

Who Needs Ban?

To ban or not to ban. Political left and political Right as well were engaged in a futile debate for quite some time over the most challenging issue of how to curb the growing influence of maoists. But the maoists have not yet overturned any regime, left or right, in any part of the country, nor have they sought to do so in the immediate future. The ban-debate resurrected in the wake of CPM-led left front government's much publicised operation against the maoists in the Lalgarh area of West Midnapore district bordering Jharkhand state, otherwise popularly known as jangalmahal. While the Centre's decision to ban the CPI (Maoist) as a terrorist outfit came at a time when the CPM-led left front government was conducting massive combing campaign against the agitating tribals of the region with the help of central paramilitary forces, the ruling left parties pleaded their innocence and made the public stance that they were against the ban in principle. It was hypocrisy unlimited. In truth Machiavellian conspirators enjoyed the moment behind closed doors.

Banning a party which is not allowed to function openly even in a left-ruled state makes little sense. The governments of Orissa, Andhra, Chattisgarh and Jharkhand have already banned it only to see maoist onslaughts are on the rise with every passing day. The fresh ban under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act means they will now be able to legally harass more innocent people and social activists in any part of the country because the Act is a central law.

But banning the CPI (Maoist) by the Centre against the backdrop of Lalgarh agitation and Left's humiliation in the recently concluded 15th parliamentary poll is a double-edged sword for the CPM. That the Communist Party of India (Marxist) is officially against the ban doesn't cut much ice any more. Also, its pretension of disagreement with the Centre over the ban decree seems too clever by half. The marxist chief minister needs to produce theatre for the outside world. But the people don't believe he was not instrumental in imposing the ban. What is unfolding in Bengal and elsewhere in relation to what they call maoist crisis is no simple confrontation between tyranny and freedom. There lies a broader game plan to stifle any voice of dissent that exposes the system.

Meanwhile, union coal minister Mr Sriprakash Jaiswal said in no uncertain terms that "before banning such extremist organisations, the centre invariably consulted the states concerned. The West Bengal government might have approved of the step either in writing or verbally". Also, conflicting stands taken by some Left Front junior partners did not matter in influencing the tacit understanding between Congress and CPM, at least in Bengal scenario. Again Congress lost no time to criticise marxist chief minister's double speak. 'On the one hand they sought help from the Centre, on the other hand they apparently looked reluctant to implement the central law'. In reality chief minister's statement regarding "qualified acceptance" of the central mandate was aimed at pacifying some left front partners who are opposed to any such ban and keeping ordinary mortals in good humour.

Besides maoists, there is every possibility that this central law will be handy to browbeat the main opposition in the state—Trinamul Congress. How Gujarat used anti-terrorist law to marginalise the minority community people and settle political scores with the Opposition, is now history. And only in the recent past how the Chattisgarh government utilised special law to cripple civil liberties movement, in the name of containing maoism, of course, is now an international issue, thanks to Binayak Sen's arrest and his release by the apex court, after a prolonged legal battle and several protest movements during the last two years.

In the seventies they used to impose conspiracy case on the challengers of status quoism. The Parvatipuram conspiracy case in which Nagi Reddy and his associates were

framed got wide currency because the late Reddy successfully utilised the prolonged legal proceedings in the court as a vehicle to propagate his political ideas and visions and unmask the oppressive system. Being the part of the ruling establishment, today's communists have no reason to recall how the British used the Meerut conspiracy case to crush communist initiative at its incipient stage. As this is the era of speed and high risk they need draconian detention laws like the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act to get insulated from democratic accountability.

Trinamul's apprehension that their activists would be put behind bars simply by dubbing them maoist is not totally baseless. Also, their allegation that yesterday's CPM dissidents are today's maoists is partially true. Having failed to face the challenge posed by the maoists, politically, they now entirely depend on brute force to destroy the Maoist wave in some parts of the country. Whether the ban can serve any meaningful purpose of the ruling elites is a different matter but it is certainly an irritant to the powerful. □□□