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THE STATES

Extremist in trap

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in Kolkata

Chhatradhar Mahato's arrest is the first major breakthrough since Central forces were deployed in Lalgarh.

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Chhatradhar Mahato. His PCPA was used by the Maoists to spread their influence in Lalgarh.

IT looked like a scene out of the cinema screen. The Chhatradhar Mahato, convener of the Maoist-backed People's Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCPA), who had been dodging arrest for over three months, was outfoxed on September 25 by police officers disguised as

journalists, at Birkanr village near Lalgah in West Bengal's trouble-torn West Medinipur district. This was the first major breakthrough achieved by the police and the joint forces since the operations against the banned Communist Party of India (Maoist) in Lalgah began on June 18.

Chhatradhar came into prominence after an assassination attempt by Maoists on Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee on November 2 last year at Kalaichand in West Medinipur district near the forested Lalgah area. The PCPA's violent agitation, which followed the arrests made in the area after that attempt, paved the way for the Maoists to strengthen their position. At their instigation, the tribal agitators refused to allow the police to enter Lalgah, and this gave them enough time to entrench themselves in the region.

Beginning in November last year, the PCPA and the Maoists established a reign of terror not only in Lalgah but beyond, systematically killing not just local leaders of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or the CPI(M), but also ordinary CPI(M) supporters and those who resisted their diktat. They burnt down houses, ransacked CPI(M) offices, held kangaroo courts and carried out executions in the name of the area's impoverished people.

As of September 30, as many as 62 people, mostly CPI(M) leaders and workers, had been murdered by the Maoists and the PCPA, 80 people were kidnapped and 160 injured, many of them critically, in the violence. "It is quite clear in the way one particular party is being targeted that the Maoists are using terror to create a political vacuum in the region, which they intend to fill," a senior police source told *Frontline*.

Police trap

Chhatradhar Mahato, who organised violent rallies in the tribal belt in the past 11 months, was also the most familiar public face of the Maoists – he held press conferences and updated the media on the situation in Lalgah.

Taking their cue from this, two police officers claiming to be journalists from a Singapore-based news channel established contact with Chhatradhar and a few local journalists who were in touch with him. They finally secured an appointment for an interview and were taken to his hideout in Birkanr, where they arrested him after the interview.

Though this has queered the pitch for the media, particularly the local press, who may henceforth be looked upon with suspicion by the Maoists, the State police insist that there was nothing wrong or illegal about the trap laid for Chhatradhar. The Jhargram court, where Chhatradhar was produced after his arrest, remanded him in police custody.

Manoj Kumar Verma, Superintendent of Police, West Medinipur, told *Frontline*: "For us this is a very important breakthrough. Chhatradhar Mahato was responsible for a lot of the law and order problem that exists in Lalgah today. He was responsible for the entry of the Maoists into the region and for recruiting people; instead of books he gave guns in the hands of children. He also ordered killings and oversaw executions in the so-called jana adalats [people's courts conducted by Maoists]."

There are 22 criminal cases pending against Chhatradhar in which he is the main accused, including charges under Sections 16, 18, 30, 38 and 39 of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), 1967, for his links with a terrorist organisation.

More cases are likely to be added to the pending ones as, according to Verma, a large number of people who have been arrested recently have named Chhatradhar as the person who gave orders for various crimes. The Government of India decided on June 22, 2009, to include the CPI (Maoist) in the schedule of organisations banned under the UAPA.

Soon after Chhatradhar's arrest, Maoists called a 24-hour countrywide bandh on October 3, and CPI (Maoist) polit bureau member Koteswar Rao (alias Kishenji) reportedly warned of "dire consequences" if Chhatradhar was not "unconditionally released". The PCPA announced a 48-hour bandh on September 30-October 1 in the Jangalmahal.

Senior PCPA leader Asit Mahato, who has taken charge of the outfit's activities in the Lalgarh area after Chhatradhar's arrest, told *Frontline*: "The intensity of our agitation has doubled. We wanted to conduct a peaceful agitation of the oppressed people in the region, but the way the administration and the combined forces are behaving we are left with no other option except a bloody confrontation. It is the people of the region who feel this way. We are also thinking of an indefinite strike in Jangalmahal at some point."

As the news of the arrest spread, miscreants set off a landmine in Kantpahari, a few kilometres from Lalgarh. Four of the six people arrested in connection with the incident are suspected Maoists. In Salboni, not far from Lalgarh, a mob vandalised the houses of three CPI(M) leaders. On the evening of the same day, two police constables, Sisirkanti Nag and Siteswar Prasad Singh, were abducted, allegedly by Maoists, in Belpahari. Though they were set free the next day, the kidnappers were reported to have initially threatened to kill them if Chhatradhar was not released. Sporadic incidents of violent protests were also reported on September 28, and there have been a few instances of blocking roads by felling trees.

However, the district police chief does not expect too much trouble. "Because of the atrocities committed by Chhatradhar, the people of the region are no longer with him. In the last five days [September 25-30], there has not been much protest in the Jangalmahal, unlike in November last year," Verma told *Frontline*.

Is Chhatradhar a Maoist?



Policemen stop A rally of the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities at Lalgarh on August 26.

In Kolkata, however, there have been some protests led by a group of eminent intellectuals, including writer and social activist Mahasweta Devi, poets Shankha Ghosh and Joy Goswami, theatre artistes Kaushik Sen and Bibhas Chakraborty, and others. They insist that Chhatradhar is a leader of a “people’s democratic movement”.

Earlier too, on June 21, three days after Central forces began their operations, a group of leading artists and intellectuals, including film director Aparna Sen and theatre personalities Shaoli Mitra and Kaushik Sen, held talks with Chhatradhar in the affected area, ignoring a government request and defying a ban under Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code.

Chhatradhar himself has never professed to be a Maoist. But the organisation he led, the PCPA, was certainly used as a vital tool by the Maoists to spread their influence in and around Lalgarh. In fact, Chhatradhar served as the political front for the Maoists.

“Chhatradhar has always claimed that he has nothing to do with Kishenji and the Maoists; then why are they calling a bandh and clamouring for his release? He is part and parcel of the Maoist atrocities. We do not differentiate between him and other Maoists, and we have a lot of evidence to prove that Chhatradhar is a Maoist,” Verma told *Frontline*.

Police claims

Bhupinder Singh, the Director-General of Police, West Bengal, while speaking to the media on September 30, revealed that Chhatradhar admitted, in police custody, to having “links” with the Maoists. He also confessed, the DGP said, that he had a life insurance policy worth Rs.1 crore, that he recently bought a house at Mayurbhanj in Orissa, and that he received funds regularly from Kolkata and outside.

Confessions made in police custody are, of course, inadmissible as evidence in a court of law, according to the Indian Evidence Act. The police, however, were guarded in their statements and said they were still verifying the details of the insurance policy and the accounts held by the PCPA in different banks.

Questions are being raised as to why Chhatradhar, known to have travelled to Kolkata on two occasions earlier this year, was not arrested before. State Home Secretary Ardhendu Sen explained that it was because Chhatradhar's political activities had undergone an "evolution" since those visits to the city and that he progressed increasingly along the extremist path.

Trinamool stand

Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress seems to have undergone a metamorphosis as far as its stand on Chhatradhar is concerned. In February, Mamata Banerjee, not yet Railway Minister, shared a dais with Chhatradhar. Earlier, too, she had extended unequivocal support to his cause. But she gradually distanced herself from the movement he represented, and after her significant success in the Lok Sabha elections, she has had practically nothing to do with Chhatradhar and the PCPA.

In July this year, when a team of senior Trinamool leaders, including the Leader of the Opposition in the State Assembly Partha Chatterjee, Union Minister of State for Shipping Mukul Roy and Union Minister of State for Rural Development Sisir Adhikari, went to Lalgurh, they did not even meet Chhatradhar. Soon after Chhatradhar's arrest, Mamata Banerjee held a press conference in Kolkata on September 30. Chhatradhar was not even mentioned.

Chhatradhar Mahato's arrest assumes special political significance in the light of the recent announcement by Union Home Minister P. Chidambaram highlighting the urgent need for a nationwide counter-terrorist initiative against the Maoists before they became an uncontrollable force. Chhatradhar's arrest may well be a precursor of things to come.

Two officers, claiming to be journalists, secured an appointment with Mahato.