

We Will Spread this Fire

[Comrade Manoj, a prominent CPI (Maoist) leader in Lalgarh tells his story to The Times of India.]

My name is Manoj. It's not the name my parents gave me, but all my comrades call me 'Manoj'. My father's name is Dhiren Murmu. I am his second son and I am 25. I was born at Bamundanga village in Salboni. I've lived most of my life in this hopeless village.

Our village falls under the Kansijora gram panchayat. The left Front has been in power here for 30 years. Salboni has always been a CPM stronghold. But, in 30 years, neither the state government, nor the panchayat and Zilla Parishad took any interest at all in developing this area. We might have been living in the Stone Age.

When it rains here, the dirt tracks turn muddy and we are forced to drag ourselves and our cattle through the muck. We are not able to ride our bicycles or use carts. We don't have clean drinking water. People are forced to drink filthy, yellow water. After sunset, we live in the dark as there is no electricity here. No jobs either. During the paddy season, we work in the fields and then sit idle for the rest of the year. Because we are tribals, no one has bothered to do anything for us.

In 2002, we got tired of being treated like rodents. So, the villagers got together and demanded development in our area. This infuriated the local CPM bosses. The police and Marxists slapped false cases on us, accusing us of working for the People's War Group (PWG). They branded us Maoists. So we began to think we might as well join the Maoists.

Things turned nasty quickly. The former police superintendent of West Midnapore, KC Meena, lodged an FIR against the entire village. Nearly 90% of the men and teenage boys were charged with being Naxalite. We knew what was coming. We had to do something to save ourselves.

I was just 18 at the time. I was in class XII at the local school. But, I too joined in protests against the police. Within days, the police filed a case against me, my father and brother. They accused all of us for working for the PWG. Our family has always supported the Congress party. In 1988, when Mamata Banerjee formed the Trinmool Congress (TMC), we switched loyalty to her.

One day, police jeeps rolled into our villages, picked up people from their houses, bundled everyone into their vehicles and dumped all of us into the Midnapore jail. That was where I first met Maoist leader Sushil Roy [comrade Barunda]. I found the Maoist ideology very appealing. Roy asked me to join the Maoists so that I could help the poor. I liked his ideas. Then I met two PWG leaders in prison. And I realized that neither Congress nor the TMC can stop the CPM's terror. I also realized that under CPM rule, we had lost the right to speak up. It was time to take a stand and speak up.

I joined the Maoists. They gave me a new name, a new identity and a new life. Now, I work for the Lalgarh movement. I joined this great surge of people last year. On November 5, the police arrived here looking for people who had blasted landmines at chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya's convoy at Salboni. In Lalgarh, the police rounded up innocent tribal women and began to molest and torture them. One woman lost an eye. Others were badly injured. After this incident, we decided to join the Lalgarh movement. It was our party's decision. The Maoists always stand with the deprived. We joined them at Nandigram and Singur. Now, we have joined them in Lalgarh.

It's been easy for us to win the people's support. Most of them have been victims of torture by police. The people listened to us and joined the Peoples' Committee against Police Atrocities (PCPA). Opposition party workers have also supported us. Everybody is rebelling against the CPM cadre and police.

We know the government forces want to crush us. But, we plan to expand our area of influence. As soon as we are able to turn Lalgarh and Junglemahal (a forested area spanning three districts – Bankura, Purulia and West Midnapore) into a Maoist-dominated area, we will apply our ideology here. We will undertake development work for the poor. We will raise money through public donations. And nobody will pay tax to the government anymore.

After victory at Lalgarh, we will expand our fight to the tribal communities of Jharkand, Bihar, Orissa and Chattisgarh. Our war has just begun.

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