

Patnaik and his Detractors

Dilip Simeon

[Professor Prabhat Patnaik's criticism (<<http://www.pragoti.org>><http://www.pragoti.org>) of the opponents of the Left Front's policies and actions in Nandigram is instructive.]

The title of Patnaik's article is "The left and its "Intellectual" Detractors'. Although many critics of the CPI (M) may not call themselves intellectuals, there are undoubtedly some scholars among them. Patnaik places their intellect within inverted commas. This grammatical sneer conveys the impression that the CPM's detractors are mindless nullities. Patnaik's contemptuous title suggests a mental annihilation of criticism.

In Patnaik's view, genuine politics consists in being able to distinguish between "alternative constellations of political forces" that represent the 'camp of the people' and the camp of those hostile to 'the people'. Since the Left for him is by definition the CPM and its allies, it follows that the correct delineation of these camps may only be made by his party. Many of his comments on political correctness deal with the struggle against communal-fascist forces. This is significant. On the one hand people have before them the recent spectacle of the author Taslima Nasreen being hounded out of Kolkata by a contingent of these very forces. On the other, as late as 1989 his party was in an electoral alliance (euphemistically named 'seat-adjustment') with the BJP that assisted its political growth.

It is clear that the 'camp of the people' undergoes frequent changes. In 1989 it included the front organisations of the RSS. Given his assumption of partisan infallibility, it follows that Patnaik's party made the correct analysis 18 years ago, and has made yet another correct analysis today, when presumably the camp of the people includes corporate interest groups and real-estate developers. If this is the level of discernment that determines the CPM's political decisions, surely one may ask whether the political emptiness to which Patnaik refers has not entered the portals of his own party, and whether the retention of political power has not become an end in itself.

Patnaik states that the failure to distinguish between types of violence, to condemn all violence with equal abhorrence, to place all perpetrators of violence on an equal footing, "amounts in fact to a condemnation of nothing. To say that all are equally bad is not even morally meaningful." He condemns this "messianic moralism", and scorns those who adopt such positions as apolitical "Olympian moralists" who have removed themselves from "the messy world of politics". Interestingly, Patnaik's observations in (elliptical) defence of certain forms of violence, could be made by any left or right-wing extremist. Violence has a tendency to blur political distinctions. Such arguments are in fact raised by many political partisans who practise the tactical deployment of force to achieve their ends, and who believe that their own good intentions are the touchstone for converting murder and goondaism into virtuous acts. If there is messianism at work here, it is evident in the actions of those who believe themselves to be beyond good and evil, because all their actions are already certified by History. If

political damage has been incurred by the Left Front, surely it is more on account of the images of masked men on motor-cycles carrying out armed actions in the name of the CPM, rather than because of irritating articles written by its detractors. There is an established tradition of non-violent resistance in India. Gandhi was no Olympian moralist, if by this phrase Patnaik wants to denote a distaste for politics. Nor did Gandhi say that all violent protagonists were equally bad. What he did say made sense to ordinary people and spoke to everyday experience. He said, "What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty or democracy?" His commitment to non-violence was arguably his way of ensuring the evolution of a democratic public sphere. So close was Gandhi to the messiness of everyday life that in August 1947 he managed to touch the hearts of the people and thus prevented a repetition of the terrible events known as the Great Calcutta Killing of 1946, an achievement for which even his severest critics gave him credit.

Criticisms of abstract moralism apart, Patnaik ignores a central concern of the CPM's 'detractors'. This is the sheer fact of the use of a political para-military in Nandigram. Granted that criminal acts were being committed by political groups interested in exploiting popular grievances in Nandigram, a sustained non-violent campaign could have been undertaken to re-establish the rights of those driven away by force. Such a course would have enhanced his party's prestige. Along with that, the state government was always entitled to use legitimate force. However in March 2007, it sent in irregulars along with the police, and in November, it sent in hundreds of vigilantes after neutralising the police. (Patnaik refers to this as "re-occupation"). The Home Secretary of the state used the phrase "war-like situation" to describe the state of affairs.

The deliberate disablement of the police by the political executive in order to enable the violent activities of paramilitary gangs, can only be described as state-terror. If this is an example of the centrality (to use Patnaik's phrase) that the CPM accords to politics, people are in a dangerous situation indeed. It was precisely this reminded the LF's critics of Gujarat in 2002, notwithstanding the crucial difference that the Nandigram action was not a communally inspired massacre. West Bengal's government violated its oath of office by depriving its political opponents of constitutionally guaranteed protections and subjecting them to blatantly partisan violence. This was illegal, politically inept and ethically indefensible. *No amount of polemical scorn vented on critics can erase this fact.* This is not an abstract question, nor will it go away. The Chief Minister has apologised for his words, but not for his deeds. Patnaik could have addressed this issue, but did not.

It is good that Patnaik has raised the issue of the contemporary vaporisation of politics. One symptom of this phenomenon is the impossibility of rational conversation, because of the rapid degeneration of debate into personal attacks, ad hominem remarks, scorn and derision of the kind reflected in his own use of polemic to deal with what is a serious crisis of legitimacy for leftism. Undoubtedly, many sectors of the democratic polity and not just the CPM, indulge in such destructive forms of speech. But surely it is to the advantage of the CPM that reasoned discussion and a willingness to deal with inconvenient

truths not be completely overtaken by blind loyalty and disregard for facts? Should political debate be reduced to a form of religious propaganda? (Our opponents' wrong-doings are crimes, but we only commit 'mistakes'). If no one will allow argument and dialogue to change their minds, why will anyone join the Left? If all political parties are always right, are people not living in a subjectivist universe, where the truth has been politically abolished and judgement replaced by whim? Intellectual shut-mindedness and physical intimidation are two sides of the same absolutist coin. They might bring satisfaction for awhile, but have always been the harbingers of disintegration. Patnaik should cast his critical gaze inwards—it might yet yield beneficial results. □□□