

JANGALMAHAL DEBATE-II

From Manmohan to Mamata

Swami Agnivesh

I RETURNED FROM Raipur-to-Dantewada 'Peace and Justice March' on 10th May of 2010 after exhorting both the Maoists and the Government to abjure the spiral of violence and counter violence, and to seek solution through dialogue. The slogan we had raised was 'Goli se Nahi Boli se'. Therefore when on 11th May, Union Home Minister P Chidambaram gave me a letter asking me to take initiative for peace talks, I felt happy. And as soon as we took initial steps we found that the Naxalites are prepared for a negotiated peace. Both the sides put forward certain conditions for ceasefire. This development encouraged me and I felt that at long last there would be some solution to this problem.

While the situation was expected to ripen, what happened was just the opposite of it. Suddenly I came to know the shocking news of Azad's killing. It vitiated the scenario. The mysterious situation in which Azad was killed itself created antagonism. Both sides were taking rigid stand. The Naxalites said it was a cold-blooded murder, but the authorities claimed it was a genuine encounter. So, I demanded an inquiry. The government was not inclined to institute one. If the government had nothing to hide, it should have agreed for a free and fair inquiry. Even National Human Rights Commission has said every incident of encounter killing should be inquired into.

When it was evident that the Home Minister of the country was not in favour of any investigation, I met the Prime Minister. He requested me to give him five days. Days became months, but the PM did nothing. I met Rahul Gandhi then, and he too assured me. I also met Salman Khurshid. I met the opposition leaders. I told them that they should come forward so that I could continue with the peace initiative.

For creating a favourable condition for peace talks, it was necessary to win the confidence of the Naxalites afresh. It could be won only by instituting a free and fair inquiry on the encounter to find out whether it was genuine or fake. When nothing happened, we moved the Supreme Court. On 14th May, 2011, the apex court ordered to institute a CBI inquiry. Justice Aftab Alam ordered to produce an interim report in 6 weeks and the final report by three months. When not even the interim report came after six months, I knocked the door of Supreme Court again. I have heard the CBI has now submitted its interim report, though till date (26th January, 2012) I am yet to get a copy. What I have learnt is even more disappointing. The interim report has tentatively established that it was a genuine encounter. But it has demanded more time to look into the Central Forensic Scientific Laboratory report. The Supreme Court has now given the CBI time till the end of March. Let us hope that the CBI will at long last look into

the very basic material of Central Forensic Scientific Laboratory report. Hopefully again, without any influence from its political bosses.

My experience of working with the government is not good. I feel they do not stand by what they commit. They do not even have the deftness to carry out a great task. The Naxalites were ready for talks even after Azad's killing if they were not given a short shrift.

BENGAL SCENARIO

I went to Lalgarh on 9th August, 2010. I addressed a rally there with Mamata Banerjee and I supported her. There I described the Azad incident as a fake encounter. But Mamtaji went further and described it as murder. It was heartening for me as Mamata Banerjee, a leading member of the UPA, attached so much importance to it.

I hoped she would win. Rather I was confident that she would win and would form her government in Bengal. I said that in my speech there. Afterwards exactly the same happened. Mamataji formed her government. Then, I asked her and her party-men to come forward and take initiative so that peace negotiations could start afresh. At that juncture only she could do it, both at the state level and the national level. Her party has significant presence in the union cabinet as the Rail Ministry is still with her party. She is in power in the state. She carries formidable weight. She has the required strength to do it even now.

Then she formed a committee of interlocutors to negotiate with the Naxals. I was not a member of that committee. But, Sujato Bhadra and my other friends were there. I do not know what transpired between them and the Naxalites, but the initiative did not succeed. Then Mamata Banerjee started saying that she had given enough space to the Maoists, but they had not responded. She said it was time for police action. I felt sad when I came to know about it.

When I got the news of Kishenji's death in an encounter, I felt very sad. Because even after Azad's death Maoist leaders Kishenji and Akash made a press statement that if Swami Agnivesh continued as mediator they were ready for talks. This statement was carried in the front page of *Economic Times*. They showed their sincerity about talks.

I am not aware of the reasons of failure of peace initiative in Bengal. But when Bengal government hardened its stand, I felt they too were having the attitude similar to the central government. Kishenji's death has dealt a body blow to the peace process. Who is responsible for this can be explained by Sujato Bhadro and his companions. But I may share what my experience of working as a negotiator was.

I have found that the Maoists stood by whatever they promised through their sources. They took away five jawans of the Chhattisgarh Armed Forces and kept them as hostages. After 18 days they freed all of them, unharmed, before the media. The family members of those five went to the jungles along with me. They were all happy. Next day, in a press conference Chief Minister of the state, Raman Singh, thanked me for my effort. There I proposed that the state

government should also release any five of those many tribal people in jail as a return gesture, as that would send a very good message for peace initiative.

Raman Singh promised to do so, but he never kept his words. Prime Minister had earlier promised, and did not keep it. Rahul Gandhi too promised to take initiative, and never did so.

Mamata Banerjee supported the demand for investigation into Azad's death, but when her own government came she changed her stance. I demanded an inquiry on Kishenji's killing. Thereafter I tried to meet her, both in Kolkata when I had gone there and in Delhi when she came here. But I was not given an appointment. I do not know why.

I firmly believe that the government will never be able to eliminate the Maoists through arms and armed personnel. For that they must, keeping in view the demand of the adivasis for their right to jal-jungle-jamin, look at why Fifth Schedule of the Constitution of India, PESA Act and Forest Rights Act were not implemented. They will have to find out which forces were responsible for it. Without solving this you cannot expect to find solution to the Maoist problem. The present Union Minister for Rural Development Jairam Ramesh is of late saying the same thing. But how far his government is sincere on that I do not know. As far I understand, Maoists have taken up arms to resist the exploitation of the adivasis and bring an end to the injustice done to them. To find a real solution to this the leaders of the central and state governments will have to talk to the Maoists.

To initiate the talks the government should release some of the jailed top Maoist leaders like Kobad Ghandi and Narayan Sanyal for a limited period so that they can formalise the things. Every discussion and negotiation should be recorded so that later it can be verified who said what. There should be a committee of prominent citizens and human rights workers to monitor whether agreed conditions are being observed on the ground. This committee should have to be neutral, so that it can fix the blame of any violation, irrespective of whether the violator is the government or the Maoist.

Operations by Joint Forces or Salwa Judum and the Koya commandoes will never find a lasting solution.

Finally a word of unsolicited advice to the Maoist leaders.

Please never lower your guard at the first glimpse of an olive branch from the Government, however keen they may be for a negotiated settlement or ceasefire. □□□