

JANGALMAHAL DEBATE

The Whole System is Guilty!

Dipankar Chakrabarti

JUNGALMAHAL, THE MOST bakward region of West Bengal, consisting of the largest parts of the three districts of West Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia in the south-west of the state, has been hogging the media headlines since the beginning of the last decade. The region since then has become a hotbed of politically motivated armed conflicts. This process was acutely aggravated during the last five years of the Left Front rule. Though there were expectations that peace will be restored in the region with the departure of that regime, the same tradition has been continuing even after the present Trinamul Congress(TMC)-Congress combine assumed office under the almost absolute leadership of Mamata Banerjee. The present government had initiated some efforts for 'peace' but it ended in a whimper. The failed effort has rather produced a bitter debate within the civil society in general and human rights movement in particular.

A large section of the population of the region consists of 'Adivasis' or tribals and Scheduled Castes. These downtrodden people have been deprived of any effective development endeavour. In terms of development, this region, termed 'the Western Region' by the government, is like two sides of the same coin: co-existence of rich forests and huge areas of uncultivated lands; or of natural beauty and harsh poverty and deprivation. In six decades of the Indian democracy, the tribals have received their shares only as alienation, exploitation, discrimination, deprivation and dispossession. According to the 2004 Human Development Report of West Bengal, these districts ranked 14th among all the districts in the state in terms of human development indicators. It is interesting to note that about four decades earlier, in 1961, their position was nearly the same. A few years back, the Panchayat & Rural Development Department of West Bengal government had marked a few thousand villages of the state as 'the most backward' on the basis of the census figures. Most of them are situated in this region. The LF government tried to prove its 'seriousness and sincerity' for the development of this region by opening a separate department for Western region development, and till recently none other than Sushanta Ghosh (the CPI(M) leader who was in jail for sometime for his alleged role in the killings of Trinamul supporters) was its minister-in-charge. Sadly, even after a decade, the region remained an impoverished hinterland as it was before.

The question of food security in the region is also very relevant. Since the death of 5 men belonging to the Shabar tribes out of starvation in village Amlasole in West Medinipur in 2004, the name 'Amlasole' has become a synonym for harsh poverty and hunger death. There are innumerable 'Amlasoles' in the region. The features of poverty and backwardness of the region are different from those of other backward regions. 60 to 70% people depend on cultivation. Number of agricultural daily labourers is much more than the marginal and small farmers,

wages are low; cultivation is seasonal and totally dependent on rainfall. Consequently, food security depends on this seasonal cultivation. During lean period, food consumption level drops by 30 to 40%. More than 50% people remain almost without food for about 6 months every year. The half hearted and incomplete land reforms started by the Left Front government has hardly affected the region. In the Jungalmahal hardly any patta (cultivation rights) has been issued. Per capita availability of land is high but not usable due to the nature of land and absence of effective water-conservation measures. A big section of the tribals have to migrate for livelihood to *Namal* (low lands in adjoining districts) as migrant labourers every year. Centrally sponsored public distribution and pro-poor projects like NREGA, Antyoday and Anaapurna Anna Yojana or the active role of the local panchayats could have partially redressed the problem of food security like Kerala. But widespread political manipulations have derailed the projects. Thus for sheer survival, the poor have to depend on the 'benevolence' of the money-lenders, or go to other regions for work.

Forests are another age-old source of livelihood for the poor. Thanks to the forest department's nexus with criminals, political leaders, police, timber mafias and administration to loot the forests and the flawed path of development, the centuries-old dependence of tribals on forests is threatened. Tribals who lived for generations in villages nestled in the forests have lost their natural surroundings and a traditional source of livelihood in the wake of rapid deforestation and fake development. Obviously, just food relief cannot solve the basic problems here. Concrete steps like modification of the nature of land, proper use of cultivable land, steps for irrigation and water conservation as well as ensuring the forest rights of the people are urgent needs. Also required are effective management of the panchayats in people's interests, expansion of the scope for small and cottage industries as well as proper infrastructure for education and health care to uplift the people of the region from the age-old perpetual backwardness.

POLITICAL EQUATIONS

It is a paradox of Indian parliamentary politics that electoral parties take oath to follow 'peaceful' methods and yet frequently resort to arms whenever their rule and domination are endangered. Jungalmahal is a glaring example of this phenomenon. In spite of centuries of poverty and deprivation of the people in this region, no massive people's movement has ever developed here since the independence. Even the land movements organised by the Communists during this period in other parts of the state did not significantly spread to these areas. The Naxalites; first the MCC group, and then the People's War group, and finally after their unity, the CPI (Maoist) party tried to organise the people since the 1980's. Their main emphasis was on armed struggle through individual annihilation, and not building people's movement. Initially they were active around Salboni, Lalgarh, Goaltore, Garbeta and Belpahari.

And the ruling CPI(M) had to take the help of the Maoist armed squads to bring the area under its control from BJP's influence. In the meantime, CPI(M) too managed to develop their

own armed squads and naturally they tried to oust the Maoists. The Maoists then tried to maintain their influence with the help of TMC, the new emerging force. The killings in Choto Angaria took place in this backdrop. Five Maoist cadres were brutally murdered in a TMC shelter by the CPI(M) armed goons. CPI(M) thereafter imposed their almost absolute domination in the whole area directly with the help of their armed forces, known locally as 'harmads' and indirectly of the obedient police and administration.

The Maoists, no doubt, are dedicated and self-sacrificing, working for the uplift and liberation of the downtrodden people, though many have serious and reasonable differences with their methods. Their strategy was to select the area as a part of their guerrilla zone mainly by armed actions so that they can develop the people's army and a liberated area. They were able to influence, through their long association with the local people, a sizable section of local people, victim of deprivation and neglect, to join them. Though initially they made some efforts to organise the people based on some of their longstanding economic grievances, most of their organisers were arrested. Afterwards, due to the dearth of politically conscious able organisers and failure to develop effective mass organisations, their efforts in this respect were not very successful. In contrast, armed actions bore some fruits in threatening or neutralising the local reactionary forces, and consequently their dependence on armed actions became almost absolute. Since then the regular armed clashes between CPI(M) and the Maoists became the main feature of the competitive political violence in the region.

The Maoists mainly operated through their armed squads consisting largely of the downtrodden people of the areas under their influence and increased their campaign of individual annihilation of CPI(M) cadres or sympathisers. CPI(M) too mainly depended on their armed forces, though publicly they vehemently denied their existence. Naturally they got immense help from the police and administration. Anyone refusing to accept their hegemony used to be termed 'Maoists' and the police obediently arrested them with 'non-bailable' fictitious charges, so that they are forced to spend years behind the bars. It is tragic that the main victims of these armed clashes by the warring sides were poor and belong to exploited classes.

Since 2006 an almost unprecedented popular upsurge against government's pro-corporate land-grab swept West Bengal starting with Singur, and then spreading to Nandigram. Realising that their life and occupation are threatened in the name of 'development', the downtrodden stood up and erupted into massive protest movements. These grassroots mobilisations were initially not led by any party or individual but grew out of affected people's initiative. The major sections of the civil society too stood by them. The CPI(M)-controlled LF government was simply cornered and even forsaken by their erstwhile ardent supporters in the rural areas, as evident in the Panchayat elections of 2008. Sensing the regime-changing potentials of these protest movements and anger of the people, Mamata Banerjee-led TMC, the main opposition party in the state came forward to harvest the fruits of this mass upsurge. In order to resist the CPI(M)'s armed retaliation in Nandigram, TMC had to take the help of the

Maoist armed squads. It led to an understanding between TMC and the Maoists against CPI(M) onslaughts which also spread to an extent to Jungalmahal.

LALGARH MOVEMENT

November 2008 onward, a new situation emerged after the Maoists blasted a landmine during the return journey of Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the then chief minister of West Bengal from Salboni following the inauguration of the construction of a mega steel plant promoted by the Jindal group mainly on government land. The police went on a rampage in the adjacent tribal villages and unleashed a reign of terror in 35 villages encompassing the entire tribal belt of Lalgarh. They tortured and arrested innocent people and charged them with sundry charges including waging war against the state, conspiracy, and attempt to murder, use of dangerous weapons and obstruction to justice. In the process, they brutally beat up one woman, Lakshmi, and she had to be hospitalised. During night raids, many women were brutally kicked & beaten with lathis and butts of guns. Chitamani Murmu's eye was blinded after being hit by a gun butt. These widespread police brutalities soon became a flashpoint and tribals had no other option but to rise up in revolt.

A long-oppressed people rose up and dared to confront their oppressors. Road blockades were erected spontaneously, and subsequently a People's Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCAPA) was formed, consisting of people of various anti-CPM political forces including the Maoist cadres and sympathisers. The blockade continued until the first week of December, when state government had to negotiate with the Committee. For seven months, the Government was compelled to withdraw all administration in the area. It was a great victory of the people. Primarily, the people's demands were against state-oppression, but subsequently new demands were included against dispossession and marginalisation of tribals from their land, forests and water in the name of development. The movement was spontaneous and spread to other areas, not only in Jungalmahal, but also in other parts of the state, reminiscent of the Santal Mutiny of the 1850's.

THE MAOIST BLUEPRINT

The Maoists operating in the area had a different plan. They wanted to utilise the uprising to create an area where the absolute rule of the Maoist Party and their squads would be established. The Maoists had no regard for the tradition and culture of the Adivasi samaj. Their political strategy itself was a great divider. Many sympathisers of the Lalgarh movement were aware of the derailment of a genuine and unique mass movement by the Maoists in pursuance of their blueprint. But at the same time, the Maoists had been able to attract the attention of the downtrodden people to their exploitation and deprivation, to the basic economic system responsible for their perpetual backwardness. The people naturally appreciated their support against the ruling party-government nexus, and were ready to accept them as their natural ally had there been no excess of extortion and bloodshed, frequently for flimsy and dubious 'crimes' of the offenders.

After the partial withdrawal of the government forces, the armed squads of the Maoists were the only armed forces in the area. Of course, there were CPI(M) squads in nearby areas. Between 2009 and 2010, more than 300 activists and supporters of CPI(M) were killed, almost all of them being poor Adivasis. In some cases, the killings were committed with utmost brutality and the families of the dead were prevented from lifting and cremating the dead bodies. Some were threatened with dire consequences in case of any opposition. The broad democratic nature of the movement was thus ruined. The Maoists virtually pursued the CPI(M) policy to wipe out all other social or political opposition through threatening, insults and armed actions, even murders. Consequently the Maoists began to lose popular support since the people of Jungalmahal did not accept the politics of violence beyond a tolerable limit. This 'hijacking' of the tribal and non-tribal people's resistance movement against police atrocities by the Maoists and its projection as their own creation and under their absolute control, as well as the series of killing by them naturally deprived the movement of the massive support of the civil society, though in the initial phase of the Lalgarh movement it stood by the movement. The State, on its part was just waiting for a convenient moment to step in and label everything to do with Lalgarh as Maoist and arrest its leaders.

The opportunity was provided by the Central government, which banned the Maoists' movement and started the 'Operation Green Hunt' by sending Joint Forces consisting of Central para-military forces and the State Armed Police with the concurrence of the CPI(M) controlled state government. The draconian act, UAPA was indiscriminately used flouting the promise of the earlier LF governments (only with two exceptions of using TADA during the 1980's). PCAPA was virtually banned, its leader Chatradhar Mahato and a few others were arrested, and ludicrous charges were raised, though none of them found any place in the charge sheets. The PCAPA activists, being marked by the joint forces as terrorists, were hounded regularly and the forces made their life miserable.

Even the ordinary innocent people were persecuted, tortured and arrested on flimsy grounds, and the women were sexually abused by the joint forces, obviously with the active help of the CPI(M) cadres and their 'harmad' forces. In the face of this joint operation, the Maoists tried their best to mobilise the people for a mass resistance. When the joint armed forces started their campaign, only the advanced sections and cadres of the Maoists were ready for some resistance with landmines, which were not very effective against the onslaught of the State. The villagers fled their villages and took shelter elsewhere. Not only the Civil Rights Activists, but also a large section of the civil society began to oppose these draconian measures, and demanded the release of PCAPA leaders and withdrawal joint forces.

DOUBLESPEAK

With the West Bengal Assembly elections round the corner, a new political equation began to develop in the state. Sailing on the waves of the mass upheavals of Singur and Nandigram and basically usurping the fruits of those movements, TMC under Mamata Banerjee began to emerge as a prospective alternative force to CPI(M). A clear indication in this respect had been

evident following the Panchayat and Parliament elections in 2008-09. It was essential for TMC to win a sizable number of the assembly seats in Jungalmahal to wrest the power from the CPI(M). The ruling Marxists managed to retain its seats in this zone in Parliamentary polls, despite its debacle elsewhere. Consequently the understanding between TMC and the Maoists against CPI(M) onslaughts that developed in Nandigram, and spread to a certain extent to Jungalmahal through the participation of TMC supporters in PCAPA activities, was felt to be renewed and broadened, so that the public anger against the joint forces could be translated into anti-CPI(M) votes.

Kishenji, the top Maoist leader, openly expressed his wish of seeing Mamata as the next chief minister of West Bengal. In spite of some mutual misgivings, both sides came together against CPI(M). Mamata in her election campaigns repeatedly emphasised on the necessity to have a dialogue with the Maoists. In her much talked about meeting at Jhargram in August 2010, she made promises to withdraw joint forces from Jungalmahal and to release all political prisoners unconditionally. She also demanded the release of the PCAPA leaders including Chatradhar Mahato, and judicial enquiry into the alleged fake encounter death of the Maoist top leader Azad. The pledge to oppose 'state terror' was included in the TMC election manifesto as well. In fact, West Bengal assembly election witnessed a revolt against CPI(M)'s autocracy and suppression of democracy as the majority of the people cast their 'negative' votes for TMC and Mamata with the sole objective of ending the CPI(M) rule. The TMC-Congress alliance swept the Assembly polls in May 2011 and Mamata, as expected, became the new chief minister.

But the truth remains that basically Mamata Banerjee was an inheritor of the political ideology of the Congress. The main architects of the Congress autocracy of the 1970's, especially the dark days of Emergency, were her mentors. She followed a domineering method of leadership to control her organisation as well as political movements of her party. The election fulfilled her long-cherished dream of becoming the chief minister. She was ready to go to any extent to achieve that goal. She skillfully hegemonised the oppositional space in Singur and Nandigram movements and plucked the fruits. She did not even hesitate to utter leftist slogans since then and take a public posture against suppression of democracy. She gathered a large number of leading artists, writers and intellectuals, and consequently built a halo around her.

However, Mamata began to reveal her true self after her remarkable victory in the assembly polls. She wanted the Maoists to play a second fiddle to her party in Jungalmahal. The Maoists were obviously not ready to oblige, since that would go against their strategy to make it a part of their guerilla zone. Consequently, their earlier mutual misgivings gave rise to serious contradictions. She refused to honour her pre-election pledges, on the basis of which rested their mutual understanding. Her Government rejected the demands for unconditional release of all political prisoners, immediate withdrawal of joint forces from Jungalmahal and public announcement on non-enforcement of the draconian central law, the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act. But peace in Jungalmahal was the aspiration of the people, and they expected

the Mamata government to take concrete and effective steps to that end. With Mamata's volte-face, the possibility of restoring peace began to fade.

PEACE TALK

Most of the human rights activists including many intellectuals and activists who directly or indirectly supported Mamata's call for 'Paribartan' (change of regime) now began to oppose her changed stand. Mamata responded to the situation in her inimitable way. She assembled a few pro-changers, who actively took part in the last election campaign in her favour, and who enjoyed the trust of the Maoists and PCAPA. She requested them to help her to bring peace to Jungalmahal. A six-member team of interlocutors was formed on July 7 under her care and guidance. Their approach was reflected in a joint statement ('a kind of understanding', according to one of the interlocutors), signed by the Home secretary on behalf of the state government and the six interlocutors on behalf of a so-called 'Nagarik Samaj' (Civil Society). The team included two prominent human rights activists; though they did not represent their respective organisations (Rather that statement was unanimously opposed and condemned in the South Bengal annual general meeting of the most familiar civil rights organisation in the state).

The statement promised a special package for economic and social development of Jungalmahal and rights to forest dwellers, and asked all sides to 'hold fire'. On the question of withdrawal of the joint forces from Jungalmahal, it merely parroted the government's stand that they would be withdrawn only after Jungalmahal becomes free of arms and peace being restored. It appealed to the Maoists for talks 'to create a democratic atmosphere free from fear and terror', and reflected the government's strategy to entice the Maoist rank-and-file to surrender arms. It promised not to be 'revengeful to those who would wish to surrender arms' and offered them 'financial package and social rehabilitation' (though the connection between promises of not being revengeful during arms surrender and 'impartiality' of the interlocutors was not clear to many). The statement also assured to investigate the incidents of 'atrocities and injustice perpetrated during the earlier regime, on the basis of specific complaints' (No mention of investigations regarding atrocities during the current regime!).

No one can deny that an atmosphere conducive for talks must be created before beginning any dialogue. And, in the existing circumstances this could only be created only by keeping the pre-election promises of Mamata Banerjee : release of all political prisoners including Chatradhar Mahato and withdrawal of all cases registered against them; withdrawal of joint forces from Jungalmahal; and immediate stoppage of indiscriminate arrests and illegal detention of the people by the joint forces. It is utter imbecility to assume that without the fulfilment of at least some of these pre-conditions, the essential conducive atmosphere could be created.

POLITICAL PRISONERS

The two prominent human rights activists among those interlocutors have already lost the confidence of almost all the civil rights activists and members of civil society due to their blatant opposition to the emerging movement for the unconditional release of the political prisoners. If one looks back, in a similar situation in 1977, the very first resolution adopted in the very first cabinet meeting of the first LF government was to release all political prisoners, in keeping with their pre-election promise. Later, due to bureaucratic bungling and interference by the Central government the process of release was delayed. When the civil rights activists took to streets demanding the hastening of the process, the then chief minister Jyoti Basu took immediate steps and ultimately all the political prisoners were released. Though the same government later turned into an autocratic rule, this truth cannot be wiped out. However, the abovementioned two interlocutors just tried to do that and advocated dependence on the Mamata government in lieu of people's movement.

This 'absolute' faith on Mamata Banerjee's benevolence might have endeared them to her, but almost proportionately, the civil society increased its distance from them. There was another reason behind this loss of confidence on the interlocutors. Their main spokesperson is also a member of the government constituted review committee for the release of political prisoners, and his experience of that committee's working should have alerted him in time. The government imposed insulting conditions ('muchleka' or undertaking in the real sense of the term) for the release of the political prisoners. Just on that ground, any self-respecting person should have protested and if necessary, resigned from the committee, but the members kept mum. They initially recommended the release of 78 political prisoners, but the government curtailed it down to 52. The later list included two Maoists along with 50 others of KLO etc. Though the chief minister herself announced her move to release 52 out of those 78 prisoners before Independence Day 2011, only 15 non-Maoist prisoners have been freed so far, but not a single Maoist has been released. The names of two Maoist prisoners have been struck from the list, purportedly, owing to the pressure of the Central Home ministry.

Incidentally, in 1977 too, the Central Home ministry had opposed the release of the prisoners with charges of violence, but the LF government refused to pay heed to that objection, since law and order was a state subject. Notwithstanding this submissive stand of the 'fearless' chief minister of West Bengal, the committee has reportedly recommended the release of some other prisoners and political status for Chhatradhar Mahato and his close associates. No recommendation has yet been fulfilled. In many cases, the public prosecutors in lower courts opposed bail petitions of many political prisoners. Had the members of the Review Committee cared for minimum self-respect, they would have resigned in protest. Alas, this did not happen.

It was also evident from their previously mentioned 7 July statement that they have completely forgotten the basic demands raised by them during the previous LF rule. Naturally, the peace efforts had a very shaky start. After the death of the top Maoist leader Kishenji in November in an 'encounter', the interlocutors came to realise the futility of their efforts and they were virtually forced to disassociate themselves from the still-born peace efforts. But they have neither the moral authority based on widespread respect and public confidence nor the basic

honesty of K G Kannabiran, the leading mediator in the failed Andhra talks between the Maoists and the Andhra government. He publicly confessed after the failure of the Andhra talks: “We (interlocutors) unwittingly played a treacherous role in believing the bonafide of the government”.

WHO IS TO BE BLAMED?

According to the main spokesperson of the interlocutor team, they had accepted their assignment because of Mamata’s sincerity in recognising the political nature of the conflict in Jungalmahal and her repeated insistence on opening of dialogue and bringing peace. They also boasted of their own fight against the misdeeds of the LF government, though one may presently see that they have forgotten how to fight under the new regime. To learn swimming one is supposed to go into water. The tragedy is that these interlocutors have not even tried to learn how to swim! That is why in all their TV interviews or write ups after the failure of the peace efforts, they basically tried to guard and defend the Mamata government, and put all the blame on the bureaucracy, a section of the media and the Maoists. It is their own fault that they were not ‘aware’ of the machinations of the bureaucracy and the servility of most of the media to the power that rules.

So far as the Maoists are concerned, no doubt, they have to bear a part of the responsibility, since they refused to take into account Mamata’s massive mandate, the shifting allegiance of the anti-CPM forces and sympathisers in the PCAPA and also the post-poll public opinion. They indulged in killings while the dialogue was on, thereby vitiating the process. Their erroneous tactics of mainly depending on armed actions and annihilation while neglecting mass movements have cost them a lot. They have lost a sizable section of their sympathisers, thereby harming the cause of liberation of the downtrodden people. The dichotomy in the Maoist position on political freedom as they considered it legitimate for them but refused to extend it to their rivals including parliamentary parties also went against them.

That the government was to be blamed primarily for the failure was clear to all the close watchers of the effort except the interlocutors. The Government had simply ignored the July 2011 charter of the PCAPA. The charter included the demand for a judicial probe into the fake encounter deaths of its leaders, release of jailed activists and punishment of police officers who had committed atrocities on tribal women during the earlier regime. It also listed the demands for genuine autonomy for the region, developmental priorities and people’s vigilance on the flow of funds, freedom to continue the PCAPA- led development activities as well as recovery of vested and tribal land allotted to others like the Jindal group for their steel plant.

In her first public meetings on July 12 in Jungalmahal, Mamata instead tried to entice the people by announcing distribution of subsidised rice for the poor, distribution of cycles for school-going girls and promises on developmental projects like roads, bridges, schools and colleges. But real upliftment of the people from the pit of perpetual backwardness remains a far cry, even if all of her announcements are fulfilled.

She also declared the government's plan to distribute subsidised food from police stations and BDO offices, the erstwhile centres of exploitation and repression, and consequently hated and feared by the people. She promised a rehabilitation package to those who would surrender. The Maoists and the civil society members were most upset with her call to the local youth to 'take up arms for the government and the country'. Finally, a befitting climax was her announcement that 10,000 special police constables would be recruited from Jungalmahal, clearly imitating the design of the BJP-led Chhattisgarh government to raise anti-insurgent armed force also known as special police officers.

The experienced interlocutors did not utter a single word against these autocratic declarations clearly standing in the way of a fruitful dialogue for peace.

ONE-PARTY RULE

One of the interlocutors later confessed (see Frontierweekly.com) that "Maoists had alleged that the TMC led Bhairab Bahini like Harmads of the CPI(M) had been terrorising the people." According to him, "Some disturbing news indeed came to our knowledge. Under the nose of the new government, the TMC leadership, with the help of the new converts, became super-active to seize ('Dakhal' politics) political space in the area totally". Maoists requested them to make enquiries. They brought these to the notice of the chief minister, but she instead denied those allegations and asked them to give 'concrete evidence'.

Interlocutors themselves pointed out that there was not a single killing by the Maoists for a month since 30 September 2011, the day the interlocutors signed the joint declaration for 'ceasefire'. However, it was alleged that the police and joint forces were not sitting idle. They were raiding villages, chasing and harassing villagers and preventing them from collecting sal leaves and firewood for their sustenance. Side by side, the new repressive vigilante armed squads formed by the TMC youth, called the 'Bhairab Bahini', began to operate openly in the area just in the style of CPI(M)'s 'Harmad Bahini'. They were moving with sophisticated weapons with the forces in plain clothes and exhorting protection money from the people, branding anyone opposing their demand as 'Maoists' and handing them over to the police.

The district administration too played a subservient role by imposing an unwritten ban on the constitutional rights of the people to democratic assembly and freedom of expression. Since the first week of September 2011, the forces arrested nearly 80 persons. On October 21, the Lodha Sabar Kalyan Samiti complained before the West Medinipur district magistrate that in the name of search operations, the police and joint forces are torturing innocent people, as a result of which 16 Sabar families in Aulgeria village have been forced to leave their village. This incident perhaps played a role, at least psychologically, behind the 'sudden' outburst of Mahasveta Devi against the government in the press conference of APDR. On October 26, it was alleged that at village Patasol in the Goaltor area, the house of Gopal Pandey was looted by the Bhairab Bahini, and when he escaped, his mother, wife and daughter(nine years) were threatened. The police, obviously took no action. Again, twelve students, belonging to the student organisations Jharkhand Student 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, brutally beaten up and handed over to Jhargram police.

On October 15, Mamata Banerjee attended a public meeting at Jhargram where she condemned the Maoists as 'Mafia' and 'supari-killers', for their involvement in the murder of a TMC leader. But just on the previous day, joint forces and police forces raided the house of Sushen Singha in village Shushnijobi under Belpahari PS to arrest him. He was not at home, and the police and the joint forces alleged to have humiliated and raped her wife Shibani. Unable to bear such indignity, Shibani consumed poison to end her life. She was taken first to Belpahari block health centre and then to Jhargram hospital in an unconscious state. The Jhargram SP, Gaurav Misra, refused to hand over the medical report to the members of the victim's family. Thanks to the efforts of the physicians, Shibani could regain her consciousness and on her complaints, her family members registered an FIR at the Jhargram SP's office when the Belpahari PS refused to do so, on flimsy grounds.

That news was out in the media on the day of chief minister's meeting at Jhargram. She simply brushed away the charge of rape and called it a concocted story. Ironically, the woman chief minister's remarks were based on police reports. But people have not forgotten the incident during the LF regime, when Mamata Banerjee herself was dragged away forcibly by the police from the corridor of power in Writers' Buildings for seeking justice for Chapala Sardar, a raped woman to the doorstep of Jyoti Basu and Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee. But the interlocutors 'couldn't' enquire about these allegations, however serious they might be, since they 'did not have that infrastructure'. The cat was out of the bag. If allegations raised by one side of the dispute were not properly addressed or simply neglected on the plea of lack of infrastructure, should the interlocutors morally claim to be 'impartial' and expected the dialogue to proceed? No, it cannot and that is why the dialogue failed, and the 'peace-efforts' of the Government ended, at least for the time being.

MAMATA, MEDIATORS AND MAOISTS

There is no necessity of a blame game. Both sides, mainly the government and partially the Maoists are responsible for this failure. Also, the interlocutors, to quote again the respected civil rights activist Kannabiran, consciously or unconsciously 'played a treacherous role in believing the bonafide of the government'. People aspire for peace, but for that the government must first create an atmosphere conducive for peace efforts. Mamata must not approach the 'Maoist problem' as a law and order problem, but as a human and developmental one, as recommended by the experts Committee formed by the central government in 2008. Some bouts of relief and doles to the exploited Adivasis of Jungalmahal cannot uplift their lot; rather it is essential to take concrete steps regarding solving the basic problems which are at the roots of their backwardness. Otherwise, the same Mamata Banerjee who was so vocal in demanding judicial enquiry into the fake encounter death of Azad will again and again have to justify the

role of her armed forces in the cases of alleged fake encounter deaths of many Kishenjhis under her rule.

Also, the Maoists must take into cognizance the ground reality. They should ponder over the post-poll desertion of other anti-CPI(M) forces from their side as well as large number of their cadres and sympathisers. They should also think over their gradual isolation from the civil society and the common people in the wake of their excessive dependence on armed action and autocratic control over the mass organisations. Moreover, mediators or 'interlocutors' should be those who are not self-declared 'representatives of the civil society', nor celebrities and TV talk show participants, but respected persons who are consistent in their approaches and enjoy confidence of the people.

Or else, peace in Jungalmahal will remain a cry in the wild. □□□