

Kishenji's Death and Some Candid Observations

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How did Kishenji die? A lot has been written on this subject in several newspapers and periodicals. One need not harp on that issue once again and write something anew. Because one can engage in endless academic discussion and debate on how he died—that is, whether he breathed his last in direct armed confrontation with the police and/or joint forces or whether he was arrested beforehand and thereafter murdered in cold blood—but that would not lead us to anything fruitful or concrete. Because those who are direct, indirect or broad supporters of the Maoists they will give full-throated backing to the 'killed-in-cold-blood' theory whereas those who regard Maoists as enemies of the country will speak just the opposite, that is, he died in encounter. Of course, there are among the latter the ideological camp followers of the BJP-RSS as well and, according to them, regardless of 'whether he was killed in encounter or fake encounter, by killing him the joint forces have done the right thing', and some of them have given vent to such feelings in newspaper columns too. So such a debate will find every participant sticking to her/his position, none will be able to convince or influence the other to change her/his view and accept the former's opinion. It must be admitted in this connection that politicisation of practically every issue has reached such heights in West Bengal that the scope for really free discussion is exceedingly limited in the State.

But those of us who are neither supporters of Maoism nor subscribe to the state's policy of taking revenge by using the 'tooth-for-a-tooth' dictum have no hesitation in giving primacy to a rational debate based on logic far beyond our respective political views. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Union Home Minister P Chidambaram have for quite sometime now issuing statements on behalf of the Union Government characterising the armed Maoist uprising in the Central Indian heartland as the biggest danger to the country's internal security. But they have not projected in detail the reasons behind the Maoist problem assuming the dimension of such a grave danger. So it is not in the least unnatural to think that in their opinion the Maoists have become such a big threat only because of their reliance on arms and they have to be tackled by military means alone. The reality, however, is different. The architect of the most significant achievement of the 34-year Left Front rule in West Bengal (that is, 'Operation Barga', the wide scale movement to record the tenancy rights of sharecroppers or bargadars in the State), currently a Rajya Sabha member representing the Trinamul Congress, Debabrata Bandyopadhyay (who headed the Expert Group set up by the Planning Commission to make a detailed study of the rise of Left-wing extremism in the adivasi belt of Central India and suggest how best to contain and tackle it; the Group released an extraordinary report in 2008 and that is till date perhaps the best document to understand the present-day Maoist problem), has clearly written: "From one Police Station area (Naxalbari) of one district (Darjeeling) in one State (West Bengal) today's Maoist movement has in these 44 years spread to approximately 2000 Police Stations areas of 200 districts in 12 States." In this period, especially in recent times, the Central Government and the governments of those States affected by Naxalism-

Maoism have adopted the strategy of curbing Maoism with the help of the security forces. At the same time the police budget of the Centre and States has also increased phenomenally. And yet despite all these, leave aside resolving the problem, Maoism has neither been cornered nor contained—rather the Maoists’ strength has grown exponentially instead of being reduced. Why? That is because compared to the sixties, seventies and eighties of the last century the decades of the nineties and beyond have witnessed the magnitude of poverty, deprivation and eviction from land of the extremely poor adivasis growing on a massive scale in tune with the neo-liberal measures adopted by the Government of India as a direct consequence of its new economic policies. [In concrete terms, since the government, having abandoned its erstwhile activities attuned to the concept of a welfare state, has forcibly taken away the land of the poor and oppressed adivasis and handed over that land to indigenous and foreign corporate institutions in a pro-active manner in conformity with its current course of action, the plight and predicament of the adivasis have taken such a huge scale; and it is these destitute people whom the Maoists have drawn into their fold through political means without resorting to force, of course, it would be a travesty of truth to claim that there has not been the slightest use of force, but to insist that they have been forced to become Maoists would also be downright untrue; actually they have by and large spontaneously joined the Maoists precisely because they were debarred from normal life and livelihood. Needless to add, this brings out the failure of the present policies of the government.] And since I had given a detailed exposition of this reality that I was described in a TV channel as a ‘closet Maoist’. There was another reason for characterising me in this way. I had openly stated that it is impossible to tackle Maoism with the aid of arms alone; the Maoists’ theory and violent activities (wherein people-centric political activities are gradually taking a back seat) can be tackled primarily by political means, that is, through political negotiations. This was not to the liking of that channel’s anchorperson; hence I too was branded a Maoist. This did not affect me, however. Because I am fully conscious of my anti-Maoist position (even though that position is unequivocally opposed to the government’s strategy of eradicating Maoism relying solely on military operations; I firmly believe that the victims of such a strategy would not be just the hard-boiled Maoists but also ordinary adivasis—what is known as ‘collateral damage’—and that is already happening in Chhattisgarh in particular).

Let us now return to the issue of Kishenji’s death. As mentioned earlier, no purpose would be served by discussing how he was killed. However, some points need to be raised. If what Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has hinted at is true, then she wanted Kishenji to be somehow arrested and not killed. If that was the CM’s directive, then why was it not carried out? This question is not at all illogical. It is possible that Kishenji himself did not give that opportunity to the security forces. But still two more questions crop up in this context. The joint forces are learnt to have exchanged fire with two-three persons including Kishenji. If that was so, then why were 1000 rounds of fire exchanged as has been reported? And a more important query is: such a major operation was conducted wherein Kishenji got killed and yet not a single policeman or member of the joint forces suffered serious injuries? How is that possible? Mamata Banerjee has publicly stated that Kishenji was given three days to surrender, but he did not surrender.

Consequently the joint forces were constrained to conduct the operation. Here the CM can be legitimately asked: did she really think that a leader like Kishenji would voluntarily surrender? If she did think so, then it does not testify to her political foresight. Mamata has further said: it was in Junglemahal that the Maoists had secretly worked out plans to attack the Kolkata Metro and kill several Ministers and leaders including the Chief Minister. It is quite natural for the police to furnish such an argument but is it proper for any political leader like Mamata Banerjee, now in charge of the West Bengal administration, to present such a story before the public?

The Statesman had organised a panel discussion in Kolkata in 2010 wherein this writer too was a participant. Mamata Banerjee had also participated in it. At that discussion one had unequivocally complimented Mamata for having brought the issue of the death of Azad, a top leader of the Maoist party, on the national scene by openly declaring that the manner in which Azad was killed was not proper, there should be an investigation into his death. When I was explaining at the same meeting why that death cannot be described as 'death due to encounter'. Mamata cut me short to say: "Please refer to the postmortem report on the death, it is clear from that Azad was killed due to firing from close range."

Today, questions are being raised on Kishenji's death as well, it is being said that he was killed in cold blood. Personally, I believe that Azad's death cannot be bracketed with that of Kishenji; even if one accepts the charge that Azad was killed in cold blood, one cannot say the same about Kishenji's death since the logic of 'death due to encounter' is stronger in the latter case. However, it is possible that one may be making a mistake by reaching such a conclusion. That is precisely why when several questions remained unanswered and since human rights activists and intellectuals of varied persuasions have questioned the authorities' 'death due to encounter' theory, a full-fledged inquiry should be conducted into the manner of Kishenji's death because that alone would be able to allay all doubts.

However, it is necessary to underline some other points connected with Kishenji's death. It is more than transparent from whatever has been published after his death that the Maoists under Kishenji's leadership were isolated from the people of Junglemahal. Because of this isolation from the people, it is increasingly becoming clear that the common people of the area had given information about Kishenji's den to the joint forces. Nonetheless, one basic truth needs to be spelt out here. There is no doubt that the Maoists have built a strong base in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh; but it must be admitted that such a Maoist base could not be built in West Bengal due to a variety of reasons. However, the Maoists were steadily advancing in that direction. The poor, deprived, destitute adivasis of the area (that is, Junglemahal) were standing by them. That is not because a conspiracy was afoot in West Bengal to throw them out of their land by leasing it out to industrialists as had happened in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. That was far from the reality in West Bengal's Junglemahal. That the 34-year Left Front rule did nothing to help Junglemahal develop and ensure basic means of survival and livelihood to its inhabitants while bringing about phenomenal prosperity to the local CPM leaders like Anuj Pandey are fundamental facts of life beyond refutation. Side by side the ordinary adivasis of the area had to cope with not just increasing poverty and deprivation but also mounting oppression and

repression resorted to by the local police administration and CPM haramds. In several places of the region the local populace had to experience undeclared curfew at night. And at the fag end of Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's Chief Ministership the CPM haramds' wanton atrocities alongside the police had reached such a scale that the people could no longer bear such attacks, and thus extended all-out support to the Maoists' violent acts to counter the state terror. That was their way of revolting against the prevailing state of affairs. Not to recognise this would amount to blatantly trampling truth and being blind to the actual situation.

But simultaneously what cannot be also underestimated is the persisting atmosphere of terror perpetuated by the Maoists under Kishenji's leadership. As a result of this terror the same Mamata Banerjee, who had earlier conveyed her desire to hold negotiations with them, finally decided to close the door for talks. In the meantime there has come about a radical transformation of the situation in the State following the 2011 Assembly elections and a genuine change of guards there. Ending the LF's 34 years of continuous and monopolistic hold on the West Bengal Government the Trinamul Congress-Congress alliance has come to power with Mamata as its head recording a resounding victory and decisively trouncing the Left Front while dealing it a grievous blow from which the latter has yet to recover. This change of guards has engendered immense expectations and kindled hopes of a new future. At this point in time the Maoists should have understood that their movement cannot advance in the old style, what is essential is to change the tactics of struggle *a la* Lenin in July-November 1917 in Russia. But they did not undertake that task perhaps out of shortsightedness. Kishenji himself must take the lion's share of the blame as he alone was the initiator of the Maoist movement in Junglemahal.

As a result what happened was waiting to happen. With several killings taking place one after another, Mamata Banerjee's patience ran out. [Some human rights activists and intellectuals sympathetic to the Maoists maintain that as the ruling establishment had launched assaults on the local public claiming them to be Maoists thereby vitiating the environment, the Maoists were compelled to respond with retaliatory acts. However, what needs to be pointed out is that these were not retaliatory acts, they were unprovoked and had taken place before the joint forces resumed their operations—as a matter of fact the resumption of the operations was the direct consequence of those acts of provocation by the Maoists.] She publicly declared that the joint forces' operations (which she had suspended in the expectation that that would pave the way for negotiations) would resume shortly. But at the same time she announced a package of measures based on her commitment for the development of Junglemahal. This has evoked positive response among the local people. However, there should have come one more announcement: despite the resumption of the joint forces' operations, special care would be taken to ensure that innocent tribals do not become victims of such operations so as to keep the collateral damage to the minimum. But this specific commitment did not come from her.

Yet what cannot be denied is that on account of the people's confidence in Mamata at least at the grassroots, the hopes generated far and wide have had their effect on Junglemahal as well. And her package for the development of Junglemahal has imparted a new dimension to those hopes. In such a situation it was imperative for the Maoists to change their tactics. That

did not happen. That is why they have been isolated from the people at large. In the past during the time of the previous dispensation the CPM's *harmads* used to join the joint forces whenever the latter conducted operations in the area. It is because of those harmad's atrocities on the local inhabitants that the people did not cooperate with the joint forces at that period. But now when the operations are being carried out without those harmads' participation, the people have been drawn close to the joint forces.

Mao Zedong had propounded the 'fish-and-water' theory to build the political workers' unbreakable bonds with the common people. The political workers can expand their influence over the people by taking advantage of the latter's deprivation, but once the roots of that deprivation are cut, their influence on the people gets diminished. This is exactly the way the fish moves about in water. Today winds of change are sweeping Junglemahal. Therefore the Maoists, who were led and organised by Kishenji, have become isolated from the people as compared to the past. I know, the Maoists and their supporters will speak of the terrorisation of the public as a result of the joint forces' operations. Even if that element of terror cannot be wished away, it would be deceiving oneself if one fails to recognise the hopes generated among the people there due to those winds of change.

It is high time the Maoists engaged in real self-introspection. In this writer's view, they would have to change not just their tactics but their strategy as well. Instead of relying on acts of terror more stress would have to be laid on people-centric politics. And it has to be understood that in this country it is not possible to seize power with the help of peasant upsurge as in China if other sections of people are not mobilised. But that does not mean that the extraordinary resistance they have built up against the government's land acquisition policy in the interest of the indigenous and foreign corporate entities would have to be weakened or terminated. Far from it. But this resistance should be made in essence people-centric-the people's war has to be transformed into a genuine people's resistance to the government-backed corporate land-grab wherein large numbers of people of varied persuasions can participate: from Gandhians and Socialists to Communists of different hues and even the masses following the Congress. I would like to tell the Maoists: you may reject my appeal in this regard by harping on the bogey of revisionism, but I know for certain that one day you will be forced to realise your folly on this score. But perhaps by then you may find it too late to make amends.

In conclusion I want to add another point. I wish to tell all those who are branding Kishenji as a 'mass killer' that about five thousand people had joined Mallajola Koteshwar Rao alias Kishenji in his last journey in Peddapalli town in Andhra Pradesh's Karimnagar district. It was not as if all of them accept the Maoist ideology or support the Maoists' politics. Many came because Kishenji had cut his tooth in politics by his participation in the movement centered on the demand for a separate State of Telangana. And it is by now well known that that demand is currently intrinsically linked to the sentiments of all sections of people of Telangana. But most of them who came were drawn to him because they were keen to get the last glimpse of one such person who had selflessly dedicated himself to defend and uphold the interests of the toiling multitudes of our land sacrificing his own petty interests regardless of his politics, howsoever

violent and misguided it might have been. Against the backdrop of today's selfish, hypocritical, opportunist, self-centered, corruption-ridden politicians, would it be too improper and inappropriate as also unjustified to ask the public to ponder over what Azad and Kishenji's images signify in India at the present juncture just because they happened to be the leading representatives of an outlawed political outfit? □□□