

Whither Maoist Revolution?

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Is Maoism in India really the only response to poverty and lack of development? Is an armed rebellion the only way to change the way the Indian State operates? Will such a movement lead to a better future for underprivileged people in this country? Are other forms of mass democratic struggles an alternative option at all?

These are the questions that haunted this writer as many concerned people sat through a public hearing on drought at Daltonganj in Jharkhand's Palamu district late October this year. Questions that are not new and have been debated repeatedly within the various strands of the Indian left movement for several decades now, with no clear answers as yet.

While there was this young woman standing on the stage, slowly edging towards the mike, patiently waiting for her turn to speak. She need not have said anything at all. Her emaciated, frail frame, the harassed look on her face and the tears silently welling up in her sunken eyes had already conveyed to the gathering this was another tale of unmitigated tragedy.

Barely in her early twenties, she had been diagnosed with tuberculosis a few months ago. Her husband was already on his deathbed due to the same affliction as there was no public health centre near her village. Treatment in town was obviously unaffordable. The drought raging in the district, reported to be the worst in over half a century, would end up wiping out her entire family she explained in a quiet, matter of fact tone.

The small 'jury' of three or four who had come from Delhi and Ranchi to listen to the woes of Palamu's villagers felt much, much smaller. For her horror story was only one out of some 3000 similar ones of neglect, deprivation and outright desperation that tensely waited to be recalled that early winter afternoon.

The old man who never got his old age pension, the abandoned widow on the verge of starvation, the landless worker who slogged for wages that never arrived, the child born with a deformed hip a decade ago and still hobbling his way through childhood. This contrasted with the fact that thousands of crores of rupees had been allocated for employment guarantee schemes, subsidised rations, public health and infrastructure schemes – all siphoned off somewhere between the Indian capital New Delhi and the state capital Ranchi. Stolen by a kleptocracy that dares to call itself the 'elected' representatives of the Indian people.

And yet, poverty and lack of development are not the only reasons why the Naxals or Maoists, the MCC or whatever one wants to call them thrive in Palamu. It is also the lack of respect and dignity that the dalits and adivasis of these parts have suffered for centuries, their abject humiliation by the 'upper castes' continuing without redress in Independent India.

Many, many months ago when the first movements for justice started in this district they were led by the Communist Party of India, the Socialists, the Gandhians. Struggles against feudal practices like the 'right to the first night', which forced the brides of Dalit men to spend the first fortnight after marriage as concubines of upper-caste landlords- a 'custom' enforced at gun-point. Or against

the practice of bonded labour whereby generations of families slaved for their 'creditors', the interest on their loans accumulating faster than the rivers of sweat they were able to shed.

In the seventies, when these popular struggles died down due to changing priorities or exhaustion or corruption or whatever of these organisations the Naxals had moved into this vacuum- with their guns. So somehow it is not just the failure of the Indian state to deliver the basic needs of the people but the inability of mass, democratic movements to maintain a consistent long-term presence too.

Do the Maoists have popular support? Among the landless, the poor, the 'lower castes', the adivasis the answer obviously would be yes as in the initial years their interventions did help wipe out the worst of feudal excesses. Most of their cadres come from these oppressed sections of society though the occasional 'upper caste' youth too have joined.

Have their actions led to an overall improvement in the lives of the people? Well, yes and no. Yes, because as mentioned their activities have boosted the morale of the poor and the oppressed. No, because a high morale is all very well but a highly nutritious meal or a functioning high school would be still better and these are still elusive.

The Maoists with simple Newtonian logic had achieved the first step of doing away with the fear of feudal oppression. Greater the inertia of an object, greater the force required to move it. Shoot a few really bad, 'upper-caste' warlords in the area and this has the force-multiplier effect of, at least for a short while, moving mountains of unaccounted power.

The next several steps of organising people, winning all the basic things they crave for- food, water, healthcare, escape from poverty and so on has proved far more difficult for the Maoists. In other words, the details of day-to-day life are missing from their strategy. There is only so much martyrdom and bloodshed any population can take.

It is also true though, once the gun has been taken up by the oppressed, the State weighs in heavily on the side of the local oppressors. The latter themselves escalate the levels of violence and it becomes impossible to do anything in the open. No more public meetings, no rallies, no discussions and debates among the people, no mass organisations. In other words none of those basic ingredients required to build a future, participative people's democracy.

At the same time, the underground- that dark and dangerous space so tantalising from a safe distance to angst-ridden, urban radicals- is fraught with enough problems of its own. The constant hiding, the secrecy and suspicion bordering on paranoia, the inability to communicate with activists or carry out political education of cadre, the costly lapses and subsequent losses- all leading to the near negation of the movement's original objectives.

Every now and then a creative Maoist cadre somewhere will try to do something different at the local level like run schools, crackdown on social evils, mobilise people for militant struggles that don't involve the use of arms. These struggles, wherever they have occurred, have always been hugely popular with the people. Those in power, who had complained about the violence of the

Maoists, would now worry about their non-violent methods and at some point of time step in with their jackboots to crush the experiment.

Unfortunately, the Maoist leadership too sees these experiments as ideologically soft, reformist or even worse as too 'Gandhian' and doesn't really believe in them in any way. It occasionally allows them to happen with the idea that 'deviants' within their fold can always be brought back to the 'correct path' one way or the other. The lives of the people, after all, can really change for the better only when the 'New Democratic Revolution' happens.

In the worldview of the Maoist ideologues the physics of the armed struggle will some day square the grand mathematical equation of social injustice on one side with the predations of capitalism and imperialism on the other. Their solutions are alarmingly final ones, all derived from the dead abstractions of physics and mathematics, whether they correspond with the living biological needs of the faceless 'people' and 'masses' or not.

Nobody knows what this 'New Democratic Revolution' really means, how many hands and feet it has or whether it prefers sugar and milk with its coffee or not. Or for that matter, why the Dalits and Adivasis of India should fight for this particular model of the future and not something else. The indigenous people of the Indian subcontinent for example may be better off fighting for complete autonomy from the rest of India instead of taking on the burden of carrying out the entire 'Indian revolution'. And if the Dalits and Adivasis should take up the gun why not poor Muslims, many of whose social and economic indicators are even worse? Also if this Revolution does happen some day, why should it be confined to the borders of India – why not South Asia as a whole or even beyond?

Again, nobody even knows when this Revolution is supposed to happen or be finally declared 'successful' but it is believed passionately that nothing but the gun can lead the people of India to this utopia. As one of the Maoist ideologues caught by the police recently in Jharkhand reportedly told the media with frightening clarity, 'the bloodshed will stop only when the Revolution is over'. He did not bother to set a timeframe- they could be fighting for the next 200 years – all their martyrs looking nice on wall posters in the meanwhile. Will there be anyone out there left to recognise the 'victory' when it finally comes?

Mao was right when he said 'power flows from the barrel of a gun'. The problem is about all the things he did not mention and that do not flow from guns—like water, food, medicines, peace or ultimately for that matter, even guarantees of justice and democracy. Making a fetish of armed struggle to the neglect of every other way of operating is not serious politics at all and rather indicative of the nihilist mindset behind such strategies- 'jalaa do, mitaa do, yeh duniya agar mil bhi jaaye tho kya hei'.

The Indian State too on its part is appropriately barbaric in everything it does, making each wild accusation and conspiracy theory of the Maoists seem like a profound, well-studied thesis. Rs 470 crores is the sum given by the Central Government for Jharkhand's anti-Naxalite operations- to be spent on more arms for the police and more uniforms for the unemployed youth who go on to become the Indian police. If that sum were spent sincerely on the kind of people queuing up to complain at the Daltonganj public hearing there may have been no need for either the Naxal or the noxious cop.

Instead the State builds schools in the Naxal dominated areas and fills them with policemen- there are 3000 schools right now in Jharkhand full of Cobras and Scorpions or similar species lower down the evolutionary order. It is clueless about who is really a Maoist and who is not so it ends up blindly lashing out at some innocent folk within the reach of its very short and clumsy arms.

Again, the State, for all its prattle about 'rule of law', also does nothing to encourage any form of peaceful resistance either. Mahendra Singh of the CPI(ML) Liberation, the brave and only MLA in the Jharkhand Assembly exposing corruption in high places, was gunned down in broad daylight in early 2005. An investigation by an official committee has implicated a senior police officer, who continues to rise up the hierarchy instead of being booked for murder!

Just a year and half ago Lalit Mehta, a bright young engineer and certainly no Maoist, was shot dead in Palamu district as he exposed corruption and organised social audits of the NREGA or employment guarantee scheme. His killers, local politically connected mafia, have not yet been apprehended and may never be. All this obviously sends out a chilling message to anyone who wants to follow Lalit's path of 'unarmed' activism.

The truth is that those who run the Indian State and sections of the Indian population who benefit from its policies really don't give a damn for the people the Naxals or other left forces are trying to mobilise. The Dalits, Adivasis and the poor in general can all shrivel up and die for all they care. Whether these folks want it or not they will be subjected to a perverse development process that involves driving nails through their flesh and laying rail lines across their bones so that a small minority of Indians can have their 'infrastructure' and feel like a 'superpower'. If they choose to fight back they will be crushed like flies- the endless legions of unemployed Indian youth from around the country marshalled in uniforms for this genocide.

That is precisely why when the masked Maoist leader Kishenji openly mocks the Indian State on prime time television and invites it to battle he should be careful, for he may get exactly what he wishes. The State would like nothing better than a war against its own citizens, as it becomes another opportunity to make lots of money, replenish its arsenal, demolish whatever little democratic space is left in the country and rollback all resistance to its skewed policies for decades to come. A war, for which the Maoists too, despite all their bravado, are simply not prepared well enough.

Both the Maoist leadership and the Indian State it seems are keen on playing with each other only one game called 'revolution and counter-revolution', which ends only when either of the two players ceases to exist forever.

One thing is very clear though. If a new game is to emerge forcefully on the Indian stage soon, far greater number of Indian citizens need to get down to the task of solving the problems of poverty, oppression and injustice than involved currently. The situation today, more than ever before, calls for the building of many, many more creative mass movements to establish the rights of the people than out there right now.

As the late K Balagopal pointed out so insightfully in a piece on violence versus non-violence in the *Economic and Political Weekly* a few years ago, neither

method has really made much difference to the course of Indian state policies since Independence. In other words, there is simply not enough happening to bring about change given the scale of the country's various problems.

There is no point though in blaming either the Indian State or the Maoists, both of whom will continue to do only what they know best. While Indian democracy is too important to be left to 'elected' politicians Maoist martyrdom by itself will also never be enough to change the Indian State.

It is for the rest of India to decide whether they are going to be mere spectators, pliant players or makers of a different destiny for themselves and their society. □□□

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