

Of Politics and Forests

Soumitra Ghosh

What are the objective (or, ground) realities in Junglemahal? Does the current war organically stem from those realities and will the peace when it comes be intrinsic? These are not easy questions. Nonetheless, one can't ignore them either.

The sympathisers and members of the CPI (Maoist) sees the Junglemahal war as part of their protracted people's war against the semi-feudal semi-colonial Indian state; it's a war that neither begins nor ends here in Junglemahal; the entire Junglemahal and its adivasis are just but components of the larger war. There have been many comments on this position-some supportive, some dismissive or critical. Suffice to say that the Maoist position(or line?) doesn't seem to be based on a thorough analysis of not only extremely complex and baffling, but also often separate and parallel processes, in India's polity and political economy; rather, it's more like a set of beliefs-one set of assumption feeding and leading to the next. The most pervasive of these beliefs is that prolonged military activities targeted against the state and its class collaborators will lead to a seizure of power nationally, and thence the building of a new democratic state, whatever that might mean. Because the party holds this to be true; it becomes the 'truth', which one then simply and unquestionably follows-anything else will be *blasphemy*.

The state position doesn't really merit serious attention; all along in the history of the present Indian state, the response has been military : to all challenges to what it or other nation states of the world call 'territorial integrity', and its long-term political control over peoples and nature. Most comments on this war usually include elaborate opinions on what the state should or shouldn't do in an ideal situation-it seems that despite many differences, there's still a glimmer of hope somewhere that the state shall do right.

Moving away from 'grand narratives' of the Indian state and its new democratic alternative, and hence the war itself, what does one get? Junglemahal has always been a loose term; generically the term denoted all uncultivated tenures within a zamindari-the mahals indicated lands where such tenures existed. Later on, and after large-scale reclamation of forests started in the area in the wake of British occupation, the region under the control of the Birbhum Nawab was loosely called Junglemahal; it included today's Birbhum, Bankura and parts of Burdwan. There even was a separate Junglemahal district for a time in the later days of the Company Raj, but it died prematurely.

If one extends the boundaries of older Junglemahal area, one gets, once again loosely, today's Junglemahal : the laterite upland area on the borders of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Orissa. The jungles which survived the carnage of British reclamation continued for nearly two centuries, and subsequent 'management' ravages of the forest department Raj, are still there.

Or their remnants and relics; one has to do a bit of palimpsest-hunting to look for the original forests—this writer searching for the original Sal trees in 2002 and finding only a few in Jhargram town and in the abandoned 2nd World war airport in Basudevpur (near Bishnupur). The rest had simply vanished.

The disappearance of forests from Junglemahal is closely linked with the state take-over of all zamindari forests in 1955—for the forest dwelling communities it meant extinction of all forest rights they traditionally and by law enjoyed; barring a few exceptions like those under the British-owned Midnapore Zaminadari Company, the zamindari forests usually supported many kinds of rights for the ryots and the tenure-holders. Denial of forest rights had traditionally fuelled people's movements in the Junglemahal area and beyond; forest conflicts remained the most regular form of resource conflicts in India, up until present times.

Historically, larger political struggles happening in the forested terrain have always had overlaps with the forest struggles—for instance the 1920s Santhal uprising, and the land struggles in Nayagram-Gopiballavpur in the 1960s and 70s, not to mention the earlier Mundari rebellion. Forests remained pivotal to nearly all political struggles in Junglemahal, as long as they existed. Since 1977, the Joint Forest Management (JFM) practices started, and despite subsequent failures, it really caught people's attention in the early days; forest regeneration through community efforts helped second growth Sal coppice forests to come back in completely denuded areas; which helped, in turn, to replenish perennial water sources, and improved food security—both the adivasis and non-adivasi ethnic Bengalis in forest areas use forest foods like wild mushrooms and various kinds of tubers. JFM had a monetary incentive aspect too; the forest department promised people a share of the timber revenues after harvesting. Forest lands were put to other, financially profitable uses; in Purulia, for instance, huge areas went under cultivations of Sabai or Babui grass, and in the Banodwan-Quilapal and Matha areas—pollarding for Tasar-growing was a common occupation. Besides, there were the usual forest-based livelihood practices: collection of Sal leaves, Sal seeds, Kendu leaves, medicinal plants, wild mushrooms and red ants' eggs. All these practices, along with subsistence-level agriculture, had for long sustained the forest communities of Junglemahal—and any denial of rights always resulted in conflicts.

For a time, JFM, coupled with the newly formed panchayats, provided a conflict resolution mechanism of sorts—but only nominally. JFM failed because it didn't mean restoration of rights wrongly and utterly illegally taken away from the communities. For instance, in late 2002, the people in Quilapal showed this writer their Tasar silk growing areas inside the forest: while they had been asking for more forest areas under *Tasar* on behalf of their FPCs (Forest Protection Committees or *van-committees* are JFM institutions set up by the Government forest department) the forest officers were trying to ban it because they thought it caused deforestation. In truth the people in those areas enjoyed 'recorded' legal rights over government forests until the state finally extinguished those in as late as 1969; even the departmental working plans listed those, including *Tasar*. It failed also because the committees were taken over by the leaders of this political party or the other—violence in FPC meetings were not unheard of—and the benefits were

controlled—if not usurped—by community elites. Benefits here mean control of the Sabai grass or Sal plate-making business as well as the Sal seeds and Kendu leaves: while middlemen from the ruling party controlled the first, the second went to the LAMPS—and in both cases the community-level collectors or producers were deprived.

There's also the ecological crisis of the areas under plantations of quick-growing trees like Eucalyptus and Akashmoni—the production forestry agenda of the state and also the social forestry schemes under the Panchayats brought large Sal forest areas under monoculture plantations. Such forests offered neither food nor the usual income from non-timber forest produce to be had from Sal areas. In West Midnapore some villages entirely lived on the dry leaves. The women collected that by sweeping the forest floor. The leases are not always sold even—sometimes those were exchanged with bowlful of muri in a relatively affluent household.

There were other kinds of more usual deprivations; misappropriation of development money at the panchayats and the forest department, corruption of the PDS, ill-utilization of NREGA money and so on. While these all are important in understanding the Junglemahal scenario; the forest was and still is the core; no analysis of the Junglemahal is possible without first looking at the dynamics of the forest situation, the socio-ecological and political webs, and the history.

The forests then provide contexts: historical as well as political, ecological as well as social. A struggle that emerges from these contexts is naturally expected to keep forest at its core; and not just militarily. Not that the forest hasn't been used for military purposes in the past; on the contrary the Junglemahal forests had been time and again used by successive Mughal armies and the rebellious local feudals, and later, some of the tribal uprisings against the British also used forests as a military strategy. The point here is that the war by the Maoist party is often portrayed as a freedom struggle of the oppressed and deprived adivasis of the land. Is it really so?

If it is so then one likes to understand what really is the party's forest agenda. Does it have any? There were instances of burning forest offices in Saranda and Bastar, and similar instances in the Bengal Junglemahal. There's also the fact that in some forest areas, prices of forest produces had gone up because of the Maoists. These were sporadic events, and do not automatically lead to an assumption that the party has a forest politics as such: a coherent analysis of the forest conflicts past and present, and how these, if at all, acquire an anti-state, revolutionary praxis in time. Are the adivasis and their forest cause politically central or important to the party? Or, these only form an opportune and populist strategic context?

This is an important question because when one remembers that in the heart of the Maoist people's war and revolution (if one has to believe, among others, Arundhati Roy); forest usage continues in pretty much in the same business-as-usual fashion; the Ballarpur Paper Mill illegally harvests truckloads of bamboo from the wilderness habitats of the Maria Gonds—among other tribes—without being challenged. Near Chandrapur, the Adani group looks for a coal-block concession deep inside the forest. Not far away, in Taroba National Park, the forest department has been harassing villagers because they do not want to move away from the

forests. Yes, in Bastar and some other areas the presence of the Maoist army and also to a great extent the party's political-organizational work had given the forest communities much needed support; but alternately, hasn't it also exposed them to more brutal assaults from the state, in the name of the infamous green hunt and such military operations?

The tragedy is that years and decades of democratic struggles by the forest communities and their often disorganized, hastily assembled movement platforms have at long last resulted in a wide spectrum of legal rights and powers for the people living in forests; there are now laws like the PESA and the Forest Rights Act that empower people to protect, govern and use their forest resources, corporations, contractors and the forest department notwithstanding. It's a tragedy because the ongoing war-peace binary reduces the entire forest issue either to ill-understood and extremely shallow media gossips about violence, or, worse still, the propaganda by the warring parties. The new Chief Minister of West Bengal talks about 'aranyer adhikar', apparently not sure about what the words really mean. The talks about bringing a PESA-like Act for the Junglemahal districts have been shelved, and forest rights in this state now simply mean land entitlements (wrongly called *pattas*—the deeds do not give ownership rights) being distributed under the Forest Rights Act. Here, at least, there has been no 'paribartan' whatsoever; the previous Government acted in the same manner, ignoring the radical provisions of the FRA, and limiting themselves to 'giving' 'pattas' to selectively chosen candidates in an arbitrary and illegal way.

This is not to say that the FRA and PESA and such laws constitute a panacea. No law in a Country like India's can be a panacea; on the contrary, laws which even remotely empower people are intensely disliked by the state and the political parties alike. The state either shows no eagerness in their implementation and violates them at will (like what's happening with the FRA), or ignores the acts altogether (PESA is lying there for about two decades—the state governments haven't bothered to frame rules). Political parties dislike it because there is always a fear that such laws, if implemented, will irretrievably alter the rural power dynamics in forest areas. Corporations will be among the most affected : the FRA says clearly that the Gram Sabha (the village assembly where all adult residents participate) will determine what happens inside forests under its control; if it thinks that a particular activity can damage their ecology or culture, they can stop it.

Organizationally loose, not halfway politically articulate, and knowing little or nothing about the Maoist Party's people's war, the forest movements (and many other social movements) of India are locked in a protracted battle against the forest department raj, the corporations, the contractors and the political elite. The struggle is not for land titles alone, or dubious governmental charity. Instead, the struggle aims to establish equitable community control over the forest commons. Though the law provides for this, the movements do not expect the government to do it for them. Beyond this realization, however, a clear and generally shared political notion about the Indian state is yet to emerge.

The movement of forest villagers in North Bengal has been going on for a decade, and in the Sunderbans fishworkers and other forest dependent communities organize themselves into new movement platforms. A forest movement has started afresh in Junglemahal as well; in fact the first ever public mobilization of forest dwellers and adivasis in Kolkata that took place on 18th December, 2008, was a movement initiative in which 26 social organizations of adivasis and other people of Junglemahal participated. Chatrodhar Mahato and his colleagues from the Lalgarh movement were also present in the programme, and soon afterwards the demands of the movement, hitherto limited to police atrocity and justice issues, started to include demands for rights over Jal-Jangal-Jameen as well. The maoist party took over the Lalgarh movement in time, and the wave of killings started. The other process of movement formation continues; several non-party people's organizations of the region now raise the forest rights and the FRA implementation issue prominently, singly, and also collectively under the banner of Adivasi-Banabasi Adhikar Mancho.

These movements, and many other movements in the region(movements against sponge iron pollution, for instance) together make up a political space that can exist outside the military binary, and yet raise important issues like who owns nature and how nature will be used in future. Given the scale and sweep of the unprecedented neo-liberal assault on nature—in form of the usual extractive industries, dams and power stations, but also in the form of total commoditization all natural resources including in the name of ecosystem services trade—and the dangers posed by global warming, these are the two key political issues of the present century.

One knows where the Indian state stands in this in general: the blatantly neo-liberal policy regime of the present Indian government is testimony enough. Beyond a few protests here and there, all the mainstream political parties of India, including the mainstream left and the TMC, do not object to the rampant extraction, loot and plunder by corporations in the Indian forests and rivers. The Maoist Party objects to this on paper, but unfortunately enough, such objection seldom translates into sustained political protest against the corporations and big traders. A typical example of this is the anti-sponge iron pollution movement in Jhargram.

The point one tries to make is that today, social movements in India pose the single largest threat to both the corporations active in the natural resource sector and the continued state hegemony over forests; and not the Maoist party and their war: the state has not been targeting adivasis in Maoist areas alone, it follows a similar course of repressive action everywhere the people mobilize for their rights. On the other hand, where the mobilizations are organizationally strong enough, state designs can be effectively countered, depending on the political realities on the ground. Though the repression doesn't entirely go away, movements still manage to retain political relevance. It will be premature to say whether the movements will coalesce in a new political left in the days to come, but there's little doubt that things are stirring.

A position like this shouldn't be taken as one intended to undermine the heroic fight the inhabitants of Junglemahal had put up against the state atrocities all these days, and the very real courage and commitment many in the CPI(Maoist) and their mass fronts displayed, against all odds. It is simply that sheer military power and the naive political binaries which the process of militarization creates and seeks to impose on the society at large should not be condoned any longer, not even in the name of revolutionary war. To end, all revolutionary wars are not revolutionary practices by default; in fact, instead of linear and largely pre-programmed party-controlled exercises, many forms of revolutionary practices co-exist and flourish in these troubled times. AS Devid Levins puts it:

"We have to examine and invent new forms of struggle, all aimed basically at changing consciousness and building solidarity even when we are small and seemingly helpless. Revolutionary politics is not limited to storming the winter palaces. Any action that pushes back the boundaries of the permissible, that legitimizes thinking and questions the unquestionable, that strengthens our own capacity to analyze and organize and that tightens the ties that unite us for the long haul, that invents ways of broadening participation and that undermines the crippling burdens of racism and sexism and homophobia and hierarchical posturing within our own movements, is revolutionary practice".

The question of peace in Junglemahal cannot be seen in isolation. □□□