

A Writer's Dilemma

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This writer who has been writing for *Frontier* over the last 25 years now finds himself caught up in a dilemma: what to write about and whether there is any new idea to convey? This may seem strange, because the present situation is stimulating enough for a writer. While the entire country is in turmoil over grave socio-economic issues; new issues, not academic but related to the very existence and survival are emerging in quick succession. The unstable economy, ongoing mode of development, industrial policy, displacement of marginalised people are some of the burning issues, to name a few. Why should there be a dearth of material?

The problem lies elsewhere. Goethe once said that to talk about a subject too much is to blunt its edge. This is what seems to be taking place. The hypocrisy and failure of the ruling left in West Bengal is a case in point. It is, in a sense, too well-known to the common public including those who support the left. This is not to suggest that there is no need to explore new areas to unmask the real face of the ruling party that claims to be leftist. News-reports in daily papers are actually doing this task by exposing the government's failure in almost every sector and how they have hoodwinked the common people with cooked-up success stories and figures. More exposure may add to the reader's stock of information (which s/he may not keep in mind for long) but will not provide a new insight because he knows it too well that what passes for leftism is but sham.

This age which is called the age of information and technology is also the age of information explosion. Thanks to the different forms of media and internet, information, today, is not at all difficult to come by. People are rather getting flooded with information. Take for example, the most sensitive issue of the present-day development discourse—chemical hub, SEZ, industry vis-a-vis agriculture, nuclear power, climate change, environmental disaster and so on. This debate, highly relevant by any reckoning, has led to a spurt of literature which is almost impossible for an interested individual to go through wholly.

Even if an enthusiastic reader attempts to do it, he/she may get tired at a certain stage. In the name of 'alternative', the same stream of thought, the same refrain, by and large, is repeating itself. The radical counter discourse, by its sheer volume, seems to have outweighed the dominant one that it seeks to challenge. The debate goes on and on and the destructive process takes its own course simultaneously. This is however not to forget that unprecedented mass upsurges have posed a considerable threat to the development-model thrust upon the people by the state arbitrarily. While Kalinganagar in Orissa (January 2006) shook the Tatas for a time and Singur in West Bengal (since December 2006) finally forced them out, Nandigram (2007) set a brave example by stalling the state government's farmland acquisition drive in that area. One may cite several other examples in other states. Some projects have definitely been stalled or scrapped.

But have they made any dent in the official policy? Is the state, at all, eager to rethink and reconsider the kind of development that it upholds as the only road to economic revival? The very recent incidents indicate that the state firmly sticks to the policy, and goes on signing agreements with the corporate bodies to carry on with its plans and projects ignoring public resistance. Fresh trouble has broken out in Kalinganagar, the bauxite mining on the Niyamgiri hills threatens the very survival of the local tribals (Kondhs) and in West Bengal, even after Nandigram, the plan to expand New Town at Rajarhat by gobbling more arable land has not been reconsidered at all. It seems all the stakeholders have taken to a wait-and-watch policy and are waiting for the opportune moment to resume their activities.

Electoral politics is certainly not unconnected with this situation. But as politics has now become completely devoid of ideology, change of government does not hold out any hope for change in official policy. Everybody has seen how the NDA government at the centre (1999-2004), after coming to power, completely, ignored its pre-poll *Swadeshi Jagaran* (revival of indigenous industries) promise and rather facilitated the entry of multinationals in the industrial sector. The BJP government in Chattisgarh and its friendly government in Orissa are now pursuing the same policy. The Trinamul Congress (TMC) which is likely to replace the more than 30-year-long CPI(M)-led Left Front rule in Bengal was a part of the NDA Government for some time and is now allied with the Congress-led UPA Government.

The UPA has no qualms about inviting the corporate giants to occupy fertile farmlands and plunder rich natural and mineral resources in the name of industrialisation. There is no wonder that the left supported this government till 2008 because on the issue of so-called development there is no difference between the rightist Congress and the Leftist CPI(M).

All these facts are too well-known and have been exposed elaborately. The common people may not know the niceties of SEZ or Nuclear Power Plant; but it is palpably clear to them that what is taking place is not going to serve their interests. Larger volume of information will not add much to their common-sense and experience-based understanding. To take a cynical view of intellectual discourse is to hint at the need for activism. And activism has already set in and expressing itself in the form of what is officially branded as 'terrorism'.

Terrorism or the politics of murder and violence has, in fact, helped to confound the scenario. It is post-colonial experience that this kind of politics overshadows the issues which generated the activism. It also makes the common people hesitant to extend unreserved support to genuine public movements. The debate then veers round to the ethics of violence and gets embroiled in the question of violence and counter-violence. Even those who believe that it is the state that is responsible for eruption of violence, also condemn the gruesome killing of policemen or 'suspected informers' (who often happen to be ordinary villagers). They tend to discard this politics as cruel when common people get killed in the crossfire between the police and the activists or as a result of the planned subversive actions of the terrorists. The fundamental structural violence of the state, the silent deaths of people by starvation, the increasing impoverishment of the marginalised and several other related issues gradually recede in the background.

At a recent convention (7 July) in Kolkata both Medha Patkar and Swami Agnivesh pointed to the danger of terroristic politics. Agreeing with them, one may however ask : what should the suffering people do when the state pays no attention to their grievances and justified demands? Is not terrorism the fallout of the state's criminal indifference? Have not the people taken up arms out of utter desperation? 'It takes a loud voice to make the deaf hear', Bhagat Singh had proclaimed more than eighty years ago. Does not the argument still hold true?

There seems to be a grain of truth in both the arguments and counter-arguments. But the consequence of the politics of violence, as borne out by history, does not impact the ruling power and the revolting terrorists only. Terry Eagleton, eminent cultural theorist, observes that a perfect anarchist is 'dead already' because 'by embracing death (he) ... is insulated from time, change, history and decay'. Following the same observation, one may say that a suicide-bomber or death-defying terrorist has no fear of death, let alone the consequence of his act. He dies but his death or suicide leaves a trail which chases those who survive. The state takes the opportunity to unleash terror on a wider scale and it is the common people, often those not at all involved in politics, are to bear the brunt.

Lalgarh in West Bengal is a tragic example in this regard. A spontaneous public movement against police atrocities, a self-respect movement of the tribals was eventually usurped by the Maoists who have their own political objective. This changed the character of the movement and turned Lalgarh into a killing field where cops and jawans are being killed on the one hand and on the other villagers of different political hues are killing each other almost everyday. In the midst of this widespread violence, tribals have left their homes, are living an uncertain life and are being tortured by the police and the paramilitary force. Where would this violence and counter-violence lead to? Most of the common people are confused and hence the Lalgarh movement didn't move the civil society in the degree that Nandigram had done. The initial question—why the police attacked the innocent tribals late in the night and blinded a woman—has almost passed into oblivion.

When the Lalgarh people revolted and demanded that the police should apologise, they didn't draw on Maoism or any other political ideology. They reacted spontaneously. In order to give their movement a political shape, the Maoists have distorted its spirit. This change has helped the state to initiate action on the pretext of curbing terrorism and given the force a freehand to attack and assault the common people who only asked for justice. Intellectual debate over the politics of violence and terrorism has been removed from the context. Some of the horrible acts committed allegedly by the Maoists—killing of jawans at Silda, the rail disaster (Jnanasweri Express) at Jhargram which claimed around 180 lives—have served to divert public attention from the fundamental issue : increasing plight of the tribals and senseless police violence/ more importantly, the estimated structural violence of the state that often remains invisible.

To conclude, one may once again turn to Goethe : 'All the clever thoughts have long since been thought. What matters is to think them anew'. □□□