

The Battle Never Ends

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The people of jangalmahal have begun to dissect Maoist politics. Though not a political commentator, as a resident of Jangalmahal, it is quite natural and typical of this writer to participate in this discussion.

‘Will Maoists be able to turn around?’ ‘Turn around’ in what sense? Kill a few CPI(M) or TMC workers, or ‘police informers,’ or engage in some petty armed action—is that turning around? Maoists can do that even now or will be able to do it in a while. Maoists have that capability at the all-India level. But if this turnaround is seen in the perspective of the Lalgarh movement, then it has to be said that Maoists have lost that capability in Jangalmahal; and this situation has been created quite some time before Kishenji’s killing.

After the Assembly elections in Bengal—the new government had been in power for quite a few days by then—this writer alongwith a journalist friend went to visit Chhitamoni Murmu. Disgruntled and angry Chhitamoni didn’t even want to meet the journalist. With great difficulty when her whereabouts were traced, she was adamant about not speaking to the camera. The journalist’s question was: ‘the movement that you were conducting against police atrocities, has the coming of new government changed the situation in any way?’ After repeated requests, she said only one thing: ‘ask Mamata Ma to come once and see how we are.’ Chhitamoni is not a leader but she is a symbol of the Lalgarh movement. Any woman can call Mamata Bannerjee ‘Ma’ but on Chhitamoni’s lips it indicated a perilous political weakness of the Maoists.

This weakness surfaced even before the elections. There was a difference of opinion among the Maoists over Chhatradhar’s contesting in the election. Ultimately when Chatradhar did contest, there was almost no campaign by People’s Committee in Lalgarh. Not that the fear was absent, but there was another reason : through a campaign in the entire Lalgarh area, the voters had already been exhorted to vote for TMC. Chhatradhar gathered very few votes from Lalgarh; among the areas from where he got the most votes, one was the Shapdhora area close to Jhargram. This area is known as an old Jharkhandi stronghold and the people here had joined People’s Committee. But after their Pradhan was killed by Maoists, the people of the entire area, especially Santhals, went against Maoists. Post-elections, a divide was created once between Santhals and Mahatos of the area. Even though this divide did not lead to a communal conflagration, it did deepen into a permanent chasm. At present, the entire area is under the control of a force calling itself *Janajagaran Mancha*—Forum for Mass Awakening. It’s the armed wing of this body that is being called *Bhairab Bahini*. Its members have close ties with TMC’s Subhendu Adhikary group; the administration, too, is helping them. The administration did not stop them when in broad daylight, they rode, faces covered, on motorbikes through Jhargram town. Villagers say some of them are seen openly carrying arms.

Over a long time, one faction of CPI (ML) had great influence in the south-eastern area of Jhargram, (which falls under Gopiballabhpur Assembly constituency). The present MLA, Churamoni Mahato, is close to this faction. At present, this faction is very close to TMC. Churamoni won the elections on a TMC ticket. Maoists also supported his candidature. This faction's member-supporters were in People's Committee.

Though Maoists had overall control over People's Committee, at the local level, the Committee's character used to be different in different areas. The political character of People's Committees in Lalgarh, or Shapdhora, or Lodhashuli or Belebara areas is not the same. Maoists in some places, the Jharkhandis in some other places, Trinamoolis, or Naxals in other places and even CPI(M) dissidents in some areas were in the leadership of People's Committee. As long as Left Front was in power, these groups had a common identity—they were all 'opposition.' But after TMC have come to power, there have been significant changes in the political equation.

Clever politician Mamata Bannerjee had well intuited the situation. By demanding a judicial enquiry into Maoist leader Azad's death, by talking about the freeing of political prisoners, she lured the Maoists. Before elections, she addressed a meeting in Lalgarh together with Naxal intellectuals. Seduced by these moves, the Maoists issued a call to make 'Didi's rally' a success. In village after village, they issued fatwas against working for any other group except People's Committee or TMC; they talked of voting for TMC in the elections. From the time People's Committee transformed into Gana Militia—Mass Militia—and effectively turned into a secret and illegal organisation, it lost its mass character. For mass gatherings, Maoists then became dependent on TMC rallies. Leaders like Sidho Soren, Lalmohan Tudu, Chhatradhar Mahato and others were forced to go underground. Government, too, perhaps wanted this. Sidho and Lalmohan were killed by police, Chhatradhar was arrested. Taking advantage of this situation, TMC entered the arena and succeeded in establishing its political leadership over the entire Jangalmahal area. After the elections and the formation of a new government, Mamata, despite making a gesture of peace talks through intermediaries or release of political prisoners, in reality, she adopted all kinds of steps to drive out the Maoists.

On the one hand, create police sources among Maoists, dangle police jobs as enticement, promise no-holds-barred 'development;' and, on the other hand, appoint mediators to confuse Maoists or People's Committee leaders—this was Mamata's strategy; she was never establishing peace through political dialogue with Maoists or People's Committee.

The Maoists either did not comprehend the political situation, or because of their internal debates, were unable to adopt an anti-TMC political stand. Even when they did take somewhat of a stand, one section was asking the mediators to carry on with the peace talks. Perhaps, they had to pay for this political blunder with Kishenji's life. Not just losing a life, the way they lost their base in Jangalmahal, perhaps, cost them much more.

There are, of course, questions also about the real picture of this Maoist mass base. Some believe Maoists had no mass base in Jangalmahal; whatever was there was entirely based on

terror. This view is an exaggerated one. Even to conduct terror over an extensive area continuously for two-three years requires some kind of mass base. But again, there is truth in this view.

It's true that in the beginning, the anger of the adivasi-mulbasi-tribal and original-people against police terror in Lalgarh erupted in a mass explosion. This struggle was seen, especially by adivasi society, as their social rebellion. It was like another *hul* –rebellion. Then the organisation of the struggle, *Bharat Jokat Majhi Maroa*, was transformed into Pulishi Santrash Birodhi Janaganer Committee–People's Committee against Police Atrocities (PCAPA)–to give political character to a social movement. This People's Committee was also welcomed by the people. Even though they knew 'this is a Maoist organisation,' people accepted it as a mass political organisation.

But the Maoist leadership of this organisation wanted to wage 'war against the State.' They believed that 'revolution has begun' and adivasis of Jangalmahal were ready for this revolutionary war. So, 'terror is a revolutionary weapon.' And, so, many ordinary CPI(M) workers were killed for being 'police spies.' Gradually, the role of the arms-carriers became important in this movement, while the role of ordinary people declined. The youth of Jangalmahal were picked up and given training in using weapons, but most probably, they were not given any revolutionary politics. Close observers have said of these local leaders, 'they themselves don't know what they want.' In many instances, there was no sign of any class outlook behind the killings. Bandhs were called day after day, but MPS or factories belonging to the Patwaris, were merrily open. Funds were collected by force. These incidents drove the ordinary people away, made them suspicious of Maoist politics. Together with these, people were forced to attend meetings at night and all odd hours, women made to walk in rallies for mile after mile. Such incidents for day after day irritated the villagers. People can make many sacrifices for a greater ideal, but the Maoist leadership were not able to present any such ideal, any such culture to the people through their workers. In fact, in many instances, the reverse picture became prominent.

Various incidents of this kind made different sections of the people of Jangalmahal lose respect for Maoists. But for as long as there was military control of the Maoists in the villages, people accepted them quietly. In Maoist politics, there is no means of listening to criticisms by the people. If they criticised, lives would have to be sacrificed, beatings to be borne – fear sealed the lips of the people. After the elections, when the military control loosened, people, too, moved away.

In reality, people of Jangalmahal were genuinely keen on protesting the State's exploitation and deprivation. After the fall of the Jharkhandi leadership, people were in search of a genuine leadership. In the initial phases of the Lalgarh movement, people had accepted the leadership of People's Committee and wanted to move forward. But the people of Jangalmahal were unable to step together with Maoist politics. This does not mean that Jangalmahal people have become Trinamulis. Shattered by the monstrous and relentless State terror, they do not, at this

moment, have the strength to oppose TMC and counter another bout of State terror. People are tired. Besides the boom of guns are still reverberating in Jangal-mahal. Only the hands wielding the guns have changed. □□□

[Translated from Bangla by Aditi Chowdhury]