

A Year of Lalgarh

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Lalgarh – the name resonates in the hearts and minds of struggling people all over India: adivasis and dalits, farmers and fisherfolk, workers and students. In West Bengal it has taken its place along with Singur and Nandigram in songs and slogans of resolve and resistance. Wherever people are fighting for their livelihoods and their dignity, resisting the onslaught of state and capital, Lalgarh now provides inspiration and courage. Most importantly, for the long-oppressed adivasis, Lalgarh has already entered the annals of legendary struggles of the likes of the santhal “hul” led by Sidhu and Kanhu, and the historic rebellions led by the likes of Birsha Munda, Tilka Majhi and Chand Bhairab. It has been just over a year since the unprecedented uprising of the adivasi people took place in Lalgarh, triggered by the brutal police raids in the wake of the land mine attack on chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya’s convoy. It is a good time to look back on this year, and to learn our lessons from Lalgarh.

In the last one year the movement has gone through many ups and downs, has faced brutal oppression by the state and the terror apparatus of the ruling party, culminating in the entry of the joint police and paramilitary forces of the state and the central governments (referred to as the “joint forces”) in the middle of June, 2009, and the arrest of its main spokesperson, Chatradhar Mahato. It has been the subject of both the wonder and vilification of the corporate media, and has elicited varied responses from civil society. However, all this has not dampened the resolve and the courage of the struggling people of Lalgarh, who have stood up in the face of oppression, and will not be subdued. Even today, when the joint paramilitary forces have closed in on Lalgarh and each day brings stories of atrocities, of firing on farmers tilling their fields, of arrests of children playing cricket, of looting and pillaging of villages and poisoning of wells, the people of Lalgarh are marching out in larger and larger numbers to assert their rights and to resist this onslaught.

On just a single day, 7th January 2010, a rally of 15,000 people proceeded from Jaipur in Salboni towards Pirakata, which is the site of a major camp of the joint forces, in protest against the raid on the previous night in Sundarpur village in Salboni where the joint forces personnel indiscriminately beat up people, looted houses and arrested twenty persons. At the same time as these 15,000 people proceeded towards Pirakata, another rally of 10,000 people proceeded from Kalsibhanga to Pirakata. Such rallies and demonstrations have been a daily occurrence, with women in the front ranks in every case. As police have raided villages, the news have been spread from village to village using both the dhamsa madal (the traditional Santhal drum) and the mobile phone, and within minutes village women have assembled and resisted the raiders, facing beatings and arrest. School students have gheraoed schools from which they have been displaced by joint forces personnel. They have even blockaded the Rajdhani Express, the ultimate sign of the power and privilege of the elite, to make their voices heard in the corridors of power in Kolkata and Delhi. The forces of the state can lathicharge and teargas and arrest these people as much as they will, but it is evident that they will not be able to subdue them, to get them back to the docile

condition where they will suffer the daily indignities of harassment and hunger silently and where their resources and labour will fatten the likes of Anuj Pandey, the notorious CPI(M) leader whose palatial house was destroyed in Dharampur in June 2009 in a mass upsurge.

The Lalgarh movement has been unprecedented in its intensity, its breadth, and the challenges it has thrown up in front of the state, which has kept the adivasis in a miserable condition while flaunting its democratic nature, and towards society, that has always been apathetic to their conditions, except as subjects of anthropological research and as examples of exotica. Within a few days of the upsurge in early November, 2008, the entire Lalgarh area was out of bounds for the state, especially its police apparatus, which was the face of the state that had always confronted the adivasis. The police stations, always the places from where the "rule of law" emanated as a daily nightmare for the people, were locked with the policemen cowering inside, under a social boycott. Like the proverbial prairie fire, the movement spread to the other districts of the adivasi-populated region, collectively called as jangalmahal, and soon thousands of people were marching on the red soil of West Midnapur, Bankura and Purulia. As the traditional institutions of adivasi society, including the apex body of the village headmen, the Majhi Madwa, failed to keep up with this revolutionary upheaval and became discredited, and as the adivasis were vehement in their opposition against the leadership of their movement being taken over by the parliamentary political parties, as happened in Singur and Nandigram, the Peoples' Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCAPA) was born to spearhead the struggle.

The Peoples' Committee did not derive its authority from the established social and economic hierarchies in adivasi society, or from the established political parties, but from the general assembly of the masses, as exemplified by the mammoth rallies that were held on a nearly daily basis. New, and unprecedented, forms of democratic practice sprung up, giving rise to the village committees having fifty percent male and fifty percent female membership. Members of all political parties, as long as they joined independently of their party identities, were welcome to join the people's committee. The enthusiasm of the people, who were now united together in not only throwing off the yoke of oppression by the state, but were also trying to build something new, was palpable, and infectious. Young men and women, armed with their traditional weapons, exuded an air of empowerment. Housewives, in the front ranks of ten thousand strong marches raised cogent questions in the face of policemen (and women) who were confronting them: Aren't the police supposed to serve the people? How would it feel when someone kicks a pregnant woman on her abdomen? New leaders of the movement emerged, Chatradhar Mahato, who became the spokesman of the movement, Sidhu Soren, a young energetic organizer, Lalmohan Tudu, Sukhshanti Baske and many others.

As the people, and this new leadership, recovered from the trauma of domination by the Indian state and the ruling party, and gained confidence in their own abilities, they took up the developmental activities which the same state and party have always denied them. "Development" is the buzzword which the state has always used to justify its actions on behalf of the ruling class, just as today "development" is being used as a pretext by the union home minister P. Chidambaram to unleash the might of the armed forces in a war on people resisting the loot of their land and resources. However, the lives of the adivasis of Lalgarh show the development disaster of the Indian state, and of the CPI(M) government which claims to have been a "government for the poor" for the past thirty two years. All the

basic necessities of life: food, water, education, health, roads, and the control over the resources that enable them: land and other sources of employment, have been all but absent. What have been present instead are the rapacious timber and kendu leaf mafia, corrupt government contractors, and increasingly, big corporations that are out to grab the land and the mineral resources of the area.

In contrast, the peoples' committee took up a modest initiative to provide the same development measures, with a new developmental model ensuring popular participation in planning and execution. Land distribution programmes were taken up, check dams to harvest and store rainwater during the monsoons were constructed, mini tubewells and shallow pumps were installed, kilometers of roads of red gravel (moram) laid and health centres staffed with volunteer doctors and health workers from Kolkata were started (the health centres confirmed a depressing apprehension, 90 percent of the thousands of patients who visited the health centres, especially women, showed symptoms of malnutrition like low blood pressure and edema). Together with this, the people ensured that much-touted government schemes like the Indira Awas Yojana for providing cheap housing to poor households, funds for which were systematically siphoned off by CPI(M) and Jharkhand party functionaries, were implemented properly. These efforts might have been modest in their scope, but they were successful where the state had failed abysmally and provided a new paradigm of participatory development.

Much of this has come to a standstill as the joint forces have moved in, promising to bring "development" in their wake, development as defined by Buddhadeb Bhattacharya and Chidambaram. Many of the tubewells and shallow pumps have been destroyed or looted by the paramilitary forces and the health centres have become their outposts. Schools have been reoccupied and students forced to give exams sitting on the roads. When some of the schools were vacated by the joint forces personnel, because of a court order in response to a public interest litigation filed by an organization from Midnapore, they were found in a pathetic condition, classrooms filled with human excreta and walls smeared with pornographic graffiti. This is the "development" that Buddhadeb and Chidambaram plan to bring to the adivasis. However, the people of jangalmahal are still determined to continue their efforts towards a popular and participatory development process, and after the initial shock of occupation by the joint forces, some of the developmental activities are limping back on track.

Just as Lalgah threw up an unprecedented challenge to the state, it also presented a new, and somewhat incomprehensible paradigm, to the various political and civil society forces which have elicited a wide variety of responses. Much of it is centered around the involvement of the Communist Party of India (Maoists) in the movement. Among the political parties, the CPI(M), have been virulently hostile to the movement as the movement has destroyed its hegemony in the jangalmahal area and its members and supporters have been targeted by the Maoists. The CPI(M) have long been identified as a primary oppressor by the people of Lalgah, with its local leaders like Anuj Pandey running a reign of terror in the area through his armed henchmen. Beyond these local leaders have been district leaders of the CPI(M) like Dipak Sarkar, the district secretary and Sushanta Ghosh, the state minister in charge of the area, who have maintained a stranglehold on the adivasis (the infamous "ghoskar bahini", the armed cadre force of the CPI(M) is named after the duo).

Since the beginning of the movement in November 2008, CPI(M) goons, referred to as harmads, have launched attacks on peoples' committee members to regain lost ground, resulting in the deaths of people like Rajaram and Lakhindar Mandi and Nirmal Sardar. These attacks had been resisted both by the peoples' committee and the Maoist squads active in the area. These attacks finally culminated in the Dharampur incident in June 2009, when the adivasis, incensed by a CPI(M) attack on a rally, were led by the Maoists to destroy the house of Anuj Pandey and the CPI(M) party office in Lalgarh, and kill the hated musclemen of Anuj Pandey. This finally led the CPI(M) government in West Bengal to request the Congress government at the centre to send paramilitary forces which were waiting in the wings, and the home minister Chidambaram couldn't be happy enough to oblige, declaring Lalgarh to be the "laboratory" for his forthcoming attack on the adivasis of the Maoist-dominated belt stretching from West Bengal to eastern Maharashtra.

The response of the main opposition party, the Trinamool Congress (TMC), was more interesting. The leader of TMC, Mamata Banerjee, at first expressed support for the movement, visiting the area without her party banner, and even sharing the stage with Chatradhar Mahato, a fact which the CPI(M) uses today to allege a Trinamool-Maoist nexus. However, after the parliamentary elections in May 2009, which the TMC won handsomely in alliance with the Congress, and went on to join the UPA government, which eventually sent in the paramilitary forces into Lalgarh, she did a volte face, and dissociated herself from the movement condemning it as a handiwork of the Maoists. She now claims that the CPI(M) and the CPI(Maoist) are two sides of the same coin, and has even censured her party MP, Kabir Suman, for writing a song on Chatradhar Mahato. The TMC's opportunistic politics regarding Lalgarh stand exposed, although Mamata continues her posturings in sympathy of the adivasis.

The responses of various other political parties and civil society organizations have been multifarious. Smaller left parties like Majdoor Kranti Parishad (MKP) have played supportive and constructive roles, participating in demonstrations in Kolkata in solidarity of the Lalgarh movement, and even trying to enter Lalgarh with a couple of hundred party activists when access was blocked by the joint forces. Parties like the CPI(ML)-Liberation have been openly critical of the actions of the Maoists, but have participated in demonstrations held in opposition to the arrest of Chatradhar Mahato. On the other hand, some like Santosh Rana's faction of the CPI(ML), which also has connections with the Jharkhandi groups in the area, have accused the Maoists of taking over the movement and for preventing the functioning of institutions like panchayats.

The involvement of the Maoists has also been the central problematic in the response of various members of civil society and some intellectuals to the Lalgarh movement. When the Lalgarh movement started, for some time the civil society did not know how to respond to it. Here were the long-oppressed adivasis, challenging successfully the might of the state and marching in the triumph of being able to throw off the yoke of oppression. Here, unlike Nandigram and Singur, there were no apparent victims of massacres or CPI(M) brutalities who could be sympathized with. This was a hitherto unexperienced paradigm confronting civil society. However, civil society soon woke up from its inertia and expressed its solidarity with the Lalgarh movement as it found the epitomization of many of its own aspirations in the latter's democratic expressions and popular participation.

However, this was accompanied by a sort of romanticization of the movement as an expression of the quest of dignity by the adivasi, the "noble savage" of European humanist tradition, and a sort of naïve admiration of its "purity" and "spontaneity". Therefore, when the Maoists came to the forefront, inevitable fissures showed up among civil society, with a section considering that a "spontaneous" movement of adivasis has been hijacked by the Maoists. Some forwarded the "[sandwich theory](#)", the adivasis caught in a crossfire between two equally condemnable forces, the state and the Maoists. In contrast, another section thought that the entire movement is a brainchild of the Maoists.

The reality is probably somewhere in between. The Maoists have been active in the area for a long time, even from before the CPI(Maoist) emerged as a party. They have been involved in long term organizational work in the area and organized peoples' struggles for raising the price of kendu leaves, against the timber mafia and against corruption in panchayats. As a result, they enjoy immense prestige among the adivasis; anyone who has interacted closely with the adivasis will know about their respect for the "*boner party*" – the party of the jungles, as they refer to the Maoists. Just as most of the reporters having Lalgarh on their beat have the phone number of Kishenji, the Maoist leader who was in charge of the jangalmahal area, so do have many common villagers, and many a times a call to Kishenji becomes the last resort against the attacks of CPI(M) harmads.

This is a reality in jangalmahal which can only be dismissed by people who want to fit reality into the straitjacket of their own prejudices. The uprising in Lalgarh took place spontaneously as an assertion of adivasi dignity in the face of police oppression, but the groundwork by the Maoist activists have been an important contributory factor. The violence by the Maoists, mostly targeted against the members and supporters of the CPI(M), but also sometimes against members of the Jharkhandi factions and Trinamool Congress, is also a major reason why a section of civil society and the intelligentsia is ambivalent, if not antagonistic, in their attitude towards Lalgarh. Mindless violence by the Maoists should definitely be condemned; however the violence by the Maoists has a certain strategic implication.

The experience in Chattisgarh has taught that the state has organized and armed a section of the adivasis to create the infamous Salwa Judum, an anti-Maoist vigilante force which has gained nationwide notoriety for its sprees of murder, rape and looting. The first inklings of such a phenomenon has also been seen in the jangalmahal region, with the formation of the Gana Pratirodh Committee, consisting mainly of members of the CPI(M) and also various Jharkhandi groups. The presence of the joint forces in the area has encouraged the activity of these people. The Maoists, with their violence directed against CPI(M) members and supporters, want to nip this attempt in the bud, such that a Salwa Judum-like phenomenon does not spread its roots in the jangalmahal area. Moreover, the violence by the Maoists is also meant to challenge the hegemony of the joint forces, which have become increasingly besieged and in many cases scared to even step outside their camps without overwhelming force. However, indiscriminate violence is reprehensible, and detrimental even to the long term interests of the Maoists themselves in the area, as it is sure to create a large body of hostile individuals. The Maoist movement today has the greatest potentiality in bringing about fundamental change in the condition of the most exploited and marginalized section of the Indian people and in resisting the onslaught of capital. To fulfill that potential, it is

necessary to go beyond the logic of mindless militarism and evolve new methodologies of mass mobilization.

The movement in Lalgarh still continues, and is expected to gain greater heights as the Indian state goes into an all out war against the people in the entire adivasi-populated region of India. The state might consider Lalgarh to be the laboratory for such an operation, but it might finally prove to be the mortuary of the same. Terrible oppression, daily firings [shootings] and indiscriminate arrests of people have not been able to subdue Lalgarh. The people of jangalmahal have stood up, and they will not bow down again.

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