

ASSAM

Of Hypocrisy and Peace

Hiren Gohain

The killing of Azad by the AP police with suspected collusion of the Union Home Ministry by luring him into a trap with the bait of dialogue has been a gruesome example of state hypocrisy. There are practical lessons too, for armed revolutionaries.

Official guarantee of safety for any person who is trying sincerely to mediate or create conditions for a dialogue must first be secured. Swami Agnivesh unwittingly helped to stage this false encounter. The state is armed to the teeth against all genuine and sincere attempts to bring about peace. The Taliban-style execution of the police sub-inspector is hardly a proper response to such cold-blooded murder.

At this moment there are several insurgent groups engaged in war against the government. Some of them may be shadowy outfits created by the government's dirty-tricks department. But most have genuine grievances and fought long and hard to gain their objectives. From time to time there have been efforts by civil society groups to bring about cease-fire and peace through dialogue. The government makes appropriate noises. But in practice it does little to justify faith in its sincerity. It thus seems to confirm the allegation of the insurgent groups that its aim remains to maintain the regime of exploitation and oppression that the latter complains of. At any cost, that is.

In Assam people are digesting such lessons at the moment. There is now a deep and broad yearning among the masses here that a peaceful solution to the problem posed by the activities of the ULFA be found as early as possible. People do not go all the way with the ULFA, but they do think their perception of Central tyranny is not baseless.

Huge dams are coming up in the steep highlands of Arunachal Pradesh for generating thousands of megawatts of electricity. These run-of-the-river mega dams do not have reservoirs to store excess water during heavy rains. When the pressure on dams from rivers in flood rises a tremendous volume of water is released at once, and it sweeps away with its fury people, livestock, houses and crops in vast quantities. What is more, the siltation makes fields permanently unfit for cultivation. People have been fighting peacefully against this extremely destructive project for years. Now the whole of Assam is opposed to it. There is further the danger of destabilisation of geological strata in this highly seismic zone under the enormous pressure of the dams and the temporarily stored water.

The government invoked some reports of environmental clearance, which have been exposed as flimsy and hollow. An expert committee formed by the Assam government has strongly recommended re-designing and scaling down the projects, pending which all work on the dam should be stopped. Work has not stopped. The Centre says it cannot stop the project now after spending such a huge amount already. And to divert public opinion it has fomented violent 'border-clashes' on the Assam-Arunachal border through attacks by alleged miscreants on peaceful Assamese peasants and villagers.

This is an example of the issues that ULFA has highlighted, though in a blunt and brutal, counter-productive manner.

A civil society group of leading citizens and intellectuals sought to intercede in April, and received encouraging response from jailed leaders who compose the majority of the leadership. They agreed to a peaceful settlement provided they are released to hold a formal meeting of their central committee without constraint. The issues of sovereignty for Assam and acceptance of the Indian constitution might be considered in and through a dialogue. The civil society group ascertained after long discussion that the ULFA leaders were serious. They met the Prime Minister and the Home Minister and carried back to Assam promise of an honourable settlement. Two months later there is still silence at the Centre. Occasionally it is claimed that unless the armed leaders and cadre still at large come over, dialogue is meaningless. When it is pointed out that the civil society group has created conditions where such an outcome might ensue, they again fall silent. The so-called national media goes along with the Home Ministry and seek to sweep it under the carpet. Unnamed 'top officials' of the Home Ministry are sometimes reported as making absurd and offensive statements to some members of the local press. For instance recently it has been reported that unless the ULFA formally abjure violence and accept the Constitution, the government cannot think of starting a dialogue. But as said earlier no self-respecting insurgent leader can accept such abject preconditions.

The civil society group had persuaded the ULFA leaders to sit down to talks without pre-conditions. That is to say, they are expected not to press on their demand for sovereignty, and the government is expected not to demand an explicit renunciation of violence. Some more powers for the local population to determine their own affairs and take major decisions without interference from the Centre are on the cards, should negotiations begin. But it seems the Centre is unwilling to lose its overriding powers to overrule the state's decision on matters of crucial importance to the local people. In any case once certain such steps are taken there will be no fear of relapse of bloody anarchy.

The latest and most disturbing suggestion of a volte-face appeared in a report filed by the Delhi correspondent of *The Assam Tribune* on the 3rd of September. It seems that certain 'top officials' of the Home Ministry have informed him that the state government will talk with the ULFA leaders and the Centre would only be a facilitator.

This is in direct contravention of an assurance given by the Prime Minister in the presence of the National Security Adviser to the delegation in reply to a specific question that while the state government would prepare the ground at the final stage the Centre will hold talks with the ULFA leaders. It thus seems that a section of Home Ministry officials is getting busy to sabotage the talks. After all, the state has limited scope for discussing outstanding issues between the ULFA and the Government of India.

It is that section that seems to be patronizing miscellaneous elements in Assam who are noisily trying to cry down the proposed talks.

Dialogue can take place only if the rulers have a democratic outlook. If the democratic pretensions are only a facade or a ploy to lure the unwary into a trap, then it will only lead to renewal of violence. Or is the government preparing to let Assam go the Kashmir way or the Manipur way? □□□

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