

THREE WOMEN FROM JUNGLEMAHAL

Soft Landing, Tough Tasks

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THE FRAIL FRAME OF Jyotsna Mahato conceals her age. At 25 plus, she looks like a girl in her teens. But once one speaks to her, her passionate plea for justice for her people and her courage of conviction reveals a robust mind.

She does not offer any jargon-laden defense of her side in the context of contesting narratives in today's Junglemahal, where gun-barrels are still hot even amid an eerie calm. Jyotsna speaks of her experiences, her background, her dreams and disappointments. For police, she is a suspected Maoist and one of moving spirit behind the *Nari Ijjat Bacho Samiti*, officially dubbed as one of the Maoist frontal outfits. But the girlish woman from Barapal village under Jhargram sub-division of West Midnapore insists that she does not understand politics and ideologies as people do. She became part of junglemahal movement as late as in 2010.

Her marginal farmer family, with their four bighas of land, eked out a living out of sustenance farming. However, the additional income came from small-scale trading in Sal leaves, one of the crucial products of the fast depleting forest in Junglemahal. The village poor, belonging to the landless Sabars, Santhals and poor households of Mahatos, generally better off than the tribes and castes which are situated at the lower rung of socio-economic hierarchy, collect the Sal and Kendu leaves from forests to supplement their meager income. After her father's death, Jyotsna and her two brothers collect the leaves from them and sell it at little profit to middlemen and wholesalers from neighboring Orissa.

The only politics that her family got involved was over the land disputes with Jyotsna's uncle who allegedly got the better share of the ancestral land, courtesy of his allegiance to the CPM.

"I had no time for politics and political rallies as I was busy in finding a livelihood. But the mass rapes by the joint forces and CPM harmads last year (2010) in neighboring Sonamukhi village changed my life," Jyotsna recalled.

"I could not stomach the outrage and joined the women's rally to Jhargram to demand punishment of the culprits. This was first time I had ever walked in a procession. I was arrested for the first time in my life for being vociferous when police stopped us. I became angry after this arrest," she said.

Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee government had dismissed the mass rape complaints as Maoist propaganda. The new government did not investigate into the complaint.

Her metamorphosis from a would-be home-maker into a women's organizer may be typical of many others of her sisters in Junglemahal. But her repeated reference to customs in 'Mahato

Samaj' and women's plight amid the contest between government forces and their ruling party collaborators in one hand and armed Maoists and their supporters on the other provides a crucial social clue to women's involvement in the anti-police and anti-CPM agitation that began in the fag end of 2008.

"Tumi jano na, Mahato samajer rit-rewaj keman. Police-er hate hok ba anna karo, dagi meye hale tar biye howa muskil. (You don't know the customs of Mahato community. It's difficult to get a girl married if she is arrested or outraged by police or others)," says Jyotsna. "Their parents and brother have to cough up more dowries, both in kind and cash. Many alliances were broken as they failed to do so. Hundreds of such branded girls in Junglemahal had to suffer the shame and humiliation of being rejected," she continued. However, she parried the question whether her arrest led to similar social ostracism and disappointments in her life. But clearly, her voice betrayed her emotions.

She said her committee's movement is not only aimed at protesting against the sexual assaults on women by the joint forces and their henchmen but also against the demands of heavy dowry demands in case of '*dagi* girls'. The rally against the Sonamukhi gang-rapes, she says, changed the 'police-fearing girl' into a different self. "I am not scared of police-CRP any more. What has happened to many girls and married women may happen to me. But I don't care anymore," she said evidently in desperation. "Mamata is saying we are all Maoists. Believe me, I have never come across Akash-Bikash- Kisenji (Maoist leaders known by their nom de guerre) as you mentioned. But if fighting for the honor of junglemahal women is Maoism, then they can call me a Maoist," she said with a glimmer in her eyes.

Nevertheless, Jyotsna had other reasons to be angry. She had exposures to the wider world beyond her village prior to her clash with the joint forces. She had been to Cuttack where she learnt the skills of a private nurse while working at a nursing home.

But Jyotsna says she went there to train herself in a job what could be a passport to upcoming urban centers for a madhyamik-passed village girl. She came back home after four years looking for suitable jobs in sub-divisional or district towns. "But it was difficult for us to admit patients from our area in Jhargram hospital after Sonamukhi incident. Police harassed patients and their families on their way to hospital, particularly after the dusk. Mohonpur health centre was far off. So local clubs decided to open a community-managed health centre at Kurhashol. Local doctors including quacks joined in our efforts," she remembered.

"The health centre gave me the opportunity to practice whatever I had learnt as a nurse. I used to spend hours in the health centre, making inventory of medicines collected from different sources as well as assisting the doctors. I gave injections to the patients and taught them about the medications and doses. It was mostly the local poor who used to turn up at the Centre," the young woman said with an obvious pride and self-satisfaction. "But police closed down the health centre after some time claiming that it was run by the Maoists. Tell me, is running a health centre a crime?," she asked. She said she did not support murders by the warring sides. "It's wrong whoever kills. But a war is going on between the Maoists and government. We

don't know which side is right. We were caught in the cross-fire. What are the crimes of women and other people of Jungle-mahal," she questioned.

Asked what she would like to say to Mamata Banerjee if she gets the chance to meet her, Jyotsna said: "She being a woman herself, I would ask her to realize the women's plight as one of us. She has given job to Lalmahon Mahato's wife (the Trinamul leader killed by the Maoists). But what about the widows of others who had been killed by the joint forces and harmads? Did her supporters alone vote her to power? We too want peace and development. But at what cost?"

NIYATI

The housewife in her late thirties is not a political greenhorn like Jyotsna. But she is not a political activist either in the urban sense. Yet, Niyati, the better half of Chatradhar Mahato, the leader of People's Committee Against Police Atrocities has been compelled to take up many roles since her husband was put behind bars by erstwhile government.

She now supervises laborers in family fanning, manages household chores as well as takes care of old in-laws and her two sons who are in hostels away from their home in West Midnapore's Barapelia village.

Besides, she attends courts in different corners of the district on the days of hearing of multiple criminal cases including one under the UAPA against her husband and his friends. She visits Mahato at Midnapore central jail regularly, meets lawyers in Midnapore and Kolkata in between attending rallies demanding the release of her husband and other PCPA leaders and their supporters.

"Amake doure berate hocche. Ar pere utchi na (I am running from pillars to post. I can't take it any more" smiles a visibly tired Niyati wiping sweat from her face with the anchal of her Sari. With her traditional Bengali look complete with sindur and sankha-loha- (religio-cultural signs of married status for Bengali Hindu women) bangles; she hardly makes a prototype of an activist, least of Maoist women.

Instead, she betrayed the emotions of a harassed and besieged house-maker of a peasant family. "My old father-in-law has broken down completely. No more he looks after family cultivation. Some part of our 8-10 bighas of cultivable land has been left fallow due to lack of manpower in the family. Already he has lost his younger son Sasadhar (a Maoist guerrilla commander, killed in a suspected encounter last year)," Niyati said.

"My father-in-law was hoping that Mamata Banerjee would release my husband. Hope belied, he has cocooned himself. So many responsibilities and uncertainties, I can't take it anymore." Tears welled up in her eyes as she spoke. But if we are to believe Mamata Banerjee's minions today, Niyati is the one of the major trouble-makers for the new regime, a rabble-rouser against the government's peace-enforcing efforts, kingpin in the PCPA's residual extortionist moves.

"Mamata is more peeved with her than Chatradhar. She had been warned through well-meaning messengers but she did not listen to them," confided a Trinamul leader in the know of the things.

Yes, she is not submissive. She makes aggressive speeches demanding release of her husband and other political prisoners. But clearly not comfortable with the craft, she reads out the written speech.

"Mamata has reneged on her pre-poll promises of withdrawal of joint forces and release of my husband and other prisoners. The government has changed but not the policies. The denial of our right to launch movement to press for our legitimate demands continues," she said. "We too want peace and development. But our dignity and identity come first. Government must release our prisoners and discuss with them," she added.

Well, she may be echoing the Maoist position that the new government has dismissed after the peace process between the Maoists and Mamata failed. She does not conceal her sympathies with the Maoists but denies her husband's link with the rebels. "Maoists have taken up guns against injustice. My husband too fought against atrocities on poor people. He, however, believed in democracy. That's why he contested the assembly polls from jail," she said.

Nevertheless, she has fond memories of younger brother-in-law, Sasadhar. According to her, younger Mahato was initially an introvert student who used to stay away from home. "He became a disciple of Anukul Thakur (a Bengali Hindu religious guru with wide following) and stayed at thakurbari in Midnapore town to attend university. He became upset when CPM sided with a section of my husband's greater family in a land dispute," she recalled. "We don't know how he grew links with the Maoists. My husband did not oppose him. Why should he? Each was following their own beliefs. He went to jungle carrying guns. My husband was a family man and led a mainstream life. They never crossed each other during the PCPA movement," Niyati said. " We are proud of Sashadhar. People of our village and neighboring area respect and mourn him. He was killed in cold blood," the sister-in-law said.

However, the Mahato family was traditionally Congress-turned Trinamul supporters, she revealed. "My father-in-law was a Congress man. My husband was always anti-CPM and once contested village panchayat poll as Congress candidate. He joined Trinamul after it was formed in late nineties," Niyati said.

She too belonged to a Congress supporter's family and contested panchayat poll as the party's nominee. "But I was essentially a housewife. I joined the first protest rally in my life after Chintamoni Murmu lost her eye following police rampage in their village."

Hers as well as Chatradhar's bitterness about Mamata began before the latter became chief minister. It was the assembly polls that led to the clash between two former allies against the CPM.

According to Niyati, Chatradhar decided to contest the polls as independent candidate from jail to register his belief in democracy as well as to curve an independent niche for him as well as the PCPA which he had led. "He wanted to counter the campaign that he is a Maoist just because Sashadhar was his brother. Also, he was not ready to wipe out the separate identity of such a widespread mass movement and popular organization which he led. But Trinamul was not ready to leave any seat for him. Perhaps they were expecting that he would join or campaign for them directly. But he declined."

According to Trinamul camp as well as pro-government civil society members who had tried to make peace between Mamata and Mahato at that time, the latter was asked to contest from any other seats except strategic and prestigious Jhargram. But he refused to obey and finished poor third after Trinamul and CPM.

"Trinamul bagged the seat but Mamata did not forgive Mahato's intransigence. Chatradhar lost his bargaining capacity due to his failure," said an insider of the negotiation in that period.

Niyati confirmed that Maoists did not approve Mahato's decision on the ground that it would divide anti-CPM votes. 'Our supporters wanted him to contest. But Maoists did not campaign for him. We did not have money or manpower for his poll campaign. Despite being jailed for two years, he got 20000 votes. Whatever Mamata says today, people will decide what their leaders should do. He listened to his people,' she says defending her husband.

According to her, Chatradhar responded positively to Mamata's post-poll peace move. But he wanted the government to release him and his comrades first. "He also said he would need a month's time to discuss with our people before joining discussion with the government. But government refused to listen to him," she said. "I am ready to meet Mamata. But will she listen to me? Will she remember that we too supported her to gain power?" Her wry but anguished tone was unmistakable.

SABITA

Unlike the other two, she was visibly docile, hapless and scared. Sabita Mahato has reasons to be so. The young widow of Umakanta Mahato, the key accused in the Gyaneshwari Express derailment that claimed more than 150 lives now herself lives under the shadow of police reprisals and death even after the killing of her husband in an 'encounter' by police.

For intelligence officials, Umakanta was the kingpin of the heinous crime and a dreaded Maoist who had paid the price with his life. His mobile call to Maoist leadership about the accomplishment of sabotage mission was intercepted by police and that provided the clinching evidence for his role, they claimed.

For Sabita, it's hard to believe the police version as she remembers her husband in a different light. "I never saw him fighting another person. He was at home on the night when Gyaneshwari happened. It was me who informed him about the incident after listening to the radio news next morning," she said.

"I don't know whom he called or what told him over phone. But he told me he was not involved. I don't know whether he told the truth or not. He went underground after police came looking for him," she added.

Maoists denied the blame for Gyneswari carnage while Mamata who had castigated CPM earlier now changed her position by putting the onus on the ultras, her friend-turned foes. One can only hope that truth about the crime and its perpetrators will come out of the mess of politically motivated allegations and denials.

According to Sabita, Umakanta, son of a relatively well-off peasant family in Bakshol village under Jhargram sub-division, co-owned part of 8 bigha farmland and 10 bigha of cashew-nut field. He also ran sundry business and had a motor cycle, a symbol of relative prosperity in rural Bengal. Madhyamik-passed Sabita too belonged to a local trader's family.

He was associated with social work in the area while being politically close to Aditya Kisku faction of Jharkhand party since his teens. "My husband was anti-CPM from the beginning and opposed high-handedness of its local leaders. We had to suffer because of his political affiliation. CPM supporters ransacked our home and he was out of home for two years in the nineties," she recalled.

Her husband joined Trinamul after it was formed. "He brought TMC in our village. In 2009, he joined the agitation against the highly polluting sponge-iron factory in Jitushol and led a road blockade against it. I never heard him talking of Maoists and taking up guns," Sabita said. "But he was arrested and jailed as an accused in the case related to the killing of poll personnel in Kushbani forest during parliamentary polls. He became angry with police for falsely implicating him. After spending 8 months in jail, he joined the PCPA in 2010 only," the widow continued.

He became its president after Lalmohon Tudu was gunned down by joint forces few yards away from his home. Fugitive Umakanta met his death in the similar fashion on his way to home in August last year. "Police claimed it was a gun-battle. But nobody believed," she said. Nevertheless, she is eager to bury her traumatic past but find her enmeshed into her slain husband's political life. Police has charged her in two criminal cases including one regarding blasting of a road culvert in Belpahari. She got anticipatory bails in both the cases. But she is scared about looming disaster for her four children if she is arrested eventually.

"Police still visits my home and threatens to pick up me. Believe me, I had no political life earlier and joined the PCPA rallies when my husband was active. I don't want bloodshed anymore. I don't want any other woman to lose what I have lost," she said with moist eyes.

Insisting that she and her late husband had always voted for Trinamul, Sabita said she had voted for Mamata's party in the assembly polls this year. "But none of the Trinamul leaders visited us after Umakanta's death. I would request chief minister to withdraw the cases against

me and allow me to live a normal life. Politics would not feed my children. She is helping widows of other slain leaders. Do not my children deserve the same?"

Will Mamata listen to these three women who echo the plight of many of their sisters in Junglemahal? Jury is still out on what went wrong in Junglemahal in the name of revolution and democracy, people's power and *Paribartan* and who stood for dignity and development in the killing fields of Junglemahal. But a sustainable peace is possible in the much-gored land only if the new government tries to heal the wounds of all sides who suffered across the political divide. □□□

[All the interviews were taken in Kolkata, at the sidelines of Rights body APDR's meeting, on the day Maoist politburo member Kisenji was gunned down in an 'encounter' in Burishol forest.]