

JANGALMAHAL DEBATE-I

## Peace That Is More Dangerous Than War

Amit Bhaduri

CROOKED ARE THE TIMES. Crooked because, peace turns out to be more dangerous than war for those who seek peace. Crooked because, enforcement of law in the name of peace turns out to be more frightening than the lawlessness of war. Crooked because, lies are given out as facts by those very politicians who pretended until yesterday that they share the anxiety of the people but possess conveniently crooked memories to do exactly the opposite when in power.

Mamata Banerjee's political fortune began to change for the better as the CPI(M) increasingly displayed an almost pathological arrogance towards the people. Its fate was sealed in Nandigram and Singur and, then in Jangalmahal. She provided the rallying point in parliamentary politics. But below it lay a deeper issue: the anxiety of the poor of being dispossessed of their land and livelihood, their defenselessness against the brutality of state terror used by the party in power. She pretended to sympathise. Many in the civil society thought they had found a leader who was willing to face the issue of arbitrary state power and party terror in which the CPM had indulged. And many had hoped, even if she cannot provide economic relief to the people, she can at least stop the state machinery from brutally oppressing the people. It has taken hardly six months for her to dash all such hopes, and exhibit tendencies which rely on police force rather than on the people; on empty populism and utter lies to justify state repression. Killing of the Maoist leader Koteswar Rao (Kishenji), with a fantastic story telling of the encounter given out to the media by the chief minister herself foretells the dangerous extent to which she would go to promote herself against the people with the aid of state terror.

In the Jangalmahal area of Purulia, Bankura and West Medinipur, Banerjee's party had tremendous electoral success, as all but one front ranking CPM leaders were defeated. These were desperately poor areas of West Bengal and sub-human poverty had been a part of people's life. The CPM had done virtually nothing to alleviate these conditions during its long years of rule. Poverty had made people cynical about ever being able to change their life through electoral politics. Such cynicism breeds political apathy and despair, possible occasional outbursts, nothing more sustainable. And yet, what the Jangalmahal witnessed for quite a while before the election was a growing sense of political restlessness and popular resistance. Anyone visiting the area could feel that something was in the air, perhaps a growing sense of identity of the oppressed adivasis. A sense of solidarity was shaping up against a long history of deprivation, cultural subjugation and most important of all, contempt shown by the state to their life and dignity. Throughout Jangalmahal, the combined central and state police forces and, the CPM supported goons of the 'harmad bahini' behaved like an occupation army in a foreign land with no accountability. They killed, looted and raped. Local resistance initially

with leaders like Chatradhar Mahato or Lalmohan Tudu simply wanted their dignity to be restored and an apology from the guilty police officers. The Maoist party provided the backbone of support only from the background, but on all account they were flowing with the popular mood of anger and outrage not leading it at that stage. However, the people of Jangalmahal got back in return more abuse in the form of state terror, more arrests and more torture, rape and killing. Fighting the Maoist influence became the umbrella excuse for all kinds of atrocities committed by the police and the party.

Mamata Banerjee with the experience of Singur and Nandiram was quick to capitalize politically on the situation by promising (a) unconditional release of all political prisoners and (b) withdrawal of police forces from the area. As soon as she won the election, she started going back on her promises. Political prisoners were not released and she refused to withdraw the joint police forces until an officially initiated peace process had yielded results to her advantage. And then she played the same old gramophone record played earlier by home minister Chidambaram. Every time the authorities say they want to initiate a peace process they want their armed adversaries to 'abjure violence'. This peace without categorical guarantee of safety from the government is dangerous for underground Maoist leaders who need to initiate first dialogue within the party. In the process they run far greater risk of becoming visible targets for the police who capture and kill them in fake encounters. This happened to at least two Maoist leaders when the peace talk failed in Andhra in 2003, to Azad in 2010, and now it has happened to Kishenji in 2011 with Mamata Banerjee presiding over the killing as the chief minister of West Bengal. Clearly the state policy all along has been to liquidate illegally its Maoist opponents in the name of peace talk and, Banerjee has not deviated from this policy. She only made herself more ridiculous by telling absurd stories about how for three days the police surrounded and requested him to surrender which no villager (of Sorakata) ever heard. Obviously, she was referring to a silent announcement which only she and her police could hear! Then according to those who saw the dead body, it had unmistakable signs of horrible tortures, burnt marks (under left feet), marks of cutting with a sharp weapon like bayonet (more than 30 marks) and bullet marks. If the chief minister is to be believed, Kishenji must have been shooting at the policemen while his feet were being burnt, his body and face were being cut up by bayonets and pierced by bullets! The post-mortem report like Banerjee herself was silent about all this. Finally, the official postmortem report done in Medinipur claimed that the bullets were fired from a distance of at least 500 meters. Although it might fit Mamata Banerjee's fantasy of an encounter, no known rifle used by the Indian CRPF or police is known to have such a long range (between 300 and 450 meters for AK-47 and Insus rifles).

Beyond the land of malicious fantasies and lies, the truth is brutal. Peace talks with the Maoists have become a ploy for trapping and killing them in cold blood. This same pattern has repeated itself over and over again and, the real puzzle is why the Maoists still respond to peace talks. The reason probably is that the Maoists survive mostly on popular support, and, ordinary people everywhere would like to live in peace. It is the pressure of popular demand to which the Maoist leaders yield at great personal risk. Otherwise, it goes without saying there is

no trust between the two parties to build the bridge of peace. For civil societies and concerned citizens vocal in this matter, it is essential to face this fact instead of wallowing in platitudes of the desirability of peace and constitutional rights which the state does not respect, and the Maoists have no reason to respect if the state treat them simply as dangerous outlaws to be killed, not a political party with a diametrically opposite ideology.

There is only one thing concerned citizens as outsiders can do to call the bluff. Peace talk cannot be initiated in Jangalmahal unless an impartial enquiry is held first into the brutalities and killings committed by the police, and the CRPF and all the prisoners released unconditionally to give evidence in particular cases. Only when the guilty are punished the climate for peace would be created without the outrage of the people being exploited politically either by Mamata Banerjee or the Maoists. But this requires a government which depends genuinely on the people and not on the police. Evidently Mamata Banerjee has failed miserably to qualify. □□□