

Nepalese and Indian Maoists

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The theme of the article 'India's Disarmed Mao-ists' by Sumanta Banerjee [*Frontier*, January 28-February 3, 2007] is as follows :

The Nepalese Maoists have recently concluded a pact with the Severn Party alliance. Thereby they (the Maoists) have agreed to end a decade long armed insurrection. They have surrendered their weapons and dissolved the separate Governments of the liberated areas. They will participate in the coming elections and join the interim Government. This policy has been criticized by a certain representative of the Indian Maoists. Banerjee comes down heavily on the Indian Maoists. Violence, he declares, quite correctly, was never a cardinal doctrine in Marxism. It was only a means to an end, often necessary, though always deplorable. If a socialist society can be achieved through peaceful means, so much the better. The Nepalese Maoists apparently believe that this possibility now exists in their country. Banerjee believes that they are probably right. At least people should wait and see. Banerjee then goes on to castigate the Indian Maoists on two counts. They choose soft targets for their violence, poor villagers and so on, not daring to strike the real centres of power. (The same thing was said about the Naxalites in the late sixties and early seventies. Why kill poor, ill-paid constables, rather than the rich and powerful people, who control the state?) Banerjee contrasts this policy with the courage of revolutionaries of the British era : Bhagat Singh throwing a bomb in the Legislative Assembly, the Chattagram revolutionaries taking over the local armoury. He might have added Jatin Mukherjee, with four companions, fighting a pitched battle with British troops, the INA, the naval mutiny of 1946 and so on. Certainly the Naxa-lites, from the sixties to the present day, have not matched these.

The second point that Banerjee brings up against the Indian Maoists is even more grave. He claims that they ignore the Sangh Parivar and Hindu Fascism, which is the chief danger facing India today. In contrast the Congress is "faction ridden, nationally weakened, ideologically confused", thus presumably no great threat. What proves that the Maoists are blind to the danger of Hindu fundamentalism? The Sangh Parivar has a strong presence in places like Jharkhand and Chattisgarh, which are likewise supposed to be centres of Maoism. Banerjee implies that if the Maoists had realized the danger of Hindu Fascism, they would have got rid of it by now, at least in those areas.

As for the Nepalese Maoists their present position is all the more important since they had progressed further on the path of revolution than any other leftist force in the history of South Asia. A large part of Nepal, one quarter or one third according to some estimates, had been liberated. Nothing like this happened elsewhere on the Indian sub-continent, even in the heyday of Telen-gana, Tebhaga or the early Naxalbari movement. It is true that the Nepalese Royal Army was largely a ceremonial body. The Indian armed forces and even the police are far harder nuts to crack. However, this does not lessen the heroism and achievement of the Maoists. More-over the Nepalese Government had received financial and military assistance from various foreign quarters. The Nepalese Government has been forced to negotiate with the revolutionaries and come to terms. This was not the case during any other revolutionary movement in this part of the world.

Now the revolutionaries have given up everything that they won through ten years of hard struggle and the loss of some 13,000 lives. What have they gained in return? The power of king has been considerably reduced, even though monarchy has not been abolished. Nepal, the only Hindu state in the world, has become secular, much to the chagrin of the Sangh Parivar. These are important gains but are they enough to justify all the suffering and loss of life? Moreover, if these are to be the only aims of a struggle, violent or otherwise, then nobody in India would need to raise a finger. India, after all, is already a secular Republic.

Benerjee is extremely angry with the Indian Maoists for declaring that a people's army is necessary in order to safeguard people's power. No Marxist party has glorified violence for its own sake or preferred a blood-stained rod to power, when a non-violent path was available. The only possible exceptions in the pantheon of leftist thinkers are Georges Sorel and Fanon. (Fanon believed that fighting the colonizer physically would help the colonized regain his self-respect. But even Fanon did not advocate violence uncritically or unconditionally.) (1) However, if power does not exactly grow out of the barrel of a gun, at least it can be only safeguarded through the control of guns. This is proved by history, both distant and recent.

Much has been made of the coming of radical regimes in many parts of Latin America to power through elections. The CPM leaders point this out to prove the viability of the peaceful path of elections, in this day and age. No one says that the parliamentary path should be completely abandoned. But, in the past, Washington backed military coups and take-overs overthrew moderately leftist regimes, which had come to power through legitimate elections. Guatemala in the nineteen fifties, Brazil in the sixties, Chile in the seventies. In Nicaragua, the San-dinistas came to power by means of a revolution, but afterwards followed a moderate path, allowing a multiparty system of Government and a mixed economy. Such moderation gained no kudos in the White House. Throughout the eighties, the US funded, counter revolutionary contras (remember the Iran-Contra scandal, involving President Reagan) carried on warfare against the Sandinistas, leading to their electoral defeat in February 1990.

Nor are histories of ceasefires and peace pacts that end revolutionary wars very bright. In the eighties, a large part of Central America was in flames, while the Contras were trying to unseat the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, in neighbouring E L Salvadore and Guatemala, revolutionaries were fighting against extremely reactionary and ruthless Governments. Peace was established, in E L Salvadore in 1992, in Guatemala, some four years later. But the Governments in question, under US tutelage, hardly followed the terms of the peace treaties. In E L Salvadore, for instance, the Government had promised to reduce the number of military and semi-military personnel by a certain percentage. This was done only after more such personnel had been recruited. Thus the absolute number of soldiers remained almost the same. It was an act of those who, in the words of Shakespeare, "keep the word of promise to our ears / and break it to our hopes". The common people and radicals have been forced to start the rebellion and civil war again, albeit on a smaller scale.

True, things have changed somewhat in the past seven or eight years. Leftist Governments of various hues have come to power in several Latin American states: Brazil, Chile, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Uruguay. (Can the Kirchner Government of Argentina be called leftist in any way?) This is what the CPM leaders have been telling the Nepalese Maoists, persuading them to change their ways. Yet the Latin American

scenario is rather complex. The leftism of Lucio Inacio Lula da Silva in Brazil or Michella Bachelet in Chile does not go much beyond rhetoric. Perhaps they are afraid of meeting the fate of their predecessors, the exiled Goulart and the murdered Allende. The Sandinistas have returned to the drivers' seat in Nicaragua after more than sixteen years. However, this has been at the cost of some damaging compromises and alliances. The fate of the more radical left is by no means certain. Evo Morales of Bolivia and Rafael Carrea of Ecuador are likely to face violent resistance on the part of the reactionaries. Hugo Chavez in Venezuela was briefly ousted and imprisoned in 2006. If events did not follow the usual pattern of events in Latin America, it was because of a strong mass movement and because Chavez enjoyed strong support among the armed forces. However, the-ruling classes and military chiefs, backed by the USA, have by no means given up hopes. In Mexico, the election of 2006 was probably rigged in favour of the conservatives.

Nor does East Europe offer a shining example of transition from "totalitarian Communism" to demo-cracy. Manipulation of elections by forces within the reborn ruling classes and the might of the US state is blatant. On many occasions only the candidate backed by the West is allowed to win.(2)

In this context, it is doubtful whether the Nepalese Maoists have been wise to give up everything that made up their basis of strength, relying only on the alleged sanctity of election and the goodwill of the ruling classes. However, this is not the only reason for disquiet. The Nepalese Maoists have laid down not only their arms, but their ideology as well. This is clear from their publications, speeches and interviews for the last one year or so. They have violently and contemptuously attacked all leftist leaders and movements of the past. This is not criticism and selection, winnowing the grain from the chaff, but a total rejection. They claim that there must be a New Leftist agenda, for the twenty-first century. However, this new agenda looks suspiciously like the old agenda of PLG (privatisation, liberalisation and globalisation). Prachanda, the Nepalese Maoist leader, has invited Indian industrialists to his country. He welcomes foreign investment, provided the profit is re-invested locally. Not much is being said about land reforms, welfare measures and the like and that too in a country where the lot of the common people is far from enviable. The market backed by state power, will solve all problems.

The love of Prachanda for India is also rather puzzling. It is not just love for India, as a neighbouring country and people. The anti- Indian bias common among certain Nepalese should be corrected. However, the newborn affection of Prachanda is concentrated on the Indian state and its representation. He is full of gratitude to the Indian Government, which helped to carry out the peace negotiations. Most ominous of all, the Nepalese Maoists today are deeply influenced by the CPM. It was Yechury, a top leader of the CPM who in effect, brokered the deal. Prachanda announced his intention of coming to Kolkata in order to study the industrial policy of the Left Front Government. If and when his party gains a share of the political pie, one might expect replies of Singur and Nandigram in Nepal.

The Indian Maoists have reasons for not being excessively pleased by the metamorphoses of their erstwhile Himalayan comrades. It was once believed that there was a grand Maoist International in South Asia, stretching from Pashupati to Tirupati, i.e., from Nepal to Andhra. The Nepalese Maoists now declare that this was never the case. They had some loose ideological link with their Indian counterparts but no organisational link. Even so, there must have been some cross-border movements and

activities of the revolutionaries—cross-border “terrorism” in Government terminology. The Nepalese Maoists, poachers turned game keepers, will certainly put a stop to this, if and when they gain a share of the state power.

Even more important is the “demonstration effect” of the turn round, on the part of the strongest group of Maoists in South Asia. The Indian media, as well as the CPM, have welcomed the return of the prodigal to the fold and inviting others to follow suit. It is another step in the triumph of globalisation and the unfolding of the “end of history”. Possibly Banerjee has ignored or underestimated this point.

Now about the Indian Maoists. Much of the criticism put forward by Banerjee is certainly valid. The Maoists have sometimes used needless and excessive violence. Quite possibly some innocent villagers have been executed as ‘Spies’. Civilian damage might have been limited. Vietnamese Communists used to say that terrorism or “excessive” violence (but who decides what is excessive?) were hallmarks of weak or incompetent revolutionaries. Also the tactics and strategies might be questioned.

However, one should remember that such charges are brought against almost all revolutionary movements. The revolutionaries of the British era, whom Banerjee praises, did not always target only Viceroy, Governors and district magistrates. They were sometimes accused, rightly or wrongly, of robbing and rendering unprotected old women. Such a story appears in *Four Chapters*, a novel by Rabindranath, which virulently attacks the revolutionaries. Not all who perished at the hands of the revolutionaries during the French, Russian, Chinese and other revolutions were aristocrats and the like. In times of crisis, the ruling classes always push forward sections of the common people as cannon fodder. The Salwa Judum is such an example. Naxalites should be very careful to make distinctions, lest they play into the hands of the ruling classes and have turn inter-class contradictions into intra-class ones.

Can it be maintained that the Indian Maoists are cowards, who attack only soft targets? The attack on a jail in Jehanabad and setting free all the inmates seem to tell a different story.

An even more important accusation which Banerjee brings against the Indian Maoists is that they do not fight the greater danger of Hindu fascism, instead targeting the “faction ridden, nationally weakened, ideologically confused” Congress. One might concede that the Sangh Parivar and Hindu Fascism present the greatest danger to the Indian people at this moment. However, Banerjee seriously underestimated the Congress, dismissing it as a nonentity, powerless to help or harm. After all, the Congress holds power at the Centre, albeit with the help of a coalition. It is likewise the ruling party in several states. Anyone who opposes the Indian state, whether in a violent or non-violent way, or even tries to negotiate with it, must take the Congress into account.

Thus the Congress, though certainly not what it was in the heyday of Nehru and Indira, still possesses plenty of clout. It is “nationally weakened” in a relative, not absolute sense. As for the Congress being faction-ridden, it was always so, practically from the moment of its birth in 1885. Indeed the Congress was meant to be a loose, umbrella type of organisation, rather than a homogeneous, tightly knit party. If, factionalism could kill, the Congress would have died long ago or not been born at all! Banerjee can recall the battle of giants before Independence. Moderates versus extremists, pro-changers versus no-changers, Gandhi versus Subhas. Deshbandhu and

Subhas even started separate organisations, the Swaraj Party and Forward Bloc, while insisting that they remained part of the Congress. That Subhas was expelled was another matter. Immediately after Independence, Nehru had to put down opponents of some stature, such as Purushattom Tandon. In the late sixties the struggle between “Indicate” and “Syndicate”, i.e., Indira and a powerful group of leaders, Morarji Desai, Kamraj, Nijlingappa etc. led to the split in the Congress. The two parties born from the split were not free from factionalism either. It is true that Nehru, with his towering personality and immense popularity, managed to paper over the cracks. Indira with her populist measurers, vote catching image and no nonsense authoritarianism, could also control the party. Perhaps she even encouraged factionalism, so that her own power could be unchallenged. But fear of revolt within the party was probably one of the factors that led her to declare the Emergency.

Nor is there much “ideological confusion” in the Congress at least at the top. The Three Musketeers who control the party and the Government (with Sonia holding a veto power), Manmohan, Chidambaram and Montek are perfectly clear as to what they want. Hundred percent privatisations, hundred percent foreign investment in every sector, abolition of all labour laws, abolition of reservation for the small scale sector and so on. They are total devotees of the PLG doctrine and Washington Consensus. If they cannot carry out the entire programme at one stroke, it is because of certain constraints: the pressure of coalition politics, fear of a popular backlash, the Sonia factor. Even the NDA was not free from such constraints. The present Government seems to have adopted a policy of “reform by stealth” or “one step forward, two steps back”. Disinvestments, the SEZs (Special Economic Zones), FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) in the retail sector - everything is going on, if in a slightly slow and roundabout way.

It is not clear what Banerjee means when he declares that the Maoists are soft on the Sangh Parivar and Hindu Fascism. The Congress and the BJP-led coalitions have alternately held power at the Centre. This has also been the case in some of the regions where the Maoists are strongest: Madhya Pradesh, now bifurcated into Chattisgarh, Bihar, now bifurcated into Jharkhand, Andhra. Can Banerjee prove that the Maoists have been quiet under the rule of the Sangh Parivar and its allies and active only when the Congress was in power? Also, the Sangh Parivar is in competition with the Naxalites in many regions. What does Banerjee want the Naxalites to do, to prove their hatred of Hindu Fascism? Blow up BJP office in New Delhi? Murder Vajpayee, Advani and Narendra Modi? But then he would be the first to accuse them of mindless terrorism.

Banerjee is, of course, free to think that the Nepalese Maoists, who incidentally, now feature in the “Play- boy” have followed a wholly correct path, while the Indian Maoists are evil and foolish. However, his one-sided praise and attack needs some balancing or factual support. The contrast that Banerjee draws between the weak, faction-ridden Congress and a strong united BJP is also over drawn. The BJP is no disciplined cadre based party. Its “Congressi-zation” has been rapid in the last few years. The rebellion of top leaders, such as Uma Bharati and Kalyan Singh, Sudarshan throwing his “Sudarshan Chakra” at Vajpayee and Advani, are more than straws in the wind.(3)

References :

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