

The Times of India

At Night, Maoists Rule Lalgarh

Caesar Mandal, TNN 31 August 2009

LALGARH (West Midnapore): The veneer of security is stretched too thin over the Maoist badlands of Bengal. And it can often be deceptive.

On paper, the Lalgarh Operation that started on June 18 to flush out Maoists is still on. Security forces are stationed at the outposts. The tarred roads are still being patrolled. But once the [sun](#) wanes and the shadows lengthen, the Maoists take over. If there's a knock on the door late at night, villagers can only huddle together and pray. No security forces will come to the rescue.

Policemen and jawans stationed in the three districts of West Midnapore, Bankura and Purulia bordering Bihar and Jharkhand - a 2,100 sq km terrain of fields and forest - are aware of this imbalance of power. As are villagers. So, the indefinite bandh by Maoists over the past fortnight has been near-total. Many villagers have fled to nearby towns, while others have accepted the rebel diktat.

Take the case of Jhargram, the subdivisional town about 200 km from Kolkata. Well connected by both road and railways, Jhargram is a trading centre and tourist spot. Though hundreds of cops armed with sophisticated weapons have been standing guard here, the bandh call had turned the town into a graveyard.

Though over 50 [companies](#) of jawans, including central forces, are posted in the Maoist-dominated areas, the guerrillas have increased their area of dominance. They have even made into the district headquarters of Midnapore, killing local CPM leaders, ransacking their offices and forcing hundreds of party members to quit.

"More than 30 members and leaders of our party have been killed since the [operation](#) started," admitted Bijay Pal, district secretariat member of CPM in West Midnapore. After torching more than 50 CPM offices, the Maoists are now holed in about 20 km from Midnapore town.

Hiran Maity of Sakhakhuli village of Lalgarh has mortgaged his utensils for a bagful of rice. He is a seller of broomsticks, but for the past 10 days he hasn't sold any. Sarala Mandi, another villager, had walked 20 km to the local BDO office for relief. She returned empty-handed as the office was under lock and key.

The biggest impact of the bandh can be felt in Lalgarh, around 30 km from Jhargram that is the epicentre of the Maoist rebellion. The undulating terrain and the forest cover that stretches to Jharkhand is ideal for hit-and-run guerrilla warfare.

What triggered the Maoist upsurge? Years of deprivation, neglect and grinding poverty. The

nearest block primary health centre from the remote forest hamlets of Belpahari is at least 16 km. Most villagers can't avail subsidised rations, because their cards are lying with ration dealers. Villages like Amlashole, from where starvation deaths were reported in 2002, falls in this belt.

The village panchayats, mostly run by CPM and Jharkhand Party, had turned into symbols of corruption. Leaders, mostly non-tribals, used to call the shots, paying little heed to local problems. The disconnect paved the way for wanted Maoist 'commander' Kishanji and his face Chhatradhar Mahato.

But the Jangalkhand story is not just an outburst of deprivation. Riding on the resentment, Maoists systematically annihilated local CPM and Jharkhand Party bosses, sometimes with local support. The target was to crush an organised force like CPM and break the local intelligence [network](#). This has come as a setback for security forces. Even tribal heads, who had a grip over the community, were silenced by Maoists.

PCPA, the 10-month old tribal outfit which emerged as the voice against police atrocities, has spread its tentacles to each nook and corner of the region wrenching areas out of the control of the forces and CPM.

Between November 2008 and June 2009, Maoists and PCPA men kept around 600 sq km of Binpur and Salboni blocks under seige. They wiped out the state machinery by hounding out police, closing down gram panchayats and preventing other government agencies from functioning.

Finally in June 2009, the government had to start a recapture operation involving 50 companies of security forces. But the operation proved far from easy, with Maoists expanding their area across 900 villages since the operation began on June 18.

The rising insecurity among the local CPM [leadership](#) has helped Maoists convince villagers that the CPM-led administration has withered away. As a result, no one has dared to defy the bandh. Instead of the panchayat office, businessmen and villagers have started approaching the rebels for help.

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