

Indira's Birbhum War

PRABIR BASU

WHAT is happening now in Birbhum happened at Naxalbari, Debra-Gopiballavpur and many other places. It will happen everywhere. The scheme is the same and will be pursued by the servitors of imperialism and social-imperialism without any democratic inhibition. The most notable feature of the reality in Birbhum is that an occupation army has been torturing, maiming and arresting unarmed poor people in the most cowardly fashion.

We know that if CPI(ML) cadres are butchered in streets, fields or jails, our political parties would salve their conscience with a feeble impotent protest. What we did not expect is the silence of every parliamentary party, from the Congress(R) to the CPI(M) on the undeclared war launched by the government not only against the CPI(ML) but the unarmed people of the entire district.

In this silent war the government has all "patriotic" "national" newspapers as its cohorts. Professional journalists visit Santiniketan or Suri almost like thieves (we do not know why) in the name of collecting re-

ports—and TA and DA. Possibly the most courageous among them, once in a bus on his way from Bolpur to Suri, gave vent to his feelings on law and order in order to provoke some of his talkative co-passengers. Only a whispering remark came from a middle-aged state employee: "Shh! Don't discuss, spies everywhere!" The normal Calcutta journalist is instructed to hear nothing beyond official information. Even his visual experience is tailored at the time of writing. What the journalists do in the case of Birbhum is to explain their visual experience in the light of their confabulations with the high-ups of the district administration: roads are empty even at 9 a.m., the desolate and dark evenings in any subdivisional town bear the fearful semblance of midnight, the bi-weekly urban *hats* do not attract rural people. All this is part of the conspiracy of silence over the degree of military-police brutalities against the population. By raising a hue and cry about Naxalite violence, these journalists took adequate care to suppress news of the violence of the army and police.

The administration's complete iso-

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lation from the people has led to widespread administrative violence. Having no confidence in its own police ranks and in people entrusted with collecting anti-Naxal intelligence, the Central Government has gone berserk and formulated the present anti-people plan. *The Statesman*, *Jugantar* and other newspapers, as precursors of this plan-execution, fostered the reports that even the police personnel of the district were helping the Naxalites. Veering round this pet thesis of a 'revolutionary' party like the CPI(M), one A.B. reported in *Frontier* (July 10) that, to his surprise, CPI(ML) activists caught with snatched rifles (including one of a murdered policeman) in the Rampurhat area were not shot dead at the time of arrest! This defiance of the Home Department's instruction, it was hinted, was the work of Naxal-police connivance. A.B. is a clever fellow and as a result he dramatised the Naxalite characters more than he did the events or the statistical figures of murdered jotedars' land acreage. It is not the place to challenge the death register of jotedar martyrs or his meticulous accounts of the property of the dead, but what is relevant for our purpose is his conclusion—indeed a clever variant of the same in *Jugantar* or *The Statesman*—that the Naxals do more harm than good to the rural poor, and that they, having no roots among the village poor, are teenaged adventurers and that but for the bad administrative set-up, these boys having personal connections with vested interests would not have been able to make such headway.

All these journalistic exercises were meant to justify the military-police action in the name of law and order and promote a psychological imperative that, as the CPI(ML) activists have nothing to do with the poor, the army and police have no other choice but to terrorise and torture 'some' people in order to trace out the Naxalite culprits.

A few days back the Vice-Chancellor of Visva-Bharati, under pressure from students and workers, re-

quested the District Magistrate not to harass or arrest Visva-Bharati employees without taking the authorities into confidence. The DM very politely informed him that he was authorised to take nobody into confidence except those in the administration and that his police could arrest anybody for 'interrogation' and he might at any time subject the whole university campus to combing operation.

Prominent Feature

The single most prominent feature of the present military administration is that no young person, whatever may be his avowed faith or faithlessness, is to be spared 'interrogation'. So, away from their own houses, Birbhum youths have been playing as far as practicable, hide and seek with the armed watchdogs of the world's biggest democracy. Every onset of a military caravan in the local towns or bazaars means darkness at noon and hell at midnight. It is not only young people or teen-agers that are having a trying time these days, rumours are there that if an aged person unfortunately looks young or oddly healthy, CRP officers consider him to be a possible Naxal and therefore a special target of the baton. Some shop assistants of a famous dealer—who happens to be a district stalwart of the Congress(R)—were arrested at Bolpur for 'arson, gun-snatching and murder' of spies. The youngest and sickest of them—hardly twelve years old—was convicted in a case of rifle-snatching from the CRP. The employer telephoned the police station to certify that the arrested used to work for almost twelve hours in the shops and so could have had no connection with anything affecting law and order. He was advised to keep quiet. Ultimately, the arrested were bailed out to learn that for their safety the employer has extended their working hours without however increasing their wages.

The most worried man in Birbhum villages today is a poor father who happens to have a number of young sons, because he can neither send

them to some poor relatives for shelter nor afford the cost of establishing their innocence in court.

While there is hardly any policy discrimination between urban and rural people so far as arresting them is concerned, the methods of 'interrogation' differ. To be severely beaten in course of 'interrogation' is a special prerogative of the village poor—particularly youths. The villager is set free, but not before he has obliged the police with some money. Money is supplied by a village tout who behind his client's back negotiates the transaction. Some police officers however do not allow middlemen into these transactions and straightaway take cash with an air of generosity generally found among old temple priests.

Somehow urban people are not asked to pay bribes unless the relatives of the arrested themselves throw hints through a middleman. One must admit that in the town areas beating in the course of interrogation has now been suspended. For example, in Bolpur town, on a particular day large numbers of people were arrested for 'interrogation' from both a middle-class area and an area largely inhabited by low-caste people (*Huari, Bagdi, Dom* etc). It was reported that while the second set of people were beaten up, the first group was not.

How do people react to the inflictions? The immediate reaction is all-pervading panic, but once the operation is gone through, wrath against the administration becomes violent and somewhat desperate.

In a village near Ilambazar a young pregnant woman suffering from some extra-physical ailment could not be sent to a local doctor staying just outside the combed area and died. The large-scale arrests and torture had already angered the people. The woman's death turned them violent. After the combing operation was over, the villagers held a meeting and thought of making a mass attack on the nearby army picket. The CPI(ML) activists reappeared and reportedly asked them

not to take such adventurous action at that moment. They explained that it was the People's Liberation Army which would take revenge against the entire state machinery.

This is not an isolated instance. In the Rampurhat area, the military-police brutality exposed the impotence of the local Congress(R) leadership of a group of predominantly pro-Congress villages. The leadership had tried to exonerate the police by pointing out the wickedness of the CPI(ML) cadres who had annihilated a local leader of the Congress(R)—a bad character and jotedar of the area. After the combing operations, however, the worst victims turned out to be young people—an active band of Chhatra Parishad workers—of the villages. Some were beaten so much that without timely hospitalisation they would have died. There were indiscriminate arrests. The net effect was that a good number of young boys of these villages tried to contact the CPI(ML) activists with the purpose of taking revenge on the police.

One more instance. Only a few miles away from Suri a village, predominantly inhabited by rich peasants and jotedars, and under the leadership of the so-called VRG (Village Resistance Group), did not let in unknown outsiders. Many usurers from nearby villages were extended temporary hospitality there in face of the growing anti-usury campaign of the CPI(ML). All of a sudden a guerilla squad entered the village at midnight when the entire contingent of the VRG was absent from the village (according to a local report, this VRG, in connivance with the police, used to commit dacoity in other villages) and snatched a few guns from some houses. The next morning the military and the police combed the entire village looking for guns and went in for selective beating and arrests. This led to mutual suspicion among the villagers, some of whom are reported to have sought protection of the CPI(ML). The particular village is now a house divided, with some of the VRG *masians* engaged in anti-Naxal spying.

In towns and villages, there have also been abject surrenders to fate, particularly from the upper and lower middle class areas in towns and a section of the privileged peasantry in the rural areas. Age-wise, the reaction of the youths is extremely encouraging from the point of view of the CPI(ML) but the reaction of old people is presumably anti-Naxal in character.

On the Run

How do the CPI(ML) activists face the situation? It is almost anybody's guess. Certainly they are on the run. Seldom do people hear of bomb attacks on police pickets or troops. There are people who believe that CPI(ML) cadres are avoiding armed confrontation with the police. The reasons cited to explain this tactical retreat are however far from consistent. Sometimes it is said that in Birbhum, the CPI(ML) movement has no roots among the sons of the soil and therefore a compact military administration is bound to neutralise their manoeuvring capacity and drive them out from the district. This equation of CPI(ML) activists with youthful adventurers is in fact the pet thesis of all political parties opposed to any kind of Naxalism. But it is pointed out even by the sympathisers of the party that at the present level of organisation and experience, it will be premature on their part to engage in even a series of sniping attacks on police patrols or pickets. On the other hand, the people should be allowed to feel by themselves the need for total mobilisation against the police and the military.

What is to be noted at this stage is that the origin and development of the CPI(ML) in Birbhum has two distinct local characteristics. In the first place, although the party as in other districts followed the programme of class-annihilation as the form of class-struggle, unlike in Debra-Gopiballavpur it sought to take as many people as possible into confidence. There were instances when a particu-

lar jotedar was not annihilated, because the local peasants prescribed lighter punishment. In other words, the pattern of the movement followed, in a sense, the mass-line; and contrary to what other parties say, in Birbhum both among urban and rural poor, the CPI(ML) has successfully established itself as the only party of the poor. Nowhere else has the CPI(ML) gained such tremendous popular support and popular protection. As a matter of fact, in Birbhum, more than anywhere else, the party's action programmes were considerably influenced by the likes and dislikes of its supporters. This possibly explains the phenomenal growth of party support, while the organisation is lagging far behind.

The Birbhum party's main weakness stems from its second local feature—its underground organisation is not as mature as it is elsewhere. The activists are daring but not always tactful. The main reason for this organisational immaturity lies in its lack of combat experience and the relative ease with which the party made headway in this district. In other districts, there are different shades of political agents of the Establishment who operate from among the masses against CPI(ML) cadres. There are strong youth contingents of different political parties, particularly the CPM, operating against the CPI(ML) cadres, and over and above the state police administration is more alert about the left political elements in general, and the Naxals in particular. In Birbhum, the CPI(ML) did not feel these difficulties and as a result the party's steeling has not been adequate.

This may lead to danger in the face of the military-police combing operations going on throughout the district. One should not be surprised if the present phase of retreat of the district CPI(ML) ends in mass-scale arrests of activists causing the movement a temporary set back. The lessons are there, the CPI(ML) has to grasp them and use them in future.