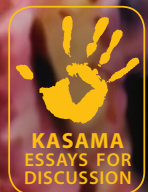


Revolution in India: Lalgarh's Hopeful Spark

by Sam Shell



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Introduction

India's forty year old Maoist-communist movement has undergone some remarkable growth in strength and influence over the last few years. This has occurred in part because of the consolidation of previously divided Maoist forces into a single party, the Communist Party of India (Maoist). Beginning in 2003, the Maoists were said to be present in 55 districts in 9 states, but by 2008, mainstream sources estimated they were present in 220 districts in 22 states with around one third of these being directly affected by the people's war, while the others under the influence of varying degrees of political activity. The Maoists now have a noticeable presence in a total of one-third of all of India's districts.

They have set up revolutionary democratic governing structures known as *janathana sarkars* in areas of Chhattisgarh and Jharkand in eastern India. These governing structures have administrative wings that deal with issues such as culture, education, health, finance, forest protection, public relations, and justice. Armed village militias have been organized as part of a larger people's war. These function as the initial steps towards setting up liberated political base areas—to exist as pockets of dual power—in opposition to the Indian State. In the area of West Bengal mainly populated by adivasis, or tribal peoples, the Maoists have developed a large base of popular support, including the beginnings of revolutionary political power. This work has laid the basis for the political uprising of the adivasis in the Lalgarh area beginning in November 2008.

This party takes as its goal a revolutionary transition of India to socialism and the development of a global communist society. As their more immediate goal, the Maoists seek to overthrow semi-feudal relations in India and the domination of imperialist powers over the country. This first step is called New Democratic revolution in Maoist theory—and they seek this through the development of revolutionary political base areas for a people's war that can defeat the Indian army and overthrow the current state. Central to advancing that process is the agrarian revolution—the uprising of impoverished farmers in India's vast countryside against feudal exploiters, their political cronies and their armed repressive forces.

In the following article I will attempt to discuss the Lalgarh uprising in West Bengal, and its connection with the Maoist movement.

* * * * *

And the riot be the rhyme of the unheard...
— Zack de la Rocha

At this moment an incredible event is taking place in the West Midnapore district of West Bengal. Before the eruption, this sleepy area was little known except to its own inhabitants. Now, a people's movement of unprecedented size to West Bengal has risen from the suffering of its adivasi (tribal) inhabitants, galvanizing the region, and shocking greater India. This movement has been popularly termed "the Lalgarh uprising."

Background of the Movement

Although one could accurately say the point of eruption of this rebellion occurred early in November of 2008, it is necessary to step back further in order to appreciate the context within which these events have unfolded. Lalgarth is an incredibly impoverished area of West Bengal. It contains one well-developed road—built to accommodate police—that is of little use to its indigenous inhabitants to whom even a motorbike is a rarity. Neither clean water nor electricity is available. Police brutality was a regular occurrence where villagers were detained and tortured for little or no reason—some singled out for repeated horrific abuse.¹ For many years the State promised development in the area, yet little to none was seen.

In 2007, the Jindal Steel Group was given rights to set up a Special Economic Zone (SEZ)² for steel production and was awarded a huge portion of land (different reports claim figures somewhere between 4,500 and 5,000 acres). Large sections of these lands were tribal lands, supposedly protected by law for allocation to the indigenous people through a land-reform program. When the development began, adivasi people were displaced, and due to the specter environmental damage, many of their livelihoods were threatened. For years the system had abandoned these people, leaving them under the boot of petty bureaucrats to live as paupers and subjected to every imaginable abuse. Then, in a final act of force, it sought to drive them off of the only land they knew. This callous act was no less than applauded by the ruling powers of the area. After word spread of the land rights being granted to Jindal Steel Group, the region shook choking with outrage.³ (Bhattacharyya, 2009)

1. De, Koustav. "Lalgarth, an Icon of Adivasi Defiance". Monthly Review Zine. Monthly Review. Web. December 17th, 2008 <<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/de171208.html>>.

2. Special Economic Zones are designated areas where economic laws have been reduced or eliminated. They are notorious for horrific labor and environmental abuses.

3. Bhattacharyya, Amit. "Singur to Lalgarth via Nandigram: Rising Flames of People's Anger against Displacement, Destitution and State Terror". No 2 Displacement. Web. April, 2009 <http://www.no2displacement.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=121:singur-to-lalgarth-via-nandigram&catid=45:document&Itemid=136>

On November 2, 2008, a landmine detonated in Shalbani in the West Midnapore district when a procession of business and governmental leaders—including the chief minister of West Bengal—returned from the inauguration of the Jindal Steel Works SEZ, having been planted by Maoist guerrillas to target their convoy in opposition to the shameful industrial project.⁴ The high-profile attack spurred a massive campaign of police terror in local villages where many of the indigenous population were targeted as suspects or Maoist sympathizers [support for the Communist Party of India (Maoist) is widespread in many areas of the region]. Men, women, and children were targeted without regard and were subjected to physical abuse, torture, and rape.⁵ Particularly polarizing moments were when one woman was struck in the face with a rifle butt resulting in a permanent loss of sight in one eye, eleven women were severely abused, and three students were arrested and detained (in a manner more resembling a kidnapping than arrest) on suspicion of being Maoists. However, the inhuman treatment of villagers by police extended far beyond these few vicious incidents and was rooted in a long history of such acts.⁶

Several days later thousands of villagers mobilized. Armed with only traditional weapons such as bows and arrows, and an iron resolve forged on decades of suffering, they dug trenches and laid tree trunks across roads to prevent security personnel from entering. In retribution they descended on police stations, damaged their cars, cut off electricity to the buildings, and demanded that police explain why so many of the adivasi people had been hurt.

4. Ray, Partho Sarathi. "Background of the movement". Sanhati. Web. November 13th, 2008

<<http://sanhati.com/front-page/1083/#1>>

<<http://southasiarev.wordpress.com/2009/06/23/we-will-spread-the-fire-says-the-maoist-from-lalgarth/>>

<<http://sanhati.com/news/133//>>

5. A Fact-finding Team of Students from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. "Report of Fact-finding Team from JNU on the Eve of Lalgarth Violence". Monthly Review Zine. Monthly Review. Web. June 18th, 2009 <<http://monthlyreview.org/mrzine/lalgarth180609.html>>.

6. Kutty, P. Govindan. "Mass Uprising in Lalgarth". People's Truth Bulletin #5. People's Truth. Web. June, 2009 <<http://peoples-truth.blogspot.com/2009/06/peoples-truth-bulletin-no5.html>>



Women at an assembly in Lalgarh

Huge mobilizations of this nature went on without pause for more than a month, drawing widespread attention. Police officers became subject to a social boycott, making it difficult for them to acquire the basic necessities of food and sanitary items required to stay in the area. Coupled with a strong Maoist presence, the social boycott made the Lalgarh area almost impassable for governmental authority figures.⁷ Since these events, the uprising has spread like a wildfire influencing hundreds of villages in the West Midnapore district and has drawn immense support not just in West Bengal, but also from many areas in India. It has assumed a definite political character.

On November 8, 2008, the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities (Pulishi Atyacharer Biruddhe Janaganer Committee, or PCPA) was formed in Dalilpur Chowk. It was composed upon formation of elected

representatives from 95 villages.⁸ These numbers have vastly grown its foundation. Its inception bypassed previous organizations of tribal elders and mainstream political parties which had utterly failed in providing relief to the people of the area, and gave an organized and democratic voice to those from oppressed groups. The committee now makes all major decisions at large public meetings which are often attended by more than 10,000 people from hundreds of villages.⁹ The committee also put forth a 13-point set of demands—as well as the police and administrative boycott—to make clear the adivasi people's grievances.¹⁰

8. De, 2008.

9. Chowdhury, Sumit. "We talk of participatory democracy, Lalgarh is practising it". Sanhati. Web. November 25th, 2008 <<http://sanhati.com/front-page/1083/#10>>

10. see <<http://sanhati.com/front-page/1083/#9>> for the list of demands.

7. Bhattacharyya, 2009.

Many demonstrations, blockades, and strikes have been called by the PCPA, and relatively peaceful assaults on police camps and mainstream party offices were organized, initially by adivasi people. In many cases, police have been forced to withdraw entirely according to their demands. Another significant gain was to win the majority of their 13-point list demands as well as large monetary concessions for development, although these monetary gains were viewed as hoaxes that would never, in the end, benefit the adivasi people.¹¹ However, their most important demand—that police go to each village and apologize—had yet to be won.¹²

The months after the initial uprising have been characterized by constant forays and negotiations between police, government officials, their respective party cadre, and the people of West Bengal. These conflicts have often taken the form of liberating and losing village territory to government factions. A particularly interesting moment occurred during the weeks prior to the April 2009 Lok Sabha elections. The PCPA put forth a popular demand that no police be allowed into villages during the elections. Although the residents of the areas supported the idea of allowing the polls to occur, they refused to allow them to happen if any police personnel were going to be present. After a long stand-off, the villages finally allowed the polls to occur with police presence, but only far outside the villages where the police boycott existed. Any villagers interested in voting were given rides to the designated polling place on buses chartered by the Election Commission.¹³

An important feature of the uprising has been the oppressive role played by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), known as the CPM—the dominant party in West Bengal’s Left Front government. This “communist” party has been deeply involved with West Bengal’s capitalists for decades and has brutally exploited West Bengal’s large tribal population. In the Lalgarh area, CPM leaders routinely pocket develop-



The people destroying a CPI-(M) party office

ment funds meant for the villagers, and their police forces arrest and torture adivasis suspected of working with the Maoists in the area.

Recent Developments

On June 14, 2009, the PCPA and Maoists conducted a large campaign where they liberated 48 villages and took control of CPI (Marxist) party buildings in Dharampur. They were met with fierce opposition and were involved in furious gun battles for days preceding these events, but, in the end, succeeded in freeing these villages.¹⁴

On June 16, 2009, there was another significant uprising in Lalgarh in which a large number of adivasis set numerous police camps on fire, drove security forces and CPI (Marxist) cadre and leaders out of Lalgarh, retaking control of the area.¹⁵ An especially important

11. Kutty, 2009

12. Indian Express. “Lalgarh tribals still wait for apology, ready for second round of protests”. Express News Service. Web. January 30th, 2009 <<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/lalgarh-tribals-still-wait-for-apology-read/416885/>>

13. De, 2009

14. Bhattacharyya, Amit. “Lalgarh Update”. Revolution in South Asia. Web. June 23rd, 2009 <<http://southasiarev.wordpress.com/2009/07/04/india-a-detailed-report-from-lalgarh/>>

15. Rediff News. “Tribals take control of Lalgarh”. Rediff News. Web. June 16th, 2009 <<http://sanhati.com/front>>

moment was the destruction of the palatial building of CPI (Marxist) leader Anuj Pandey, one of the most hated government officials of the region. The destruction of this building was of great symbolic meaning. It had stood as a tower of oppression keeping the adivasi people under its heavy shadow for many years. Its destruction has finally allowed the sunshine to pour in, lifting the spirits of flowers once so heavily choked by weeds. Unfortunately, since this uprising security forces have descended into the area and have carried out murderous repression campaigns of the same nature that sparked the initial movement.¹⁶ We can only hope those facing these campaigns can effectively defend their new-found freedom in significant ways.

During at least the past few weeks the United States has been providing technical assistance to the Indian government to quell the rebellion, which has allowed them to monitor the areas of Baroperlia, Kantapahari, Ramgarh, Mahultal, Kadashol, Pingboni, Goaltore, Dhrampur and Jhitka¹⁷ as well as plan assaults. The CPI (Maoist) was officially “banned” throughout India as well in June. Soon after, a spokesperson of the Maoist party, Gour Chakravarty, was arrested in Kolkata while giving an interview.¹⁸ The government has even gone so far as to arrest outsiders who have arrived as neutral observers. A team of intellectuals from Kolkata, including filmmaker Aparna Sen,¹⁹ and a ten-person team of social activists, were arrested and assaulted by police.²⁰

page/1083/#32>

16. Sanhati. “Police atrocities continue”. Sanhati. Web. June 29th, 2009 <<http://sanhati.com/front-page/1083/#46>

17. Dasgupta, Rajarshree. “Chemical dyes and foreign technology used to locate Mao”. Translated by Amit Bhat-tacharya. Web. June 27th, 2009 <<http://sanhati.com/front-page/1083/#47>

18. Indian Express. “Bengal follows India: Maoists banned, top leader held”. Indian Express. Web. June 23rd, 2009 <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/bengal-follows-india-maoists-banned-top-leader-held/480286/>

19. General Secretariat of the ILPS. “Support the Heroic Struggles of Adivasis in Lalgargh, India”. International League of Peoples’ Struggle. Web. June 30th, 2009 < http://www.ilps-web.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1859&Itemid=43>

20. 15. MSN News. “Medha Patkar stopped on way to Lalgargh”. MSN. Web. July 3rd, 2009 <<http://news.in.msn.com/national/article.aspx?cp-documentid=3069256>>



A young rebel

Despite the huge mobilization of military units and support from foreign imperialist countries, the people of West Bengal and the Maoists have been able to hold their own against the Indian paramilitary forces by conducting guerrilla-style battles and by driving police back out of newly-seized areas. The tribal people have often mobilized blockades while the PCPA and Maoists have conducted more military-based struggles.²¹

Since July 4, 2009, paramilitary forces and the West Bengal State police have been sent to capture Pingboni and Birbhanpur.²² They also have been combing the forests of the Lalgargh area of Kadashole, Salboni, Godamouli, Jhitka, Kantapahari, and Ronja as part of an assault on Maoist forces and tribal people.²³ Some leaders of the PCPA are also being explicitly targeted for allegedly supporting the Maoists. Sixteen paramilitary groups are operating in the area including COBRA.

21. Bhattacharyya, Lalgargh Update

22. One India. “Security Forces to Capture Pingboni, Birbhanpur in Lalgargh Area”. One India. Web. July 5th, 2009 <<http://news.oneindia.in/2009/07/05/securityforces-to-capture-pingboni-birbhanpur-in-lalgargh.html>>

23. Mondal, Pronab. “Lalgargh forest clean-up begins”. The Telegraph. Web. July 5th, 2009 <http://www.telegraphindia.com/1090705/jsp/bengal/story_11198455.jsp>

According to some press reports, the military groups plan to stay in full force until at least the end of July.²⁴

As of July 8th, mainstream news agencies have reported that Lalgarh was recaptured. However, the Maoists forces stationed there were able to escape relatively unscathed to the jungles of Ayodhya hills in Purlia via Belpahari²⁵ and still a number of villages remain liberated (up to date numbers are difficult to ascertain).

Notable Characteristics of the Lalgarh Uprising

From the beginning the Lalgarh uprising has been a progressive force. Since its birth, this movement has had an undeniably organic character, and at its height, drew tens of thousands of villagers out to fight against the corrupt establishment. The movement, clearly born out of the struggles of the noble adivasi peasants, has transcended rural tribal lines in important ways by drawing solidarity and defense from broader sections of the populace including students,²⁶ human rights organizations,²⁷ small store owners, and adivasi migrant workers.²⁸



Rebel women at a roadblock

Since its birth, the movement has quickly taken shape and developed leadership along democratic lines. The first leading mass organization rising out of the struggle was the PCPA. After its formation, committees quickly appeared in multiple villages, often being led by women. All the major decisions of this organization were decided at mass meetings consisting of up to 10,000 adivasis from hundreds of villages.²⁹

Aside from the mass democratic organization the PCPA, embryonic parallel governing structures have begun to emerge as well. These are known as Gram Committees, which were formed in January of 2009 as an alternative to the panchayat system, a tool of the ruling factions of India. Each committee consists of a 10-member elected body—five men and five women—with each body having two delegates for larger area meetings (10 villages). Above those committees are a total of 35 representatives for central committee

24. The Hindu. "Forces Could Stay in Lalgarh till Month End". The Hindu. Web. July 5th, 2009 <<http://www.hindu.com/thehindu/holnus/000200907051431.htm>>

25. Chaudhuri Sumanta, Ray. "Lalgarh Maoists now camping in Ayodhya jungles". DNA. Web. July 8th, 2009 <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report_lalgarh-maoists-now-camping-in-ayodhya-jungles_1272046>

26. Fact finding team of students from JNU. "Report of fact-finding team from JNU on the eve of Lalgarh violence". Sanhati. Web. June 17th, 2009 <<http://sanhati.com/news/1600/>>

27. Amnesty International. "India: Authorities should avoid excessive use of force". Amnesty International. Web. June 22nd, 2009 <<http://www.amnesty.org.au/news/comments/21205/>>

28. Ray, Partho Sarathi. "Uprising spreads, supported by migrant adivasis; CPIM stokes Bengali regionalist sentiments".

Sanhati. Web. November 18th, 2008 <<http://sanhati.com/front-page/1083/#6>>

29. Ray, Partho Sarathi. "Novel methods of participatory democracy and gender equality in Lalgarh; tribals elsewhere stand up; development issues resonate". Sanhati. Web. November 30th, 2008

meetings—at this level the male/female ratio is not required to be equal (with females occupying a minimum of 12 seats)—who play governing roles. Each decision these committees make must be ratified by a general assembly of people and at least 150 of these committees have been formed (although these numbers are rapidly changing). Along with Gram Committees, the villagers also have set up village defense committees—a form of militia—to protect the people from hermad, police, and CPI (Marxist) attacks. (Bhattacharyya, 2009) These committees are quite radical and novel departures from the traditionally patriarchal and authoritarian institutions of the area.

Whenever these organizations meet with representatives from the official government, they demand that the officials sit on woven mats alongside them. This occurs in direct contradiction to the traditional practice of governing officials sitting in a chair while the people sit on the ground around them. (Ray, 2009) These practices have served to shatter the chains wrapped around the inhabitants of the area, elevating them from a subservient childlike position, to one of equality, one of a people no longer subject to the rule of a small elite.

Over the course of the struggle, new developmental initiatives have taken place. In Kantapahari, a hospital set up two years ago, but never utilized by the government, was seized by the PCPA and renamed the “People’s Hospital.” The hospital opened its doors staffed with one physician and six health workers. (Bhattacharyya, 2009) The PCPA has also taken steps to deal with agriculture and water scarcity problems with the instillation of tubewells in multiple villages and irrigation projects such as canal dredging. These initiatives have all taken place solely on the basis of monetary contributions and voluntary labor.

The Maoists have been playing an important role in developmental projects by encouraging a model of self-sufficiency and sustainability as opposed to projects dominated by foreign capital and a wealthy elite. These projects have included health centers, drinking water and irrigation projects, and road development. Along with the establishment of parallel governing structures, the Maoists and villagers have built at least

50 kilometers of gravel paths, set up tube wells and water tanks, set up irrigation initiatives, and are running health centers.³⁰ These projects—coupled with the defense by the Maoist army and their ongoing people’s war—create the potential basis for developing revolutionary power structures independent of the Indian state.

Exciting developments have occurred explicitly within the women’s movement—practices such as fair representation have been won and women’s leadership in the general movement has served as an important offensive against traditional patriarchy. An all-women’s branch of the PCPA has been formed, which is not only responsible for the fight against police repression and CPI (Marxist) attacks, but also against domestic oppression. One important initiative of this movement has been the seizure of businesses that distribute alcohol.³¹ Those who ignore the ban on consumption can be subject to social boycott.³²

Concluding Remarks

It is my belief that the facts overwhelmingly demonstrate that the battle occurring for Lalgah’s liberation is a just one. This movement is one of unprecedented size to the area, born from and led by the indigenous inhabitants of the region for an undeniably just cause. Revolutionary people should be watching this movement, learning what we can, and offering whatever support possible. No doubt this struggle will be a long and brutal one, with the people of West Bengal facing many trials and tribulations. This is a uniquely polarizing moment in recent political history, already being called the new Naxalbari, and will most likely prove to be a locus of revolutionary struggle for some time to come.

30. Bhattacharyya, 2009

31. It’s important to mention here that women’s abuse and oppression by men is clearly not simply an issue of alcohol consumption—although it can exacerbate the problem—but one of ideology and political economy. However, that being said, the importance of the formation of such groups during this struggle cannot be underestimated and is a great sign of progress.

32. Bhattacharyya, 2009

For further reading see especially:

1. For an in depth report on the Lalgarh movement see Amit Bhattacharyya's "Singur to Lalgarh via Nandigram: Rising Flames of People's Anger against Displacement, Destitution and State Terror"³³ and "Lalgarh Update".³⁴

2. For a discussion of Maoism and its relationship to tribal villagers in the Lalgarh movement – "Lalgarh's Radicalisation of Resistance: From 'Ordinary Civilians' to Political Subjects?"³⁵

3. For a long series of press reports from a progressive news agency see Sanhati.com's collection available at RevSA.³⁶

4. For a brief but heartfelt account of life in Lalgarh from a Maoist native to the area see the article by "Manoj".³⁷

33. Bhattacharyya, Amit. "Singur to Lalgarh via Nandigram: Rising Flames of People's Anger against Displacement, Destitution and State Terror". No 2 Displacement. Web. April, 2009 <http://www.no2displacement.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=121:singur-to-lalgarh-via-nandigram&catid=45:document&Itemid=136>

34. Bhattacharyya, Amit. "Lalgarh Update". Revolution in South Asia. Web. June 23rd, 2009 <<http://southasiarev.wordpress.com/2009/07/04/india-a-detailed-report-from-lalgarh/>>

35. <http://southasiarev.wordpress.com/2009/07/10/lalgarhs-radicalisation-of-resistance-from-ordinary-civilians-to-political-subjects/>

36. <http://southasiarev.wordpress.com/2009/06/13/press-reports-on-the-uprising-in-lalgarh-and-its-background/>

37. <http://southasiarev.wordpress.com/2009/06/23/we-will-spread-the-fire-says-the-maoist-from-lalgarh/>

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