

## Chhatradhar Mahato Responds to Mamata Banerjee

*[Recently, Mamata Banerjee, the Trinamool Congress supremo, had offered to mediate negotiations between the agitating adivasis of Jangal Mahal and the government. In response, Chhatradhar Mahato, the imprisoned leader of People's Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCAPA), wrote an open letter from jail, which was published in the Bengali daily newspaper Pratidin. A translated version of the letter is published below.]*



I saw in the newspapers that you have organised a press conference and declared: "who is Chhatradhar?". Also, you have accused me of being corrupt. I don't regret that you don't know who Chhatradhar is, but you are certainly answerable for saying that I am corrupt. Prior to this, the DG of the state spread stories about my possessing crores of rupees and owning houses in different places and now have shut up. Now you too have said so. Fine. I now request you to tell the public what acts of corruption I have committed and where. I see that at the same time you have expressed a desire to unleash the armed forces. I don't know whether you remember the bone-chilling screams of our mothers in Manipur: the Indian Army raping them. So, our mothers and sisters in Jangalmahal got extremely concerned with these talks about deploying the army. I fear that the bone-chilling screams of our mothers in Manipur might be echoed in Jangal Mahal, the breeze through the Shaal and Mahul forests will get poisoned. I pray that this wish of yours is never fulfilled.

In a mass meeting in Jhargram on January 15 you have extended an invitation for discussions and imposed a seven-day time limit on it. This proposal of yours is really great. In spite of all the meetings and processions for 13 months, thousands of people of Jangalmahal have failed to push the administration to participate in talks. Rather, they were presented with threats from the administration and the terror of the joint forces colluding with the harmads. But your proposal remains somewhat vague, i.e., you have not clarified as to with which organisation you want to have this discussion. Because there are quite a few organisations here such as Jharkhand (Aditya) Jharkhand (Naren), CPI (Maoist),

ourselves, the Police Santrash Birodhi Janasadharaner Committee and many more. In case you want to sit for talks with our organisation, the Police Santrash Birodhi Janasadharaner Committee, then I have a few things to say. First, before sitting for talks, it is very important to create an atmosphere (in Jangalmahal) for discussions. Currently the joint forces are creating havoc every day: looting, burning down things in villages, picking up people from their homes and murdering them. The villagers are leaving their homes and taking shelter in various camps. There is a horrible atmosphere of terror. The schools have been occupied and got turned into hell. Tell me, how can there be talks without removing these joint forces?

They have picked up innocent villagers from the villages of Jangalmahal and subjected them to merciless physical and mental torture and then imposed dozens of cases on them to put them in prisons. From young mothers with little babies to old mother figures, from students of class six to old men, these murderous forces are not sparing anybody. The imprisoned families are devastated. Already in a state of destitution, now they have to face this mental torture also. The imprisoned people and their families are quite at a loss. The barbaric CPI(M) have imposed the black law UAPA, a shame on democracy, on me and many persons of our organisation to wreak their political vengeance. In such a frightening situation how can we have talks unless everyone is freed? Talks can only be held if everyone is unconditionally freed.

You understand very well that the movement based on the 13 demands that started in November 2008 in Lalgah against police atrocities has now spread beyond Lalgah and Jangalmahal into the adjoining districts of Bankura and Purulia. In support of the demands, the entire population of Jangalmahal including the Advasis and Moolbasis have maintained their mental strength and are continuing their fight in spite of facing several kinds of repression continually. If you are not sympathetic towards our demands then tell me how can we have the discussions? Hence the demands have to be considered with importance in the talks.

Listen, the Indian constitution has given every citizen the right to get organised. It has given the right to express their opinions. It is not that they have to organise only as per the wishes of the ruling class, is it? Our organisation is a totally independent one and we are undertaking programmes openly by democratic means. Indeed, people with very diverse opinions can join our movement. They come with their own individual identities. They have participated in the movement in support of the demands. Nobody has ever used their organisational banners in our movement. Hence, attachment to Maoists, attachment to Trinamool, attachment to CPI(M) are nothing other than fabricated labels or elements of pure fiction created by the administration and the political parties. And you are talking about killings? I am taking full responsibility in saying that the West Bengal government is entirely responsible for the condition in Jangalmahal today. Later, the Central government has joined them. If you had been sympathetic to our demands right at the beginning then this situation would not have arisen. But the administration admitted their mistakes. Be it the British rulers, or the ruling classes after they left, i.e., the powerful political parties of independent India, all of them wanted to dominate us and keep us trampled under their feet. Even though we are the indigenous people of India we do not get enough to eat. Whenever we raised our voices about our culture, our education and our freedom we were only met with brutal repression of the state power. Currently, as we have raised our voice against the terror in Jangalmahal, once again the State and the Central government have colluded to unleash terrible repression upon us. But everybody acknowledges our deprivation and misery. In 2009, during the Lok Sabha elections, the officer of the Election Commission in charge of West Bengal have sat down for talks with us and a solution was found. How come there was no problem then? Tell me, why do we have this situation today?

Inspite of this brutal torture on us you have not said anything in our favour. Quite on the contrary, when joint forces and the harmads are still not successful in curbing our movement, then you are expressing your desire to deploy the army. You have said that you will lay railway lines in Jangalmahal. Great idea. It is just like Buddha shouting, haven't we done anything in the last 32 years? We have built roads. But no food is carried on those roads. Neither is kerosene. All these things stay in Medinipur town: to facilitate the luxurious lifestyle of the Harmad officers (or to make their palatial houses, something left unsaid). Now only the vehicles of the mechanised armed forces travel on those roads.. No other car is allowed to enter theses road. I hope that ultimately your railway lines won't be used for bringing in the soldiers only? If this laying down of railway lines creates employment for the young men and women of Jangalmahal then I will remain eternally grateful to you.

(This letter arrived by fax. Some sections were hazy. Whatever could be retrieved is being published here.)

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