

ALL WAR AND NO PEACE

## Behind the Silencing of Azad

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The assassination of Cherukuri Raj Kumar aka Azad on July 1-2, 2010, a senior leader of the CPI (Maoist) scuttled a peace process and virtually destroyed the hopes of millions of Indians who wanted the government offensive against the Maoists to be halted. In truth it was a double killing. Peace-loving people were encouraged by the news reports that the Union Home Minister had written to Swami Agnivesh on May 11, 2010 to explore the possibility of a 72-hour ceasefire to pave the way for talks between the Maoists and the Indian State and the letter sent by Cherukuri Rajkumar aka Azad, on 31st May, 2010 reiterated that Maoist party was serious about talks. In particular, unlike in the past, party's response was unambiguously positive. Azad wrote that "to ensure the establishment of peace there should be ceasefire or cessation of hostilities by both sides simultaneously instead of asking one side to abjure violence ... lift the ban on the party and mass organizations so as to facilitate them to take up open forms of struggle ...initiate measures to release Party leaders as a prelude to the release of political prisoners .... and .... stop all its efforts to escalate the war including the measures of calling back all the para military forces deployed in the war zones." Indeed even in his interview given to *The Hindu* (April 14, 2010) he had stated in response to the question whether by engaging in talks the Maoists wanted "to buy time" or is it a "re-evaluation of political strategy" he had been candid enough. He had said that "it does not need much of a common sense to understand that both sides will utilize a situation of ceasefire to strengthen their respective sides." But he pointed out that "talks will give some respite to the people who are oppressed and suppressed under the fascist jackboots of the Indian state and state-sponsored terrorist organizations...". In the same interview he also reminded that it was the "imposition of the ban that had led the Party and the mass organizations to take up arms in the first place... What shook the rulers at that time (in 1978) and compelled them to declare Jagtjala and Sircila taluks in Karimnagar district of North Telengana as disturbed areas in 1978 was not the armed struggle of the Maoists (which had suffered a complete setback ...by 1972) but the powerful (movement against) anti-feudal order in the countryside...." In short the manner in which the party responded this time further inspired hopes in the possibility of ending the on-going civil war.

Granted that hope generated about prospects of talk had weak foundation. No political party in government power has ever shown willingness to engage in sincere dialogue with the revolutionary left. The 2004-05 peace talks between the Maoists and the Andhra Pradesh government ended because fake encounters continued to be carried out by the AP police and so did Maoist retaliation. Thus even before substantive issues could be taken up talks got sabotaged and AP police crackdown ensued which dealt a severe setback to Maoists in AP. The assassination of Azad on July 1-2 has made the already difficult task bleak. It is evident from facts available in the public domain that Cherukuri Raj Kumar aka Azad and Hem Pande were unarmed when they travelled to Nagpur where Azad was to meet a courier between 11.30-1.30 pm of July 1, 2010. They left on June 30th from somewhere in north India and were disappeared most likely on the morning of 1st July either before the train reached Nagpur or on reaching

Nagpur. It appears that he was on his way, among other reasons, to meet other senior leaders of CPI (Maoist) to decide on the date from which 72-hour ceasefire was to commence. Swami Agnivesh had communicated to him on June 26 that "Maoists should set a date for abjuring violence for 72 hours. In my letter I had suggested three dates : July 10, 15 and 20. Before he could respond, the police killed him." (*The Sunday Times*, 18 July, 2010).

It is alleged that Azad was killed because the Maoists did not cease their ambushes causing fatalities which demoralized security force personnel, such as the June 29 ambush in Narayanpur district of Bastar in which 29 CRPF jawans lost their lives. While ceasefire had not commenced and both sides were engaged in attacking each other it is one thing for such attacks and counter-attacks to continue. However, the greyhound which kidnapped Azad and then killed him were aware of his identity (but not of his companion) and therefore knew that he was engaged in talks with the government. They could have either allowed him to travel or else to arrest him and his companion. The fact that they chose to do neither meant that they had sanction to liquidate him. And therefore, it is likely that the AP greyhound knew that by doing so they would be scuttling the incipient peace process. After this it would be difficult for Maoists to heed the demand for cessation of hostilities if a leader engaged in these backchannel contacts can be eliminated. Because it sends a message that no one is safe at the hands of trigger happy security forces. On the other hand it imperils the efforts of all those who wanted to end this war from escalating. From circumstantial evidence it is clear that warmongers have won this round. The July 14th 2010 meeting of the chief ministers of Naxalite-affected states makes it clear that the Indian government post-Azad assassination is going ahead with escalating its war efforts. For instance it was announced at the meeting that 36 battallions of India Reserve force will be added to the 105 already raised along with 16,000 more Special police officers (SPOs -civilians trained and armed by the government to combat Maoists) bringing their strength to 30,000.

To essentialize the issue of Maoist violence is the way in which class society dehumanizes struggles and movements. If the bottomline is that reproduction of social inequality is unacceptable then those who believe in step-by-step process, and others in leap or qualitative jump, from one stage to another, must accept that there will remain a divide and yet both are also symbiotically linked to each other. Those who decry armed struggle claim that popular movements can make existing institutions responsive to people's needs.

The point is such efforts were being made even when Maoists had not emerged as the biggest threat to the Indian ruling classes and have not ceased because of Maoist rebellion. Except such efforts have actually gained more leverage, thanks to the Maoist movement emerging strong. This becomes even more remarkable because in 2004-05 when Maoists were dealt a blow in Andhra Pradesh and more or less wiped out with mere presence in a single district followed by Salwa Judum type repression in Chattisgarh. No one believed that they would emerge stronger this time around. But they did. So much so that almost all the contemporary social welfare legislations, be it NREGA, Forest Act, enforcement of PESA, proposal to make joint forest management committees managed by the gram sabha...and the Planning Commission's "Special Problems of Tribal Development" have all been inspired or advocated by referring to the need to wean away the poorest among the poor from the Maoists/ Naxalites? The Prime Minister had drawn attention to the need to withdraw lakhs of cases filed against the

tribals for petty crimes, since 1980, lest such persecution of tribals drives them to join Maoists/Naxalites. The union law minister had opined that "(t)here is a feeling among the common citizens, especially the poor, women, the elderly and the weaker sections, that the legal and judicial process is far removed from them." He added that common man's disenchantment was manifesting itself in "new form of violence and strife - civil unrest, armed peasant and tribal movement, Naxalite and Maoist rebellion." (HT 25/10/2009).

Thus even peaceful or non-violent movements owe their credibility or their relative effectiveness to the Maoists' armed resistance. Then why should anyone decry Maoists for their armed resistance or want them to stop the war when resistance itself derives succor from this? It is important to keep exploring possibilities of peace which can enable the Maoists to work openly and launch mass struggles because they have captured the imagination of the poorest among the poor.

Moreover, while violence will continue to play a role, as long as State pursues militaristic approach, violence also has its limits. These limits are set by politics. It is one thing to resist but another to promote alternative politics. While displacement, land grab by and for mining and mineral based conglomerates, forest rights, welfare needs have received spotlight, alternative to the present order of things is somehow missing. Why is it that ten thousand suicides by farmers evokes less revulsion than a criminal act committed by the Maoists?

Is there an alternate vision for removal of poverty and empowering the people? How is that decade long military suppression in NE and J&K does not encourage people to ponder the nature of the State which can year in and year out crush movements which demand right of self-determination, an eminently democratic and peaceful approach? Is the Indian state anti-Muslim, pro-Hindu, racist...or a repressive state which presents itself as one or the other depending on which section of people it is engaged in crushing and therefore demonizing. The point is that for left to be credible it must go beyond surface manifestation of wrong and address the underlying causes and processes which account for skewed and unequal and stunted growth. Regrettably, parliamentary left despite 58 years of open politics and despite holding government power at provincial level, has not offered an alternate vision. Yes they have some achievements but these are hardly of the kind which inspires anyone to claim that they present a different vision of politics.

Now Indian State propagates that Naxalites are irredeemably bent upon waging a war against the Indian State and short of suppressing them there is no other option. Of course Maoists want to seize power. That is a perfectly legitimate objective. In the last four decades several Naxalite parties gave up this path to pursue non-violent parliamentary or extra parliamentary struggle. Their experience hardly inspires confidence that the Indian state has become amenable to people's concerns now that some of these left wing rebels gave up arms. Appeal and prospect of non-violence has been undermined, by the state itself. Be it NREGA, the forest bill or the decision to enforce Panchayat Extension to Schedule Areas, which was passed in 1996 but not implemented and so many other such issues figure on the agenda, thanks to the fear that were this not done the poorest among the poor will continue to turn to Maoists.

The point is that so long as State monopolizes means of violence they will remain enabled to subject people to a life of indignity and enslavement. Freedoms and liberties would remain prerogative of the middle classes to enjoy. Working people are vulnerable;

no sooner they appear to have succeeded in mobilizing people and begin to question the inequalities and inadequacies of the system they become target of State's oppressive ways.

India, for all its verbosity about non-violence, is one of the most heavily armed state both in terms of accumulation of destructive power of its arsenal as well as size of its military force, which gets force multiplied by draconian laws, and thus enables the ruling classes to practice 'slow genocide'. Consider that 45% of children below 6 years suffer from malnutrition, malnourishment and stunted growth, or that by playing around with calorie intake, bringing it down from 2400 to 1800 or even less to 1500, one can statistically reduce the number of people living below poverty line and thus reduce Food Security entitlement for hundreds of millions of Indians! But this exposes people to a slow death. To then argue that violence has no role to play is quite wrong. It is as good telling people to wait patiently for the fruit to fall into their lap. This may be touching display of fortitude and of religious faith, but for the fact those at the receiving end may be getting desperate after 63 years of practicing it. Ironically, India dropped to 134th position in global human development index but moved up the ladder, to occupy ninth position, in military spending and 12th largest economy.

Despite being weak and with patchy urban presence it is clear that Maoists enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of the poorest of the poor. Thus were the ban on the party removed they could emerge as a fulcrum around which resistance could become vigorous. Indian rulers do not want this to happen. By assassinating Azad security apparatus has thus killed a senior leader of the Maoist party, scuttled peace process and throttled the possibility of Maoists coming overground anytime in near future. □□□

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