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Orissa's Lalgarh in the making

Subhashish Mohanty / *DNA*

The might of the Indian state did win the battle for the government against Maoists and their supporters in Lalgarh , but the war is far from over. In neighbouring Orissa, armed tribals have taken over villages and land, leaving the local administration helpless and with little choice but to flee.

Tribals armed with swords and axes have taken over some 300 acres in the Bandhugaon block of Maoist-affected Koraput district. Four months ago, they had taken over five of the nine panchayats and 1000 acres of land in the adjoining Narayanpatna block in the district, around 550 km from Bhubaneswar.

Of the land taken over, the tribals have begun cultivating on 400 acres in Narayanpatna block. Scared locals prefer to remain mute spectators. "Everyday, the tribals go ahead with their land acquisition and they target us," complained S Arun Kumar, a local scribe.

Balmukunda Bhuain, the Naryanpatna Block Development Officer (BDO), described the situation as war-like. "Even if I am awarded a Padma Shri, I don't want to continue here for another single day." He pointed out that an exodus of officials from the affected areas had already taken place and said Maoists had ransacked the block office a few days ago.

The Orissa government is aware of the developments but is unable to tackle the situation. The affected areas appear to be out of government control. It is now seeking help from the Centre to tackle the Maoists.

The tribal upsurge, which began peacefully some eight months ago under the banner of the Chasi Muliya Adivasi Sangha (CMAS), an organisation of dispossessed tribals, has turned violent with more than 800 non-tribal families forced to flee.

CMAS guide Gananath Patro insists the recent movement was not connected to Maoist presence in the district. "They have their presence in this area but our organisation has nothing to do with it. It was a mass uprising against land-grabbers," Patro said.

"We are fighting for our legitimate right," CMAS' local chief Nachika Linga, earlier a bonded labour, said. "Our fight is against moneylenders, liquor traders, contractors, non-tribals, corrupt officials, and politicians, and will continue. They first assaulted the tribals before the tribals retaliated," he said.

The tribals have formed a Lal Bahini (Red Army). They have deployed 15 members in every village under them. All of them wear red shirts and monitor police movements.
A majority of the worried non-tribals have left the area. "We feared for our lives and decided to let go of our land and property," said Ramua Bidika, one of the affected persons, who lost his family farmland in Narayanpatna.

Bidika, who has now moved to the district HQ, said CMAS forcibly took away their farm land, in his family's possession for four generations. "They hoisted the red flag in our land," he said.

Incidentally, the Naryanpatna block headquarters was difficult to reach as it was not linked by a metalled road to Koraput. But on June 25, Union home minister P Chidambaram arrived in Koraput after which the roads connecting Koraput to block headquarters was cleared.

One CRPF Company and one India Reserve Battalion (IRB) company have been engaged there. "No serious development has taken place for the last seven days. But any thing can happen at any moment," DIG South-Western Range Sanjeeb Panda said.

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