

EDITORIAL

Lalgarh's Battle for Dignity and Justice

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A concerted paramilitary campaign is now underway in Lalgarh and surrounding areas in the tribal-dominated western region of West Bengal bordering Jharkhand and Orissa, ostensibly to flush out Maoists and restore the authority of the state. The campaign though being carried out by the state government is being actively guided and sponsored by the Union Home Ministry. The Union Home Minister has warned that the operation may take longer than expected and has appealed to political leaders and civil society organizations not to visit Lalgarh while the operation is on. Mamata Banerjee has called for declaring the three districts of West Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia a disturbed area. The Union Home Ministry has meanwhile included the CPI(Maoist) in the list of unlawful associations under the recently amended Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.

Chidambaram's appeal against civilian visits to Lalgarh, coming apparently after a group of Left Front MPs wrote to the Prime Minister seeking his personal intervention to this effect, clearly shows that the government wants to keep the operation beyond the purview of public scrutiny. This is as good as an indirect admission about the real nature and purpose of Operation Lalgarh - a brutal war on the adivasis who had been offering such a determined resistance to state repression. In the absence of independent investigations, the actual extent of casualties and injuries inflicted by the ongoing operation is not really known. But hundreds of people have already been forced to flee and there are disturbing reports that the paramilitary forces are forcing local adivasi youth under duress to locate mines and explosives - under threat that they will be arrested as 'Maoists' if they refuse.

Lalgarh had first shot into national prominence in November last year when the local adivasis in their thousands revolted against police atrocities following an unsuccessful Maoist mine attack targeting the Chief Minister's cavalcade. The resistance has since continued unabated and during the recent elections the state had to negotiate with the People's Committee against Police Atrocities (PCAPA) which is spearheading the resistance, for setting up polling booths outside the resistance area. The state was obviously waiting for an opportune moment and pretext to go for a crackdown. The opportunity came when Lalgarh recently erupted again against provocations by local CPI(M) leaders and Maoists made tall claims regarding their leading role in the Lalgarh resistance and dared the state to intervene.

At the heart of it, Lalgarh is a typical adivasi revolt against repression and injustice. The entire history of our anti-colonial struggle is replete with many such instances and the Indian state today has no problem recognizing the leaders of those revolts as popular heroes. In the eyes of the oppressed and deprived tribal people the Indian state in all these years has not really changed much and retains many of the colonial era trappings of utter insensitivity and unbridled brutality. But when the inheritors of Birsa Munda, Sidho-Kanu and Tilka Manjhi revolt against this contemporary reality, our post-colonial democratic system knows no other way but to declare a virtual war on these seekers of justice. It should be noted that the allegations of police atrocities made by the PCAPA have been found to be true by a senior official of the West Bengal government (Backward Classes Welfare Secretary RD Meena) but instead of taking adequate corrective measures as demanded by the PCAPA the state government has only announced meagre compensation of only a few thousand rupees to the eleven women victims of police repression!

For the UPA government and its belligerent Home Minister who managed to win the recent election by administratively converting defeat into victory, Lalgarh is a test case to unleash a new pattern of governance in which paramilitary forces will become the custodian of constitutional niceties. There is also the larger political gameplan to trap the ruling Left of West Bengal in an increasingly repressive role while the Congress plays the benefactor and monopolises the mask of welfare measures!

For the people of West Bengal, Operation Lalgarh is a political eye-opener. During the recent elections, Mamata Banerjee claimed to champion the cause of the struggles in Singur, Nandigram and Lalgarh and the TMC-Congress combined reaped a bumper electoral harvest. Elections over, it is now time to thank the people and what could be a more suitable gift than Operation Lalgarh! Mamata Banerjee now says that the TMC expelled the PCAPA chief Chhatradhar Mahato two years ago when it came to know about his Maoist link! Chhatradhar says he was never expelled but quit the TMC when he found it incapable of meeting the tribals' needs. He then recalls how following the killing of three PCAPA members in police firing in February, Mamata Banerjee had visited Jangalmahal, shed tears and said, 'If these people are Maoists, then I too am a Maoist.' "We never doubted her sincerity then", says Chhatradhar. But he realizes that the circumstances have now changed: "after the elections, the same Mamata Banerjee got a Cabinet post, joined the government at the Centre, which in turn sent paramilitary forces to Lalgarh. Therefore, it is quite natural for Banerjee now to link me with the Maoists."

It is also important to look at the doublespeak of the CPI(M) leadership. Prakash Karat says the Maoists need to be politically isolated from the people they are mobilizing even as Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee demands more central forces and Sitaram Yechury asks the Prime Minister to demonstrate his seriousness in tackling what his government claims to be the biggest threat to internal security! On the one hand, the government spearheads a paramilitary operation, and the MPs seek personal intervention of the Prime Minister to prevent political leaders from visiting the operation area, and on the other hand the party talks of fighting a political battle against Maoists! If the CPI(M) thinks that all this can be justified by invoking the party-government distinction and that the Centre-state or Congress-CPI(M) cooperation in 'restoring the authority of the state' in Lalgarh could help check the TMC's advance, it is only deceiving itself.

As for the Maoists, they have only once again demonstrated the incompatibility of their ideas and actions with the needs of any radical people's movement. With their penchant for exclusive and sensational military actions and aversion to the mass political process, they ultimately only produce a dampening and disruptive effect on any powerful people's movement while letting the Mamata Banerjees reap the political benefit of people's struggles and sacrifices.

We join the democratic opinion of the country and the justice-loving people of Lalgarh to demand an immediate end to the paramilitary offensive, withdrawal of paramilitary forces and a negotiated resolution of the conflict through fulfillment of the just demands of the Lalgarh people and quick redressal of all their long-standing grievances. We also do not support the idea of banning the CPI(Maoist) as a terrorist organization. The Maoists are anyway an underground organization and the experience of states like Chhattisgarh and Orissa where they have been banned for years clearly shows that the ban has been ineffective from the point of view of checking Maoist military actions. The ban is actually a weapon to terrorise the common people and stifle the democratic voice of protest. The case of Dr. Binayak Sen is a clear instance and for every Binayak Sen case that comes to the limelight, there are always hundreds of lesser known activists and ordinary men and women whose human rights continue to be brutally trampled upon.

Victory to Lalgarh's glorious battle for dignity and justice!

P.S.

* Editorial of Liberation, July 2009.