

Review – Lalgarh and the Legend of Kishanji

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Introduction –

In search of the Maoists, security forces raided Sonamukhi village of Lalgarh, on 30th June, 2010. The male villagers fled to the nearest jungle to avoid police arrest in the guise of search operation. Security forces came, searched and ransacked the houses of poor villagers, as they generally do in such scenarios. However, this time they crossed all limits, when they pulled out the ladies from their respective houses and performed a naked-search on them. They did not even stop here; according to the complaints received from the villagers, the security forces raped six women villagers. The next day (1st July), few young boys of the village took the rape-victims to a nearby hospital. Dr. Hiralal Bisui, the superintendent of the hospital, first advised them to lodge a complaint of rape at the police station and then to proceed with medical tests. After getting this advice, few villagers came to meet the Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) to lodge a complaint of rape and to request an investigation of the incident. However, their complaint was not registered by the police. Within the next few hours, Dr. Bisui was transferred to a new location, as he was the person who advised the villagers to lodge a police complaint. Centering this incident, as the rage of villagers was taking a fierce shape, few local leaders of Congress party and Trinamool Congress (TMC) party again visited SDO's office with the victim women. This time their complaint was registered, and they were instructed to conduct the medical tests in Jhargram Hospital. However, this order was meaningless then, as six days had already passed and there were little chances to find any evidence of rape after six days. Naturally, the tests failed to find evidence of rape. Meanwhile, Mr. Sougata Mukherjee, the head of the Bengal Bureau of CNN-IBN channel, came to make a documentary of the whole incident. On 9th July, in Jhargram Hospital he met Manik Mahato, a 22-year old boy, who brought these six ladies to the hospital. All of them were returning back to their village after the failed medical tests. Mr. Mukherjee joined them in their return journey to get a detailed account of the atrocities committed by the security force, from Manik. Mr. Mukherjee tried his best to record statements from the victim women about the torture they faced. However, no one agreed to say even a single word. After many requests, at last, Manik convinced one woman to say something in front of the camera. The woman narrated the brutal torture of the security force that she and the other women faced. After the recording was over, Mr. Mukherjee surprisingly asked Manik that how he convinced the woman; Manik replied – “She is my mother.”

This was not a separate incident; rather, this was the reality of the whole Lalgarh area at that time. In the same ways elaborated above, police continued their torture on the local people; finally, in resistance the people formed an unprecedented mass-movement. Journalist Snigdhendru Bhattacharya was an active witness to this movement. In his recent book – ‘Lalgarh and the Legend of Kishanji’ (LLK), he shared his experience in detail and brought many such stories in the daylight which the mainstream media intentionally avoided. We came to know the real heart-touching stories of many such Manik Mahatos. The memories of atrocities perpetrated during the illegal land acquisition for Tata's Nano car factory in Singur and forceful land acquisition for building a chemical hub in Nandigram by the then fascist ruling party under communist disguise were still fresh. Under such a heated situation, fresh police attacks were unleashed on the people of Lalgarh.

These attacks were resisted vehemently by the local people. Like Nandigram, the people's movement centering Lalgarh proved that in a class-divided society, exploited and oppressed people would always be ready to fight the fascist ruling class, even in the form of armed-struggle. However, the people's movement of Lalgarh or whole Jangalmahal had one intrinsic characteristic. Since the last two decades, using the word 'development' as an excuse, the ruling class is continuously opening up the national market to the multi-national corporations and assisting them in their free plunder of the natural resources of this country. However, the people of Jangalmahal challenged this and proved in reality that it is absolutely possible to come up with an alternative development model, which is actually beneficial to the people. This was a severe blow to the corporate-centric developmental model. Naturally, the state became desperate to crush this people's effort, in order to save the interest of the corporates. Journalist Snigdhendru was an eye-witness of all these events. Along with the war between the state and its own people, he also reported the people-centric development activities in Jangalmahal, directed by the local people themselves. Undoubtedly, this was a remarkable effort from his side, as all the corporate-controlled mainstream media always purposefully evaded this particular aspect of Lalgarh movement in those days of turmoil. The layer-by-layer analyses of the different phases of this movement and the final balanced assessment done by the author have made this work an important one in this subject.

Context –

The so-called mainstream media generally holds the landmine blast on the convoy of Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the then chief minister of West Bengal, responsible for the subsequent events. This is nothing but an attempt to hide the truth. However, journalist Snigdhendru followed a different path to unearth the truth. He has shared full details of his several interviews with Kishanji. From those conversations it is more than clear that this blast was a response to the two recent tyrannical move of the Buddhadeb-led state government. The first was the extreme police atrocities on the people's resistances that were developed against the forceful land acquisition in Singur and Nandigram. The second was the audacious anti-people decision of the state government to set up a Jindal steel plant on 5000 acres of land in Salboni. According to a previous commitment, the state government was supposed to distribute these lands among the landless adivasis. On the contrary, the Left-front government, which was already sold out to foreign capital, was trying to impose 'industrialization' and 'development' on the people of Jangalmahal, even at the cost of violating the environmental guidelines and constitutional restrictions. The government was so desperate and arrogant that they did not even learn any lessons from the people's resistance in Singur and Nandigram. Jangalmahal, especially Lalgarh is one of the most backward areas in India. Agriculture in this area is not regular, and due to the unavailability of irrigation systems farming in these places mostly depends on rain. Scarcity of food, scarcity of drinking water, etc. are common problems faced by the local people. Sometimes they depend only on ants' eggs and wild fruits, which they collect from nearby forests. Apart from Katapahari Bajar, Lalgarh and Ramgarh, the other areas do not even have electricity connection. However, one may find some abandoned electric posts, as the evidence of false promises made by the parliamentary parties. There is no health center. Even for basic treatment one has to travel 60 kms to reach Midnapore town. In Katapahari, one building was developed to start a health center; however, soon it was transformed into a police camp. The fate of the government school was also the same. Poor parents used to send their children to the school to ensure their meal, at least for one half of the day. This was the only benefit they used to get from the school, as there was no facility to provide education in Santhali

language or any other local languages. Subsequent governments never even tried to provide that. Rather, when the school was transformed into a military camp, they were even deprived of this mid-day meal.

The people of Jangalmahal have a long practice of struggle for their mere existence. Apart from irregular farming, their other sources of income are selling of Kendu leaves, Sal leaves, wood etc. As far as their incomes are concerned, none of these are consistent sources, especially in the context of uninterrupted looting of forest resources by the jungal mafias, who have strong nexus with the forest department officials. Starting from the 1990s, the so-called notion of globalization started facilitating unregulated mining operations in this country by destroying the forests one after another. The aim is to plunder the rich natural resources of our country, and to create an open market for this. Even in the guise of ‘Social Forestation’ – a program funded by the World Bank – forest trees are being cut down and replaced by Eucalyptus trees. These measures are actually meant to disrupt the eco-system and to destroy the fertility power of land intentionally by reducing the underground water-level. All these are being done with the approval of the government. Against all these measures, the adivasi people of Jangalmahal started forming resistance since 1997-98, and raised voices demanding their rights over the forests. Naturally, the state unleashed tremendous terror on their just demands and proved that the system is nothing but a fascist system under the veil of democracy. Since that time, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (People’s War)[CPI (ML) (PW)] were not only standing beside the people of Jangalmahal, but also fighting against the state-terror like a true comrade. Meanwhile, in the year 2004, the two parties – CPI (ML) (PW) and Maoist Communist Center (MCC) were merged together and a new united party – Communist Party of India (Maoist)[CPI (Maoist)] was formed. However, in spite of people’s discontent against the then ruling party – Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPM], the party again came into power after the election of 2006, and unleashed fresh terror against the people. Whenever the ruling party faced little bit of resistance, it arrested and tortured the adivasi people indiscriminately, by alleging them to be ‘Maoists’. In a situation like this, the ruling party started the forceful imposition of their ‘industrialization’ drive. After Singur and Nandigram, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee stretched his hand towards Salboni.

The people’s movement –

The atrocities of the ruling class on the people of Lalgarh and the resistance of the people finally transformed into a war. Journalist Snigdhendu shared his first-hand experience of the whole sequence of events. Demolishing the houses of poor adivasi people in the name of search operation or arresting family members in fake allegations became a regular incident. “Tell us where the Maoists are hiding, otherwise we will arrest you as a Maoist” – this was the general threat from the police force. The villagers of Teshabandh, Basban, Korengapara, Andharmari, Den-Tirki villages reported incidents of molestation of women villagers by the police forces. In many cases, they forced the women villagers to lift up their sarees and show their private parts to prove that they are not “Maoists in the disguise of women”. The girls, while going to school or coming back from school, used to face molestation in the guise of “body-check”. After the landmine explosion on the convoy of chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee on 2nd November, the atrocities of the police forces and the CPM harms rose to an extreme level. In the midnight of 5th November the women of Chhotopelia village faced immense torture by the police forces. When the police tried to arrest Shamsher Alam, a contractor of daily laborers, by alleging him to be a Maoist, the villagers protested and became the victims of police atrocities. Police attacked Chhitamoni Murmu with rifle butt. She received severe wound in one of her eyes, and lost eyesight. The police arrested 14 women villagers. Shamsher faced immense torture in police custody. A retired

school teacher named Khamananda Mahato was arrested from Baropelia village. Bhagabat Hasda, Sunil Hasda, and Sunil Mandi were also arrested. Even police arrested three school students – Aben Murmu, Goutam Patra, and Buddhadeb Patra, when they were returning from a program of Baul song held at Katapahari. These boys were accused of assisting Maoist commander Shashadhar Mahato in the landmine blast. Sahadeb Mahato and Laxmiratan Mahato from Salboni, Gopal Karanda and Dipak Pratihar from Lalgargh were arrested by the police. When Laxmimoni Pratihar, the pregnant wife of Dipak Pratihar, was resisting the arrest of her husband, the police kicked in her abdomen in front of the villagers gathered there. Such was the intensity of police atrocities in Lalgargh.

Already the people were full of discontent due to extreme level of police harassments. On top of that, the atrocities on Chhitamoni Murmu of Chhotopelia and on Laxmimoni Pratihar of Lalgargh crossed all limits, and made the people of Lalgargh furious. On that night, 12000 local villagers gheraoed the Lalgargh police station and demanded the immediate release of all villagers who were arrested without any reason. Next day onwards the people started organizing rallies against the inhuman tortures of the police force. People cut down trees and blocked the roads by placing them horizontally, to prevent the police force and CPM harams from entering their villages. Due to the mass-pressure, the police released Khamanada Mahato and Shamsheer Alam, but denied to release the other arrested villagers. As a result of this, the agitated mass started building such road-blockades in other places such as Binpur, Salboni, Jhargram in Midnapore district, Bandoan in Purulia, and Sarenga in Bankura. To give a proper shape to this mass agitation a committee – People’s Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCAPA) – was formed at Dalilpur Chowk on 8th November. The committee was formed with five men and five women from each of the ten surrounding villages including Chhotopelia, Baropelia, Darigera, Narchia, Amlia, and Birkanar. It was decided in the committee that whether it is a deputation to the police administration or a meeting with the people, the women representatives of the committee will lead all the activities. Even the participation of the women was ensured among the speakers in the assembly. The idea of this equal representation of men and women in PCAPA was an unprecedented idea, and along with the male representatives the women also participated with their full vigor and led PCAPA from the front.

Initially, a Santhali organization, Bharat Jakat Majhi Maroa Juran Gaonta, constituted by the elders and religious leaders of adivasi society, was at the forefront of this movement. However, soon the leadership of this organization got into negotiations with police administration. Without any discussion with the people they decided to lift road-blockades from few areas and advised the masses from refraining themselves from advancing the movement forward. In spite of their long traditional authority on adivasi society and their position as respectable leaders, they did not stand beside the mass at the peak; rather, they became puppets of the enemy CPM and police administration. However, the people rejected this leadership and advanced their movement under the banner of PCAPA. Sidhu Soren (Bhuto Baskey), the young secretary of PCAPA, led a deputation to district administration on 15th November, and placed a demand-list of 11 points. Compensation for the wounded villagers, release of the innocent villagers who were arrested as ‘Maoists’, scrapping of all fake charges, etc. were the demands. However, the two most notable demands were – (1) Rajesh Kumar Singh, the SP of West Midnapore must apologize openly to the mass by holding his ears and must promise that they will stop the indiscriminate arrests of innocent people, especially women villagers, and (2) the police officers who tortured 14 women villagers in Chhotopelia on 6th November must come from Dalilpur to Chhotopelia by crawling on nose. These two simple demands from the villagers were like a solid slap on the cheeks of the fascist Left Front government. Naturally, the government did not pay heed to this demand. Later on the villagers

reduced this to just verbal apology. But still the demand was not met. Even the government did not take any disciplinary action against the accused police officers.

The democratic structure of PCAPA and the alternative development model –

The most important feature of Snigdhendu's memoir is its ability to attract the readers towards the democratic structure of PCAPA. He has provided a detailed description of the plight of the struggling people of Jangalmahal in creating an atmosphere of alternative development activities amidst the frequent attacks of police and harmad forces, and that also just within few months. From structural and operational point of view, PCAPA was independent. As a pre-requisite to join PCAPA, one had to shed his/her political aims and the color of his/her political party. Thus, along with the ordinary mass, workers of different political parties except CPM such as Jharkhand Party, TMC, Congress etc. and even few ex-workers of CPM joined this committee. Similarly, few Maoist supporters and some workers of CPI (Maoist) party were also associated with this committee. By ensuring the active and maximum possible participation of mass in decision making and working in the interest of adivasi people, the people turned PCAPA as a democratic organization in its true sense, and as the movement advanced, PCAPA grew stronger and took more uncompromising stands. In a people's meeting held at Ramgarh, it was decided that village committee will be formed, through which an ideal democratic structure will be established where importance will be given to the opinion of each and every villager. Just above the level of village committee, there will be block committees. A block committee will look after the villages dispersed under a large area. Above this level a central committee will be established with 35 people, among which at least 12 must be women. Village committees are responsible to pass different decision by holding people's meeting. With these developments the people got the decision making power in their own hand, and were able to take decisions as a group by considering the positive and negative effects of a particular decision on that group. Leadership came from the people. These peoples' committees were kept insulated from the intervention of parliamentary political parties to avoid their influence on the decisions of committees such as how the movement will be advanced further and so on. Unlike Singur and Nandigram, this feature was unique in Lalgarh movement. This was the reason why we had not seen any kind of encouragement from the so-called intellectual brigade, what we had seen earlier in case of Singur and Nandigram. The democracy-loving civil society did not even extend its verbal support towards the real democratic features of PCAPA and the movement which this committee was leading.

Along with forming the PCAPA and boycotting police and CPM harmads, the people took the responsibility of alternative development activities. People of Lalgarh spent significant efforts to realize a parallel administration and journalist Snigdhendu showcased these efforts with utmost importance. From the birth of PCAPA, the panchayat acted according to the decisions taken in this committee. However, after a certain time period the people themselves started participating in the development activities. On 19th March, people started a health center in a house in Katapahari. This was the house where a government-run health center was supposed to be built. However, soon it was transformed into a CRPF camp. This health center, Peoples' Health Initiative, earned immense popularity among the people. Under the supervision of PCAPA, skilled doctors were appointed in this health center. Doctors from Kolkata, Midnapore town, Asansol (Bardhaman district), Belur Sromojibi Hospital (Howrah district), and other areas, used to visit this health center. Students, teachers, scientists, and other respected persons from Kolkata extended their full support in order to run this health center. Even necessary medicines were made available here at free of cost. In addition to this, irrigation initiatives along with

initiatives to set up tube wells were taken under the supervision of PCAPA. Chhatradhar Mahato, Lalmohan Tudu, the two important members and efficient organizers of PCAPA, enthusiastically guided the journalist into these areas to show these achievements. The manpower required for these developments was provided by the people, voluntarily. Even the required money was either contributed by the villagers themselves or collected from corrupted rich people of the village. Instruments and raw materials were collected from the local contractors. Within three months more than 100 kms long soil road was built through the forest. Like Katapahari, another health center was built in Salboni. Within June 2009, more than 50 tube wells were built in Lalgargh, Belpahari, and Salboni. Several dams were repaired. As members of PCAPA, many Maoist comrades were also associated in these development activities. To keep up this spirit, the Maoists took the strategy of ‘struggle and construction’. On one hand they actively took part in the mass-gatherings with demands such as withdrawal of central police force, assisted in the activities like police camp gherao. On the other hand they also participated in development activities with full enthusiasm. Adivasi people, PCAPA members, Maoist cadres – these individual identities were lost in this momentum of alternative development. While on one side the state’s armed squads were busy in capturing the schools (approximately 16) one after another, setting up camps in those schools and beating the protesting students mercilessly, on the other side the PCAPA was taking decisions that education of children will not be stopped at any cost and classes will be taken in open fields under tents. These were not empty boastings. Within few days Gohamidanga High School started operating the school exactly in this way. They did not even miss the mid-day meal in this arrangement. Certainly, the joint effort of PCAPA and Maoist cadres upholding the essence of ‘struggle and construction’ was a rare example in the history of mass movements in India.

The Planning Commission Report –

In his book, journalist Snigdhendru has discussed his numerous interactions with Maoist leader Kishanji with significant detail, which will help the readers to get a clear view of Maoist perspectives regarding ‘development’. In one such interview Kishanji discusses about a government report, which is very important in the light of adivasi-mulvasi people’s struggle to protect their rights on jal-jangal-jameen, throughout the country. In order to solve the Maoist problem, Indian government formed a Planning Commission expert group in the year 2008. Ex-IAS officer Debabrata Bandyopaddhyay led this commission, which submitted a report – Development Challenges in Extremist Affected Areas (DCEAA) – to the then prime minister Manmohan Singh. It was explicitly mentioned in this report that “While the official policy documents recognize that there is a direct correlation between what is termed as extremism and poverty, or take note of the fact that the implementation of all development schemes is ineffective, or point to the deep relationship between tribals and forests, or that the tribals suffer unduly from displacement, the governments have in practice treated unrest merely as a law and order problem. It is necessary to change this mindset and bring about congruence between policy and implementation” [DCEAA, page 30]. Snigdhendru points out few other significant lines mentioned in this report, such as – “Any agitation supported or encouraged by the Naxalites is brutally suppressed without regard to the justice of its demands. In such matters, it becomes more vital in the eyes of the administration to prevent the strengthening or growth of Naxalite influence than to answer the just aspiration. Often any individual who speaks out against the powerful is dubbed a Naxalite and jailed or otherwise silenced. The search for Naxalite cadre leads to severe harassment and torture of its supporters and sympathizers, and the kith

and kin of the cadre” [DCEAA, page 55]. Glimpses of the fascist attitudes of the state are even visible in an official report. Naturally, the government did not take any corrective measures based on this report.

When the Lalgarth movement was ongoing, journalist Snigdhendru called up Debabrata Bandyopadhyay and sought his opinion on the situation in Lalgarth. He said – “In 1967, it (Naxalism) was a problem in one police station area (Naxalbari) of one district (Darjeeling) in one state (Bengal) of India. Since then, the government has steadily increased the use of arms to tackle this movement. The problem has now spread to about 180 districts in about eight states of the country. What good have all those arms and armed personnel done and what else could have been done with the money spent on it?” [LLK, page 47]. Even it was clearly mentioned in the Planning Commission expert group report that – “... the Naxalite movement has to be recognized as a political movement with a strong base among the landless and poor peasantry and adivasis... Though it’s professed long term ideology is capturing state power by force, in its day to day manifestation it is to be looked upon as basically a fight for social justice, equality, protection and local development” [DCEAA, page 59-60]. However, it was an interesting fact to notice that within six months after the submission of this 95 pages long report, the people of Jangalmahal were forced to build a resistance against the extreme level of police atrocities, and the situation was slowly transformed into an armed warfare between the state and its own people.

Kishanji and the Maoist party –

Apart from PCAPA, if one wants to name another organization that contributed significant efforts in the Lalgarth movement, then undoubtedly it will be the CPI (Maoist) party. When the police force and CPM harams unleashed armed attacks to crush the people’s democratic movement in Jangalmahal, then it was the Maoist guerilla fighters who fought by the side of people, and even risked their own lives. It was proved in this movement that they are the real friend of people. It was not fear, rather forming people’s organizations through enormous selfless efforts since long time, was the basis of their acceptance among the villagers. Snigdhendru’s Lalgarth experience was a recent witness of that.

The Maoist movement in India emerged in 1967 for the first time, centering the Naxalbari village of West Bengal. However, by the end of 1970s this movement lost its momentum. Later, in the first half of 1990s, CPI (ML) (PW) expanded their influence in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, and the then undivided Madhya Pradesh. It was the time when Kishanji played an important role in establishing connection with other Naxalite fractions active in Bengal and Bihar, which followed by the merger of these fractions to form a unified party. In the very first interaction with journalist Snigdhendru, Kishanji explained the movement of Lalgarth as “people’s movement”. Without any sort of hesitation, he clearly admitted the responsibility of the landmine blast on the then chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee’s convoy, and said – “Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee was personally responsible for the killing of fourteen villagers in Nandigram. The people gave him a death sentence and we were trying to execute it.” [LLK, page 4]. Regarding the oppressed people’s movement in Jangalmahal, he clearly mentioned that – “Lalgarth is a people’s movement. The Maoist party is with them. The Maoist party is everywhere where people are fighting for their rights and justice. We were present in Singur, we led the resistance movement in Nandigram and we are in Lalgarth too. People want us to be with them. And we never hide from the people. We only keep our organizational structure secret from the state. I have been underground since 1978 and living among the people. Someday I may get killed. But the people will protect me as long as I’m fighting for them.” [LLK, page 3]. Though, the people could not save Kishanji from the brutal state-terror,

there is no doubt that he occupied a permanent place in the hearts of the people. On 24th November 2011, Kishanji was martyred while fighting with the central force. His mother Madhuramma, waiting for the last 39 years in the Peddapalli village of Andhra Pradesh, finally got back her son, but only the martyred dead-body. A report was published in The Hindu on 28th November 2011, covering the people's massive gathering at Kishanji's funeral. The report read – "After the body of the Naxalite leader was brought to his house in Brahmanaveedhi here early in the day, hordes of people from various walks of life arrived there and paid respects to Kishanji by forming serpentine queues. Amid slogans of "Lal Salaam – Lal Salaam", "Kishanji Amar hai," people paid their floral tributes... When Gaddar rendered songs hailing the supreme sacrifice of Kishanji, people started wailing and recollected the sacrifices made by him for the sake of society by living underground." Snigdhendru did not forget to mention about this gathering in his book. Most of the media houses completed their responsibility just by showing Kishanji's back and towel-covered face. In comparison with them, what journalist Snigdhendru has attempted, that seriously deserves commendation.

Kishanji was able to create a clear difference between the Maoist presence in Lalgarh and their activities throughout the country or their presence in Singur-Nandigram. He was successful in bringing the Lalgarh movement into the top of urban discussion through his regular communication with the media houses, through his frequent statements on the distressed lifestyle of the people of Lalgarh and the whole Jangalmahal, through his efforts to expose the reality of the state's propaganda of development. Not only media houses, Kishanji maintained regular communication with various intellectuals and prominent persons in Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal, several journalists, various social workers in Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, and New Delhi, and several retired bureaucrats. This was a unique characteristic of Kishanji. Unveiling the state's one-sided false propaganda on Maoist party and its activities, Kishanji intelligently used the state's own media and threw such a heavy challenge to the state that the central government finally banned CPI (Maoist) party throughout the country on 22nd June 2009. In West Bengal, apart from CPM, all other associates of the ruling left front government opposed this ban. However, after this announcement from the central government, West Bengal's then chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya started using the UAPA law indiscriminately against the dissenters. At the very starting, Gour Chakrabarty – the veteran political spokesperson of CPI (Maoist) – was arrested. After this arrest, along with being an important member of this movement, Kishanji himself took the responsibility of being the party's spokesperson. He started communicating with the journalists himself to provide important information regarding the movement. Lalgarh was slowly developing itself as a model for the contemporary Maoist movements throughout the country. In spite of the presence of 6000 security forces, the regular rallies of PCAPA, closing down the panchayat office, forcing the panchayat members of CPM to resign from their post and to announce their total renunciation with the CPM party, gheraoing Lalgarh police station and para-military camps – these activities altogether took this people's movement to a different level. To resist and to give proper responses to the attacks of police forces and CPM harmads, Sidhu-Kanhu Gana Militia was formed. Overall, the CPI (Maoist) politburo was enthusiastic about the whole development in Lalgarh movement. In the first half of July 2009, an open letter – 'To the people of Lalgarh' – was sent by the politburo. Snigdhendru, in his book, discussed few important aspects of this letter. The most important aspects of this Lalgarh movement towards which the Maoist party asked to focus on and follow them throughout the country, are – (1) this is an armed movement of the people in real sense, and is able to attract all the local people to participate in this; (2) in case of forming committees, people's participation from each village and there also the mandatory equal representation of men and women upholds the democratic character of the organization (3) the movement was not stuck to demand mere economic privileges, rather it was uplifted to a struggle of larger political rights and the rights of self-dignity; (4) this movement was an example of forming a 'joint-front'

inviting the representatives from all sections of the society, starting from common people to the city-based progressive people and intellectuals.

The arrest of Chhatradhar Mahato – an efficient organizer of PCAPA – was the first heavy blow to this movement. Simultaneously, murders of numerous PCAPA members by CPM henchmen and indiscriminate arrests were ongoing. A security force camp was formed by the ruling party in an open place at Silda to protect the CPM leaders. The camp was successfully attacked by the Maoists. This incident created heavy discontent among the jawans against the ruling party. The Left-front government was puzzled, and thus, increased the level of repression manifold. As a revenge of Silda attack, the security forces murdered Lalmohan Tudu – another efficient organizer of PCAPA, and announced that he died in a so-called ‘encounter’. In his lifetime, Lalmohan Tudu – the president of PCAPA – never carried a gun. He was a very popular personality in Lalgaharh. The murder of Lalmohan Tudu was a brutal incident and of course another heavy blow to PCAPA. After this, few Maoists leaders were also arrested one after another. Due to all of these, the movement faced an overall setback. Moreover, centering the unfortunate incident of Gyaneshwari Express accident, a negative atmosphere was created, and the ruling party started playing the dirty game of misleading the urban people by making the Maoist party responsible for this accident. Thorough investigation of this accident, Maoist party’s statement rejecting the false claim of the ruling party, etc. has been discussed with utmost seriousness in Snigdhendu’s book. If we talk about the CPI (Maoist) party, then the first heavy blow came to it with the murder of Azad – the national level spokesperson of the party. In the first week of April 2010, back to back two guerilla attacks of the Maoist revolutionaries shattered the arrogance of the state from its very root. After these two incidents, the central government received severe pressure from different levels to call for a ceasefire and to initiate a peace-talk with the Maoist revolutionaries. Chidambaram selected social worker Swami Agnivesh as an intermediary person. Several rounds of correspondence took place between Agnivesh, Azad, and Chidambaram. Finally, on 26th June Agnivesh wrote to Azad, regarding three possible dates of starting the ceasefire – 10, 15, or 20th July, and asked him regarding the preference of dates from the side of Maoist party, if there is any. But, on 2nd July, when the whole country was waiting for the response from Azad, the government announced that Azad died in an encounter in a forest at Adilabad district. The last letter of Agnivesh was still there in Azad’s pocket.

Naturally, beyond the so-called ‘encounter’ story, the state did not provide any statement regarding Azad’s death. However, from the post-mortem report one can only conclude that Azad was shot from point-blank range, which means, Azad’s death was nothing but a cold-blooded murder. It should be noticed that Azad was murdered by the state at a time when peace-talk with the government was in a final stage. This clearly proved that the government did not have the mentality of holding any such peace talk. The murder of Azad was an irreplaceable loss to the Maoist party, due to which the influence of Maoist party and PCAPA in Jangalmahal started decreasing. The movement started becoming an anti- CPM movement, and the opposition leader Mamata Banerjee and her party TMC started enjoying the fruits of it. The Left-front government, which was already at the verge of sinking, ensured its own end by perpetrating a massacre at Netai village. In the subsequent election, the people of West Bengal dumped the 34-years long regime of Left-front government. With the wind of change, Mamata Banerjee took the seat of chief minister of West Bengal. Then, it was just a matter of time to her to reverse her own stand on the withdrawal of joint force from Jangalmahal, on the release of arrested political prisoners such as PCAPA activists and the “Maoist brothers” – as once addressed by the new chief minister. Mamata Banerjee did not take much time to follow the path which CPM followed before her. When she was in the opposition, she declared the notorious SP of West Midnapore – Manoj Verma – as an enemy. After coming to power, she kept him in compulsory waiting for few days, and again brought back him

on October 2011 to finish the Maoists. She got her desired result also. On 24th November people come to know that Kishanji is dead. According to the official narrative, Kishanji died in an encounter with CRPF forces in the Burishole forest. However, different human rights organizations such as APDR, Bandi Mukti Committee, PUDR etc. and various activists from different organizations in Delhi and Andhra Pradesh carried their investigation in the Burishole forest, and proved that the official narrative was nothing but a lie. How Kishanji died? – That is a mystery till date.

Chidambaram vs. Kishanji –

Another important issue, which is covered in the book, is the conflict between the then home minister P. Chidambaram and Kishanji. It was the time when on one hand the people's movement in Jangalmahal was in its peak moment and the alternative development started becoming a reality due to the joint efforts of common people, PCAPA activists, and Maoist revolutionaries. However, on the other hand Chidambaram was desperate to malign this people's movement. The central government understood it well that this is no more just an armed conflict, rather it has become an ideological war. Kishanji's frequent interviews with the media houses were clearly exposing the anti-people stands of the state government and the center government. Kishanji was successful to build a sense of solidarity among the urban middle and lower-middle class towards the distressed condition of the people of Jangalmahal and the struggle for their rights to live with dignity. Above all, slowly Lalgarh was becoming a model of expanding the Maoist revolution throughout this country. Lalgarh was showing the path, like Naxalbari did. In a situation like this, on 17th August 2009, the then prime minister Manmohan Singh and home minister P. Chidambaram held an emergency meeting with the chief ministers of various states. In that meeting, Chidambaram claimed that the Naxalites are "anti-development" and said – "[Naxalites] have targeted the very instruments of development – school buildings, roads, telephone towers. They know that development will wean the masses away, especially the poor tribals, from the grip of naxalites. Hence, these deliberate attacks on development activities." However, we are already aware of the official report of the planning commission, the development activities carried out by the people themselves under the supervision of PCAPA and Maoist revolutionaries. Therefore, the claims of Chidambaram were nothing but blatant lies, and one could easily understand that Chidambaram's intention was to create a negative impression among the urban mass regarding this Lalgarh people's movement. However, Kishanji was not silent to this. On the very next day evening he called Snigdendu and condemned this act of Chidambaram. Kishanji clearly mentioned that – "We are fighting for people's development. We are opposed to their model of development in which the rich become richer and the poor poorer. We don't want industries that will serve the purpose of the US. We want industries that serve our people – agro-based industries, small and medium enterprises (SMEs). We don't demolish schools or hospitals because people get services there. We destroy the structures because, in reality, these buildings are used for housing the CRPF." [LLK, page 48-49].

A relevant portion of the official planning commission report (2008), can be quoted in this regard. In the concluding section of Chapter 1 of this report, it was mentioned that – "The development paradigm pursued since independence has aggravated the prevailing discontent among marginalized sections of society. This is because the development paradigm as conceived by the policy makers has always been imposed on these communities, and therefore it has remained insensitive to their needs and concerns, causing irreparable damage to these sections. The benefits of this paradigm of development have been disproportionately cornered by the dominant sections at the expense of the poor, who have borne most of the costs. Development which is

insensitive to the needs of these communities has invariably caused displacement and reduced them to asub-human existence. In the case of tribes in particular it has ended up in destroying their social organization, cultural identity, and resource base and generated multiple conflicts, undermining their communal solidarity, which cumulatively makes them increasingly vulnerable to exploitation.” [DCEAA, page 29]. Therefore, in this report, a criticism can be found, which is bolder than Kishanji’s response to the false claims of Chidambaram. However, the government did not show any interest to this report, and rather declared a war on these marginalized communities.

In the party-statements issued against the false claims of Chidambaram, and in several interviews with journalist Snigdhendu, it was observed that Kishanji was extremely hopeful about the alternative administration – Janatan Sarkar – effective in Dandakaranya. In one such interaction with Snigdhendu he said – “Do you know we send medical help to more than 1,000 villages across India every day? There are doctors, including specialists, among our soldiers in Bastar. They do not carry guns. They wear aprons. There are about fifty such teams in Bastar and we run about 100 health centers, including those having indoor facilities. The services are free. The medicine that we distribute comes from enemy hospitals. Medicine used to rot in their custody or got pilfered. We are making proper use of them. We do not charge people for development activities and facilities. We tax big corporate houses and the bourgeoisie. Villagers voluntarily donate two days’ earnings a year and that adds up to a huge amount. Things are happening in a very different way in Dandakaranya, you can’t imagine till you see it yourself!” [LLK, page 47-48].

For Chidambaram, the reality of alternative development in Dandakaranya was not only hard to imagine, but also a grave concern to him. And, he knows these developments very well. Thus, ‘Maoism’, “the biggest internal security challenge facing our country”, etc. are nothing but excuses. The main intention of the state is to assist the ongoing plunder of mineral resources by foreign multinationals in the name of ‘development’, and crush all the measures of alternative development model which is challenging the state’s exploitative development model. To fulfill this it has declared war on people through various initiatives, starting from ‘Salwa Judum’ to ‘Operation Green Hunt’. In an interview with the Outlook magazine, dated 9th November 2009, activist and writer Arundhati Roy clearly stated that Chidambaram is working for the interests of the mining corporations. Using the necessity of security measures in adivasi-dominated areas as an excuse he intentionally appointed armed forces there, so that the corporations can get an easy hold of the local hills and jungles in spite of the massive resistance from the local adivasis. Unveiling the real face of Chidambaram, Arundhati Roy spoke – “What are we to make of the fact that the Union Home Minister, P. Chidambaram, the CEO of Operation Green Hunt, has, in his career as a corporate lawyer, represented several mining corporations? What are we to make of the fact that he was a non-executive director of Vedanta – a position from which he resigned the day he became finance minister in 2004? What are we to make of the fact that, when he became finance minister, one of the first clearances he gave for FDI was to Twinstar Holdings, a Mauritius-based company, to buy shares in Sterlite, a part of the Vedanta group.” [LLK, page 77-78].

Conclusion –

Along with the thorough details of the movement and his interactions with Kishanji, Snigdhendu also put some light on the assessment of this movement with utmost seriousness, which it deserves. He mentioned about several issues that are responsible for reducing the influence of this movement in the later stage, appeared in

different sources as critical assessments of this movement. For example – the movement failed to analyze the class character of Mamata Banerjee correctly, which resulted into a belief that after the electoral loss of CPM the joint force will be withdrawn and the political prisoners will be released. Many joint activities with TMC party, encouraging people to attend Mamata Banerjee’s rally etc. were actually massive mistakes, and it was proved immediately after the change of power. Snigdhendu personally felt that it was a big mistake from the Maoist leadership to capitalize the inner contradiction in the ruling class, which led them to believe TMC as a ‘less dangerous party. The general secretary of CPI (Maoist) conveyed few demands as a pre-condition of peace talk. However, even before the fulfillment of these demands the Bengal leadership was very much eager for the peace talk, to which the top leadership did not agree. Snigdhendu considered this as another mistake in the side of Bengal leadership. Moreover, following the Janatana Sarkar model of Dandakaranya, the attempt to create a similar model in Jangalmahal did not achieve a full success. The political consciousness of the people was not developed up to the desired level. Thus, the people did not understand that beyond the CPM, development and peace, capturing the state power should be the ultimate aim of oppressed mass. This led towards few non-proletariat tendencies in the organization. For example – even there is no such concept of death-sentence in the system of people’s court; due to the lack of proper political consciousness among the people some unpleasant incident took place in the war-like situation of Lalgarh. The ruling class took full opportunity of these incidents, and to some extent became successful in creating a negative propaganda among the common mass regarding the movement and the Maoists. Thus, a simple fact that – there is a fundamental difference between a war-field and comparatively stable urban area - went unnoticed in the atmosphere of propaganda.

In a nutshell, it must be admitted that Snigdhendu’s work covered a lively account starting from the beginning of Lalgarh movement to the death of Kishanji. Kishanji as an important character in this movement, in spite of different measures taken by the state’s intelligence department his efficient and risky use of mobile phones to keep constant connection with the media houses to inform them about the movement, issuing statements, exposing the real face of state-terror, and finally his death – a rare and well-researched description of these events can be found in this book. However, the most important characteristic of this work is its attempt to grasp the nationwide situation, which prevents this book from being just a memoir of Lalgarh movement. Rather, going beyond the boundary of Lalgarh, this book can play a significant role if one wants to understand the nationwide people’s resistance to protect their jal-jangal-jameen and the past-present-future of the state-sponsored terror unleashed on this collective resistance.