

Beyond Maoist?

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It is always easy to criticize and dismiss an argument in its weakest formulation. Attacking the policies of the security-centric Indian state establishment, particularly the Home Minister, today does not need much daring. Prime Minister, however, in his address to state police chiefs in September 2009 said: don't forget that the Maoist movement has support among the poorest of the poor in the country. Those on the left opposing the impending armed state offensive often invoke this quote from the PM to buttress their point about how these are really poor people, innocent civilians and ordinary villagers who will suffer if the offensive is undertaken.

But when one looks at the repressive face of the Indian state gearing up for the offensive, it is almost unbelievable that it is garnering all its strength to take on such poor suffering beings as constitute the adivasis of Central India! Is it only because the state is repressive in nature that it finds the poorest of the poor so dangerous or is it that they are 'actually' dangerous? Why does the same state, sometimes so benign with a progressive constitution, which also promotes NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), which also provides, even if most grudgingly, different rights, want to put its foot down in this case to eliminate the 'problem'? Surely then the poorest of the poor must be dangerous people, there must be something about them, something fantastic, invisible to a flat, humanist, do-good perspective, which only sees them as 'suffering' and in need of 'rights'! What is the power they have, which the mighty Indian state fears and wants to eliminate as soon as they can? One has to understand the power they have as precisely the poorest of the poor, in fact, over and above being Maoists or supporting Maoists.

The state fears not their guns, not their violence, not their taxing the local population, not that they will be another parallel power structure. What the state and Indian democracy fears is precisely that they are the poorest of the poor, that they have nothing to lose (and hence cannot be bought over or assimilated) and hence can launch and be the motive force for an unrelenting political transformation beyond their immediate grievances, the loss of their land or livelihood. Indeed the Maoist movement, or any adivasi formation engaged in armed struggle, does not even have a list of demands that can possibly be fulfilled or addressed by the government. A dynamic seems to be unfolding where they are not willing to settle down with even say 'peace with justice' but, like those who 'have nothing to lose but their chains', are aiming for 'a world to win'. Surely if they are waging a war without any specific demands, that must be aiming for the world—a war waged by those who have no place in the world.

Thus the Indian state does not fear this one Dantewada—in fact it has left Dantewada festering with the 'Maoist virus' for several years and only now is planning a decisive assault. It does and can tolerate it; a lot of people in fact think of the Maoists as just another power structure which acts at the behest of this or that power group, or on their own, doing extortion and so on, which means that the Maoists as only an armed group could be tolerated and assimilated.

However, if the poorest of the poor, as Maoists, are aiming for a world to win, then, fair enough, the Indian state must fear not this one (isolated) Dantewada as a local event, but that there can be not just one but two, three, many Dantewadas. Tebhaga, Telegana, Naxalbari, Srikakulam, Jharkhand, Dantewada, Lalgarh—aren't these the many Dantewadas spread over India's recent history? What if they were to come up simultaneously in different parts of the country—all at the same time? After all, these are people with 'global ambitions', present in neighbouring Nepal, who want to overthrow the Indian state singing the *Internationale*, are not only talking about tribal identity or tribal rights, support the nationality struggles in the North-East and Kashmir and hence have a much larger agenda, if not vision. If this 'virus' spreads this will not only weaken the Indian state politically, which it already has, but also militarily. Naxalbari in 1967 inaugurated this emergence of the poorest of the poor as precisely such a political subject: this legacy continues today in so many different forms all across the country but it is as part of the Maoist movement that the struggle against the ruling order has come to a head.

Large sections of the left seem to understand the repressive nature of the state and capital but not the political subjectivity of the poorest of the poor. A moral, almost subjectivist critique of the state as to its repressive 'nature' is however a bit too invested in presenting the poor as victims or innocent civilians—who then get preserved as that all along. Most denunciations of the state's impending armed offensive therefore derive their power and legitimacy in being able to present the poor as victims or at best only protecting his homestead against rapacious corporates backed by the state. Or at best that they have been forced to take up guns since they had no other means, since they could not wait any longer for the state to deliver goods and services. There is a refusal to accept that the poorest of the poor might have short-circuited themselves out of being either the beneficiaries of some benign, welfare state or being just victims or innocent civilians.

Against this humanitarianism of sections of the left, it is precisely the conjugation of poor and political which needs to be imagined and asserted, and which the ruling classes fear. Referring to the radicalism of Tommy Spence, a proletarian in 18th century England, scholar Peter Linebaugh states that "what made Spence dangerous to the bourgeoisie was not that he was a proletarian nor that he had ideas opposed to private property but that he was both". Here is the formula, if one likes : he can be rich and radical but not poor and radical —the ideal combination allowed in today's rights-based capitalism is poor and needy.

Is the refusal or inability to view the poorest of the poor as political subjects another instance of how one can all gleefully laugh at Fukuyama's end of history thesis and yet it is bloody difficult to actually make history today? Any attempt to make (universal?) history will involve the use of force, violence, a party and will perhaps lead people to a totalitarian state. ... So, it is often said the poorest of the poor are not a problem as such, it is their articulation as political subjects, as Maoists or Naxals, which is the problem, carrying the seeds of totalitarianism. And yet it is around the Maoist movement today that the political struggle of the poorest of the poor against the ruling order has sharpened and assumed new heights.

It is against the 'repression' of the political subjectivity of the poorest of the poor that it is necessary to assert that they are not just fighting a battle to save their livelihood and resources and the armed offensive is not just going to kill and clear them from the way—rather the poorest of the poor in rising up are actually passing a verdict on the very political system and democracy in this country and the armed offensive is actually not just the voice of big capital but more fundamentally reveals the true nature of what passes for democracy in India. It is clear how it is today misleading to attack only Chidambaram and the hawks in the Home Ministry, IB and the Jungle Warfare vultures. It might be only the Chattisgarh DGP Vishwa Ranjan who openly calls for finishing the Maoists LTTE-style, but there seems to be a silent but wider consensus. None of the major political parties have launched any agitation in support of the poorest of the poor. Much like the Gujarat pogrom in 2002 or the numerous aerial bombings and killings in the North East, the present armed offensive can take place and Indian democracy will still go about its routinised, sterile normalcy. Indian democracy itself stands exposed as so many times earlier : the question today is whether or not the civil society willing to go with the political struggle against it that is raging in front of all.

More symptomatic is the fact that the right-wing Hindu parties, apart from some media-savvy strident declarations to go trample the Maoists challenging the Indian state, have been unable to convert it into a political plank for populist political gimmicks. When for example the Kashmiri movement gets active the BJP will publicly call upon the government to crush the movement there by sending the army, trying to mobilize support on this basis. On the Dantewada issue even the right wing is not too invested in publicly declaring or inciting war—the Naxal or Maoist issue with its poorest of the poor base is a tricky one, and Indian democracy feels frail to the core here. The best defense then is to present the militant adivasis and the Maoist movement as only challenging the actions and omissions of the Indian state and not really questioning the very idea of India, going much beyond the pet Hindu-Muslim question, secularism, and other more familiar obsessions.

People have pointed out that the adivasis, due to the wrong policies of the state, have become Maoist by default. What is more revealing is however the assumption that the poorest of the poor must always (by default?) only be interested in livelihood issues, implicitly assuming that they cannot go beyond them and get political. 'Innocent trapped civilians' soon enough feeds into a narrative where they are dependent on the support of the urban middle class left who can alone engage in politics by reaching out to them beyond its own interests. The default assumption seems to be that the poorest of the poor can be fully deserving of 'rights' and access to resources but they cannot be political -- as though they are put in place, this far and no more!

The problem for the state is not just that the poorest of the poor are sitting over rich resources and mining treasure which they refuse to give up but that they are political, that they are 'Maoist'. Those on the left who are calling for peace, for 'peace with justice', find it extremely important to make the distinction between ordinary civilians or adivasis and Maoists. This distinction is both important and real. However, it looks like this distinction often derives from the refusal to

accept that the poorest of the poor today carry the promise of a political revolution. Dantewada, Lalgarh—aren't the political struggle around them today in some ways decisive for the prospects of political change and social transformation? Does one see only 'violence' and 'armed conflict', or only 'livelihood issues' and 'resource grabbing by MNCs', or 'Maoist intolerance' there, or a much larger political struggle which can inaugurate a wider mobilization of revolutionary forces across the country? Do the Maoists on their part see only expansion of their control and more areas to rule over, or do they see the possibility of radical change?

If therefore the Lalgarhs and Dantewadas are arenas sharpening the political struggle in the country, and not just looming humanitarian disasters due to 'armed conflict', then different struggles and resistance movements taking place in the country must therefore coalesce around this central fault line weakening the ruling classes, daring them to come out with some of their last lines of self-preservation. Pressure on the government to withdraw the armed offensive must be part of a larger, internal political solidarity with the ongoing movement, with the objective of taking it to a higher level.

What one should deeply ponder here is then why, particularly given that the Maoists do not have a base in urban areas, other left parties engaged in resistance refuse to align themselves with the resistance thrown down by the Maoists in different parts of the country. Thus for example the use of violence by the Maoists becomes such an important problem that one refuses to accentuate the political crisis for the Indian political order inaugurated by Dantewada today and instead sees only an impending humanitarian disaster in Dantewada. The poorest of the poor are seen only as in need for humanitarian help and goods and services: separating them from the 'violent', 'intolerant' Maoists only allows large sections of the left to overlook and indeed trash the political subjectivity of the poorest of the poor, or make it amenable to the given democratic order. But, in fact, the deep roots of the Maoists in the population are evidenced by the inability of the administration to recruit 'informers' from among the locals, say in Lalgarh.

No wonder, in the case of Andhra Pradesh, it was only when the party leadership exposed themselves by coming overground during peace talks that the state was able to target and kill them. Today, the biggest problem for the state derives from just an opposite reading of the mass base of the Maoists than what the democratic left argues. One former Cabinet secretary suggesting ways of 'dealing with the insurgency' points out that "their (Maoists') strong points are not their weaponry, but the support from large sections of the tribal community in whose midst and on whose behalf they operate". Further, unlike certain left commentators who argue that the Maoists like the LTTE are a mirror image of the present repressive state, a replicative state-in-the-making, the strategists of the Indian state hold that the Maoists are unlike the LTTE which "conducted itself like a state and paid a heavy price for it". Clearly, if, as the democratic left believes, it was so easy to separate the Maoists from the civilians, then the Indian state could have by now easily 'drained the water and killed the fish'.

Overlooking the dynamic political revolutionary process which may have been inaugurated by the present crisis, where the Indian state and political order is forced to shed its democratic cloak and where the democratic legitimacy of the

state is being exposed by the state's own actions, leads directly to treating Dantewada and Lalgah as just like some cesspools of violence and counter-violence, of some irrational forces working themselves out and hence needing the intervention of sane, democratic citizens of civil society. While it is true that the masses in these areas are not already 'making history', it is as of today far more than a struggle over economic resources, livelihood issues, or jal, jangal, jamin (*Water, Forest, Land*).

The Tatas and Essars are of course out there to grab resources from the adivasis and the armed offensive is related to the interests of big capital. But this does not mean that the fight of the adivasis is only to protect 'their' resources, that they cannot go beyond 'livelihood issues' and the 'struggle for survival' and in fact inaugurate a larger political struggle in the country. Actually it is not they who cannot go beyond these issues, beyond livelihood issues, but it is large sections of the left and progressive persons who cannot. In reaching out to the trapped innocent civilians in Dantewada, leftists are trying to block from view the fact that they are actually reaching out to people, calling on progressives to join their struggle, by going beyond the livelihood issues and jal jangal jamin that democrats and liberals are bent on offering them. These sections of the left think that Dantewada and Lalgah areas are or just waiting to become cesspools of violence and conflict; they do not see them as possible cauldrons of change that have dared and trashed Indian democracy and the existing political system—and proposed an alternative political system.

Ruling class strategists like KPS Gill seem aware of this when he states that the "Naxalites ideologue believe that they have an alternative political model to offer". Clearly, the poorest of the poor have thrown the ball in the court of the privileged democratic forces of the country, urging them to join a political struggle shorn of the political imbecility and juvenile belief in the nature and possibilities of the present democratic order. Is the democratic left in the country willing to accept that the poorest of the poor can try to rewrite the history of the country? Is that also considered too ambitious a project to be undertaken by the 'masses', in a country whose history has always been decided by the elite, by Nehru-Gandhi-Jinnah-Patel in round-table conferences?

And it is here that the otherwise legitimate question of use of violence seems like so much bickering to justify the refusal to accept the political content of the Maoist movement and the political challenge to the very nature of Indian democracy they put up today. Otherwise, it is an absolutely legitimate question to talk about violence and killings, the idea of the absolute worth of human life, the dangerous idea of 'the enemy of the people' and so on. Also the question of capital punishment itself must be debated thoroughly. One cannot dismiss this as just a bourgeois deviation as some Maoist utterances tend to do. However, it becomes 'bourgeois' precisely when these problems become a way to avoid the fundamental question of the political struggle, when it becomes the sole basis of judging the Maoist movement as a whole. For, at the end of the day, it is only against the background of the advancing political struggle that such questions can be addressed and not merely by calls 'to eschew violence' or abstract talk of the dehumanizing effects of violence.

Thus it is that the problem posed by the Maoists or the impending armed state offensive must and perhaps can be addressed in the course of the intensification of the ongoing political struggle. More Dantewadas, more Lalgarhs, more Naxalbaris—that is the solution. This need not necessarily mean more of the Maoists, more of the Maoists in the present form—one cannot rule out the transformation of the existing political forces or of the Maoists themselves. This cannot but involve more resistance at all levels, working class mobilization, middle class mobilization in the towns and cities, anti-caste struggles, gender struggles and so on.

But the fact of the matter is that for the Indian state and capital today, and not just its repressive armed wing, the armed resistance and the PLGA stand as a major stumbling block providing stiff resistance everywhere they exist. It does not at all seem preposterous to suggest that the adivasis under the leadership of the Maoists today have precipitated a political struggle where capital and state are forced to come out in their true unholy nexus disregarding all supposed democratic credentials and rule of law.

Numerous activists and commentators have pointed out how the interests of big capital are what really drives the actions of the state, given that the entire region is resource rich and contains enormous mineral deposits. The convergence of capital and state is clearly visible in the political struggle today. It is the achievement of the Maoist movement and its work for years in the area that state and capital are forced to give up all pretense of democracy, rule of law and business as usual. State and capital today stand exposed in their bare exploitative, oppressive essence.

The point is that the oppressive nature of capital and the state do not reveal itself spontaneously, particularly to the vast masses of people. It is in places like Dantewada and Lalgarh that people have not only understood this nature of the ruling order but actually are willing to fight against it without any recourse to the democratic pretensions of this order. This makes the masses here and the Maoists an advanced detachment particularly now that such a sharp political struggle has created a crisis of national proportions.

Further, this is where the Indian state is weakest today. This is where large masses of the people have rejected the Indian state and its democracy, forcing it to come out to use armed force against its own civilian population, like a mafia state which everybody hates and hence must survive on the use of force and repression. This means that people should not only rush to the defence of the one front, Dantewada or Lalgarh, in the political, class struggle today but also replicate similar and not so similar bases elsewhere in the country. If not jettisoned, mere humanist 'concern' (which somehow always readily gets pretentious) for the 'trapped masses' should be strategically used to democratically corner the state with a clear eye on converting the Dantewada experiment into a nationwide phenomenon.

Now the Maoists themselves have not been astute in expanding their struggle, in reaching out to urban masses, in overcoming their often sectarian attitudes and obsolete work methods and thinking. They do not seem to know what they can do to broaden the struggle in urban areas, relate to other political forces, respond to the more sophisticated machinations of 'democracy' and so on.

Ideally, on a less rigorous note, one can say that the best for revolution in South Asia would be to combine the 'flexibility' of the Nepali Maoists with the 'dogmatism' of the Indian Maoists. But the Maoists are willing to change, if not subjectively, but, as one saw in Lalgarh and elsewhere, at least through force of circumstances. And change they must. However, what is of crucial importance is the larger revolutionary process of which the Maoists themselves are no arbiters nor even masters but only the more advanced elements and that too, so far, in the present conjuncture. □□□

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