted peace instead of police raids at day and night. So the villagers tried to keep them away from the Maoists. The Maoists became isolated.

9. Police officers managed to get the information about absconding Maoists. Maoists cadres and sympathisers surreptitiously got in touch with the police to stay at home. Anarchism and adventurism had to pay heavy penalty ultimately. This writer is of this opinion that Kishenji was led into a trap by his close comrades- in arms, who were turned into police informers, behind his back. But anarchist Kishenji was not a coward man. This writer though differed with Kishenji's political line but respected his life-long dedication and valour. He had been carrying AK 47 not to surrender but to fight back. Whenever he was challenged by the Cobra forces he used his firearm in no time. The last encounter which ended in his death didn't last long. It was not possible also. Kishenji in his death proved that the line of Maoists is wrong and not tenable.
10. After the death of Kishenji the Maoists are on the defensive in Junglemahal. Many Maoists have now become police informers. Some Maoists are surrendering. Sporadic violent actions may go on here and there. But as the villagers now want peace, they will be able to keep Junglemahal peaceful now.
11. There lies the difference between forested areas of Bastar and Bengal's Junglemahal . The density of forest cover in Bastar is deeper than Junglemahal. The socio-economic factors in Dandkaranya region are worse than that of Junglemahal. Tribals of Bengal's Jungemhal are poor. True tribals of Jharkhand, Bihar, Orissa are poorer. But tribals of Bastar are poorest in the country. So the political and military line which could be sustained in Dandakaranya region would not be replicated for a long time in Bengal's Junglemhal. □□□