

Mao vs Marx

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In politics, the truth is almost always counter-intuitive. In this realm—where the art of the possible intersects in unexpected ways with the science of the impossible—ominous portents of anarchy often conceal messianic promises of deliverance. Lalgarh, today, is perhaps the starkest symbol of this confounding cocktail, which has come to characterise the polity of CPM-led Left Front-ruled West Bengal.

What distinguishes the Lalgarh uprising from other violent incidents that have scarred Bengal in recent years is that the cynical calculus of competitive electoral politics has had absolutely no bearing on the movement. The insurgency of the Lalgarh population has been shaped by its experience of a state that has registered its presence in the area through the brutal effectiveness of its repressive apparatuses but has been absent as a purveyor of emancipatory social development.

That is precisely why Lalgarh should not be classified as a tribal identity movement. The majority population of Lalgarh is tribal, but the anti-competitive orientation of their struggle, thanks to the objective politico-economic conditions that have shaped them, serves to invert the logic of identitarian movements, which always articulate their politics in supremacist terms of ethno-cultural domination.

The People's Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCAPA)-led revolt, which was sparked seven months ago by a repressive combing operation launched by the state police in Lalgarh and surrounding areas in response to a Maoist mine attack on the chief minister's cavalcade, has steadily become a two-pronged movement of resistance and social reconstruction through participatory management of rudimentary public services such as healthcare developed by the local community.

The Bengal government was extremely cagey until a few weeks ago to launch a crackdown. That was largely due to the movement's mass insurrectionary character. In Lalgarh, violence has been a collective expression of disaffection against the oppressive socio-economic order the state defends. Even the guerrilla operations carried out by Maoists in the area have become a seamless extension of this insurrection, which enjoys wide-ranging legitimacy. It is this legitimacy, which derives from an assertion of popular sovereignty, that had compelled the West Bengal regime to keep its Stalinist proclivities—seen in Nandigram—in check for so long.

A modern State formation also acts in the name of popular sovereignty. But in an insurrectionary situation, as in Lalgarh, the government comes to be seen as an external threat to the sovereignty of the people. That renders the legal-illegal dichotomy problematic and makes it difficult for the state to monopolise violence to crush popular movements in the name of curbing anti-sovereign insurgency. The CPI(M)-led Left Front Government could ill-afford such a risk after the electoral drubbing.

Alas, Lalgarh has squandered that advantage, thanks to a tactical blunder by the Maoists. The recent claims by various Maoist leaders that the PCAPA was a front of their underground party has given the repressive arms of both the

Bengal government and, to a lesser extent, the Centre, the alibi they had been waiting for. They know the police operation in Lalgah will now be widely perceived as a legitimate measure to protect popular sovereignty from Maoist depredations.

The Maoists, thanks to their doctrinaire commitment to agrarian revolution and the tactical emphasis on guerrilla struggles exclusively in rural areas of the country, have failed to mobilise the working class in the urban areas. Their time-worn approach of encirclement of cities by a people's army raised from the countryside has militarised their politics; their roving guerrilla squads carry out dramatic raids on behalf of a rural population they have barely organised. It has thus been easy for the Indian ruling classes to delegitimise it as an 'outside' threat to 'internal security'.

The Maoists may have a significant numerical and ideological presence within the Lalgah movement. But the PCAPA, diverse in its composition, is not a Maoist front. The situation was an opportunity for the Maoists to quietly provide the PCAPA logistical support and ideological orientation to expand the movement politically through the aggregation of other disenfranchised sections of Bengal's society into one movement, which would articulate a polyphonous critique of a larger political-economic logic constitutive of their various miseries. That would, among other things, transform Maoism into an ideological current, which is always internal to an ever-expanding constellation of popular movements.

Under such conditions, the character of political violence, even when guerrilla tactics are deployed, would always be insurrectionary. The State would then be hard put to delegitimise such violence, or the movements that generate them, as anti-sovereign. It would also reclaim Maoism from its current sectarian militarism that has, often enough, ended up replicating the same repressive forms of state power.

Clearly, the Maoists' conception of the party as a priori state-form, which seeks to subordinate various registers of struggle to its doctrinaire conception of politics, is their Achilles' heel. This predisposes their organisation to the same kind of social-democratic and Stalinist degeneration that has afflicted the CPI(M)-led Left Front's strain of working-class politics in Bengal. In social democracy, there is no place for transformative politics because it treats the State, which actually is constitutive of an exploitative system, as a neutral instrument that merely needs to be controlled to enforce equity. The absurd Stalinist split the CPI(M) has managed to create between development and democracy is a symptom of this social-democratic malaise.

The Maoists, who too call their party the CPI(M)—Communist Party of India (Maoist)—should make sure their uncanny resemblance with the original CPI(M) stop right there. And that can probably begin with their redefinition of the organisation as a movement-form, where Maoism is envisioned as a dynamic organisational impulse and the party is always in a state of formation through a process of perpetual politicisation at the grassroots. □□□