Vote and Violence

Criminalisation of Politics? Or Politicisation of crimes? It doesn't matter in which way one reviews the Indian Panorama of parliamentary culture because the end result is the same: continuing shrinkage of democratic space for ordinary people who are wary of growing partisan turf war. With middle class aspirants growing in geometrical progression and getting rich quick in normal course becoming really difficult proliferation of political outfits, regional or otherwise, is the logical outcome. After all it seems to be the easiest and safest bet to make inroads into the corridor of power and privilege. As parliamentary parties and groups can no longer resolve their intra-party contradictions through peaceful means violence remains the only option to settle scores. In this regard the CPM-ruled Bengal is unique and surpasses even Bihar in institutionalising extra-parliamentary violent activities. It is time for other parties to start paying attention to the Marxist model of staying in power and try to emulate its success despite massive social discontent.

In today's electoral politics vote without violence is unthinkable. Not that in the yester years election was completely free from violence. But those were the days of limited fire power with crude bombs and pipe guns. It's no more. Also, it is no more a seasonal phenomenon because there are so many elections round the year. Even school committee elections are too hot to handle in the Marxist scheme of things, not to speak of panchayet or assembly elections where stakes are nowadays literally high. All parties utilise muscle power to sail through the electoral battle and it is becoming an accepted norm in parliamentary politics, no matter what they say in public.

As parliamentary business is essentially an art of how nicely to loot the exchequer while hoodwinking the gullible voters, without needing much education and skill, private armies, rather professional 'death squads', are replacing casual and temporary musclemen and hitmen. Private army first hit the headlines in the '70s and 80s when uppercaste ladlords in Bihar launched different *senas* to protect their caste and landed hegemony against the rising dalits and landless labourers under the sway of naxalites. Now all political parties across the country follow Bihar rules because it pays dividends. Now government backed private armies and senas are making rounds. While *Salwa Judum* in Chattisgarh drew flak from international human rights bodies, CPM-ruled Bengal is currently gaining currency nationally and globally for the Marxist device of running terror teams and armed camps. 'Death of Squads' sponsored by the ruling Marxists are variously described as ''village resistance committee'' or ''harmads'' and people in junglemahal know it better what *harmad* means. They are learning daily by paying heavy price how fascism under the cloak of Marxism is exploiting the situation.

For quite some time the main opposition party in Bengal—the Trinamul Congress—has been agitating against the deployment of CPM-armed cadres (or *harmads*) who in league with joint forces are terrorising and brutalising tribal villages in the name of combating Maoists. The Maoists too have been protesting against the *harmads* for long in their own way of course and some of their armed actions are no less bone-chilling than harmads'. The word harmad has now opened a new war of words between the Centre and the state, thanks to Union Home Minister Chidambaram.

The Chidambaram letter that triggered controversy over the usage of word 'harmad' forcing CPM to bat on backfoot was a deliberate ploy to isolate the Marxists from masses and sending the message that Congress-Trinamul Congress alliance in the forthcoming state assembly poll that is just a few months away, was not really on the rock, much to the dismay of Marxists. The absence of CPM allegation about Trinamul-Maoist collaboration in

the said letter seems to have emboldened the former, albeit it doesn't mean Chidambaram is going to withdraw joint forces from junglemahal and abandoning his Marxist friends in executing the holy crusade or what is now widely known as Operation Green Hunt, against the Maoists. But the word 'harmad' in Bengali vocabulary is so derogatory, having its origin in 19th century Portuguese piracy along coastal Bengal, that even the shameless Marxists, otherwise non-repentant about what happened in Nandigram, feel uneasy.

There is no difference between caste-based private army i.e. sena and CPM-sponsored 'harmad' or terror squad. Both terrorise the poorest of the poor and all political adversaries, left and right alike.

Armed clashes that are now taking place across the length and breadth of the state are simply ominous because the poor are actually killing the poor in a partisan way without realising the nefarious game the politicians are playing with. What is now localised in junglemahal is likely to spread throughout the state taking a full-scale civil war in view of coming assembly poll. The tragic side of the story is that they are increasing the rosters of martyrs on both sides, only to be forgotten in due season. Making procession with the dead is becoming a new tool to fuel fanaticism.

It doesn't require much political wisdom to predict that post-poll violence will be much more brutal than what people see now. Swami Agnivesh may nurse the illusion that CPM could bounce back after 5 years even if it loses the eighth opportunity but the idea betrays ground reality. Those who know how political opponents were marginalised and brutalised during the Emergency days could well imagine what lies in store.

Violence is now an integral part of vote. Previously what was occasional and sporadic, is now being institutionalised in almost all states. Overly fascists are being paraded as Gandhians and communists preaching non-violence and democratic rights. The lack of political equilibrium creates nervousness among the people. As the system has no reasonable balance of strength, social and economical, what one can expect in the coming days is more violence. □□□