

Phantom of Peace

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Peace is not an absence of war; it is a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence, confidence, justice. —Spinoza

... politics is war without bloodshed while war is politics with bloodshed.—Mao

THERE IS MUCH IN COMMON between war and politics. War is all about politics and all wars are political. Politics is essentially war—for the domination of nations, resources, or for that matter, minds. Only bloodshed makes the difference—whether one will call it war or simply politics. And that is a thin line—so accustomed have people become to see bloodshed, who cares for it any longer?

Peace, on the other hand, is something fundamentally different. It does not depend on whether blood is being shed or not, or whether, in other words, two conflicting sides are at war. For the two sides to reach a state of peace, they must reach a state not simply of equilibrium of force or might, but precisely of equality, of mutuality, and, as Spinoza says, of justice. Until this state is reached, there can be truce but not peace, because underneath the apparent tranquillity there remain inequality, injustice, and violence. More so, if the tranquillity itself is brought about by violence. And it is not easy to bring about tranquillity in a war scenario through violence on a routine, mundane scale. If there is tranquillity without peace, be sure that it was preceded by tremendous violence. If history has not recorded it memory and consciousness certainly did. Some day, they might speak—rather cry out hoarsely—to make people understand that what they had thought to be peace was an illusion.

Unfortunately, nobody can hear the murmur of non-peace until they become as loud as mine-blasts. People always wake up the day after. Then, they wonder how chapattis travel from barrack to barrack and sal twigs are passed on from village to village faster than the speed of e-mails.

People do the same thing every time it happens. Because they see the leaders of their political “mainstream” doing the same thing every time. Searching for scapegoats. Playing blame games. Contemplating more violence. And in the intermissions, talking “peace”.

Two days before the death of 76 CRPF jawans in a Maoist attack in Chhattisgarh’s Dantewada on 6 April 2010, Union home minister P Chidambaram visited Lalgargh, then the hotbed of insurgency in West Bengal, and remarked that the “buck” should stop at the chief minister’s table. Thus, he made the Left Front government primarily responsible for controlling (or not controlling) the rebellion. After the Dantewada incident, Chidambaram admitted that

something had gone "very wrong". He said, "I have been asked directly or indirectly where the buck stops after the attack. The buck stops at my desk."

What was it that had gone "very wrong"? Here is an observation of the Supreme Court of India: "People do not take up arms, in an organized fashion, against the might of the State, or against fellow human beings without rhyme or reason. Guided by an instinct for survival, and according to Thomas Hobbes, a fear of lawlessness that is encoded in our collective conscience, we seek an order. However, when that order comes with the price of dehumanization, of manifest injustices of all forms perpetrated against the weak, the poor and the deprived, people revolt." (Order dated July 5, 2011 by Justices B. Sudershan Reddy and Surinder Singh Nijjar on Writ Petition (Civil) No. 250 of 2007, Nandini Sundar & Ors. Versus State of Chhattisgarh.)

But the home minister had other things in mind. The Naxalite (or Maoist) problem, according to him, had blown up to such proportions because it did not receive adequate attention during the last 10 years or so. This time, the "menace" must be fought "to the last drop of our blood".

If public memory is short, politicians' is shorter. The Naxalite issue is not 10 years old. Forty years ago, in 1970, the then Prime Minister, belonging to the same party as Chidambaram's, had expressed her resolve in Parliament to "fight to finish" the Naxalites. And on 10 May 1973, the late CPI parliamentarian Bhupesh Gupta, raising a question on the killing of his nephew in Calcutta, said, "Even though dubbed as terrorist, he had no fear under British rule of being shot down in the street by the police in an action described as an encounter." The then Union minister of state for home, K C Pant, replied, "But now that the house is ours, we have to do something even if it is our nephews and nieces who try to destroy it from within."

After the irreplaceable loss of 76 lives in the "battle of Sukhma", people found the same debate going round and round again. "Call in the air force, bomb them to splinters," some "responsible" persons started demanding. Thankfully, some others, including the chief of air staff, expressed doubts whether this could be the way to deal with the rebels who are "our own people" after all.

When militant Maoism announced its birth in the fields of Naxalbari in North Bengal in 1967, analysts identified the root cause as underdevelopment. The initial revolt was crushed within five years. Or so it was thought. Four decades later, when it is again tearing through the spine of the country, the buck stops at the same place: lack of development (this development, by the way, has nothing to do with the spurious 'development' dream global capitalism is showing third world people every day—it is the accessibility of all to the conditions of fulfilment of civilised human needs).

What was being done about the "root cause" in the intervening time? Those at the helm of affairs have no answer to this riddle, and so have started talking in riddles themselves. Those among the people of Lalgah who were fortunate to meet the Union home minister during his visit had this experience. When they poured out their problems before him—the lack of health

care, drinking water, irrigation, ration, and what not—he gave them the proverbial chicken and egg option : “Drive out the Naxals from your area and don’t provide any moral or material support to them.... If they are ousted from your areas, I can pressurise the government to initiate development works then.” Did the buck lie with the people now? Which came first—lack of development or rise of insurgency? And what should have been done first—removal of underdevelopment or driving out the Maoists?

But this is how India’s great “strategists” work. After a heavy exchange of fire at Lakshmanpur near Lalgarh on 25 March 2010 in which the joint forces even used mortars, the police were sure that a number of Maoists had been injured at least. And they must have been receiving treatment from village quacks, since there were no hospitals or nursing homes within commutable distance. So now the forces stepped up “vigilance” on quacks, virtually cutting off the only healthcare providers in these remote villages from the needy people. The health centres set up by the People’s Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCPA) were raided and shut down. A few makeshift medical camps organised by the forces were expected to fill the void.

Such “strategies” to separate the Maoists from the people only increased the distance of the administration from the masses. Contrary to the theory currently popular among some sections of the media, academics and “civil society” activists, the Maoists did not fall from the sky and impose themselves over the poor “innocent” people of Junglemahal. Nor is there is any justification in thinking that the people have been forced to suffer “sandwiched” between the state forces and the Maoists. That would be denying the people their active role in course of history of Junglemahal. Even if one keeps aside the turbulent Seventies for the time being, various Naxalite groups that later merged to form the Communist Party of India (Maoist) have been working in the region for a long time, at least since the mid-1990s, in the present phase. On different occasions, they have organised people to demand their basic rights like drinking water, healthcare, irrigation facilities and decent wages for the forest dwellers who pick kendu leaves for making bidis.

Alongside, they have spread the message of armed revolution, which seems to have had a good number of takers among the local poor (there is no reason to believe that all the Sorens, Tudus, Baskes and Mahatos that people hear about had been herded like sheep to join the armed “gangs”). And if the Maoists were able to draw sustenance from the latter, it must have been possible because of a mutual dependence and commonality of interest at some points. One such point is that the people are often reminded rudely by the course of events that the “democratic” means of protests and demands have always met a dead end. Ten years ago, in the winter of 2002, an old man in Banspahari village told this correspondent candidly, “If one had to do janajuddha for a health centre, one might as well do it.” (He punned on the word janajuddha, which means people’s war. He could have meant waging a war by the people, or joining the CPI(ML) People’s War, one of the Naxalite groups organising armed struggle in the area at that time.) In truth influence in Chhattisgarh grew manifold after the murder of Shankar Guha Neogy, one of the strongest proponents of non-violent people’s movement in India since Independence.

The same is true of Lalgarh. The PCPA was a vastly popular platform of the local tribals and poor that could not have gone underground because of its sheer strength of numbers. The government dragged its feet on its demands for months, and stopped all negotiations abruptly. Though not yet banned, it was virtually pushed underground as it was branded as a Maoist front and its leaders began to be hounded and killed. As a reaction, the tribals announced the formation of their own 'Sido-Kanhu People's Militia'. And the official strategists immediately equated it with the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA) of the Maoists.

RIDDLES AND REAL ISSUES

There are riddles galore in the story. Was it just bad timing that on a day (22 February 2010) when Maoists responded to Chidambaram's 72-hour ceasefire offer with a 72-day proposal if the government too halted its operation, a contingent of joint forces marched to the house of Lalmohan Tudu, president of the PCPA in Lalgarh, and killed him along with two associates?

At least in Lalgarh, there was a difference between the present wave of Maoist insurgency that is sweeping a large stretch of India from south to north and the nature of the unrest in this region. It is a part of the forest-clad laterite terrain popularly called Junglemahal, covering parts of West Midnapore, Bankura and Purulia districts of West Bengal that extends up to the Dalma hills of neighbouring Jharkhand, where the Maoists have a strong base. As much as 39.86 percent of the population in the Binpur-I block of West Midnapore district, of which the Lalgarh police station area is a part, lives below the poverty line. The land is mostly mono-crop, and there are little irrigation facilities. As a result, a large number of people from the area travel to distant places as migrant labour, contributing to the agricultural or 'developmental' activities in other parts of the country at low cost. There are few sources of safe drinking water and fewer health centres to care for those suffering from disease and malnutrition, pregnant women, nursing mothers and children. A building in Lalgarh meant to be a government health centre was turned into a police camp after being kept unused for about a year.

True, underdevelopment is all too apparent among the local population, mostly tribal and Dalit and it has brewed discontent. But that was not the issue when the recent upheaval took place in Lalgarh that eventually catapulted the Maoists to centrestage. What was at stake was the dignity of the local people. Even as the state failed to deliver any of its civic responsibilities towards these poor citizens, it had made them its whipping boys (and girls). They had gotten used to raids, beatings and arrests whenever some 'Naxalite incident' took place anywhere in the district. Like what happened on 2 November 2008.

On that day, West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee and Union steel and mines minister Ram Vilas Paswan narrowly escaped a landmine blast while returning after inaugurating a special economic zone being set up by the Jindal group at Salboni for building a steel plant. Though the spot was about 50 km away, the police swooped down on Lalgarh.

Three teenage students—Aben Murmu, Gautam Patra and Buddhadeb Patra—were picked up by the police as they were returning from a village festival at night, tortured and charged with waging war against the state.

Lakshmimani, the wife of Dipak Pratihar, a resident of Kantapahari village who was one of the 10 people arrested, was badly thrashed. Altogether 35 villages were raided. At one of these - in Chhotopelia - seven women faced police violence on the night of 6 November. Chhitamani Murmu lost an eye and Panmani Hansda suffered fractures. All were battered with rifle butts, sticks and boots.

This time, Lalgah turned around. The next day, it was a very different scene. Thousands of women and men armed with bows, arrows and axes blocked all main roads and declared that the blockade would continue until the police officers responsible for the assaults came and apologised to the people.

The state did not take any conciliatory measures and the people's mood hardened. The reins of the movement passed on soon from the hands of the traditional tribal organisation Bharat Jakat Majhi Marwa Juan Gaonta to a unique people's committee - the Pulishi Santras Birodhi Janasadharaner Committee or PCPA. There was no control by any established political party and all decisions were being debated and adopted by an assembly of thousands. Five women and five men were elected from each village to form the committee. A 13-point People's Charter was drawn up, which included the withdrawal of all "false cases" registered against the local people since 1998 and compensation for victims of police atrocities, apart from the initial demand for an apology.

Blockades began to come up throughout Junglemahal and even in far-flung tribal populated districts, raising apprehensions of a "second Santhal Rebellion" in the media as well as the administration. After a month-long battle of nerves, the schoolboys were released. Medical treatment was arranged for the assaulted women, though Chhitamani did not get her vision back. And one by one, the police camps in Lalgah were shut down.

The PCPA reciprocated by relaxing the blockade, though the 'police boycott' continued as the demands for apology, case withdrawal and compensation were yet to be met. A round of negotiations started before the parliamentary elections on 30 April 2009. The PCPA let Lalgah vote peacefully and even its leader Chhatradhar Mahato exercised his franchise in style, flaunting his electoral identity card.

The negotiations continued for a couple of months after the polls, but no progress was made. For a long time since the blockade started, the Maoists, even if they were present, remained in the background. The PCPA, apart from carrying on the movement, initiated several community services such as setting up health centres, planning small irrigation facilities and building village roads through voluntary labour. The role of the Maoists in all these activities rather resembled that of well-meaning NGOs. Though several 'development'-related demands were later added to the PCPA agenda, those were never really made bargaining points.

Meanwhile, there were several negative developments. The ruling CPI(M), too eager to regain lost grounds, began amassing armed cadres along the borders of the blockaded region. There was talk of a "Nandigram-style" action. Skirmishes became frequent along the "borders", leading to the exodus of hundreds of people. And inside the rebel territory, those who still belonged to the CPI(M) were forced to sever relations with the party on pain of "punishment". Soon, "spies" began to be exterminated one by one. In course of this chain of events, the Maoists began to emerge from the wings.

MAKING OF THE ENEMY

Maybe, the state thought it easier to deal with a known enemy, a structured political party like the Communist Party of India (Maoist), with which it was already waging war in neighbouring provinces, rather than an enigmatic "people's committee." The Centre was already planning an all-out offensive and the West Bengal government, though still run by the Left Front, had a communion of interest with it in this case. So, the negotiations with the PCPA were abandoned after 12 June 2009. The Maoist party was banned. Chhatradhar Mahato was arrested by police officers posing as foreign journalists. He and several other PCPA activists were put behind bars under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.

Thus the "people's committee" was to be buried with the Maoists—perhaps that's what some strategists thought. Operation Green Hunt ruled the day—and the nights—not only for the people of Junglemahal, but also for all "Maoist sympathisers" in other districts including Kolkata.

Until Shilda happened. In a daylight operation on 15 February 2010, the guerrillas, reportedly led by a woman, obliterated an entire camp of the Eastern Frontier Rifles in this small town close to Lalgah, killing 24 jawans and losing five of their own. And notwithstanding the cries and agitations of the relatives of these foot-soldiers, the home minister on 19 February offered the 72-hour truce. The language of violence had been spoken—and understood.

The killing of Lalmohan Tudu completed the circle. The Centre-state joint forces were bang on target. This middle-aged man had come home for his daughter's ensuing secondary examination. They shot him and his neighbours Suchitra Murmu and Yuvaraj Murmu, claiming they were planning to attack another paramilitary camp.

The following day, Chidambaram announced his fax number in which the Maoists could send in their offer. And Maoist leader Kishenji in turn gave out a phone number through the media, where the home ministry could call for negotiations. It was now a battle of nerves between 011-23093155 and 9734695789. This is how people are reduced to numbers, perhaps.

But no one dialed. And nothing was discussed.

Again, after midnight on 25 July, a large contingent of the joint forces moved into the Metala forest in the Goaltore police station of West Midnapore district. They spotted three synthetic

tents in a clearing amid the trees, two black and one orange. The informants had told them that the big catch was in the orange one. So, they closed in on that from all sides.

According to police, a fierce encounter followed which lasted for about five hours. Ashish Tiwari, a jawan of the Combat Battalion for Resolute Action (Cobra), was killed. After the gunfire stopped, six bodies—including that of a young woman—were found in the camp. Five of them could not be identified immediately. But there was no confusion about one. He was none other than Sido Soren, the 23-year old general secretary of the PCPA, whose real name was Bhuta Baske.

"Soren was a hardcore Maoist," the superintendent of police said. But was he always a guerrilla hiding in the jungles? On 12 June 2009, only 13 months before he died, he was sitting at the Midnapore circuit house and talking coolly with many of the top guns of the administration and the police. It was the last negotiation meeting that the state had with the PCPA. A number of decisions were taken at the meeting, such as the release of several minors and "sympathetic consideration" of the cases of the others held in the wake of the Lalgarh agitation, to pave the way for peace. It never took place. Before that, the joint forces' operation was launched. With the killing of Sido, the entire founding leadership of the people's committee had been either eliminated or imprisoned.

At one point, even the Maoists had kept an avenue open. Gour Chakraborty, a senior leader who was doing political work openly, was appointed the official spokesperson of the Maoists in West Bengal. He was arrested under the UAPA as he came out of a TV studio in Kolkata after a talk show. It was a unique experiment of the CPI (Maoist) in West Bengal that failed. Soon, Chakraborty's function was taken over by the ethereal voice of Kishenji over telephone lines of the media. And then, Kishenji, too, was eliminated in an "encounter".

THE DAY AFTER

Meanwhile, there was a great "change" in the political scenario of West Bengal. The Left Front regime fell after 34 years in the wake of a massive electoral victory of the Opposition Trinamul Congress. Mamata Banerjee became chief minister replacing Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee. Before the election, she and her party had promised in numerous speeches and publicity materials that justice would be done to the people of Junglemahal. Political prisoners would be released. The joint forces would be withdrawn. Nothing happened. There was not even any mention of resuming the unfinished talks with the PCPA. Instead, she just appointed a team of "civil society representatives" to talk with the Maoists, now totally underground. After a couple of rounds of "preparatory" parleys, the talks failed to take off and the "interlocutors" gave up.

Perhaps, the strategists and advisers of the new regime now think that peace talks are no longer necessary. For, the signs of "peace" that they were looking for are already there in Junglemahal. People turned out to vote in large numbers, indicating the return of their faith in parliamentary democracy. The villages that were once bastions of the PCPA are now Trinamul Congress strongholds. Even the women of Sonamukhi village, who had once complained that

they had been raped by joint forces personnel and Jyotsna Mahato, the firebrand activist of the PCPA who had organised the Nari Ijjat Bachao Committee (Committee to Save Women's Honour) in the wake of the incident, had joined the ruling party. The remnants of the Maoist squads are on the run.

And thus, policymakers in New Delhi and Kolkata remain buried in self-satisfaction. At best what they can aim at is a transition from politics with bloodshed to a war without bloodshed, not peace with justice. Until they wake up to the shock of a "third rebellion". Till then, justice will continue to elude Junglemahal. Till then, Junglemahal will remain in a state of war—with or without bloodshed. Unless the realisation dawns that peace without justice is *maya*. □□□