

Lalgarh Movement: Our Stand

Monday 5 October 2009, by [Radical Socialist \(India\)](#) (Date first published: 20 September 2009).

The Lalgarh movement, which began in November 2008, is one major form of manifestation of popular unrest among Santhals, Mundas, Shabars and Lodhas, some of the most exploited adivasis of West Bengal. It explodes in a particularly graphic manner the claims of the Left Front government about its treatment of adivasis, which is not particularly different from governments in other provinces or from the colonial regime even six decades after independence. Located near Salboni in West Medinipur district of West Bengal, it is in the eastern part of the vast tract of the central part of India inhabited by adivasis (stretching over Jharkhand, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharastra and Gujarat), Lalgarh is an extremely poverty stricken area. Each day is a struggle against poverty, starvation, malnutrition, ill health, illiteracy, unemployment and unending list of marginalisation. Laws about forests and forest dwellers have been ignored. Forests have been illegally cleared by contractors while adivasis have suffered. Few pattas have been given to adivasis in West Midnapur.

To the long history of economic exploitation, discrimination, cultural deprivation are added political and state repression the historical patterns of which did not change fundamentally with the coming of the Left Front. The Bengali middle-class upper caste domination within the reformist left meant that struggles for social justice and dignity among dalits and adivasis were always ignored or papered over with tokenisms. The repressive arm of the state, supplemented by party-cadre repression, remained the chief instrument of control. Perhaps the clearest indication is that 32 years of Stalinist rule have not made any significant change in terms of ensuring that reserved jobs and reserved educational seats in West Bengal are actually filled up by recruiting adivasis hailing from West Bengal. Since the 1990s the government has resorted to indiscriminate arrests of the local adivasis—the excuse given was to liberate the area from the Maoists. In an interview to Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar (March 2009), Sumit Chowdhury, a leading member of the Lalgarh Sanhati Mancha, revealed a massive figure—more than 1500 people at present languish in police custody without trial. These deprivations, the everyday violence to which adivasis have been routinely subjected, have all contributed to the build-up of deep resentment. An evidence of utter neglect of the adivasis is that though a few years back a scheme was developed to provide education, health and other benefits to the adivasis, with the assistance of IIT Kharagpur faculty, only a small amount (Rs. 84 crore, i.e., 840 million) was sanctioned and out of that only 140 million was actually spent.

This peripheral zone of hunger and rightlessness was targeted for a Special Economic Zone. The Jindals wanted to build a steel plant. For this they got about 5000 acres of land in September 2007. Out of this, 4500 acres were given to them by the West Bengal State Government, reportedly from vested land meant for distribution among the tribals. The remaining land was directly purchased from the owners by the SEZ developers. Originally the sanction was for a steel plant. The SEZ identity was granted later, all of a sudden in August 2008, because once granted the SEZ status, one can ignore at will a whole series of laws and rules — including such crucial requirements as doing an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). So this take over of land for the Jindals meant violating all laws on forests. Both the Tribal Welfare Department and the Forest Department gave a silent nod to the upcoming 35,000 crore rupees mega-project of the Jindals. This first industrial venture in the area was foisted on the adivasis and locals without taking them as well as their suggestions regarding the developmental model into confidence. The SEZ status will also protect the project

from strikes or any other kind of protest movements from the adivasis who obviously look at it as an encroachment on their land, water and forest resources. While denying the right to these natural resources to the locals the plant will have free access to water and electricity.

Massive police terrorism accompanied the explosion of a landmine near Salboni on November 2, 2008, possibly targeting West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharjee, who went there to inaugurate the proposed steel plant at Salboni. The police, supposedly went there to ensure the safety and security of people, was identified as the main element contributing to people's insecurity. The organization that came up was named Pulishi Santras Birodhi Janasadharaner Committee (Peoples' Committee Against Police Atrocities or PCAPA) – a telling commentary on how people see the police. Their charter of demands was the consequence of state violence, including violence on women. On November 4, an armed police party arrested Dipak Pratihar of Katapahari village while he was buying medicine from a chemist's shop in Lalgarh for his pregnant wife Lakshmi. In the process the police brutally beat up Lakshmi and threw her to the ground. She had to be subsequently hospitalized. The police and CRPF, led by the officer in charge of Lalgarh police station, Sandeep Sinha Roy and the superintendent of police of West Midnapore district, Rajesh Singh, unleashed a reign of terror in 35 villages encompassing the entire tribal belt of Lalgarh. In raids throughout the night of November 6, women were brutally kicked and beaten up with lathis and butts of guns. Among the injured, Chitamani Murmu, one of whose eyes was hit by a gun butt, and Panamani Hansda, who was kicked on her chest and suffered multiple fractures, had to be hospitalized. Chitamani lost her eye because of the injury. Eight other women were badly wounded. These police brutalities soon reached a point where the adivasis had no other option but to rise up in revolt. The 13 point charter of demands expressed the demands perhaps a little crudely, but very firmly. Demand 1 called for the oppressive Superintendent of Police apologizing in public, doing sit ups while holding his ears, and rubbing his nose along the ground, forms of punishment deemed humiliating. This was an attempt at inversion of existing power relations. Not surprisingly, any talk of an apology by the Superintendent of Police was unacceptable for the state. How could it lower its head to people it really considers inferiors and subjects rather than citizens?

For many months, Lalgarh saw a democratic, pluralist mass movement. This movement drove out the police from the area, but the result was a reduction in violence, showing that the greatest amount of violence is perpetrated by the state. The struggle in Lalgarh is a demonstration of uneven and combined development. On one hand it seems a continuation of adivasi struggles of the type that had developed repeatedly in the colonial period. On the other hand the struggle has been waged against the most modern form of capitalist exploitation. While many symbols of adivasi traditional politics are seen, the struggle has also embraced more modern radical politics. The Lalgarh movement had space for various political forces. But what was most important was its attempt to establish popular power at the local level, making Lalgarh, in a small scale, what Zapatistas for example had done in much larger areas of Mexico.

The Operation Lalgarh has come as a political eye opener for the people of West Bengal. The misrule, authoritarianism, support to rightwing capitalist policies, of the Left Front Government, coupled with the absence of a credible left alternative, had meant that the anti-neoliberal struggles in Nandigram, Singur and Lalgarh had turned people in the direction of the Trinamool Congress (TMC). Many Maoist and Stalinist organizations and individual leftists had aided the process by calling for an all-embracing anti-CPI(M) bloc. Now, the ruling UPA has bared its teeth. The allegations of brutality made by the PCAPA were found to be true by Backward Classes Welfare Department Secretary R.D. Meena of the West Bengal Government. But instead of taking serious action, the government decided to teach the adivasis a lesson. The UPA government has joined in happily. Two issues are involved in their action. On one hand, they want to show that in combating popular struggles, they will make common cause with all their political opponents within the

bourgeois framework. On the other hand, since law and order is a state government issue, there is also a clear plan to let the Left Front take the popular hatred, while the Congress reaps the benefit of being in the opposition in West Bengal as well as for token welfare measures. Even more significant, however, was the role of the TMC. Mamata Banerjee had used the struggles in Singur, Nandigram and Lalgarh to garner votes. Now that TMC is in UPA government, her position has changed. Chhatradhar Mahato, the PCAPA leader, was a former TMC member. Now the TMC claims he was expelled, but he says he dropped out because he felt TMC would not do anything genuine for the adivasis. The only noise the TMC made when operations began was that the CPI(M) should not be allowed to capture the turf when the paramilitary forces moved in on Lalgarh. In other words, today the TMC has no objections to the popular movement being crushed through state violence. The CPI(M)'s role should also serve as a warning to those who think there is any benefit in allying with it against the Congress and the TMC. Even while Prakash Karat was arguing that the Maoists need to be fought politically Sitaram Yechuri was calling on the Prime Minister to demonstrate his seriousness in tackling what his government claims to be the biggest threat to internal security!

The CPI (Maoist) was one of different forces involved here. It was a myth, systematically peddled by the bourgeois state and the bourgeois media, that the CPI (Maoist) was the dominant, or even the sole force in Lalgarh. In the first place, the CPI (Maoist) is no more "terrorist" than the CPI(M), the Congress, the BJP or the TMC. We disagree with the Maoist strategy, with its focus on military action, sensational "heroic" deeds, that in fact detract from and harm the development of democratic mass movements. We also oppose the killing of individual opponents by labelling them as "class enemy" or "social fascist". But we do not accept that these tactics, or the strategy of "peoples' war", make them terrorists. If killing opponents or innocent people in order to gain political mileage is terrorism, then what of the BJP (43 riots during Advani's ratha-yatra of 1989, as well as the Gujarat pogroms of 2002)? What of the Congress, whose leaders remain unpunished despite the passage of a quarter century since the anti-Sikh riots of 1984? What of the CPI(M), which has been responsible for the killing of political opponents both in the period 1969-1971, and in the period of the Left Front rule? By the logic used by Union Home Minister Chidambaram, or by the CPI(M) daily Ganashakti, both of whom call the CPI(Maoist) a terrorist party, all the aforementioned parties should be termed terrorist and the same laws applied to them.

A ban on any political party is in fact a weapon in the hands of the ruling class. Anyone can be accused of being a covert supporter or activist of a banned and supposedly terrorist party and given stiff sentences. The history of cases and punishments show that such laws are routinely used against popular movements and left-wing forces.

If terrorism is seen as a tactic that is used to intimidate masses of ordinary people, non-combatants, then it is the Indian state that is the most systematic terrorist. The return of the police, aided by paramilitary forces, to Lalgarh, is bringing huge coercion, violence, damage to property and denial of access to basic amenities including food and water. As the Indian state has not declared that Lalgarh is outside India, and that it is declaring war on Lalgarh, not laws of war, but the civil laws of the Indian state have to take precedence. The armed intervention in Lalgarh has actually resulted in flouting the normal laws of India with impunity. Thanks to the anti-terrorist laws passed by Parliament, whether the 2004 Act or the 2008 Amendment of the UAPA, public officials and members of the armed forces can commit gross violations of human rights while individuals wronged by them have no legal redress. This has been systematically used by the so-called counterinsurgency forces that have gone into Lalgarh. Newspapers, even those supporting the sending of the combined forces, have reported about gross violation of democratic rights. In village after village in the Goaltore block, all houses are locked up (ABP 23 June, 2009). Jharna Mal told reporters that in the name of searching for bombs, security forces broke into their home, spilled 30 kilogrammes of rice on the floor and poured kerosene on that, making the rice inedible. (*The Telegraph*, 29 June 2009). A

doctor, Jatin Pratihari of Kantapahari, was harassed for allegedly being in league with Maoists and for treating Maoists. (*Bartaman*, 30 June, 2009). PCAPA members have been harassed in a big way. Chhatradhar Mahato's house has been repeatedly raided. About 14 school buildings have been taken over and education for some 20,000 students halted. (*The Statesman*, 28 June, 2009). In Gohomidanga, school students were subjected to repression by the police when they protested the closure of their school. Women protestors have often been made special targets. A few cases have been reported, such as the police attack on 350 women in July, 2009, who demanded the withdrawal of the security forces near the Lalgah police station, leading to a number of women being injured. At a demonstration on September 5 at Kata Pahari, three women publicly accused the combined forces of sexual assault, in the presence of the media.

The massive state terror that was unleashed cost West Bengal 1 million rupees a day in the initial stages. Why, one might wonder, is the state spending so much money on policing and so little on development? Why spend so many billions on security of bureaucrats and ministers and so little for the supply of water, electricity, and basic needs of the most deprived masses? The answer is simple. If the condition of adivasis was substantially improved, where would forest contractors, mines, and others get the vast pool of super-exploited labour? So the government of the ruling class will not spend for the social improvement of adivasis.

In this context, we reject as unprincipled, opportunistic and false, the statement issued by a group of intellectuals claiming to stand on the left. Signed among other people by Irfan Habib and Prabhat Patnaik, the statement condemns the Lalgah movement, claiming it is a part of attempts to "destabilize" the Left Front government. For these "leftists", the rights of Stalinist-turned-social liberal parties to be in power are far superior to the democratic and human rights of the working people such parties claim to represent but actually betray. For them, since the Lalgah movement has not bowed its head to the West Bengal Government and the CPI(M), it is simply "anti-Left". Such leftists have nothing to do with Marx's famous dictum, that "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves". History evidently teaches the Stalinist professors of History nothing. By falsely labelling the democratic movement of the people a tool of reaction, they lend left-sounding intellectual support to the utterly right-wing politics of the Indian bourgeoisie. They ignore, and cover up, such incidents as the arrest of civil rights activists who tried to investigate the situation. At least two such incidents should be kept in mind. An all-India team including Rajkishore, General Secretary, Revolutionary Democratic Front, K.N.Pandit, Co-ordinator, Visthapan Virodhi Jan Vikas Andolan, Gopal Menon, documentary film-maker, Padma, a woman rights activist from Tamil Nadu, and others were arrested on getting down from a train in Medinipur station on their way to Lalgah on June 27. In the name of enforcing the so-called 'rule of law', the police broke the law itself and booked them with impunity (Case no. Kotwali PS no.1668 dt.27-6-09 u/s 151 Cr.Pc.). On July 3, another team comprising Medha Patkar, Gopal Menon, Sujato Bhadra, Amitdyuti Kumar, Saktiman Ghosh and some other civil rights activists were prevented from going to Lalgah at Debra about 60kms distant from Lalgah. When Gopal Menon started taking photographs, he was beaten on the chest with rifle butts on instruction from the Pranab Kumar, Additional S.P. Another media photographer was also hit hard. Both of them had to be taken to Debra hospital. The whole team was booked under sections 151 and 188 and released after sunset.

We also reject the argument of those friends of the Lalgah movement, who, while opposing state violence, equate Maoist violence with state violence, and go on to assert that the Maoists are "externals". We oppose Maoist tactics because they are politically wrong and incapable of generating and sustaining a mass democratic movement. We indeed condemn them for using wrong tactics that caused a serious weakening of the democratic struggles, however much they and their intellectual supporters exult that in fact the Movement has allegedly entered into a higher phase. Such exultation is based on a totally faulty belief that greater repression will hasten revolution, and

therefore they seem to be at times provoking repression in the hope that it will swell the ranks of their “revolutionary” cadres. But notwithstanding such terribly wrong, adventuristic methods, it cannot be doubted that in Lalgarh, Maoists were part of the movement. They were able to gain a degree of popular support because of their sustained involvement. To equate Maoist violence with state violence, to assume that the two are at par, is to make dangerous concessions to the state.

Finally, we condemn the identification of the state with the CPI(M), and the argument that if “people” have used force to eject CPI(M) members from their villages or if “people’s hatred” has led to the killings of CPI(M) members that is legitimate. Right-wing plebeian movements have also seen the use of “popular’ violence. If we fail to defend the civil liberties of our opponents, we are no defenders of democracy, certainly not of socialist democracy, which must be superior to bourgeois democracy.

Our demands and our stand:

- We condemn the violation of civil liberties in Lalgarh.
- We demand exemplary punishment of those violating civil liberties, including those involved in sexual assault on women
- We demand immediate ending of Operation Lalgarh
- We demand a revocation of the ban on the CPI(Maoist)
- We demand a retraction of all charges on civil society personalities who had visited Lalgarh
- We demand the right of the people, anywhere in India, to decide collectively what sort of development they want
- We support the struggle of the people of Lalgarh against the SEZ and for human dignity
- We call for united popular struggles for workers’ democracy and a mass revolutionary party, and for an exploitation free country where adivasis, dalits, Muslims, workers and peasants, women as well as men, can all walk with their heads held high.