

The effects of Mahato's arrest

The arrest on September 25 of Chhatradhar Mahato, convener of the Police Santrash Birodhi Janasadharaner Committee (Peoples Committee against Police Atrocities - PSBJC) at Birkar village near Lalgarh is being claimed as a major breakthrough by the West Bengal Police, which sent a scribe with a false name, Anirban Roy, posing as a correspondent of a Singapore-based news channel to catch him.

But the state top brass can't hope to rest easy. The use of sleuths as 'scribes' is bound to widen the gap between the biggies of the CPI(M) such as chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee and Left Front chairman Biman Bose, and the media. Already, reporters are suspect in Jangal Mahal, which includes parts of West Midnapore, Bankura and Purulia districts, an area of dire poverty.

Oddly enough, journalist bodies are sharply split on the matter. The state unit of the Indian Journalists' Union, the most powerful association of working journalists, is completely silent. But the Calcutta Journalists' Association, has assailed the state government for using fake scribes to trap Mahato. And about the Press Club of Kolkata (PCK), the less said the better. It is hard to say which is the better description — supine or one-eyed.

On January 8, 2007, for instance, the police roughed up a cameraman of a private TV channel at English Bazar in Malda district. He was hospitalised as a result. A month before that, police at Seoraphuli near the proposed (now abandoned) Tata Motors project at Singur, assaulted journalists and TV cameramen. The PCK was silent on both occasions. But they took out a protest procession when a woman journalist of a blatantly pro-CPI(M) TV channel was allegedly manhandled by Trinamool Congress supporters when she was grilling Mamata Banerjee with inspired questions.

Both the national media and an NRI-run news agency often parrot the ruling party tune that the PSBJC is a Maoist-backed outfit despite repeated clarifications by Mahato that he and his morma have no connection with the Maoists or any other political party. Strangely enough, Trinamool chief and railway minister Mamata Banerjee blames Mahato for helping CPI(M)'s Pulin Baske win from the Jhargram parliamentary constituency; a baseless accusation. There are about 70,000 votes in the Lalgarh region where polling was 13 per cent. Even if all the votes had been cast for the Trinamool-supported Indian National Congress candidate, and the votes polled by the Jharkhand faction and SUCI added, Baske would still have won by over 1,20,000 votes. So Mahato has no friends on either side of the spectrum.

Will the arrest cement a definite advance in splitting the PSBJC or demoralise the Maoists? Perhaps not. The CPI(Maoist) politburo member and chief strategist in eastern India Koteswar Rao says: "At least four policemen were killed on September 26". The police admit the kidnap of two constables. After the arrest of Mahato over 5,000 Adivasis, mostly with bows and arrows, encircled the Kantapahari police station where Mahato was lodged. Their arrows are reported to have killed four policemen, but the TV channels couldn't record it. They felt too insecure to go the spot after the entrapment of Mahato. "Our close contacts, some of whom became friends, now brand us as diku or cheat (hence outsider) after the shameful episode," said the photographer of a Bengali newspaper.

The state government may have miscalculated the impact of Mahato's arrest. It has increased the differences with the Adivasis, most of whom live much below the poverty level. According to a recent state government report, based on visits by senior IAS officers after the joint forces had swung into action in Jangal Mahal, showed that hardly any villagers possessed ration cards. A survey by the National Old Age Pension Scheme for below poverty line (BPL) families found West Midnapore among the last in the list of fund utilisation. It's worse in Purulia. Or take the National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS), which gives BPL families a one-time payment of Rs 10,000. The NFBS score is zero in two gram panchayats in Purulia.

Is Jangal Mahal a political problem or a law and order issue? The question comes from professor Tarun Sanyal, president of the Forum of State Intellectuals for Justice and Democracy. The issues around the poverty-stricken areas, dominated by the 'rural

proletariat' are "more political than economic", said Scandinavian sociologist Jan Breman during a talk at the Sashipada Bandyopadhyay Resource Centre, a Kolkata-based NGO. Breman worked extensively among unorganised and migrant workers in south Gujarat as also on the east coast of China. Of course, his words have no meaning for those guided by Stalinist intolerance and obstinacy.

sankar.ray@gmail.com

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