

Denizens of the Other India

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Any nation which undergoes a deep political convulsion produces classic literature from the pens of empathic and sensitive writers. The Chinese Revolution produced such master pieces like “The Red Star Over China”, “The Scalpel and the Sword”, “Fan Shen” and the like. The French Revolution resulted in enriching the English literature by that everlasting piece called “A Tale of Two Cities”. On a much smaller scale the upheaval in Dantewada jungles of Chhatisgarh brought out a fine piece of political travelogue of Ms Arundhati Roy entitled “Walking with the Comrades” which one of the Delhi Magazines carried recently. Though much small in volume it belongs to that genre of political literature mentioned earlier.

That such a piece would create discomfort and unease in the minds of persons who believe and thrive in the status quo is natural. Hence, this writer is not surprised to find vitriolic rejoinders coming out of the pens of well known writers belonging to the establishment. In polemical writings certain degree of sarcasm, banter and derision are permitted. And Ms Roy is highly competent to handle it if so desired. But this writer felt a bit uneasy with the word “massacre” by a critic in his first sentence of his rejoinder. Massacre conveys a sense of indiscriminate slaughter of innocent people who may or may not be involved in any conflict. More often than not, it means killing of a large number of unarmed persons unable to defend themselves against armed marauders.

In the present case the facts are completely the opposite. A company of armed constables of a CRPF Battalion went inside the jungles on a mission to “seek and destroy” the armed Maoist groups. They were fully aware of the possibility of fire fights with armed Maoist cadres. They did not enter the jungle for bird watching nor did they go there for a picnic. They went there to kill. Instead they got killed because of their ineptitude and foolishness. Such incidents do happen when one armed group attempts to eliminate the other. That they were improperly trained in jungle warfare and badly led is a different story. If they had done proper scouting and reconnaissance before they moved in company strength, they could have easily detected possible sites of lethal ambush. Obviously, that was not done, and if it were done, that was done in a shoddy manner. As a result, devoid of any local intelligence, unaware of the lie of the land, the company walked merrily into the death trap laid by the Maoists. Criminal stupidity of a much higher order was committed in the case of the charge of the light brigade in the Crimean War when the entire brigade was wiped out by the enemy artillery fire. Hence while condemning the killings, one should not condone the utter failure of the local and superior leadership of the CRPF for their culpable negligence and grave dereliction of duty in allowing such a preventable event to happen. The fault lies with the superior command.

At this point, let it be clear that this writer does not believe in the Maoist theory of capturing State power by violent means. The Constitution of India provides for peaceful transfer of power through election based on universal adult suffrage. Human history has not as yet found any other better alternative to the change of government other than through free and fair elections. Also this writer does not buy

the thesis that the change of government does not change the character of the State. Apparently it may be true. But in case of any mass mobilisation of the downtrodden who would send up their own representatives could certainly make significant change in the character of the State. Hence in the present context the Maoist thesis is inappropriate. Their acts of violence might raise the morale of their cadres, otherwise they do not have much impact. But that does not mean that this writer would condemn everything that the Maoists are doing for the benefit of the masses at the grassroots as bad. That would be unfair.

Even the hawks indirectly and condescendingly concede that tribals were, perhaps, victims of mal-governance. But as the denizens of the other India they are not expected to have all the goodies that the citizens of India have. Like any member of the elite class they believe in the Roman prescription of building roads as straight as an arrow on which the Roman Legions could march with rhythmic steps to the beats of Kettle drums. No, that would not do. All the imperial powers from the Romans in the earlier era to the British and the French in the recent history had failed. So would the Indian State, if it did not address the basic issues of the tribals of the other India. In fact their response was quite typical of that of the “Koi Hai Col. Blimps” of the world who would sneer at any movement or agitation to alter the status quo. Being the sole beneficiaries of the system they feel insecure and threatened at mere possibility of changing it. It had happened in the past, it is happening now. And it will happen in the future. But, unfortunately, history marches on inexorably.

From 1947 to 2004 nearly 2.4 crores of tribals out of the total of 8.2 crores were involuntarily displaced for “development” in which they had neither any participation nor any benefit. Original oustees of Indravati Dam Project of the fifties had to shift 5 times over later on because of the march of development in their exclusive domain. No one came to their help. The State failed miserably.

Union Home Minister’s policy prescription for regaining of hearts and minds of the tribals initially through the “controlled and calibrated” use of force would have full support of the no-changers. First, “reconquer” the area where Maoists are operating by force e.g. Operation Green Hunt. Second, reintroduce civil administration in the reconquered territory. After that “development”, if any, would, if at all, follow in due course.

It was time that one should check up what type of governance tribals had before the civil administration collapsed? A basic ingredient of any civil administration is the administration of justice. How was it done before the territories were “lost” to the Maoists? People shall take the example of one law specific to the prevention of atrocities on the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (1989). One would have expected that this special law would be administered fairly and speedily. Facts belied that expectation. The Report of the Expert Group of the Planning Commission entitled “Development Challenges in the Extremist Affected Areas (2008)” showed that between 1991 and 2000 the conviction rate under this law was less than one percent with acquittal rate of 10% and pendency of 89 to 90%. These were the figures long before the civil administration was taken over by the Maoists. The same is the state of implementation of the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006. The forest establishment is subverting it in every possible manner and the political establishment in cahoots with the corporate sector is meekly watching this process of subversion of an ameliorative measure for the traditional forest dwellers. In the jungle mahal of West

Bengal hardly any patta has been issued. The tribals suffered from utter insensitivity and neglect, of those who were charged with dispensation of justice to them in respect of all laws enacted for them. There was mounting dissension among the victims that the Indian State was not serious about giving them justice.

Then there are laws and regulations in every State against the alienation of tribal lands to non-tribals. Non-tribals look upon it as a big joke. More tribal lands had been alienated in recent past compared to that in pre-independent era. With all its crudity the “Kangaroo” Courts in the Maoist areas administer justice promptly which the tribals appreciate. Law regarding Panchayats Extension in the Scheduled Area (PESA) was enacted in mid-nineties to strengthen the traditional tribal institutions of self-governance remains a non-starter even today more than a decade after.

The Council for Social Development, New Delhi, mounted a mission in the late nineties to study tribal unrest in Koraput-Raigada area of Orissa. The author was a member of the Mission, others being Muchkund Dubey and B N Yugandhar. The mission was shocked to find how the district administration was subverting this law to acquire lands for the giant national and transnational aluminium producing companies. They were openly acting as agents of those corporate bodies. When the tribals organised and offered peaceful resistance, police repression was unleashed to smother the dissent. With all these that the tribals had been suffering, particularly after the neo-liberal economic reforms with aggressive corporate intrusion in the tribal domain, would any one in his(her) senses expect the tribals with their past history of armed resistance to meekly surrender? Materially they are very weak compared to the might of the State. But nobody could douse their spirit of defiance.

Ms Arundhati Roy’s piece has been subjected to unfair censorious remarks by her critics. It had been alleged that she “has conjured up another bad dream in tribal India and perhaps unwittingly is working overtime with other misguided ideologues to make it come true”. But these flag bearers of the establishment missed the essence of the Indian Constitution which provides for a pluralistic society where a hundred ideological flowers can bloom and co-exist. As to his wrongful thinking that Maoism would fade out, as had happened to many such insurrectionary movements in the past, one may perhaps speculate that it might not because hard facts give contra-indications. Naxalism started in April 1967 in one State (West Bengal), in one district (Darjeeling) and in one police station area (Naxalbari—from which it derives its name). Forty two years later, according to the statement of the Union Home Minister in November, 2009, it had spread to 23 States, 250 districts and over 2000 police station areas. Thus spatially the movement had spread over 2000 times. A guess estimate suggests that during this period combined police budget of the Centre and States had gone up by 600 times (firm figures are not available in one place). Perhaps a statistician could find out whether there was any significant co-relation between increase of police budget and spread of Naxalism. Naxalism seems to be a hardy plant in a sturdy soil. So far it has shown no sign of wilting or waning.

No one can remain untouched by Ms Roy’s concluding paragraph. She writes “When I looked back, they were still there. Waving. A little knot. People who live with their dreams, while the rest of the world lives with its nightmares.... I know she must be on the move. Marching not just for herself but to keep hope alive for all of us”. The inner lilting lyric of these lines vibrates like soft sweet music. □