

Fact-finding in Lalgarh area of West Bengal (10th-11th April, 2009) and convention in Kolkata (9th April, 2009)

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Lalgarh Uprising: Brief Background

Lalgarh, in the West Midnapore district in West Bengal, and the adjoining districts of Purulia and Bankura, have been the locale of an adivasi movement of historical proportions since the last five months. The movement had begun in November as a spontaneous uprising of the adivasi people in the Lalgarh area in response to the brutal assaults by police on adivasis, including women and children, in the wake of a land-mine explosion purportedly targeting the chief minister. In a reign of terror unleashed in 35 villages encompassing the entire tribal belt of Lalgarh, the police brutally beat up, kicked, hit with rifle butts and indiscriminately arrested numerous members of the adivasi communities. Women were especially targeted for beatings and humiliation. Police oppression is nothing new to the adivasis of the Bankura-Purulia-Midnapore area but the unprecedented atrocities inflicted by the police in this single week in November, especially the wanton attack on women, wore out their patience, and they rose up in revolt.

What began as rumblings of protest soon took the shape of a spontaneous mass uprising. Adivasi men and women, armed with traditional weapons, came out and blockaded the roads. Roads were dug up and tree trunks were placed on the road to obstruct the entry of police vehicles, in the same way as it had been done in Nandigram. The movement spread to all the adivasi-dominated areas and became a symbol of adivasi dignity and aspirations. Although the immediate trigger for the movement were the police atrocities, the basic issues of lack of development which are at the core of the grievances of the people, also resonated strongly. The adivasis recognize that the state terror, which they have been subjected to from the colonial times, is the “shock therapy” used to subdue them in order to dispossess them of their resources, their water, forests and land (which contains important minerals). They proclaimed that they were fighting for their right to these resources, with which their lives are intimately connected, and for their right to live in dignity. They demanded the development measures which are totally lacking in the adivasis areas, health services, schools free of police camps, food through the public distribution system, jobs for their educated youth, implementation of rural employment guarantee schemes etc.. The demands of the adivasis have been placed through a charter of 13 demands, the main amongst which was the demand for an apology from the police officials who had led the assaults, and which has become the rallying point for the movement.

Another remarkable feature of the movement has been the new forms of participatory democracy and gender equality that it has generated. The entire movement was without conventional leadership, and the villages that have been touched by this

movement have done away with all traditional political leaders and tribal elders and elected a People's Committee against Police Atrocities comprising five men and five women. All decisions are taken at public meetings attended by all men and women. Political parties are not welcomed. The movement has been completely non-violent and democratic, as it has depended on mass mobilizations of tribal people, and it has been difficult for the state to brand them as 'Maoists'.

The movement has been going on in various forms for the past five months. In the last two months, ominous developments have taken place which have the potential to throw the entire adivasi-populated area into a spiral of violence. Unable to control the uprising through the police, which has been socially boycotted, the administration, with the active help and collusion of the ruling party, floated a number of organizations styled after the Salwa Judum of Chattisgarh. These vigilante groups, composed of adivasi youth, and armed by the state and the ruling party, were set up purportedly to resist the "Maoists" but have been used to attack the adivasi agitators. At least four people have been already killed. Attacks are happening every day. It has also become an attempt to drive the adivasi movement onto violent paths so that it could be justifiably suppressed with violence. There is grave concern that the civil war-like situation in Chattisgarh and Jharkhan is being reproduced in West Bengal with the aim of fracturing the adivasi resistance and drawing the region into a prolonged, and violent, conflict that will result in the destruction of the normal life of the adivasis and disrupt all developmental efforts in the area.

In the backdrop of this impending crisis, a fact-finding mission to the adivasi areas of Lalgarh was planned in order to understand the situation, so that measures to face the danger at its inception can be thought about. It should be noted that a fact-finding committee dispatched by the central government a few weeks ago was chaperoned around by the state administration and had given rise to major grievances among the adivasis.

The objectives of the planned fact-finding mission are threefold:

- 1) to investigate the police atrocities that became the trigger for the uprising.*
- 2) to investigate the origin and activities of the Salwa Judum style vigilante groups.*
- 3) to investigate the status of development measures and the deprivation of adivasis in the area.*

The fact-finding was planned for the 10th-11th of April. A mass convention was organized in Kolkata immediately before the fact-finding, on 9th April, which deliberated on the adivasi movement in Lalgarh in the context of other adivasi resistance movements in different parts of the country, the attempts to develop Salwa Judum- like organizations that pit people against people and lead to displacement of adivasis, and finally the handing over of their land and natural resources for exploitation by corporations.

The aim of the convention was to share the experience and gain insights into the situations in Chattisgarh and other parts of India among the members of the fact finding team and the participants in the convention.

Attempt was made to look for information regarding following socio-economic/developmental issues:

1. Nutrition.
2. Health services.
3. Educational services.
4. Employment.
5. Water availability.
6. Electricity.
7. Roads and transportation systems.
8. Work under NREGA.
9. Public distribution system and BPL ration cards.
10. Land rights.
11. Forest rights.
12. Agriculture (inputs, irrigation etc.).
13. Industries and mining (employment opportunities).
14. Sale of forest produce.
15. Working of panchayats.
16. Crime.
17. Insurgency.
18. Land acquisition.
19. Participation in political processes.
20. Caste/tribe discrimination.
21. Alcoholism.

This list is neither thought to be comprehensive, nor is it authoritative. This is just a list of suggested “pointers” for the fact-finding.

Note: Detailed accounts of the adivasi movement and its background are available at the following urls: <http://sanhati.com/front-page/1083/>
<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/de171208.html>
<http://monthlyreview.org/mrzine/191108p.html>

Press Release

Report of the All-India Fact-Finding Team on Lalgarh

1. An All-India fact-finding mission consisting of ten members, including a former ambassador, a Supreme Court Lawyer, human rights activists, economists, journalists, and writers, visited Binpur 1 (Lalgarh), and Binpur 2 (Belpahari) on

the 10th and 11th of April, 2009. The team talked to the police, political party members, community leaders and local people. In addition, we attended meetings and witnessed rallies.

2. Our overwhelming impression was that the people of Lalgarh want to participate in the upcoming elections. However, they wish to cast their vote in an atmosphere of peace and security, rather than one in which they feel intimidated by threats of violence from the police or from the '*Harmad Vahini*' (alleged CPM cadre).
3. On November 2, 2008 a landmine explosion occurred while the convoy of the Union Steel Minister and the West Bengal Chief Minister was passing Salboni, 50 kilometres away from Lalgarh. Seven people, including three schoolboys from Lalgarh, were arrested by the police in connection with this incident. This was followed by a sequence of further raids by the police, in which not just men, but children, old people and women were also subjected to various atrocities. The charges against all the suspects have subsequently been dropped by the Court. This pattern of arrests and violence fits into a long-standing history of atrocities against the *adivasi-mulvasis* of Lalgarh, which in fact goes all the way back to colonial times. Fed up with this sub-human treatment, the people of the area have ultimately formed themselves into a *Police Santrash Birodhi Janasadharaner Committee* (People's Committee Against Police Atrocities, PSBJC) and have blocked entry of the police and *Harmad Vahini* into their area for several months. They have specified that the blockade would be removed if the police apologise to the people for their past excesses (in the traditional tribal manner, by holding their ears and rubbing their own noses against the ground).
4. From eyewitness accounts, victims and families of victims we heard that the police was present on several occasions when the *Harmad Vahini* carried out murders and inflicted injuries on people in Lalgarh. The state administration has taken no action against the perpetrators and made no effort to compensate the victims' families for these killings and neither have nor medical assistance been provided to the injured.
5. The authorities have accused the PSBJC of Lalgarh to be in possession of firearms. However, in our two days *we* did not come across any evidence of this. We had the opportunity to be present at two rallies of the *adivasis-mulvasis*, at which tensions rose high. There were at least 200 well-armed police and security personnel at village Murar (on the border of Midnapore/Bankura) on April 10, 2009. As they marched and shouted slogans demanding dignity and justice, the local people could be seen carrying their traditional weapons (hammers, sickles, axes, bows and arrows).
6. The people of Lalgarh have expressed their demands in a 13-point charter which involves restoration of dignity and deliverance of justice. There is, in addition, a 9-point charter which makes specific demands relating to developmental needs

like 365-day employment under NREGA, provision of basic health facilities and ration cards under the BPL scheme.

7. Our clear impression is that the struggles going on in Lalgarh are a legitimate and democratic expression of the grievances of the people against the excesses and shortcomings of state actions, guaranteed by the Constitution of India.

12th April, 2009

Fact-finding team:

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Statement on the incidents in Madhupur village on 11th April, 2009 by members of the fact-finding team who had visited the village

Five members of the All-India Fact Finding team were present in Madhupur village of Salboni 1 Block on 11th April 2009 from around 10 am to 12 noon. On reaching the village, the members found the villagers anxious and agitated. A group of 25-30 police personnel carrying firearms had tried to enter the village ten minutes ago. From accounts, when the women of the village resisted and refused them entry, the police threatened to beat up the women. The villagers then gathered in full strength and forced the police to leave the village.

In the presence of the fact finding team members, the villagers prepared for a procession to warn nearby villages against possible further entries by the police and the *Harmad Vahini*. People from other villages who had been informed soon joined the procession. Women participated in large numbers. They were completely peaceful, not carrying any fire-arms, and not in a mood for any confrontation. Members of the fact finding team left as the procession was beginning. We later came to know from the villagers that the procession had been fired upon by the *Harmad Vahini* near Memul, a village adjacent to Madhupur. Members of the procession were forced to flee, and women in Memul had to lock themselves up in their houses. It appears that the Harmad Vahini also destroyed some of the houses in Memul, and tried to break down doors.

Given the past experience of the villagers, it appears that the attempted entry of the police in the morning is linked to the attack by the Harmad Vahini, subsequently, which seems to lend credence to the fears and distrust of police by the people of Lalgarh.

12th April, 2009

Madhupur fact-finding team:

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Link for more Information about Lalgarh-Movement:

<http://sanhati.com/>