



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 8.4
IJAR 2022; 8(8): 18-22
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 06-06-2022
Accepted: 08-07-2022

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Political dilemma in Jangalmahal area: A historical perspective

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22271/allresearch.2022.v8.i8a.10034>

Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to analyze the causes of political instability in the Jangalmahal territories. I have tried to find out why this region has become turbulent again and again. Why is this trend still not ending? I have tried to find out the root causes of the spread of Naxalite / Maoist activities in this region. This Maoist tendency is also affecting the recent electoral politics to a great extent. In fact, the perpetual poverty of the people living here is one of the main causes of unrest in this area. The uneducated and poverty-stricken tribal society here dreams of a better society under the Maoist/Naxalite ideology.

Keywords: Jangalmahal, poverty, Maoist, electoral politics

Introduction

Jangalmahal is a well-known name not only in West Bengal but also in the political arena of India. During the colonial period, the region often became unstable. This trend did not stop even after independence. Very recent past, towards the end of the rule of the Left government, the region became unsettled again. The name of Jangalmahal has come up again and again in the electoral politics of West Bengal. In recent times, Jangalmahal has gained special importance in the electoral politics. Hon'ble Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee has repeatedly mentioned that she has brought back peace by stopping Maoist activities in Jangalmahal areas of West Midnapore, Bankura and Purulia districts. But, in recent times, Maoist activities have increased here again, which is having an impact on the electoral politics.

Study Area

Jangalmahal emerged as an administrative unit or district in 1805. Jangalmahal was formed mainly in present day of Bankura, Midnapore, Purulia, Birbhum district and some parts of Burdwan district. In fact, The British agency purposefully created Jangalmahal district for their economic, administrative and military interests. The British reorganized the boundaries of Jangalmahal to satisfy their colonial interests and they wanted to suppressing the movement and rebellion. This area was densely forested and inhabited by various tribal group of people. This area has a legacy of underdevelopment, exploitation and violent social revolt. This region is rich in various natural resources. On the other hand the region has had a glorious cultural history. But the region's traditional history of scarcity and poverty has not yet faded, naturally, the area has come to be known as the Maoist zone. In fact Jangalmahal is not an isolated geographic entity, it is closely linked to the Middle East India, which includes Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh in terms of population, economic resources, cultural subordination and coups.

Literature Review

'Jangalmahal' is a much studied name in history. Many historians, politicians, economists and writers have expressed interest in Jangalmahal in their writings Ranabir Samaddar ^[1] discusses the transformation of jungles from a frontier area controlled by customs and local power under the full-scale rule of colonial Bengal. Suchibrata Sen ^[2] discusses the arrival of

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tribals in the forest and their rural social structure as a peasant group. He analyzed the economic changes in the lives of the Santals of Jangalmahal during the colonial period and its repercussions. Pradip Chattopadhyay^[3] has focused on the changed identity of the Santals in South West Bengal. Sahara Ahmed^[4] has emphasized the plunder of natural resources since the colonial period. Her research areas are Jalpaiguri in North Bengal and Jangalmahal in South West Bengal. But the effect of past context on recent electoral politics is found in the adjectives now there is very little discussion. So I have tried to fill the gap.

Objectivity

I have tried to explore the legacy of recent electoral politics. The purpose of my current article is to find out the cause of the unrest here. I have tried to find out the root cause of unrest here. My discussion has raised few number of questions. such as-

1. What is the root cause of the political dilemma in this area?
2. Why has lasting peace not been established here?
3. Why this region has become the center of discussion again and again in electoral politics of West Bengal?

Methodology

Both primary and secondary sources have been used to write this research paper. I have collected data from various government reports and District Gazetteer. At the same time I have collected information from various newspapers and magazines. I have also collected information from different texts as a secondary source.

Analysis

Colonial Period

The Jangalmahal area was covered by dense forest up to the beginning of the British rule. The land in this region is not unsuitable for agricultural expansion. The region is hilly, land was rocky and the water capacity was very low. Agriculture was completely dependent on rainfall. Irrigation system did not expand much. W.W. Hunter wrote that in Bankura district there were no natural lakes or canals for water supply^[5]. Although the zamindars of Bishnupur and Simlupal built several ponds or reservoirs, much less than for requirement. Droughts were occasionally observed in most areas in the Jungle Mahal. So, this area had been legacy of underdevelopment. In this geographical and economic context, the people of the tribal communities here were almost completely dependent on the forest. A large number of tribal people of Jungle Mahals area would depend on forest for their daily requirements *viz.* grazing, quaking energy, *Sal* leaf, various mushroom, fruits such as forest dates, cool, kend, gurmoni (sweet fruit in small), custard apple, bonkarala (different kind of bitter gourd) etc. All these wild fruits nourished them and they made some money by selling them in the local market. They used the roots, bark, leaves and fruits of different plants as herbal medicine. tasar silk, beeswax and dhuna of resin procured by girdling the sal tree were the most important Jungle Products of Manbhum District. There are different plants

that give different types of oils, some of which claim medicinal properties^[6]. One of the major forest resources of Jangalmahal area is Mahul or Mol. Babui used to earn his money by selling grass ropes and palm leaf brooms. Mr. V. Ball visited Munbhum after the famine of 1866 and he pointed out that, although the agricultural work was disrupted during the famine, the tribes of the area were able to make a living on the forest^[7]. They could collect bamboo, cane and sabai grass from the forest and make different products through using them. They used to sell those products in the local market. Apart from forest there were huge waste land that was used as pasture. They would collect fish from the rivers in this region. Hunting was their most popular livelihood. They could collect freely honey, wax, mushroom, sal leaf, kendu leaf etc. from forest. The jungles also would produce a small quality of tusser cocoons, which were reeled into thread by women of the weaver class, and some medicinal plants, were used by the tribal physicians were known as 'Gunin' for medicinal purposes^[8]. The artisans of the village used to collect wood for crafts from the forest^[9]. The Santal community had a special role to play in spreading agriculture in the area. They cut down the forest in this area and spread agriculture here^[10]. Mandal system was formed here. By the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the revenue collection by the Company government had made a fundamental impact on Indian rural society^[11]. The traditional Mandal System was broken. High rates of revenue were imposed on Chakrani and Ghatwal lands^[12]. As a result of the new land revenue system, the Santal zamindars here lost their zamindari. Zamindari was bought by business class people. From the eighteenth century onwards the tribes here began to rebel against the land revenue system and forest policy of the Company government. Tribal and peasant revolts against colonial rule were a law and order problem in the administration's view. However, the militant movements of the common people of the village were not non-political^[13]. There was also a certain political thought or consciousness in the tribal uprisings of this area. They wanted to restore the traditional rights of them over the land water and forest.

Post Colonial Period

After independence, the Indian government was adopting various schemes for the development of the tribes. Attempts were made to improve agriculture and irrigation systems. But there has been no significant change in tribal society of Jangalmahal. The basic amenities of lives were not here. Agriculture did not spread. Not enough progress has been made in irrigation system, drinking water supply and electrification. The Kangsavati river project did not help in the expansion of irrigation system in the area. In fact very few areas of Bankura and Purulia districts benefited from this irrigation project. There was severe malnutrition and unemployment. Indigenous people were forced to go to Burdwan and Hooghly districts to work as laborers that was called Pube Khate Jaoya (Seasonal agricultural labor). Although this trend started during the colonial period.

Table 1: Receipt and Expenditure of Some Gram Panchayats of Jangalmahal ^[14].

1963-1964			1966-1967		1968-1969		1969-1970		1970-1971	
Name of the Gram Panchayat	receipts. Rs.	Expenditure	Receipts. Rs.	Expenditure	Receipts. Rs.	Expenditure	Receipts. Rs.	Expenditure	Receipts. Rs.	Expenditure Rs.
Khatra-1			11901	6379	10471	5883	6598	4895	7770	1800
Khatra-2			8232	7661	7708	4708	3241	686	2681	1409
Ranibandh	13008	13008	13104	12266	14309	6583	12257	8309	12117	6448
Raipur-1			14015	3612	22555	6035	17488	9847	12348	2190
Raipur-2			7983	5497	14253	6020	12247	7307	8337	2449
Simlpal	6789	2530	15631	10330	14367	8468	6661	2831	7110	2440
Taldangra	6789	2530	14025	8051	12439	9568	11195	6273	10972	6432

From the above discussion we can conclude that even though the panchayat system was introduced, the panchayats were not very active. The table below indicate the percentage distribution of population according to marginal workers and non-workers in the five Police Station areas which were inhabited by Tribals of Bankura district in 1981.

Table 2: Marginal and Non Workers Population in Bankura ^[15].

Police Station	Total population	Marginal Workers in percentage	Non Workers in percentage
Khatra	13332121	4.07	63.27
Ranibandh	82911	10.30	53.12
Raipur	184574	7.95	60.50
Simlupal	92232	4.19	63.78
Taldangra	93129	5.01	65.43

Source: District Statistical Hand Book, Bankura 1994, Government of West Bengal

There had been no significant improvement in the education health and communication system.

Under Left Front Government

In the post-independence period, various schemes were adopted all over West Bengal to the develop of the tribals. Junglemahal was not out of this plan. In the first phase of the Left front government, the peasant society has especially benefited from the Operation Barga movement. The demand for a guarantee of one hundred days of work for the common people arose during the Left period. Attempts were made to create alternative employment by forming Joint Forest Management (JFM). JFM was a socio-economic movement. As well as it as environmental movement. This Junglemahal area was once the stronghold of the CPM. From 1972 to 2007, the Left had absolute dominance in the Jhargram Assembly constituency. But, towards the end of the Left period, the region became turbulent. Maoist activity in the region increased a lot. The name of Lalgah in West Midnapore came up in the news from home and abroad. The Maoists organized local people against the alleged police brutality - forming the 'People's Committee Against Police Terrorism'. On November 2, 2008, an attempt was made to assassinate the then Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee. They gradually turned the whole Lalgah region into their free zone. Lalgah was practically isolated from the country. Between 2005 and 2012, a total of 698 people were killed in state-Maoist clashes across the Junglemahal. Of these, 544 are civilians, 75 are security personnel and 88 were Maoists ^[16]. The area was recovered by paramilitary forces several months later. A section of civil society came forward to solve the Maoist problem. The failure of the ruling government to develop the region came to the fore.

The question is, has there been no improvement during the Left Government? There was, of course, development during that period. This time the administration did not reach the grassroots level. Actual implementation of the JFM programme did not go down well with the tribal people. The traditional rights of the indigenous people over land, water and forest have not been restored. The government wanted to appease the tribals by forming elite groups among them. The government had not been able to create alternate employment in the area. The pace of development of education, public health, electrification and communication in this area was very slow. The benefits of the government project have not reached the grassroots level. There were many flaws in the panchayat system. Local leaders were involved in various corruptions. The theory of the son of the soil was not given prominence by highlighting any tribal face among the tribals of the area. I am mentioning the names of the MLAs of Jhargram Assembly from 1957 to 2006 in a table below ^[17].

Table 3: Names of the MLAs of Jhargram Assembly from 1957 to 2006

Year	Name of the MLA	Name of the Party
1957	Mahendra Nath Mahato	Indian National Congress
1962	Mahendra Nath Mahato	Indian National Congress
1967	P.C. Ghosh	Nirdal
1969	Panchkari De	Bangla Kongress
1971	Birendra Bijaya Nalladeb	Indian National Congress
1972	Birendra Bijaya Nalladeb	Indian National Congress
1977	Ramchandra Satapati	Communist Party of India(Marxist)
1982	Abani Bhushun Satpati	Communist Party of India(Marxist)
1991	Buddhabed Bhakat	Communist Party of India(Marxist)
1996	Buddhabed Bhakat	Communist Party of India(Marxist)
2001	Mina Sanatani	Communist Party of India(Marxist)
2006	Amar Basu	Communist Party of India(Marxist)

Under TMC Government

No one can deny that the role of Jangalmahal was especially important against the backdrop of the rise of Trinamool Congress in the state. The red soil has a lot of power, the red soil protest is also quite strong This jungle palace played the conch shell of the end of 34 years of left rule. Mamata Banerjee became the "mother" of the people of Jangalmahal. Mamata Banerjee explained how the tribal people did not get the respect they deserved during the Left period ^[18]. The tribal society here supported Mamata Banerjee. We can mention Kashiram who was the founder of a party called Bahujan Samaj Party, used the politics of caste to completely corner the Congress in North India. However, Kashiram was not a proponent of religion-centric politics, but a labor leader who emerged from the human rights movement. From that position he explained to the Scheduled Castes how they were kept out of development.

Mamata Banerjee did the same in West Bengal. Mamata Banerjee came forward to stand by the Maoists. She announced that if the Trinamool Congress came to power, she would solve the problems of the Maoists. The Maoists responded to Mamata's call. Even in the 2011 state assembly elections, the Maoists announced they would vote for Mamata's Trinamool Congress in the Jangalmahal. Maoist leader Chhatradhar Mahat also supported Mamata. All India Trinamool Congress, won the 2011 assembly elections under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee. I have used the table below to explain the transfer of votes from CPIM to AITMC.

Table 4: West Bengal assembly election, 2011 Jhargram^[19]

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
AITC	Sukumhar Hansda	69,464	44.67	+4.32*
CPI(M)	Amar Basu	54,191	34.85	-19.97*
Independent	Chhatradhar Mahata	20,037	12.88	
BJP	Bijay Mahato	6,376	4.10	
JMM Jharkhand	Sunil Kisku	5,573	3.66	
Anushilan Party	Bholanath Mahata	5,452	3.51	
Voter turnout		155,520	84.47	

The AITMC has gained from the CPI (M) Swing 24.29*

* Swing calculated on Congress + TMC vote percentages taken together in 2006.

Mamata Banerjee became the Chief Minister of West Bengal. He used development as the main tool to gain the confidence of the people of the area. The communication system of the region was improved. Education, public health, drinking water and food were provided here. One hundred days of work was guaranteed for the residents of this area. Jhargram district was created to bring the administration to the people^[20]. Many advanced hospitals were built. Alternative employment was created. The tourism industry was improved in this area. Various government projects were tried to help the residents of the area directly. Mamata Banerjee then called for bringing the Maoists back into the mainstream of society. "History has shown that gun rule can never bring peace," he wrote on her Face book account^[21]. Mamata Banerjee appealed to the people of Belpahari, "Be your own guard. Don't be afraid. Protect peace and democracy." As a result, a number of Maoists surrendered and joined the rehabilitation program announced by the state government. But after Mamata came to power, most of the imprisoned Maoists were not released. Anger spread among the Maoists again. Kishenji, the central leader of the Maoists, was assassinated in Jungle Mahal in November 2011. In these incidents, the Maoists became isolated. However, the Maoists, who had been silent for a long time, resumed their activities in the Jangalmahal area. They also started to organize inside. At one point, they also expressed anger against Mamata Banerjee. The Maoists demanded the release of their imprisoned leaders. Mamata did not respond.

In the 2018 panchayat elections, the indigenous community of Jangalmahal did not come to Mamata's side. This time they stood by the local party, non-party and BJP. In these areas, virtually the opposition, especially the BJP and the local tribal parties, did well. The result was frustration within the ruling party. But have the Maoists re-organized and gone to the polls under different names? Formerly Maoist-dominated Jhargram belonged to West Midnapore district. Now Jhargram has become a new district. The Maoists were once more active here. The Maoist stronghold was the Tula Vedha area of Jhargram. This time, the

Trinamool did not get a single seat out of 11 seats in this Tula Veda Gram Panchayat. The BJP got six. And the Adivasi Samonvaya Mancha got five seats. Again, Adivasi Samonvaya Mancha has got seven out of 10 in Bansh Pahari Gram Panchayat. The BJP got one. In Shimulpal panchayat, out of 11 seats, Adivasi Samonvaya Mancha and BJP have won three seats. In the wake of the Trinamool's victory in this panchayat election, the BJP did well in this Maoist-dominated jungle. In Jhargram, the BJP won 327 out of 607 gram panchayat seats, in West Midnapore, it won 418 out of 1,549 panchayat seats, in Bankura it won 234 out of 2,505 seats and in Purulia it won 4 out of 1,944 seats^[22]. At this time BJP's lotus flower was blooming in Jangalmahal. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the success of BJP party came across the entire Jangalmahal. Kunar Hembram from Jhargram Center won as a candidate of BJP party.

Two years later, TMC party under the leadership of honorable Mamata Banerjee come back again in Jangalmahal. The TMC party came back with pride in the state assembly election of 2021. In Jangalmahal they got back their lost land. Trinamool Congress won 25 seats out of 40 in Jangalmahal region. In other words, Gerua Shibir has won half of the number of seats in the Lok Sabha. However, the BJP has managed to control Purulia and Bankura. But they had to practically collapse in West Midnapore and Jhargram. I tried to show the results of this election in a table.

Table 5: Election results

District	Total Seats	Won by TMC	Won by BJP	Won by other
Bankur	12	04	06	Nil
West Midnapore	15	14	01	Nil
Purulia	09	03	06	Nil
Jhargram	04	04	00	Nil

According to a section of the political observers, the people have directly benefited from various projects of the state government. People has benefited from the social welfare programs of the state government through projects like Duare Sarkar, Kanyashree or Swasthyasathi. The ruling party has clearly demanded that the Trinamool leader provide food, drink, education and employment to the people of Jangalmahal. But recently Maoist posters have been seen in different places in Jangalmahal again. Ahead of the 2021state Assembly elections, ISF (Indian Secular Front) leader Abbas Siddiqui has once again called on the indigenous people of the area against the negligence of the ruling government. Here the government's failure to develop the tribals was strongly publicized. When he came to power, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee promised to stand by the families of the missing and martyred in the hands of the Maoists. But that promise was not fulfilled. These martyrs and missing families of Jangalmahal have created a joint platform to realize their demands. Many members of the joint forum claim that the Maoists have killed and got jobs. And even though our people were killed, we didn't get jobs^[23]. Did not get government help. The question is, is the Maoists going to rise again in the Jangalmahal area?

Finding My Study

The root causes of unrest here in perpetual poverty among the tribal people here. Since the colonial period, the tribal community in the area has repeatedly revolted against the

government. They tried to restore the traditional rights which they had lost in colonial period. In fact they wanted to get back the traditional rights over the land, water and forest. Their demands did not stop after independence. If we look at the tribal uprisings here, it will be clear that there were some common demands among the tribal uprisings. Each revolt was an indirect indication of the establishment of unfettered rights over water, land and forests. For this reason, the Naxalite and Jharkhand movements spread to the districts of Jangalmahal.

It cannot be said that there was no development in the Jangalmahal area during the Left Front government. Many development programs have been adopted during the TMC Government period also. Drinking water supply, education, health, infrastructure has improved in every field. The standard of living has improved somewhat. But it is much less than necessary. Many government projects have been shut down or money allocations have been reduced. Two most important project i.e. Jangalmahal Action Plan (JAP) and Paschimanchal Unnayan Parshad (PUP) has come to a halt due to lack of funds. The amount of money allocated for these two projects gradually decreased which is evident in the table below.

Table 6: The amount of money allocated to the JAP ^[24]

Year	Allocated money	Project
2015-16	4000 crores	556
2016-17	40 crores	515
2017-18	10 crores	182
2018-19	8 crores 52 Lakhs	103
2019-20	00	00

Table 7: The amount of money allocated to the PUA ^[25]

Year	Allocated money	Project
2017-18	56 cores 8Lakhs	699
2018-19	14 cores 14 Lakhs	193
2019-20	0	0

Conclusion

There is no reason to underestimate the contribution of various projects of the State Government and the Central Government for the overall development of this Jangalmahal area. The communication system has improved a lot and drinking water supply has been provided. But it is much less than necessary. Indeed, the main cause of political instability in the area is Maoist activity. Poverty-stricken indigenous youth are enlisting in Maoist/Naxalite group. This is the main reason for the instability of electoral politics here. The uneducated and poverty-stricken tribal society here dreams of a better society under the Maoist/Naxalite ideology. It is true that the Maoists have not come out in public in recent times. But the real picture becomes clear when we go door to door to the people living in the remote villages of Jangalmahal territories. There is a lack of alternative employment and education. In fact, attempts are being made to use the emotions of the tribals for political gain but no permanent solution has been sought for the problems of their lives.

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