

DIGNITY FIRST

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The restoration of peace in Jangalmahal that is being bandied about nowadays may not hold. Sufferings of the people there have to take its toll today or tomorrow. Justice has been denied to the people there. So, they have raised the banner of revolt demanding the right to live with dignity. 'Development,' or the lack of it, is, not the reason for this rebellion, as is being presumed in policy-making circles. The area, no doubt, is underdeveloped, but there are so many areas which are similarly deprived of minimum living conditions. Everywhere people are complaining about lack of development and the indifferent attitude of the government. Jangalmahal is no exception but it is not the prototype of all that discontent.

'Development packages' will, therefore, not assuage the feeling of deep hurt the people there are holding in their hearts. Economic measures alone are not enough to heal the wounds. The people's movement that has rocked Jangalmahal for the past three years assumes an extraordinary dimension because it has been galvanized by issues beyond the economic. Civil society, mustering all its sensitivity, needs to comprehend this.

The state's 34-year-old previous regime never accepted that Jangalmahal was a neglected area. Their prolonged reign and pro-poor image would have then been put to question. They were, however, not off the mark in diagnosing what the problem is not about. For, the upsurge in Jangalmahal was not due to absence of developmental endeavours. The regime, nevertheless, failed to or did not want to understand that Jangalmahal's principal demand was that the people there be treated as human beings, their culture and way of life given the respect they deserve. The past rulers, self-serving as they were, refused to look objectively at the chain of events in the wake of the blast on the then Chief Minister's convoy.

In November 2008, Lalgarh in Jangalmahal rose like a volcanic eruption protesting the brutal police action following the attempt on the Chief Minister's life. Their main demand was public apology from the police officers responsible for the crime. The suddenness, spread and intensity of the upheaval caught the administrative system and political parties off guard. Many an eyebrow was raised by the privileged elite.

The State considered the people's demand as blasphemy. The vast masses of the urban poor, though poorly informed, were enthusiastically drawn to the uprising. Civil society, unused to reaching out, failed to mobilise their support.

After Singur and Nandigram, the term 'civil society' has become part of the common vocabulary. During the forcible acquisition of prime agricultural land in Singur for Tata Motors' Nano venture, several action groups sprung up within urban communities in solidarity with the peasant agitation. Among them was a committee of so-called 'intellectuals.' These intellectuals

and some known faces of the cultural world were made out to be the main pillars of 'civil society.' Though classically Hegel and Gramsci had meant something else for the term, here it came to represent the section of urban society opposed to the government's policy of land grab for industrialisation. Under such circumstances, civil society in West Bengal consisted typically of the educated middle class, cultural activists, students and such other groups.

True to its character, West Bengal's civil society has played contradictory, even dubious, roles in different episodes of contemporary times. It had a major hand in the defeat of Indira Gandhi in 1977 and in the next decades formed a strong support base for the CPI(M)-dominated Left Front government. In this period, civil society turned its eyes the other way whenever grave injustices were perpetrated by the administration and the coalition in power. It fell for the CPI(M) propaganda that opposition to their government would strengthen Congress which promulgated the Emergency.

Singur and Nandigram changed that perception. A vast section of the same civil society was awakened from decades-old slumber. Those historic movements drilled into its head fundamental questions regarding the paradigm of 'development'. But more importantly, because of the ruthless manner in which these people's movements were suppressed, the democratic and progressive mask was ripped off the face of self-styled left parties and their government. It also appeared that the Left Front government was no less zealous than the Congress-led UPA and the BJP-led NDA in pursuing the neoliberal policies prescribed by global financial institutions.

Civil society trained its guns particularly on the SEZ Act after Nandigram. The heroic people's resistance there inspired to break the silence of 30 long years. The protesting voices grew in volume with every passing day and began to be raised on almost every issue that reeked of neoliberal injustice.

When the people's uprising took place in Lalgarh, it added further fuel to the already burning West Bengal. The police action made the government lose its credibility to such an extent that even the much-decried assault on the Chief Minister receded into the background. Like they had done during the Singur and Nandigram agitations, civil society and rights activists began to frequent the forest land tucked away in a far corner of West Medinipur district along the borders of Jharkhand and Odisha. Pulishi Santras Birodhi Janasadharaner Committee—People's Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCAPA) —spearheading the Lalgarh movement, received active support from a host of urban activist groups. The slogan 'Singur-Nandigramer par, path dekhache Lalgarh,' —After Singur and Nandigram, Lalgarh shows the way—said it all. Several mass organisations expressed solidarity with the Lalgarh struggle. Lalgarh Andolan Sanhati Mancha—Solidarity Forum for the Lalgarh Movement—came into being. It later became Lalgarh Mancha—Lalgarh Forum—to broaden its base.

TWIST IN THE TALE

Then, a twist in the tale cropped up. All of a sudden, CPI(Maoist) openly claimed credit for the Lalgarh movement. The unique demands and features of the movement had even drawn independent political opinion. The appearance of Maoists on the scene and the violence they indulged in upset the scenario. It paved the way for alienation of a huge section of the movement's civil society support.

The declared political agenda of Maoists is the capture of State power through armed struggle. But PCAPA neither wished to capture State power nor did they believe in the power of guns. Not a single killing was recorded in the area as long as PCAPA held the reins of the movement. With Maoist intervention, a peaceful, democratic struggle against police terror transformed itself into an armed struggle for power.

Chhatradhar Mahato always stood for peace and negotiations. Like a true democrat he defended the Maoist presence in the movement but was quite openly apprehensive of a Maoist take-over. For Maoists, their party's interests and recognition of them leading the movement were more important than the movement itself. It is the natural outcome of middle-class vanguardism.

Maoist appropriation of the Lalgarh movement provided the state government with an excuse to shut out the ongoing dialogue with PCAPA. Instead, it dispatched its police and paramilitary forces eagerly sent by the central government. Security operation launched by the joint forces was an extension of 'Green Hunt,' which the Indian State launched against the Maoists but actually for handing over the country's resource-rich forest corridor to mining multinationals. 'Maoist' is a good tag to use to break people's resistances. In Jangalmahal, Maoists, by their own action, made it easy for the State use the tag.

Maoist sympathisers argue that the autocratic State do not need an excuse for unleashing its repressive machinery. The question is, why then did the USA try to convince the world about the existence of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) before their war offensive in Iraq? Why did Indira Gandhi project the threat to her personal standing as a threat to India's security for imposing the Emergency? The reality is that aggressors do need pretexts, particularly in today's world, to carry out their heinous activities. And middle class vanguards, in their naivety, present those excuses in a platter stupidly hoping to satisfy their egos. Lalgarh paid the price for this. As much by the rapes, killings and indiscriminate arrests by the security forces as by the loss of support from ordinary citizens.

Civil society, during this time, lost the initiative, will and force to stage strong protests against the joint forces' onslaught. They failed to distinguish or make ordinary folk distinguish between Maoist violence and PCAPA-led people's upsurge. It was an irritating and helpless phase for a great number of urban activists who had pinned their hope on PCAPA and the extraordinary movement it conducted.

The result was there for everyone to see. When Chhatradhar was arrested or Lalmohan Tudu and Sidho Soren were killed in fake encounters or women were raped by security forces in

Sonamukhi, civil society could respond with only token protests. Their voice got feebler with every subsequent repressive act. A large number of activists got steadily disillusioned. Even the broad-based Lalgarh Mancha found its support-base rapidly dwindling. Maoists never learnt any lesson from all these.

Many among civil society activists simply kept waiting for the elections to the state Assembly. Almost all activities were concentrated on teaching CPI(M) a lesson at the polls. The assumption was that ousting the ruling regime from power would bring back normalcy in Jangalmahal and elsewhere in the state. The demands of the people, the crying need for dialogue and restoration of peace were all but given a quiet burial.

NO CHANGE

As anticipated, CPI(M)-led Left Front received a drubbing in the polls. Sailing the gusty winds of 'paribartan'—change—a new regime has been installed on the throne of power. During the election campaign, Trinamul Congress (TMC), supposedly the chief agent of paribartan, called for the withdrawal of joint forces from Jangalmahal and made vague promises that they would release all political prisoners. All that was quietly forgotten once they formed the government—in coalition with Congress—and its supreme leader assumed the Chief Minister's office. Twelve months have gone by since the new alliance has taken charge of the state's administration. Chhatradhar Mahato and others are still rotting in jail and paramilitary operations are continuing as before. Arrests, killings in fake encounters and even sexual assaults are showing little respite.

The new government, like the previous one, is bypassing the real issue in Jangalmahal. It is desperately making every effort to win over the people there by announcing—and may be sincerely trying to implement—a slew of development projects. At the same time, it is not only continuing with the security offensive but, more dangerously, trying to raise a Salwa Judum type force in the guise of recruiting thousands of special police personnel. Also, since CPI(M) harmads are on the run, they are being replaced by TMC-backed Bhairav Bahini. Clearly, the new regime is slipping into the shoes of its predecessor. Except that, they are using a double-edged sword. One cuts with repressive action in the name of maintaining law and order and the other with globalisation in the name of development.

The new government, perhaps to pacify civil society, started the so-called 'peace process' with great fanfare. Some of the civil society stalwarts were given the job of parleying with Maoists. It is strange that they accepted the assignment without demanding that paramilitary forces be withdrawn and those in jail unconditionally released first. Peace, they should have known, cannot take off with arms in one hand and the carrot of development in the other. The initiative was bound to end as a sob story. And so it did after Kishenji was annihilated in what appears to be a fake encounter.

By agreeing to talk primarily to Maoists, the interlocuters also fell for the State's projection of Jangalmahal as a purely Maoist issue. They might have forgotten that civil society activists had

been in solidarity not so much with Maoists as with the people's movement in Lalgarh. So, to put the government on the right track, they should have put greater stress on the demands the movement had based itself upon. PCAPA is what they should have insisted the government talked to.

Civil society activists still have a significant role to play in erecting the peace edifice in Jangalmahal. It has to acknowledge that peace cannot be achieved by working as interlocuters. Mass opinion must be built to pressurise the government to look honestly at the real issue. There is no way out but restart the unfinished dialogue initiated since almost the beginning of the Lalgarh uprising. The foremost task is to remove the sword hanging over the head of the people of Jangalmahal. Joint forces will have to be withdrawn without further delay and the release of political prisoners cannot be kept hanging in the balance. The ball is in the government's court. It will have to be reminded with a very strong voice of its election promises.

In order to bring peace, civil society has to stand steadfastly by the people's struggle in Jangalmahal. It must ensure that the people there do get the justice they have been fighting for. Will civil society rise to the occasion and perform its historic duties? □□□