

War and Civil War

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WITH THE LALGARH movement taking a critical turn a few years back, an undeclared civil war started in West Bengal. Many thought that the decade of the Sixties was coming back and people were about to witness the return of 1967-68. But that is not the case. That was a revolt, this is a war.

The upsurge of the adivasis, the indigenous people, in vast swathes of Janglemahal, including Binpur, Salboni, Jhargram and other areas now in news was one part of this war. Doubt about the legitimacy of rule and the capacity of rulers to rule became widespread. Its credibility was at all-time low. Along with this there were two more factors unnoticed for long and now demanding attention.

The first point: even after the debacle in the form of the Partition of 1947 West Bengal had begun its life in a new way—not looking back but deciding to go forward grappling with issues of the time. West Bengal regained its singular nature i.e. building up a collective but a singular existence or identity. Much of it was possible due to Left movement and spread of Leftist politics in North Bengal, central Bengal, Gangetic Bengal and Janglemahal in the south-western part of the state; also the representational system and a common administration tied all these parts in one common political-cultural whole. However, this project of building up a collective Bengal was ruined in the later years of the Left Front regime owing to its Kolkata-centric rule, upper-caste dominated party politics, corruption, neglect of agriculture, mad rush to invite monopoly capital and neglect of the need for balanced development.

The second point was even more ominous. A large section of the upper echelons of police and bureaucracy administering this state had no connection whatsoever with the people of the land. Some of the names of these top officials and administrators are now familiar to all in the context of the police suppression in Janglemahal. These big officials were the mandarins of an all-India rule. Their job was to maintain the all-India rule in this state. Hence they took it as their job to brief the rulers in the state in a specific way. Thus even a simple event of lodging complaint became a matter of security/insecurity, any strong protest became sedition, and in general popular activism appeared in governmental gaze as a programme of creating terror.

The only recourse for these police and administrative officials was—send armed police, un-uniformed armed party cadres, paramilitary forces and all other governmental personnel to terrorise, threaten, coax, browbeat, beat, arrest, kill, break peasants' houses and drive away the protesting people in order to pacify and sanitise the area. The rulers become intoxicated at the new prospect of using strong methods—but in the process they lost all sense of justice.

Clashes between rulers and the angry people seemed inevitable from the way events unfolded. Different groups of people started facing repressing measures. People had already seen a variety of these measures in Nandigram. There was a further cause for alarm in the initial phase of civil war as there was no clear demarcation line between the two combatant sides. Throughout the state, in various parts various groups of people were up in arms with their respective demands, claims, background, and stories of deprivation and exploitation; clashes and skirmishes were evident everywhere. It was almost inevitable that this would develop into an all-round bloody conflict, and the police and administrative high officials would be able to persuade the political leaders that only strong-arm methods would bring the society under submission.

It is not enough to say that dialogue should return to politics. In ordinary course, meetings take place between say a district magistrate and a leader of an agitating group of people. Earlier also the DMs and ADMs used to call local leaders for discussion, they do it still now. But clashes do not stop because of that. Just as ceasefire, which means “cessation of hostilities” is part of war, there has to be ceasefire in this social war also. If the rulers want to avert the impending disaster, they will have to talk at all levels of society, they will have to say to those who are being ruled that they had committed grave errors, and that they would now have to place dialogue at the centre of their governing policy. There is no shame in admitting mistakes and going for corrective measures.

SETBACK FOR PEACE POLITICS

Now of course after three years of war and with the rebel Maoist leader Kishenji’s death, the curtain has come down over peace-making efforts in Janglemahal and in the entire country—at least for the near future. The mediators’ group has resigned in the aftermath of his death. The human rights groups have accused the government and the joint forces of summary killing. The government denies the charge of staged killing. It says in an innocent style, as if nothing has happened, that the rebels can still surrender and come for peace talks. As of now peace politics has received a tremendous setback.

What is the political cost of the killing of Kishenji and the subsequent developments? One may ask: cost to whom? The nice covers have fallen. Rulers are talking of loss and gain through killing. The rebels may think that their path is not of peace, and/or they should think of retaliation.

FALLOUT ON THE SOCIETY

Janglemahal, hitherto staying in the back of beyond, beyond the pale of developed India, removed from the gaze of the administration, has experienced in recent years restiveness to an unparalleled degree. Women of lower classes, youth of poor peasant families had joined politics, and then the militant ranks. No amount of developmental promise can galvanise a society in the way in which the people of Janglemahal mobilised and activated their own society. Peace would have allowed women and youth of poor peasant families to join popular

peasant politics, become politically articulate, and thereby become the pride of any democracy. It is the entire society that will now bear the cost of this extinction of the possibility of peace in Junglemahal.

Bhadraloks would not have been able to do what peasants had done in organising villages and hamlets in resisting arbitrariness, highhandedness and coercion. The villagers were no more ready to wait for misery and ignoble deaths.

By the logic of the situation, in order to defend the killing—encounter or no encounter—the state government has to now go to any length to prove that the Maoists are bloodsuckers. The mass media, particularly the television channels, are now busy hosting war mongers in talk sessions, discussions and chat shows. *These are the kangaroo courts of the channels.* Leaders and cadres of various political persuasions will be compelled to take sides thus resorting to extreme views—in short to defend killings. This happened in Kashmir. It helps no side. It only results in an increasing orientation of the polity towards fascist psychology. One may say polity's fascization. As a result politics takes a back seat.

MAOIST MISTAKES AND MAMATA'S IMPATIENCE

It will not give any sane person pleasure to say that the Maoists have been paid back in their own coin, though the Maoists now seem to be partially distanced from the local population because of the killings they indulge in. If they believe in the efficacy of the death penalty, as the case seems to be, that is a backward belief, because the death penalty awarded by the Maoist courts only mimics the state. It will not end the trend of surrender and the joining of state ranks by surrendered militants. Likewise the death penalty as a rule is not an answer to informers. More often than not these backfire.

The people's courts that give out verdicts of death penalty are based on the same institutional principle of punishment and revenge that they seek to oppose. It will be a long time before they realise that people's struggles to be victorious have to be based on alternative principles. They must win the battle for hegemony while they fight the battle for political power.

Apart from resuming killing when the new regime began, which was wrong, the Maoists also underestimated the overall political milieu of a new party in power. Gun was not the answer. Apart from holding patience and caution, building a mass movement for peace was the answer and still the call of the day.

Such a call for peace will mean building public opinion in favour of the withdrawal of the joint forces, end to summary killings, arrest and harassing of villagers by policemen and party toughs, and demand for peace, bread, water, and dignity. The Maoists may have shown an inclination for peace talks, but expecting and waiting for the government to come down was unrealistic while not building up a peace movement and popularising concrete demands was a gross error. *Peace politics is more dangerous and risky than war politics.*

In the time of war lines are fairly clearly drawn. The line of peace is crooked. The party of peace must maintain alertness, have people on its side, and know how to concretise demands, fight for small causes, and help the middle space to survive. The middle space is the peace constituency. Yet the middle space is only middle, it cannot become the principal agent of peace. Possibly one lesson from Kishenji's death is that peacemakers cannot steer the course towards peace, unless the rebels by themselves have found out the way towards peace while maintaining guard.

The urge for combat will be great. All the more therefore, the intelligibility of peace politics must be studied deeply. Not without reason Arafat used to say, "Peace of the brave". The same is true for the government. If it had wanted peace, the way was not to open coffers for more recruitments for police jobs, let loose the joint forces, keep peasant leaders behind bars, and talk hot and cold. Yet, the West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee in her high strung, highly publicised meeting at Jhargram (on 15 October 2011) threatened the Maoists to lay down arms, stop their activities, and come to talk in seven days, or else, she declared, she would order counter-insurgency operations thereafter. Her impatience was evident. From impatience comes error in judgement.

This impatience is of a leader wanting to appear as a no-nonsense person ready to be tough with proverbial Bengal radicalism. It is at the same time matched by her tolerance of crimes that happened before she came to power, courting those who had oppressed the people at ground level for so long and welcoming them to her party, and allowing her strongmen to do the same things that their predecessors had done to tribal peasants of Junglemahal for the past decades. The impatience will possibly prove costly.

THREE OBSTACLES

Three things in this situation strike an observer: the poverty of ideas towards unlocking closed situations, hence impatience and playing to the gallery, and third, the role of the Union government and the security lobby.

First, concerns the poverty of ideas. The West Bengal chief minister could have thought of autonomy of the Junglemahal region towards ensuring common property resources, local ownership of forest and other natural resources, and the right of the local population groups to determine their priorities of life, namely whether they want drinking water, education, public health provisions, proper implementation of the rural employment guarantee scheme, or jobs in a counter-insurgency militia to be raised by the government to repress their own people.

Second, is the phenomenon of impatience. The point to be noted here is that governance through dialogue requires patience. Timely response does not mean hurry and breaking trust. The trust Mamata had won from various quarters was won through months and years of hard work. It can be destroyed in a day. When a ruler thinks that s/he does not need trust and her own sense and judgement is enough, and that s/he can use intemperate language in abusing the adversary, one must take it then that serious errors in judgement will duly follow. She has

only to look back at the way the previous rulers failed. Her predecessors had thought that what they would decide was enough. Dialogue was redundant.

But more important, why the impatience, why is this sudden decline of the dialogic trend, and the poverty of imagination towards innovative solutions? Why do rulers in India not learn from the disaster called Kashmir where time and again opportunity had arrived, the adversary had declared ceasefire, possibilities of dialogue had opened up, yet nothing emerged and the stalemate continues? This is where the third feature of the situation comes to notice, namely the rapid securitisation of the scenario. With the advice of the Union home ministry, Mamata went back on her pre-poll promises, did not release the prisoners, did not meet the victims of police repression, did not compensate them, and did not take any measure of rehabilitation.

Third, the advices of the Union home ministry have rarely contributed to peace anywhere, because everywhere it has substituted politics with considerations of security. Its advices do no good to state governments which have to face the heat of conflicts, and survive the fire of protests and rebellions. The options of the West Bengal chief minister to negotiate the sharp bends of popular politics are getting limited by the day. The Union government's tight monetary policy, inflationary steps encouraging price rise, random privatisation and destruction of small business and peasant farming leave no chance for her to protect her people, whatsoever she may desire. Likewise she has to depend on the financial largesse of the Centre for day-to-day survival of her government. On top of these, she has to depend on the coercive machinery of the Centre to quell militant protest. She has to thus abide by the torrent of advice coming from the Centre. Populism will mean increasingly less in this situation.

LESSONS

If the Maoists cannot keep on killing, and, as the chief minister says, call for peace talks at the same time, she has to understand that if the joint forces keep on operating, the government too cannot expect that the Maoists will come for peace talks. Towards peace and reconciliation, the government must walk the extra mile. Or will the inevitable errors in judgement begin so early, inevitably, because she is not seeing anything beyond populism and one-upmanship? There was an alternative way for her – the alternative was in finding policies for economic regeneration and building an accommodative polity. It is up to her which way she will go.

Yet, if not equally, the armed radicals of West Bengal are also responsible. They took the wrong lesson from the failure of peace talks in Andhra Pradesh and their casualties. The path of peace and the striving for hegemony is long and tortuous. If they claim to be the vanguard of politics, they cannot allow the gun to command their destiny. □□□