

Maoist Action in Dantewada

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It is understandable that human rights/civil liberties organizations should come out with statements deploring the killing of security forces (e.g. PUDR press statement on the wiping out of 76-odd CRPF personnel in Chhattisgarh on April 6) on the purely humanitarian ground that any loss of life is deplorable. But civil society groups or individuals who view the issue from a larger perspective need to take a more rigorous and clear-cut stand. If they agree that the fundamental issues raised by the Maoists are right, even if they do not accept their tactics (in other words, if they are well-disposed towards the basic Maoist critique of the present exploitative system and sympathize with their efforts to build up alternative structures of egalitarian governance in their areas of control, without supporting their tactics of indiscriminate killings of innocent civilians), they have to recognize the stark reality.

The stark reality is that the confrontation between the recalcitrant Indian state (which is adopting an oppressive neo-liberal model of development) and its opponents (the rural poor and tribal villagers who are facing displacement by that model) is fast acquiring the dimensions of a civil war. In such a war situation, the liberal-bourgeois pacifists can condemn both the disputing parties, and wash their hands off, shouting : “plague on both houses.” But can democrats and liberals afford to withdraw and refuse to take sides in this war?

If concerned citizens are opposing the Indian state’s neo-liberal model of development and its oppressive policies to impose it on the Indian people by displacing them from their homes, they should define their position with regard to the various popular protest movements that are breaking out in different forms—ranging from Gandhian non-violent types like the Narmada Bachao Movement or the anti-steel plant agitation in Kalinganagar on the one hand, to armed resistance by forest-dwellers and tribal people organized under Maoist leadership on the other. The mainstream media propaganda builds up a peculiar dichotomy between these two types of movements—describing the former as part of ‘democratic’ protest, and denouncing the latter as ‘terrorism’—as if the Maoist movement is not democratic. It is as if protests and agitations can be termed democratic only if they are non-violent. But what if thousands of people in a particular area, comprising the majority of the population, decide to opt for armed resistance, after their non-violent forms of protest are violently suppressed by the state? This is what is happening in Chhattisgarh. The reasons why the tribal people in Dandakaranya have taken up arms have been well-documented—not only by human rights activists, but also by no less an important body than the Planning Commission Experts Group in its report on extremist-affected areas a few years ago. For years together, their basic needs had not only been ignored by the state, but whenever they tried to assert their economic demands through peaceful democratic avenues—like demonstrations asking for higher prices for tendu leaf collection, or access to forest produce—they were ruthlessly suppressed by the police.

What needs to be asserted—and which is deliberately suppressed by the mainstream media—is that even the non-violent protest movements (accepted as ‘democratic’ by the bourgeois-liberals) are violently opposed by the state through the use of military force (witness the experience of the Narmada Bachao movement, or of the Gandhian Himangshu whose ashram in Chhattisgarh was destroyed by the police). If the followers of these non-violent movements, after their disillusionment with the ‘peaceful’ means of constitutional protest, take up arms tomorrow to protect their homes and occupations, should anyone denounce them as ‘terrorists’?

The Home Minister, P Chidambaram says that the Naxalites have forced a war on the Indian state and its people. It’s the other way round. The Indian state has forced a war on the Indian poor by imposing on them a corporate sector-induced model of development—threatening wide sections of rural people ranging from the villages of Orissa, Jharkhand in the east to Rajasthan and Haryana in the north, who are being ousted from their lands. They are breaking out in protest demonstrations. The state responds by resorting to violence to suppress them. It has built up a well-structured military network consisting of a variety of forces going under the names of CRPF, CISF, Special Operation Group, Eastern Frontier Rifles, etc. in various states. Exposures by independent reporters (in magazines like TEHELKA) have revealed how the senior officials and their juniors in these para-military forces have been consistently killing innocent people in false encounters, raping women, burning villages, not only in Maoist-dominated villages of Chhattisgarh, but also in Manipur and other parts of the north-east. The CRPF in particular has earned a notoriety for atrocities in areas wherever they had been deployed. The national media may shed tears for the death of the 76-odd CRPF soldiers in Chhattisgarh. But should the bourgeois-liberals and human rights activists shed tears for the young dedicated Nazi soldiers (who massacred the Jews), and were killed in reprisal by the Soviet Red Army? Surely, there should be a limit to the tolerance that bourgeois-liberalism allows!

To come back to the latest incident of the Maoist attack on the CRPF camp in Chhattisgarh... if one accepts it as a part of a civil war, such killings are inevitable (just as the CRPF killings of Maoists) in a violent system that has been institutionalized by the Indian state. The difference between the CRPF violence (involving ‘false encounters’, raping of tribal women, burning their homes, etc.) on the one hand, and the Maoist violence on the other (which means attacks on oppressive landlords and the police and para-military forces like the CRPF which come to the aid of the landlords)—has to be distinguished by civil society groups. □□□