

Lalgarh Update

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Let us pick up the threads from the last report (published by Visthapan Virodhi Jan Vikas Andolan as a book entitled *Singur to Lalgarh via Nandigram*, April 2009) which ended with the meeting between People's Committee leaders and some members of the civil society with the chief electoral officer on 12 April. Ultimately it was decided by the election commission that polling booths would be shifted from areas that come under police boycott. Lok Sabha elections throughout the country ended on 13 May and results were declared on 16 May. The phase of struggle that started from then on was something that was totally unprecedented in the history of our country—in depth, magnitude and significance. The subsequent history can be divided into Phase III and Phase IV. Phase III is related to people's movement, while Phase IV with the deployment of para-military forces, brutality perpetrated by them and resistance by the people and the Maoists.

Phase III

- The attitude of the West Bengal 'left-front' government became clear when it refused to give permission to hold a demonstration in Kolkata to be organized jointly by CAVOW (Committee Against Violence on Women) and the women's wing of the People's Committee with traditional weapons on 5 June, as it would be political in nature. The Kolkata police even threatened the local convenor of CAVOW with arrest if they did not listen. Such a decision is discriminatory. Processions with traditional weapons have always been allowed by the state government to the Muslims at the time of Muharram or to the Sikhs during their religious ceremonies. If the government allows these processions to take place as these were religious in nature, then how would they explain the holding of a procession in November 2007 by the CPI(M) after the recapture of Nandigram with adivasis wielding the same traditional weapons like bows, axes, etc. The organisers were thus forced to shift the venue to West Medinipur. Traditional weapons are a part of tribal culture and the West Bengal government, acting in this way, actually rejected that very right of the tribal people. Superimposed upon it was the fact that when a cultural team went to Chakulia in Jharkhand on the Bengal-Jharkhand border to make propaganda among the adivasis there so that they could join the rally on 5 June, many of them were arrested by the Jharkhand police and a number of women were molested and one raped in Chakulia police station. When the Committee went to enter Jharkhand on their way to the Chakulia police station, a huge force was mobilised on the Jharkhand side and they were greeted with tear-gas shells. Chhatradhar Mahato declared that the road from West Bengal to Jharkhand would be blocked to cut off supply lines if the arrested were not released. That resulted in the spread of the movement to new areas also. The administration retaliated with the promulgation of Section 144 of the Cr.PC within 2 kms of the Lalgarh police station.

Meanwhile, the CPI(M) hit back to recover lost ground with 200 armed goons from Keshpur and Garbeta. On 11 June, they fired at PCAPA members such as Mirza Abdul Mannan, Hafiz Abdul Mannan and Omar Sheikh. On 12 June, the goons shot and injured four members of the PCAPA namely, Syed Afsar Ali, Jainal Abedin, Sheikh Kamruddin and Safiur Rahman at Sijua (*TOI*, 12-6-09). The people retaliated quickly. One CPI (M) leader of a branch of Dharampur was killed.

Turning things upside down

On June 14, 2009, the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCAPA) started from Lalgarh, covered 11 kms and took control of 48 villages including CPM party offices in Dharampur—an apparently

invincible CPM citadel used by the CPM herms for launching armed attacks on the people. This was preceded by intense firing between the CPM goons and the Maoist fighters for five days in areas such as Dharampur, Jirapara, Hodhodi and Bhaudi. An unspecified number of CPM goons (around 14) died, many people left their homes from the battlefield and the Maoists, according to press reports, have seized the weapons left behind by the miscreants. Then they attacked Sijua, a CPM stronghold that would allow them easy access to the Jindal's proposed steel plant site at Salboni. So decisive was the power shift in Dharampur that CPM zonal secretary Anuj Pandey, a resident of the village, had to flee out of sheer panic.

Around midnight on 15 June, 320 policemen left their camps in Dharampur, Ramgarh, Belatikuti and Koima. Now thousands of villagers from Lalgah, where the police had been unable to enter since November 2008, swept into areas known as CPM strongholds. They burnt down the police camps at Ramgarh and Kaima; one party office after another was burnt down by the masses, thereby betraying the pent-up hatred the people nourished towards the CPM leaders. One of the most hated of the despicable lot was Anuj Pandey. The time he came to West Medinipur from Jharkhand, he was a person of ordinary means. But gradually through party connections, this fellow minted millions out of the toil and sweat of the people, constructed a palatial building in an area where people have been deprived of the basic necessities of life. He was protected by three bodyguards for 24 hours and there was a police camp in front of his palace also. It was he who exercised total control over everything in the area, viz, distribution of pattas among the poor in the Dharampu area, clearance of 100 days' work, BPL cards, application for the construction of deep tube-wells—all these and many more were controlled from the Dharampur party office. Votes were looted year after year by intimidation and application of terror. To suppress the opposition, armed herms were sent from Dharampur by this fellow to Khejuri and Gorbeta. Whenever money came for bringing about development of the area, Anuj Pandey pocketed everything and bought arms and ammunition. In the name of giving employment, he robbed the poor of millions of rupees. The money that came through 'Indira Yojana', a rural development programme of the Union Government, could only belong to him. Many of those unfortunate ones who stood against or criticised him were killed by his hired goons. He had the last word there. What happened to that palatial building?

It was broken down by the people. An English daily wrote: "The hammer rose and fell, the energy of the man behind it rising steadily as the blows gradually brought down chunks of concrete from the roof. On the first floor, three men were tearing down the fancy grills of the iron railing adorning the balcony. A huge crowd gathered below in the area now under Section 144 lustily cheering each blow that fell on the white two-story house, quite out of place in this land of deprivation under Lalgah police station. By sundown, the hammers had chopped off the first floor, leaving behind a skeleton of what was a "posh" house in the morning' (*Hindustan Times*, 16 June 2009). Every punch of the hammer was greeted with the sound of the conch-shells made by the standing women (*Sanbad Protidin*, 16 June 2009). It was like a festival of the masses. For what was being demolished was the symbol of power, the symbol of oppression and domination. The adivasi women remarked that for them it was a social festival like that of Dussera when the effigy of Ravana—the villain of the Ramayana epic was burnt down. The women on that day talked about the inhuman treatment meted out to the people by that fellow and stated that their act of destruction was a spontaneous outburst emanating out of their veins. And then to climax it all, the Maoist leader, Bikash, addressed a press conference and stated their leadership in this movement (*Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 16-06-09). Whatever the role the Maoists might have played here, there is no doubt that this was a people's movement where the masses played a very significant role. Later on, the Polit Bureau member of CPI (Maoist), Kishanji, in a press conference, also acknowledged the people's role in unequivocal terms. The history of the role of the Maoists in this historic movement is still unknown and needs to be investigated and that, needless to state, would be an interesting study.

The destruction of the house was followed by the destruction of the CPI (M) party office and the destruction also of another goon, leader of the ruling CPI (M), Dalim Pandey who is the secretary of the

Dharampur local committee. That act was equally celebrated by the women with the sound of the conchshells (*Sanbad Pratidin*, 16 June, 2009). What was the reaction of Bimal Pandey, cousin (brother) of Anuj Pandey whose palace was struck down as a result of people's pent-up anger and hatred? Their house was by the side of that of Anuj Pandey. Bimal Pandey said: "I have seen oppression and injustice being done before my very eyes. But I did not have the courage to speak out against. Lalgah became liberated on Monday. Why should I feel sorry?" (*Ekdin*, 17 June, 2009). That this destruction of symbols of power brought about liberation is the feeling of other residents of Dharampur as well. They claim that Dharampur under the CPI (M) rule was unfree. In one case, before one party office was attacked, photographs of Bhagat Singh, Subhas Chandra Bose and Kshudiram Bose were carefully taken out and placed by a tree trunk and then property kept inside the party office was burnt down. And to cap it all, there was no looting at all. Refuting the charges put forward from some quarters that the PCAPA had only created anarchy and did much harm to the common people, Chhabirani Mahato of Dharampur told a newspaper correspondent: "Although party office (ruling party) buildings and residences of party leaders have been broken, the members of the People's Committee did not do any harm to the common people. Nothing has been looted from the houses. All the rooms in the village remain the same as before" (*Ekdin*, 23 June 2009).

Events took place in quick succession as if people suppressed for ages were in a great hurry to settle scores with their enemies. They torched police stations and demolished party strongholds. The deliberate show of strength came within hours of the administration pulling forces out of police camps in Belatikri, Dharampur, Ramgarh and Koima. The first wave of attacks hit the Koima camp around 11 am. PCAPA had called a meeting in the Mohulbani forest nearby, after which, according a press report, armed supporters and Maoists ransacked the camp and set furniture and building on fire. The committee members had gheraoed the Koima camp over the past few days, leaving the policemen posted there without any food or water. Policemen had moved out through the night. Others fanned out across a 25-sq km area over the next few hours, with the attacks targeting administrative and CPI (M) party strongholds. Next to fall was the Ramgarh police camp. After that the Dharampur ruling party office was targeted (*TOI*, 16 June 2009). On the next day, the Lalgah party office was targeted. Thousands of men and women carrying axes and tongies joined in celebration as the office along with the papers and furniture were set on fire. Although, section 144 was declared, thousands of people defied and rejected it and met at a huge gathering near the police station. Representatives of the BUPC(Resistance Committee Against Eviction from Land) from Nandigram as also those of Adibasi Bikash Parishad from north Bengal joined that gathering (*Bartaman*, 17 June 2009).

The events at Dharampur and other areas reminds one of the days of earlier peasant rebellions when the rebels attacked the houses of the landlords, kacharies and granaries, destroyed property, killed them if they could, burnt down land deeds whereby the hated landlords fleeced the poor peasants and distributed food among poor which rightfully belonged to them. In the Jangal Mahal also, the rebels of Lalgah attacked the 'new landlords' i.e., the CPI(M) leaders, their houses and the party offices—all of which were symbols of power and exploitation and the cause of their indignity and humiliation. By so doing they not only destroyed the power of the oppressors, they also asserted their own power and authority. To use William Hinton's words, it was *fanshen* i.e., turning things upside down.

New model of development

The people's struggle in Jangal Mahal has ushered in some development work keeping the basic needs of the people, and there the Maoists had a role to play. The Maoists have already initiated a development model which is opposed to that followed by the Indian state. Unlike the model which opts for dependence on foreign capital and technology—a model followed in India by all central and state governments since 1947—the Maoist model stands for self-reliance, equitable distribution of wealth, all-round development at the grassroots level and opposition to foreign imperialist control and influence. In Dandakaranya,

where they have already set up a new society, this new pro-people model of development has been experimented for quite some time. Although details are still not known, some preliminary efforts along this line have been attempted in the West Medinipur district. This is evident from the following newspaper report captioned 'Welcome to India's newest secret state'. The correspondent, Snigdendu Bhattacharya writes: "Here across a 1,000 sq.km area bordering Orissa in West Medinipur district, the Maoists over the last 8 months have quietly unleashed new weapons in their battle against the Indian state: drinking water, irrigation, roads and health centres....carefully shielded from the public eye, the *Hindustan Times* found India's second 'liberated zone', a Maoist-run state within a state where development for more than 2 lakh people is unfolding at a pace not seen in 30 years of 'left front' rule. Apart from taking over the organs of the state and most notably the executive and the judiciary, the Maoists here have built at least 50 km of gravel paths, dug tube-wells and tanks, rebuilt irrigation canals and are running health centres, with the help of local villagers"(HT, 10 June 2009).

Phase IV

In the face of people's wrath, the West Bengal government stood idle. They were probably still haunted by the spectre of Nandigram; also, the major ruling party and its front partners had been trying hard to recover from the deep scar that their loss in the last elections had caused. To them, what had been taking place in Lalgarh and adjoining areas was anarchy and so order should be restored at all costs. The Chief Minister of West Bengal went to meet P.Chidambaran, the Union Home Minister to seek central help to suppress this people's rising (*Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 12 June 2009). One of the front partners, the CPI—its leader Nandagopal Bhattacharya--even asked Biman Bose, the 'left-front' chairman, to consider thinking about sending the army to Lalgarh(*Aaj Bikash*, 16-6-09).

The decision to send in central forces was taken by the central Home Minister in no time. What has surprised many is the magnitude of central involvement in what it described as 'Operation Lalgarh'. Besides the state police forces such as the police and the RAF, New Delhi introduced companies of CRPF, EFR, BSF, the notorious CoBra, Straco and Vayusena with Kalaikunda air force base located nearby and with the Greyhounds as stand-by forces. Such a huge mobilization of forces was, with the possible exceptions in Jammu & Kashmir and Chhattisgarh, quite unprecedented in the history of our country. It was nothing but what many people regarded as the declaration of war against the people of Jangal Mahal. That war against the people began with much fanfare by Buddhadev Bhattacharya, the 'Marxist' Chief Minister of West Bengal, under media glare on 18 June. The aim was to 'liberate' areas under 18 police stations which came under the control of the PCAPA(*Ganashakti*, 19 June 2009). The whole operation, thanks to the media coverage, gave the unmistakable impression that an invading army, armed to the teeth, had descended from heaven to take on the Maoist insurgents and to give them a brutal lesson. The media, virtually without any exception, covered front page news of the expedition and nobody bothered to question the validity or the possible impact that it was most likely to have on the people of Jangal Mahal. Some dailies carried front page captions such as "Buddha orders crackdown, Maoists sound war cry" or "Action at last", or "Greyhounds on standby. Cobras crawl in, save venom for final bite". It was, as if, a holy war was being conducted by the central and state governments against the Maoist infidels. Not a single media house initially raised the voice against the war. One Vayusena helicopter was introduced to drop leaflets in Santhali and Bengali languages making appeals to the people to refrain from mixing with the Maoist 'terrorists'. That reminds one of the way in which Naga Battalion was introduced into Chhattisgarh to suppress the Maoist movement. Actually, it was a psychological war on the part of the state to isolate the Maoists from the people or the 'fish from water'. That attempt, however, as the state home department had to admit reluctantly, did not succeed. Meanwhile, after giving the order for 'Operation Lalgarh', the West Bengal Chief Minister left for New Delhi.

'Operation Lalgarh' and the resistance by the People and the Maoists

The military operation against the people of Lalgarh, despite this massive show of strength, was not at all a smooth affair. It took two days and a half for the forces to reach, by covering about 70 kms, the Lalgarh police station. On the way, they met with people's resistance at different points. Roads were dug, trees were cut down, very heavy stones were placed on the main roads at several points to prevent the advance of the para-military forces. People shot arrows from different sides, women and children tried to obstruct the progress as far as possible. The police used teargas shells and started beating people mercilessly with women falling on the ground and still being beaten. Landmines exploded causing damage to a bridge and a culvert which stalled the advance of the specially trained elite military forces. The battle that everyone expected since the beginning of the operation erupted just as the sun was setting on 19th – the second day. The Maoist fighters fired at central forces in Kuldiha—one of the areas cleared by police the previous day. At Pingboni, some constables rushed forward with lathis, only to scatter themselves soon as arrows were shot at them. Suddenly, a deafening silence ripped through. One of the policemen had apparently tripped a booby trap—an IED rigged to a tree. That was the signal for the Maoists to open fire. Completely taken by surprise, policemen scrambled for cover (TOI, 21 June 2009). The blast hit the Domkal sub-divisional police officer's car in Pirakata critically injuring four policemen. A culvert was blown up at Nimala and around 9 am, heavy gunfire was heard near Lalgarh police station. Rattled by the attack, many constables reportedly refused to carry out any operation without central forces accompanying them (TOI, 21 June 2009).

What surprised the police was that all the attacks occurred in areas that security forces had swept through only the previous day. According to one report, it was a classic case of an attacking army moving faster than the generals expected. The forces covered 12 km on Day one, but their lines stretched thin. No force was deployed in the 7-km stretch between Pirakata and Pirakhali, which had been 'sanitized' by the security forces on Day one. There were huge gaps at the rear that the Maoists stealthily moved in to exploit and ambushed the forces from behind. Another contingent of central forces with minesweepers started from the Sarenga end (a forest area between Goaltore and Ranibandh) towards the West Medinipur border. On Day two, they started advancing from Pirakhali and after one hour, covered a distance of only one km and came to a halt at Bhimpur. Minesweepers and detectors were used to locate explosives. But the operation was abruptly suspended and the forces moved into Bhimpur High school where they stayed put for six hours. The para-military officer reportedly wanted police to remove barricades and take on PCAPA, while central forces would battle armed Maoists. A difference of opinion cropped up and nothing moved. While the meeting was on, it was reported that a 100-man Maoists guerrillas had taken up position in the paddy fields of Kuldiha, 14 km from Lalgarh (TOI, 20 June 2009). In many places boulders were placed, human barricades were created and broken, then created again. Ultimately, forty-five tense hours after the operation started, security forces entered Lalgarh town and reached the police station kept virtually locked from inside by the policemen. These security forces breathed a sigh of relief and celebrated in a manner that Jaffna had at last fallen to them.

Atrocities by the security forces/hermads

The first obstruction raised by the people was on way to Malida with trees cut down and placed on the road and human shields comprising both men and women with traditional weapons and women in the front. Police announced through the hand-mike to disperse within two minutes. People replied with the slogans: "We would not allow police forces that back CPI (M) hermads to advance". Within a few seconds, police action started; teargas was fired and they rushed towards the crowd with batons and rifles. One group chased the demonstrators to their village Melda and spared not even women, children, teenagers, old men and women. Many of them had been bleeding profusely due to beating. The state armed forces broke into houses and literally dragged people from inside to beat them up in a savage manner (*Bartaman*, 19 June 2009). A fourteen-year old boy had fled from teargas attacks and asked his grandmother to save him from police beating. By then, the police had already started beating up the

grandmother. As she writhed in pain, the boy rushed into the room. Buddhadev's sentry, according to a reporter, had still been beating the old granny. When a photographer, Ashutosh Patra of *Sanbad Pratidin* went to take the photo, he was beaten by the police. Four or five policemen entered the room and within two minutes, came out by dragging the boy by the hair; he was naked with blood scars on all parts of the body. He was taken prisoner. Scenes such as these were enacted in many houses in villages such as Pirakuli, Dhanguri and others. (*Sanbad Pratidin*, 19 June 2009).

The security forces failed to advance more than 7 kms from Goaltore in six hours for fear of landmines. That made them so angry that they attacked old men and women, patients and local sportsmen. They poured their venom on the people as they had boycotted the police in their areas. At Pingboni, Bankura, many people were seriously injured, such as Chandicharan Pal and Ranjit Karak, the latter being an epilepsy patient. Both were residents of Shyampur village under Jaipur police station (*Bartaman*, 20 June 2009).

When on 22 June, some intellectuals from Kolkata went to Malida, gory details of humiliation and torture of a sadistic nature came to light. The correspondent of a Bengali daily gave a vivid description, and here is a free translation into English: "All on a sudden, a woman came and got hold of Saonli Mitra's feet similar to the way a sinking man catches a straw to remain alive. She could not control her tears. 'Didi(Sister), save us. They will not let us go. Police had entered our house and has only kept us alive. Everything else they had robbed. She broke into tears as she spoke". The police broke her house, beat her black and blue. As she writhed in pain, one armed police hit her back with the pointed part of the gun. Her mother-in-law pleaded with them to spare her. "But who will listen to whom? They stripped me. I was totally helpless. Before I could realize what was being done to me, the rifle butt was pressed into my vagina. They held my two hands tight. They were throwing all types of abusive languages and continued beating me with sticks". They did these things as the call for the boycott of police was written on our house. The same was the picture in the villages of Goaltore, Belpahari and Sarenga where the team visited. Even a seven-year old child was not spared by the police force of Buddhadev Bhattacharya. The child was beaten in front of his mother and one of his legs was broken (*Ekdin* 22 June 2009).

That is not all. In some villages, human excreta was thrown into the wells from which drinking water was drawn so as to deprive them of even any source of drinking water at all.

CPI(M) herms in police uniform operate like vultures in the Nandigram style

The PCAPA has accused the CPI (M) herms of entering Lalgurh in police uniform in collusion with the state police forces and identifying the houses of members of the People's Committee to the police so that they could target them with ease. These goons masquerading as police trailed behind the security forces and started attacking committee members to regain control over so that they could again establish their fascist rule over the people (*Dainik Statesman*, 22 June 2009). The 40 odd houses in Kuldiha village were attacked by the police on the charge giving food and shelter to the Maoists. The victims of police repression from many villages such as Kuldiha, Pyachapara, Jamboni, Mahatapur, Nimtola, Malida, Pukuriashol, Amchor, Salboni, Saboli, Pirrakuli, Dhorashol, Boro Pukuriashol, Korma, Belashol, Pirakata, Boro Kolshibhanga, Sorberia, Dhangouri and Jorka came to Pirakata primary school for shelter and food. The tales are the same. Strip the women, humiliate them in every conceivable manner and make them break down so that they are never able to hold their heads high again. When Usharani Singh, Gitabani Mahato, Alo Mahato and other women were relating tales of their humiliation and molestation, they categorically referred to the presence of CPI (M) goons in new khaki dress with shoes different from that of the police force—similar to that in Nandigram. Many of them were forced to strip in front of these beasts in human figures (*Dainik Statesman*, 22 June 2009).

Human Rights Commission and Amnesty International accuse the governments

Meanwhile, the National Human Rights Commission and the Amnesty International had strongly criticised the Central and West Bengal state governments for torturing adivasi people and warned that unless these were stopped, stern action would be taken against the government (*Sanbad Pratidin*, 23 June 2009).

Cops force people to look for IEDs

The government that has many a time accused the Maoists of forcing people to act as human shields is itself doing the same thing. In fact, state armed forces—terrified of IED explosions—caught hold of local youths and forced them to poke around for hidden mines and explosives. A newspaper carried pictures of this near Dhangori village (*TOI*, 22 June 2009).

Relief camps for people

As a result of police atrocities, thousands of people were forced to flee their villages and take shelter in the relief camps being set up in Pirakata and Goaltore by the TMC. Bikash Mohit and Chanchal Mohit described with tearful eyes how people were tortured by the security forces and the police. Poison was dropped into their well as, the police said, the Maoists come to take water from the well. All the villagers were picked up on the mere suspicion of being Maoists (*Bikeler Pratidin*, 22 June 2009).

Maoists speak

One remarkable feature, quite unprecedented in the history of the Maoist movement is that Maoist leaders addressed press conferences or engaged in telephonic interviews with many TV channels or newspapers. At a time when the situation is particularly critical for the Maoists and the hunt is on for their capture or death by encounter, they talked to the media with ease and expressed their views. At a time when the West Bengal administration as also some media declared that top leaders like Kishanji had fled to Jharkhand, Kishanji appeared before the media or got engaged in telephonic interviews with different channels and asserted his presence in Lalgarh. He stated that this people's war could never be defeated by armed power, ridiculed Buddhadev Bhattacharjee as a pawn in the hands of the Central Home Minister and also replied to many questions posed by the media. He also appealed to the urban intellectuals to come to Lalgarh and see with their own eyes the brutality committed by the security forces. He also stated that the West Bengal government should immediately stop this para-military operation failing which they would encounter a conflagration in the whole Jangal Mahal (*Sanbad Pratidin*, 21 June 2009). This indeed is unprecedented.

Visit by Intellectuals

Many intellectuals from Kolkata such as Aparna Sen, Saonli Mitra, Kaushik Sen, Joy Goswami, Bolan Gangopadhyay and some others visited Lalgarh and other places. They condemned the police atrocities in unequivocal terms and made appeals to the government to stop this para-military operation and to the Maoists to cease fire. (*HT*, 22 June 2009). According to news reports, cases have been registered against them in Lalgarh police station for breaking section 144. This is vindictiveness at its worst.

Observations

The Battle for Lalgarh is going to be a long-drawn affair. At present, the security forces are consolidating their position. There is no news from the Maoist camp. As one newspaper stated, some sort of a psychological war had been going on between the Maoists and the security forces. The seemingly impregnable security forces are still being haunted by the landmine spectre. The impact of the two-day bandh in some states of the country called by the Maoists was felt in the three districts of West Bengal.

The last two days had been rather eventless, except the destruction and burning of some CPI (M) party offices.