

DEMOCRACY SANS DEMOCRATS

## Who is Afraid of Civil Society?

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*'Now, I would like to talk a little about the welfare of the elite, who profess to be concerned about the welfare of the people, who do little but blare it out from the rooftops. The rich build temples, mosques and churches, give donations to charities, and for this, are portrayed as great humanitarians. First they render people homeless and create orphans and then they open orphanage for them. In the name of development, they deprive people of their means of living, throw them out in the streets, force the women into prostitution, then they set up NGOs and campaign for Self Employment and brothel reform Centers. Not much money needs to be spent on this, even a tiny percentage of the millions and billions earned through the rampant loot of forest resources and minerals are sufficient to set up the propaganda machinery. They try to cover up the crimes of constructing the Tehri Dam (Which completely submerged the historic town of Tehri and forty villages, partially submerged 72 villages and affected 100,000 people) and the Narmada project ( which affected tribal areas of three states-Gujarat, Maharastra and Madhya Pradesh), by running a few NGOs and buying space in newspapers and that too at no more cost than expenses incurred on some product publicity.'*

*(Statement of Maoist Guerrilla Narang quoted dutifully by Satanam in his book 'Jangalnama' published by Penguin India- page 121).*

The above statement is not new to those who know the working pattern of political or semi political activists claiming to be sole champions of revolutions in India. Frankly speaking the revolutionaries are highly intolerant to any other view point and since they are not really capable to listen to dissenting voices, the result is continuing political violence. It happens because people feel they are being victimized. A victim mind always creates extreme reactions and that is what is happening in the forest zone. It is not that the articulations are wrong but in the articulations the issue of how to attain is more important. Emotions are created and amidst chant of rhetoric of a new wonder world, people come and join the process. It is equally important that for a poor ideology is not important than survival and when he sees the apparatus of state working virtually against him, the discrimination of being a tribal or feeling of contempt towards him, the hatred grows and rhetoric further fires the passion for sacrifice.

At the time of writing, comes the news of horrible train tragedy in Jhargram, West Bengal in which about 150 innocent people have been killed because of a derailment of Gyaneswhari Express. The Central government has given it to CBI to investigate while the West Bengal government has openly blamed PCPA, Lalgah, for doing this. The government says civil society and human rights activists are not condemning it and all the time they put ifs and buts. Maybe they are unable to articulate it in the TV channels or Newspapers articles because of paucity of space and time. And there are so many voices in civil society and not all of them can speak in one voice. How can it be possible when the political parties cannot speak in the same voice? Yes, after the recent attacks on trains and buses where innocent human beings are killed, one needs to ask the questions to those who claim to speak for the 'people' as who has given them right to

snatch the life of others. If the state is killing the innocent as they charge, then why they kill innocent. At the end it is the innocent who are being killed. And such killing needs to be condemned unequivocally and unambiguously. Those who do not have words for such killings should be prepared to receive the same news for themselves and their relatives and friends. Thinking about that is painful but then why civil society keeps quiet on such heinous attack and justifies it with other things.

Home Minister, P Chidambaram is suave and articulate. He is the favorite of English speaking media who think he provides answer to every problem of India particularly that emanates from the forests. They are absolutely sure that Chidambaram would resolve the current crisis and India will grow fast. Why is this that Chidambaram is getting huge support from the English speaking media but unable to garner support from different political parties including his party's own senior leaders like Digvijay Singh and Ajit Jogi both of them have been important leaders from both Madhya Pradesh and Chhatisgarh.

Actually, the home ministry has little time to evaluate the way police actions are alienating the people. Chidambaram and his ministry seems to be too conscious of criticism in Delhi but not bothered about the sentiments in the tribal hinterlands where a sense of insecurity has gripped the minds of the people. The pen pushers in Delhi who recommend army, air force and all other forces to flush out 'Maoist terrorist' do not know the terrain of the region. Most of the senior police officials have on record spoken against air support including Air Chief and Chief of the armed forces.

The biggest criticism of the government is coming through people like Arundhati Roy who does not need to have an NGO or an organization to air her view. She is famous enough to write and her writings are well marketed by the same corporate who she decries. Similarly, Varvara Rao is an ideologue based in Hyderabad who has been persistently claiming that every action that 'revolutionaries' are taking is a retaliation against police atrocities. There are so many lawyers and academics who have been writing and speaking. Mr B D Sharma wrote to the President of India about the marginalization of tribals. It is a well known fact that Sharma was the first commissioner for Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes and his reports in the commission are path breaking. Justice Rajender Sachar is a former Chief Justice of Delhi High Court. This apart there are many academics from Delhi-University, JNU, Jamia Millia and other Universities who do not support government's initiatives in Chhatisgarh. There are many former bureaucrats who do not agree with the government's strategies. Then there are Gandhians who are well connected with state apparatus and do not subscribe to Chidambaram and his theories. And all these people do not need an NGO to stand. They are much bigger than NGOs and even some time so-called civil society. Then there are organizations like PUCL, APDR, CPDR and PUDR which have their own positions on this unambiguously. They can shout as they do not receive any funds from the government or abroad. That gives them power to shout. Organizations like Asian Human Rights Commission have clearly condemned Maoist Violence while Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have track record of condemning not only state violence but also non-state actors.

Then there are thousands of smaller organizations being run by people at the grassroots. Most of them are involved in their 'projected work'. Some work on health, while some on NREGS and a number of them create Self Help Groups. There are Dalit organizations working on particular issues while numerous organizations working on

Land and acquisition issue. The fight of Narmada Bachao Andolan is going on for years and the government must explain to citizens as how much it respected a completely democratic movement. There is a struggle going on against Posco at Kalinganagar. It is not being run by the Maoists yet the tribals are being killed and humiliated in their own land. Does the home ministry not realize that people will rebel if they are left with no option except fighting?

Therefore a smart politician like Chidambaram should not have made nuisance remark about the civil society but the fact is that home ministry mandarins are behaving in worst possible way to control the criticism of their failures to tackle the 'Maoist menace' in the country. That the Maoists have virtually caught the fancy of tribal is a feeling in the Ministry because the government of India has its dirty track record of suppressing all the people's movement through their intimidation as well as vicious media propaganda. In fact, in the name of independent media, India today has corporate interest groups sitting in the chat rooms and speaking their own interests.

It is the nationalism quintessentially upper caste nationalism that is being played through the news rooms. And the cost is those who disagree with them and do not look like them. The consensus is created through media and some of the warriors find their way in these chat rooms to show that they are for the opposite view point, though the likes of Arnab Goswami never even allow them to speak.

Is home ministry so naive not to understand the criticism? Why is afraid of criticism? Why it is targeting the civil society organizations?

The fact is that the Maoists or for that matter any close door ideological perceptions never like openness. With openness they fear that people would get new ideas and may shift their ideological perception. West Bengal under CPM suffered this as anybody who would not speak the language of the Marxists would be spied. Gujarat suffered it under the BJP's Hindutva experiment as any fresh air is considered dangerous. Any ideological dissimilarity is a threat. This is happening in many other parts of South Asia whether it is Pakistan, Bangladesh or Afghanistan under Taliban. The Maoists will never want any civil society organization to work in their area. Those who pretend to work there can only do on the mercy of the Maoists and can not have their own freedom of expression because dissent is not allowed in the Maoist brand of democracy. NGOs for them and for many others are imperialist conspiracy to befool the people and defuse their resistance.

In the beginning the Congress party was afraid of them during the emergency when Indira Gandhi actually prohibited civil liberties groups to even express their ideas. So, newspapers just crawled when they were asked to bend, a phrase often used by politicians victimized during the emergency. Democratic opposition to Indira Gandhi grew up in entire country and finally mighty family had to bite dust resulting in the formation of the first non-Congress government at the center. Unfortunately, it had the same structure and therefore the internal contradictions helped Congress come back to power again.

In the post-1980s, India's issues took different turn. For the first time polity was facing a big challenge. In Punjab and Assam, there was a real challenge to mainstream polity in India. It was not just mainstream politics but to the very fabric of the constitution of India. Earlier it was just Kashmir and Nagaland which were seeking extra-constitutional mandate but now the other states also started questioning.

The reasons were lots. The powerful center which could dismiss the states at their own. The governors became the stooge of the home ministry and the non-Congress governments were being targeted. To finish the Akalis in Punjab, the Congress promoted Bhindarwale while to strengthen its base it promoted demographic changes in both Assam and Tripura. While the seculars may not like this but the fact is that the tribals in Tripura today are minority in their own state. How can a community of a state be called a minority?

It is also true that one cannot really compare the private armies and their justification of picking up guns. State has a right to protect its citizens and since its forces are legitimate and accountable they need to follow the rules of the law and procedures. Of course, Maoists are provoking so that it becomes a fight between them and the state and all the other actors are eliminated in between. The government and political parties must understand it. The issues raised by them are valid and need to be addressed. These issues have been raised by civil society for long and the government only looked it in utter contempt. Even the Court orders are not being followed; environmental norms are not being followed. So, when they close all democratic process the end product is romanticism of guns and violence. The Maoists also know that the Indian state is a mighty state and their vision of overthrowing it is a sheer stupidity. But the state of India has given them shelter under tribal pain and agony.

If the state does not heal the wounds the situation will never change. The wounds in Punjab were healed through a political process and hence Punjab is going better. Same thing happened in the north east. They invite Muviah to Nagaland and talk to him. They discuss with Landenga in Mizoram and later he became chief minister. They are initiating political process in Kashmir. Unfortunately, there seems to be no political process in Chhatisgarh, because the political class thinks that they are "elected" democratically and have got a political mandate to do anything. Yes, the bureaucrats who have least regard for political class along with these same corporate who have no respect for rule of law, are preaching the virtues of this democracy. Kanwal Sibbal, a former Ambassador of India in US condemned the NGOs for taking money from abroad and selling country's interest. It is surprising that these remarks come from those whose children always study abroad and whose life cannot be complete without visiting abroad. Prime Minister and his colleagues have studied abroad. Some of them worked for the World Bank. A large number of IAS officers are getting huge offers in UN. A number of subsidized IITians and Medical Students are getting lucrative offers abroad. Big companies are getting investment. Newspapers are publishing articles from magazines. TV channels are doing everything to show foreign films, view points and what not. Then what is this particular about foreign.

If democratic mandate is used as a bogey to install the corrupt mining companies then the Home Minister will have to think more. The questions are simple. Where are the tribal MPs, their leaders, their Panchayat leaders. Why are people silent on this issue? The government is saying that let the Maoists stop violence and it is ready to speak. But the government can stop immediately all the MoUs in these regions which are responsible for the possible displacement of millions of tribals. Not all tribals are Maoists. Those who do not have land, second time meal, do not have the luxury of ideology. If the tribals today are supporting the Maoists it is the fear of losing their land. They know once the forest department and other government officials come back to them, they will lose all the land redistributed by the Maoists. Let the government declare that all the tribals who own land and are tilling land will not lose it. All the tribals and other forest dwellers

who have land on papers will get it immediately. All the mining companies will be packed from the tribal region. Is the government ready to say this? The consensus that the government is talking about is in Delhi and not in tribal land. The land where this battle is being fought need to be reassured Mr Chidambaram. They need to be reassured that they will not lose their land and their access to forest. By making the civil society the number one enemy, they are actually changing the track. In the fight against armed struggles, it is the democratic voices which need to be strengthened in these regions. Unfortunately, the political parties are playing dirty politics and media protecting corporate interest and therefore the best people to be blamed for the whole process is civil society. The failure of the government and political parties should not be put on the civil society.

No society can flourish under the dictatorship of ideologues and those who fancy themselves to be the sole champions of serving the poor. The Maoists, it seems, believe in finality of their document which cannot be changed. Mao for them has become a tool like the religious thugs who believe the finality of their religious books and are highly intolerant to the dissenting voice. It is this flexibility and capacity to listen to the dissenting voices which was envisioned in the constitution by Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar. Democracy means justice to the lowest and poorest and not justice in the name of the corporate. People will always pick up guns where the democratic process failed. Democratic processes have failed in Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, Andhra, West Bengal and North East. In most of the states, the political parties, the governments have openly and in most brazen way, sided with corporate interests forcing the people to jumps in the ideological framework of those who provide instant justice. The answer to them is initiations of political process in decision making. Political process means not just becoming political parties and play politics but involving people in their issues and getting solution from them and of course, putting a complete moratorium in further mining in those areas. If this democratic process does not help the poorest of the poor as emphasized by Dr Ambedkar in his Constituent Assembly address, then the same people will blow up the structure of democracy. It is time the government introspect its strategy and ensure that the political parties take up issues, visit those areas, meet people and initiate a debate on it. □□□