

Prisoners of War!

HUMAN PROGRESS IS MEASURED IN PRISON. AND IT IS NOWHERE so relevant as in India—the biggest showcase of democracy. Since there is no escape for thousands of dissenters, since at the end their democratic and liberal spirit is destroyed. Sporadic unrest occurring across the country over the thorny issue of political prisoners is not unexpected. It raises questions about the credibility of politicians and the security establishment. If the maoists and insurgents who ideologically subscribe to any -ism other than maoism, could not be treated as political prisoners, they could be treated as prisoners of war. In both cases they deserve to be treated like human beings, they want to be treated with dignity and respect naturally. After all the Government of India has virtually declared war against the maoists and, the maoists too don't deny the fact that they are not at war with the state. True, 2011 is not 1977 but the issue of political prisoners is as burning as it was then, after the lifting of Indira Gandhi's internal emergency. The ordeal George Fernandes and his relatives had to face during those black days in relation to the infamous Baroda Dynamite Case otherwise concocted by the emergency hawks, is now history. Police can always manufacture dozens of false cases to imprison political opponents and they do it by obliging the powers that be but that doesn't obliterate the political character of prisoners.

A whole generation is growing up directionless, surrounded by violence. Their basic rights are being violated day in and day out by the persons in power while the victims have no meaningful recourse to address those violations. They cannot agitate peacefully, even in a purely Gandhian way. Nor can they voice the grievances against torturous isolation in living hells known as jails. It is more like 'extra-legal death sentence'.

Human Rights activists who are organising protests to demand unconditional release of political prisoners, be they maoist or anti-maoist, now run the risk of being arrested because this is the biggest showpiece of constitutional democracy, whatever it means.

Now it is becoming increasingly clear that the present non-left dispensation in West Bengal is not going to release political prisoners anytime soon though human rights bodies have long been agitating for their unconditional release. The present government under one pretext or another is buying time to complicate the issue while threatening to take stern measures against civil liberties crusaders. They floated a review committee, immediately after coming to power with a view to screening political prisoners, albeit it was totally unnecessary as even the West Bengal Correctional Services Act, 1992 provides guidance in determining political status of prisoners. In truth the so-called Review Committee can at worst be utilised as a semi-official cover to delay the very process of release of political prisoners. That the present government lacks political will to identify political prisoners and release them by honouring all the pompous pre-election promises is a fact of life. Nor has it shown much enthusiasm by deviating from the normal practice of refusing to recognise 'political offence' as a legitimate tool in voicing dissent in a democratic set up. No state government is inclined to offer political status to political

activists, all are booked under criminal offence. Even non-violent protest march, sit-in and hunger strike are not viewed as political action and the question of political status of prisoners arrested in connection with mass movement doesn't arise. In every state there are political prisoners languishing in different jails under oppressive conditions for years though they are not officially recognised so. They have very little chance of being declared as political offenders because the security establishment is hell bent on turning this country into a big prison house for the socially and economically disadvantaged who occasionally try to assert themselves under any easily available political banner, maoist or non-maoist.

Unless the idea of political prisoners gets a living discourse for the civic society, it is difficult to make the government act. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), being a unique toothless democratic institution in its own right, never raises the question of political prisoners or how to grant, political status to political offenders. They talk about inhuman conditions prisoners are forced to live in everywhere and there ends the matter. NHRC frequently organises some high sounding seminars graced by eminent persons of judiciary only to cater a select audience without much impact on the broader spectrum of the society.

Besides awarding some monetary benefits to the victims of gross violations of human rights, in most cases by the police and paramilitary forces, they hardly discuss any serious matter otherwise essential to strengthen human rights movement. They never discuss how prisoners in general and political prisoners in particular, are being denied their basic rights in captivity though they sometimes deal with custodial violence and custodial deaths. Yesterday's terrorists are today's freedom fighters but the British legacy of denying political status to political activists continues unabated. Then NHRC is entrusted to talk about prisoners, not political prisoners, they are not yet fit to speak of them. Nor can they think of prisoners of internal war in the absence of external war with any neighbouring country. At the time of writing came the news of the gruesome killing of Koteshwar Rao, more familiar with the media as Kishenji, by the joint forces in the Burisole forest of junglemahal, allegedly in a fake encounter. Human Rights bodies apart, even CPI and Forward Bloc dismissed the police version of encounter as a pure lie. Before the murder he was brutally tortured. His mutilated body was shown to the media as a war trophy! The security forces in this land of Gandhi seem to have learnt a lot from the Abu Gharib syndrome. After Azad it was Koteshwar Rao, one of the Polit Bureau members of CPI (Maoist). Ironically both of them were gunned down in cold blood against the backdrop of peace initiatives by the concerned citizens. □□□ 24-11-2011