

‘Chidambaram seems Cold to Peace’

[In May, home minister P Chidambaram agreed to let him mediate with the Maoists. But human rights activist Swami Agnivesh says this has meant no more than feelings of deep guilt after the Naxalite spokesperson he was speaking to, Cherukuri Rajkumar aka Azad, was killed in an encounter with security forces. Agnivesh speaks to Rakhi Chakrabarty about the dharma of justice and his quest to solve a hydra-headed problem. Excerpts:]

Q. Has Azad's death snuffed out all hope of dialogue between the Centre and Maoists?

A. Azad's death is a big blow to the peace initiatives. But I haven't lost hope. I am trying to re-establish contact with the Maoist leadership, especially, Venugopal Rao (Kishenji's brother). The Maoists have also been sending feelers about restarting the process. In his final days, Azad was working to pave the way for a dialogue. I wrote to him last on June 26 when I informed him that P Chidambaram had arranged my meetings with senior Maoist leaders Kobad Ghandy lodged in Tihar jail and Narayan Sanyal in Raipur Central Jail in the last week of May. Both had responded positively to the peace process. Chidambaram had been insisting that Maoists should set a date for abjuring violence for 72 hours. In my letter to Azad, I had suggested three dates: July 10, 15 and 20. Before he could respond, the police killed him.

Q. Is Chidambaram as keen on talks as in May?

A. After Azad's death, I met Chidambaram on July 8, seeking a judicial enquiry into the encounter. But he flatly refused. I found a different Chidambaram. There was a marked difference in body language. He seemed cold, indifferent and avoided eye contact. I could make out he was trying to defend the indefensible. He said he wasn't aware of the encounter until it happened. I find that difficult to believe. And not once did he mention the peace process. But I still want to go by the face value of the letter he wrote me.

Q. What is your locus standi in brokering peace between the Centre and Maoists?

A. I have been involved with human rights and civil rights movements for decades. I knew Satyanarayan Sinha and Nagi Reddy, who were part of the Naxalite movement in Bihar in the 1980s. During Emergency, we had gone underground. I protested against Emergency in my own way for which I was jailed. Then I met Nagi Reddy at the house of the then Union labour minister Raghunath Reddy.

When I read about Maoist violence and people getting killed by security forces, I was disturbed. I met Chidambaram on May 2 and offered to initiate a peace process. He agreed it is a socio-economic problem, not a law-and-order problem. He said he would make public all MoUs related to mining and was ready to discuss them threadbare. He said that the longer the ceasefire lasts, the better. He did not even ask for arms surrender by Maoists. But the Maoists were sceptical to begin with.

Q. So you endorse the Maoists' armed struggle?

A. No. Violence is not the means to achieve anything. I told Chidambaram that corruption is the biggest violence in India. Structural violence in our society is more heinous than Maoist violence. Why are 7,000 children dying of hunger everyday?

Maoists are not the marauders they are being painted out to be. They are not serious about overthrowing government by 2050. Yes, there are lumpens among Maoists. Maoist violence aims to counter state violence. Both should be exposed. All this talk about a unified command and joint operation is futile. It's suicidal and will lead to civil war. The security forces, on whom the government is depending to win the war, will desert them because they are unhappy with the state.

Q. Is there a way forward?

A. I want to create a third force comprising leaders of civil society, religious faiths and intellectuals. We are being held hostage by elected representatives. I don't believe in parliamentary politics or representative democracy. We need grassroots democracy. Why should we seek inspiration in Marx and Mao? Our Vedas say there can be no private ownership of means of production, but social or community ownership. For that, we need to break the nexus between *raj* (government), *math* (religion) and *seth* (businessmen).

Q. Years ago you said globalization is the glorification of greed as god. Do you still remain firmly against globalization?

A. Globalization, as we know it today, is a truncated form. The terms of trade dictated are only advantageous to the West. Earlier this century, World Bank president James Wolfensohn invited me to Washington for a critique of globalization. I told him it's all about market forces and commodification of everything. It's globalization of greed. As an alternative I suggested *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* where the world is a family. In a family, the youngest child gets his share first and the others take care of him. The eldest or the breadwinner is the last to take his share. But in globalized economy, the weak and the poor are neglected. If you really want to take globalization to its logical conclusion, immigration should be allowed. While the West is pulling down tariff walls for smooth movement of goods from developed countries, it's building higher walls to discourage immigration. That will only create more imbalance. Like goods and capital, free movement of labour should be allowed.

Q. Casteism, you famously said, is a form of terrorism. Isn't that hyperbole?

A. No, terrorism pales in its ferocity when you look at caste atrocities in India that happen daily. Cruelty in the name of caste has no reason. Discrimination starts from birth. It's worse than apartheid.

Q. You are seen as the eternal protester. Do you think you would have achieved more had you stuck to a particular issue?

A. All issues are interlinked, be it casteism, bonded labour, alcoholism or foeticide. As a rights activist, I live by three Ds: *doubt, debate and dissent*. That keeps me on the wrong side of the establishment. I was expelled for life from the Arya Samaj when I tried to apply its tenets like egalitarian and casteless society, rationality, spirit of questioning and acceptance of truth, to its leaders. □□□