

Politics of Area Domination

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AS MAMATA BANERJEE realized her long-cherished dream to capture the Writers' Building in Kolkata, establishing peace in the trouble-torn state, particularly in the junglemahal (forest-belt) of West Bengal, was high on the agenda of the new government. But the question haunting everybody's mind was how the new regime would try to establish peace: through the might of the state or through peace negotiation with the Maoists? The second option eluded sections of the civil society as the Maoists and the Trinamul Congress (TMC) party befriended each other in a tacit understanding before the last assembly elections to defeat their common enemy—the CPI (M) and the Left front government. But their bonhomie was short-lived as, after a few failed efforts to bring the two sides, the Maoists and the state government, to the peace-table, events took a sudden turn when the armed state forces made a surprise by killing the Maoist supreme leader Kishenji in an 'encounter'. The new rulers of West Bengal seemed simply not ready to miss the opportunity to eliminate the top Maoist leader while pretending to continue the peace process by appointing interlocutors.

It was apparent from the very beginning of the so-called peace-initiative that both the sides were responding to the peace process in order to create public opinion in their favour and ultimately to gain upper-hand over each other in the ensuing battle that seemed inevitable judging the respective ideological stand-points of the two sides. On the one hand, the Maoists would in no way be ready to bid farewell to arms and join the so-called mainstream politics as advocated by the parliamentary parties. They are committed to capture power through armed struggle and regard the state as the principal enemy that they aim to uproot by conducting 'protracted people's war'. They were ready to negotiate peace in the changed political situation after the last assembly election principally to show their sincerity to the peace-process and gain some time to expand their organizational network in the state. On the other hand, the state would in no way allow an armed insurgent group to expand its base to newer areas under the garb of peace initiative. The new ruling party TMC has gained much ground in the junglemahal during the election campaign, albeit with the help of the Maoists, and wanted to consolidate the same in the post-election situation at the cost of the Maoists.

Anyone familiar to the fast-changing ground-reality in the junglemahal of West Bengal would wonder how the state and the Maoists could come to terms even for a short-lived peace when both sides are bent to the practice of ground-domination that had become the common practice for all political parties in the vast rural tracts of Bengal since the early years of the Left Front rule. The principal Left Front partner, CPI(M), has by now been quite (in)famous for its style of hegemonic domination in the countryside that ensured resounding electoral victory for the Left Front in successive elections. One needs to study the style of domination being exercised by the present incumbent rulers of the state vis-a-vis the Maoist party to explore the possibility of peace-process initiated after the assembly election with so much fanfare. Has there been any

fundamental change in the policy of area domination in the changed political scenario in West Bengal?

During the long Left Front rule, the CPI(M) gained a kind of mastery in applying the policy of area domination, particularly in the rural areas of West Bengal. The party applied its vast party machinery skillfully combining it with the state machinery, over which it had established a vicious grip, to achieve its absolute supremacy over the village society. The TMC fought with the CPI(M) during its emergence in the state political scene in the 1998-2001 period in the countryside of West Medinipur, Hooghly and Bankura districts to successfully bring substantial rural areas under its domination. The policy of area domination at that time found expression in the battle to physically capture villages after villages with marauding armed gangs attacking and counter-attacking each other's territory, burning and looting houses, killing and injuring people, thereby bringing immense misery to the people of the affected area. The Maoists though having a complete different ideological make-up hardly lagged behind in following this policy of area domination. One may recollect that almost during the same period the CPI (ML) (People's War) and MCC, the very parties later united to form the Communist Party of India (Maoist), fought bloody battles for area domination in the forest areas of West Bengal, leave aside such instances of fratricidal fighting between various revolutionary parties raging for long in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand.

Interestingly, the Maoists [in their previous avatar as CPI(M-L) (People's War)] had intervened in that battle for area domination between the principal parliamentary parties of West Bengal in the above-mentioned districts, first against the domination of TMC-BJP combine (TMC at that time allied with BJP both in the national politics, i.e. in NDA and in state politics) and then against the aggressive CPI(M). That experience might be worthy to be mentioned in this context.

In the aftermath of 1998 panchayet elections, the TMC-BJP combine got an upper-hand over their rival CPI(M) in some areas in the afore-said districts by virtue of capturing a number of panchayets and then eliminated CPI(M) activists from those rural areas to establish their exclusive domination. When the Maoists began organizing people in the plain lands of Garbeta I and Garbeta II blocks of West Medinipur district, they had to face principal opposition from the forces loyal to the TMC-BJP combine who by then disbanded red flag from the entire area.

In 1999 the Maoists annihilated one local BJP leader in Sandhipur village of Garbeta-I block in order to demoralize the TMC-BJP forces who in retaliation killed the brother of the local Maoist leader Asit Sarkar, eliminated his nephew and blinded his brother-in-law. After these incidents, series of clashes took place in Garbeta and surrounding areas between the Maoists and the TMC-BJP forces with the former slowly getting supremacy over the latter principally by dint of their training in guerrilla warfare including their skill in using long-range fire-arms. Notably, the CPI(M) leaders of that area, cornered by the TMC-BJP forces at that time, helped the Maoists by providing food and shelters to defeat their common enemy. The Maoists then

found this help convenient for their existence and battle for supremacy in that area. But things turned otherwise once the TMC-BJP combine began to retreat from the area in face of the Maoists' guerilla attack.

The CPI(M) had by that time reorganized its forces in and around Garbeta and initially joined forces with the Maoists to oust the TMC-BJP forces from the area. But once the latter began retreating from the area, the CPI(M) forces immediately turned their guns against the Maoists with a view to re-capture their lost territory. Ironically, some of the TMC-BJP supporters, evicted from their villages, then joined the Maoists in their bid to resist the aggressively expanding CPI(M) forces and return to their homes. The Maoists, boosted by the support received this time from their enemy of the yesterday, formed a bigger armed squad (platoon formation in the Maoist parlance) to counter the CPI(M) attacks. But this time the Maoists did not get the crucial support of the SC-ST people they received earlier while fighting against the TMC-BJP forces. In the ensuing fight between the Maoists and the CPI(M), the subaltern people in the war-zone of Garbeta became largely neutral and refused to provide shelter to the Maoist forces that they required badly to keep their hide-outs secret from enemy forces.

In this situation, some TMC-turned-Maoist supporters offered the Maoists shelter in one of their villages, namely Chhoto Angaria. But the shelter was soon exposed to the CPI(M) that had already 'captured' that area. CPI(M) leaders soon gathered their forces to surround the 'shelter' and burnt the house after killing at least five squad members of the Maoists. Interestingly, the panicked owner of the house fled to Kolkata to inform the state-level TMC leadership about the carnage. Being informed, Mamata Banerjee promptly claimed that their supporters were killed by the CPI(M) in Chhoto Angaria. After that gory incident, the Maoists retreated from that area once and for all and instead concentrated their activities in the forest areas of the South Bengal districts. That was their fast intervention in the battle for area domination of the parliamentary parties when the CPI(M) tactfully used their services to regain its domination over a certain area. But had the Maoists learnt any lesson from the bitter experience they got while allying with parliamentary parties in Garbeta?

The incidents unveiled in the junglemahal of the state in the recent phase proved to the contrary. This time the Maoist movement got a fillip with the outbreak of Lalgarh movement that alienated almost the whole population from the state and consecutively from the then principal ruling party CPI(M). The CPI(M), though maintaining a low profile in the initial period of the popular upsurge in the area, tried to re-establish its stranglehold over the area at the later stage by setting up a number of armed camps being bolstered and supported by the anti-Maoists operations of the joint forces (state police plus central paramilitary forces). But remarkably, in this crucial period, the Maoists failed to mobilize the local people, estranged from the state and the CPI(M), to demonstrate popular anger against the atrocities of these forces, which had been a very common occurrence in the initial months of the Lalgarh movement. That people's mobilization against armed camps was possible had been amply demonstrated by the Netai incident where CPI(M) gangs opened fire on the agitating villagers

killing nine of them. The Maoists instead concentrated in organizing armed squads and conducting raids in the houses of CPI(M) cadres and supporters and also on the joint forces. In the offensive launched by them, scores of CPI(M) supporters, mostly poor and middle class village people, and a number of personnel of the state forces were killed. The jungle-mahal really turned into a war-zone where killings and counter-killings became the order of the day for quite some time.

After the announcement of assembly elections, political equations began to change quickly with the entry of the TMC as a contending power in the scene of battle-weary junglemahal. A strange realignment of political forces began to take shape in that particular area with the Maoists and the TMC coming to terms though unofficially in a desperate bid to beat the CPI(M) and defeat the Left Front government. In the background of the fierce battle for area domination in the Bengal countryside, the compulsion for a political formation to maintain just its physical existence in a certain area often leads to a situation when enemy's enemy turns into friends, thereby making strange bed-fellows that people had earlier witnessed in the battle for Garbeta.

This time in junglemahal the alignment of political forces took a reverse shape as the TMC was extended generous support by the Maoists who even filled grounds with their supporters for the TMC leaders to address public rallies. The declaration of the top Maoist leader Kishenji that he wanted to see Mamata Banerjee as the Chief Minister of West Bengal paved the way for the alliance in the pre-poll marriage of convenience. The TMC, which did not have substantial presence in junglemahal earlier, was quick to seize the opportunity and infiltrated in a big way in the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCPA) and Adibasi-Mulbasi Committee that had been spearheading the Lalgarh movement and hence were the targets of state repression. The Maoists contemplated that the presence of TMC people in these organizations would dissuade the state forces at least to some extent from attacking them and act as a safeguard to their own supporters working in these organizations. But in the tactical maneuver to use each-other in the opportunist alliance, the TMC ably organized its own organizational base cutting across the Maoist support-base throughout the jungle-mahal.

After the election was won by the TMC-led alliance with a thumping majority, the basis for TMC-Maoist alliance suddenly evaporated and the ground was set for a new battle to establish supremacy in the junglemahal of West Bengal. For obvious reasons this time the battle-line was drawn between the TMC and the Maoists, each trying to consolidate and expand their bases at the earliest, lest the other could take advantage of the changed situation ensued from the sudden demise of CPI(M) domination. Not even an inch of earth in the Bengal countryside can probably be left outside the domination of this or that party and junglemahal cannot naturally be an exception. It is also predictable that the TMC would use the state forces at its disposal to suppress any resurgence of the Maoists. Hence, it was highly unlikely in such a situation that peace would be negotiated in true spirit between these two contending sides, one in state power and the other conducting insurgency against the state.

THE ELUSIVE PEACE

Anyone closely following the developments in the junglemahal of West Bengal should not harbour the illusion that the new government would negotiate peace with the Maoists in earnest. Negotiation between the state and insurgent groups materialize only when the insurgent group is too strong to be defeated by force and/or there is some room for the latter to be accommodated in the present state set-up. Clearly none of these factors exists in West Bengal today. In Andhra Pradesh, the first condition existed when the state government initiated discussion in 2004. But as the second condition did not exist, the state used the facade of negotiation to unearth the Maoist network and then eliminated almost the entire force of the Maoists from the state.

So it was no wonder that peace talk between the state and the Maoists never materialized in West Bengal. In the game of one-upmanship, the new government put the agenda of peace-talks by appointing interlocutors, but did not fulfil its pre-poll promises of withdrawal of joint forces and release of political prisoners (and withdrawal of previous political cases) that could have paved the way for peace negotiation. The anti-Maoist operations of the joint forces also continued to keep Maoist movements under check. On the ground a considerable number of leaders and activists of PCPA in West Medinipur district and Adibasi-Mulbasi Committee in Purulia were provoked to join the side of the TMC party in the changed situation. Some of these forces were organized in resistance groups to thwart the movement of the Maoists in the villages.

This enraged the Maoists who in retaliation once again resorted to individual killings to cow down the newly formed anti-Maoist formations. In one incident the Maoist squad came in search of an erstwhile leader of the Adibasi-Mulbasi Committee in Purulia who had joined the TMC since the election and killed his brother and father while failing to apprehend him. Such killings gave the government the required ground to again start the joint operation in full-fledge. Because of the substantial infiltration of the new ruling party inside the Maoist network, this time the Maoists became vulnerable to the operations of the joint forces never before.

The precision killing of Maoist top leader Kishenji raised questions about the extent of infiltration of the state's intelligence network inside the Maoist ranks. The circumstances in which the Maoist leader was killed may remain a mystery, but the incident itself is probably an indication of receding influence of the Maoists in the junglemahal of West Bengal. The new rulers of the state had strategically used firstly the promises of joint force withdrawal and release of political prisoners to win over the support of the Maoists in the crucial assembly election and then used the peace-initiative along with several 'development' sops in order to divide and penetrate the Maoist ranks and extend its hegemony over the area. The Maoists in turn seem to have become victim of their own politics by first forming opportunist alliance with a ruling class party, then misreading the ground situation of junglemahal and probably being unguarded for a while by over-emphasizing the peace-initiative and above all undermining as always the necessity to conduct political-ideological struggles to counter the influence of the

state and parliamentary parties and almost entirely replacing it by their brand of 'armed struggle', which principally took the form of individual assassinations.

Thus it seems that to both the sides, peace has not been a real issue to negotiate with and both wanted to use the same tactically to gain an upper-hand over the other in the concrete conditions of junglemahal. In the game of one-upmanship, the state and the ruling party has scored over the Maoists at least for the time being. The principal problem for both the sides seems their utter disrespect to the democratic norms and aspirations of the people. The new ruling party went back on its own pre-poll promises to withdraw the joint forces, release political prisoners and withdraw political cases of the earlier regime. Rather the new government resumed the policy of 'encounter' killings to physically eliminate the Maoist threat. The Maoists on their part did not cease their policy of individual killings of political opponents. Both sides are more than ever eager to establish their exclusive domination over jungle-mahal. With such scanty regard to democracy, the society cannot rid of the cycle of violence and peace hardly gets a chance. □□□