

No Schools, All Barracks

Partho Sarathi Ray

Sixty two years ago, at the midnight of 14th august, 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru declared that finally India would redeem its tryst with destiny, and the country would awake to life and freedom. The Constituent Assembly, where he spoke these words, went on to draft a constitution which enshrined the fundamental rights of India's citizens, including Article 21A, which guaranteed free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years. To support, and strengthen, this fundamental right, the Indian parliament passed the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, commonly referred to as the Right to Education Act with much fanfare. While the India of multinationals and multibillionaires seem to have gone ahead to fulfil its tryst with destiny, and successive governments claim to be building a "knowledge-based economy", the adivasi and dalit children, inhabiting the regions of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Orissa, Chattisgarh and the other Indian states which are currently the site of the armed offensive by the state, called Operation Green Hunt, seemed to be headed towards another destiny. For, they are being denied their fundamental right to education, as their schools have been occupied by the security forces of the State.

Occupation of school buildings by paramilitary forces operating in areas of insurgency has been a practice that has been going on for a long time. In the adivasi-populated areas of eastern and central India, where state police and CRPF have been trying to suppress the Maoist-led insurgency and various popular movements against marauding corporations for the past decade and more, school buildings have always been a prime target for establishing camps for the armed forces. Operating in a terrain with which they are unfamiliar, and among a population that is hostile, facing adversaries enjoying widespread local support, the police/paramilitary forces inevitably selected school buildings, often the only pucca structure in the vicinity, to set up camps. And that spelt the end of education, and a life with dignity, for the local children. These areas, among the most disadvantaged in India, already have very few schools. And when these are taken over by the armed forces, the children have no option but to stop going to school. This has been happening for a long time, and in places like Lalgurh in West Midnapur district of West Bengal, one can hear horror stories from teenaged adivasi girls about how they were forced to drop out of their schools facing harassment and obscene gestures from jawans occupying their schools. Can a civilized society sacrifice the future of its children to the expediency of housing armed forces which are apparently there to clear the path of "development" for these same children? For a country which prides itself on its institutes of higher learning and the number of software engineers it produces, it is an abomination that schools for children, that too of the most marginalized section of its population, can be nonchalantly given over to the occupation of security forces. There is nearly no reporting about this in the mainstream media and nearly no discussion among civil society. The Home Ministry often gives full-page advertisements (paid by taxpayers' money) in newspapers blaming the Maoist rebels of blowing up school buildings, but maintains a silence about the occupation of schools by its own armed forces, which violates the Right to Education which the State guarantees to the people. The Maoist rebels have been known to attack school buildings being used as

camps by the paramilitary forces, and have sometimes blown up some school building preemptively, to deny the armed forces a place to set up camps. However, it is the practice of the State to occupy schools (and also health centres) to set up armed camps which have made these the targets of rebel attacks. India is a signatory to a number of international conventions, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which explicitly forbids the misuse of school and hospital buildings in conflict situations such that they can become targets of attack. The Indian state's action in occupying and converting these schools to armed camps violates these conventions and India's own constitution, specifically the right of children to free and compulsory education.

'Operation Green Hunt', which was launched by the Indian government in November 2009 purportedly to crush the Maoists and clear the path for "developmental" measures, has made the school occupations wider and worse. There have been no studies and nearly no information about the number of schools occupied by the paramilitary and police forces in the states where Operation Green Hunt is ongoing. Before that, in June 2009, when the joint central paramilitary and state police forces entered Lalgarh in West Bengal, they occupied 21 schools and one college in the four blocks (Binpur-1, Shalboni, Goaltore and Midnapur Sadar) in the West Midnapur district of West Bengal. As mentioned earlier, school occupations by police forces have always been a phenomenon in the jangalmahal region of West Bengal, and the vacation of all schools by police forces was one of the thirteen original demands of the Lalgarh movement.

The police had been forced out of their camps in the schools during the Lalgarh uprising, and therefore when they reentered Lalgarh, they reoccupied the schools. There were widespread protests by the local people against these school occupations. Parents, guardians, well wishers and children themselves made repeated requests to the district administration to withdraw the paramilitary forces from the school and immediately resume education but all the petitions fell on deaf ears.

On 13th July 2009, around 600 school students held a rally at Dharampur and handed a petition to the commandant of the camp set up in the local high school requesting that the 300 paramilitary personnel located in the camp be shifted elsewhere. Students of Gohamidanga high school gheraoed the camp set up in their school and demanded that the forces vacate it. In many cases, when children of various schools protested they were beaten up brutally. Similarly the request by the school administration of Bhimpur Santhal high school, made to the district magistrate, West Midnapur and SDO, Midnapur Sadar in letters dated 4th and 24th July 2009 to vacate the schools were similarly disregarded.

Finally, a public interest litigation (PIL) was filed in the Calcutta High Court, by the Paschim Medinipur Bhumij Kalyan Samiti, a community organization of adivasis from the Lalgarh area. In the submission to the court, the petitioners argued that "Gross violation of the fundamental right of the Petitioner as enshrined under Articles 14, 15(3), 21, 21A and 19(1) of the Constitution of India" was taking place as a result of the school occupations and "Non implementation of the provisions of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009" was resulting in the children of the area being deprived of education and also of the mid-day meal scheme. They prayed for "immediate direction upon the respondent authorities to take immediate affirmative action to resume education in all primary, secondary and higher secondary schools under the Binpur-I, Shalbani, Goaltore and Midnapore Sadar Blocks in West Midnapore and withdraw

members of the law enforcements agencies from such schools". As a result of this PIL, the high court ordered that ten of the schools being occupied be vacated within 30th December, 2009. The advocate general of West Bengal, appearing for the state, tried to contest the order, but the court refused to extend the deadline. Consequently, these schools were vacated by the joint forces, but still there are a number of schools which are being occupied. When these schools were vacated by the security forces, people went in and found a nightmare scenario of classrooms having been used as kitchens and lavatories, wooden tables and benches having been cut up to be used as firewood and walls littered with pornographic graffiti. Many of the schools were left with unpaid electricity bills ranging into tens of thousands of rupees, which the government refused to pay. Most schools have not yet recovered from these burdens of the occupation.

The situation is even worse in neighbouring Jharkhand state, which is also a major theatre for Operation Green Hunt. In a letter to the home minister P Chidambaram, Gladson Dungdung of the Jharkhand Indige-neous Peoples' Forum, pointed out that 48 permanent and 40 temporary camps of the Jharkhand armed police (JAP) and the paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) have been established in occupied school buildings. The letter requested the home minster, who promises to bring development to the adivasis to "kindly take necessary steps to vacate the schools immediately and also ensure that the Security Forces do not occupy any school in future so that the right to education of children of those villages can be ensured." No response from the home minister has been forthcoming.

It is important for the people of India and the world to know that school buildings are being occupied in India by security forces as a part of standard operating procedure in the war being waged by the Indian state against its own indigenous population. As a result of this, children, belonging to the most disadvantaged sections of its population, are being deprived of their fundamental right to education and of a future of dignity. □□□
[Source : www.sanhati.com]