

WEST BENGAL

## Of Civil Society and Chidambaram's War

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The Government of India is declaring a war, under the generalship of Chidambaram, on the population of what it describes as Maoist-infested areas, a population comprising the poorest of the poor of this unfortunate country. The stated target of Chidambaram's adventure is the Maoists, but apart from sporadic exchange of fire with these elusive guerrillas, the main thrust of the state will be oppression, torture, mass arrests, rape and murder let loose on the general population most of whom cannot tell butt from muzzle of an AK 47.

The crime of the people is their protest against (a) systematic embezzlement of funds, originating from the taxpayer's money and earmarked for the poor, (b) complete disregard of the state's responsibility for ensuring a livelihood for all, (c) perennial oppression by a politician-official-trader nexus, and, above all, (d) police atrocities and harassment. The crime of the people is that they live on lands coveted by foreign and domestic big capital for their water, minerals, forests and crops. Predatory development was to have displaced them from these lands, but they had the temerity to protest. Finally, the greatest crime of the people is that they look on the Maoists as a friendly political party and not terrorists.

The mini-Chidambarams in West Bengal have also declared a synchronous escalation in the joint occupation forces' activity, which means protecting the CPI(M) armed *Harmad* gangs and systematic torture of villagers living deeper into the forest, tales of which are creeping out, in spite of closing the whole area to the rest of India by clamping Sec 144.

In this situation, civil society in West Bengal continues to be disunited and confused.

The now violent conflict between the armed forces of the state and the CPI(M) *Harmad* gangs, on the one hand, and the Maoist guerrillas and the armed people's militia, on the other, has put a question mark on the support of civil society to the people's movement.

However, questioners must not forget that the immediate origin of the conflict lies in police atrocities and the dispatch of the joint armed forces into the jangal mahal. That the people have taken up arms in self-defence against the forces of the state and the *Harmad* is the result of the response of the state. Had the state listened to the complaints of the people such a situation would not have arisen. Because of the obstinacy of the state in the face of the demands raised by the people of the jangal mahal, the situation is going from bad to worse.

How many of the people involved in the movement are ideologically Maoists? That they, too, bear arms today is the direct responsibility of Chidambaram and Buddhadeb Bhattacharya. All that the people wanted were apologies for police atrocities and guarantees that they wouldn't recur. Up to this stage, the movement was peaceful. The response of the state after starting talks was to withdraw from them unilaterally and send armed forces into the area, into houses, in fact, torturing, molesting and foisting false cases, to raise a bevy of protest and now an armed militia. The opposition to such state terror on a people's movement must be unconditional, irrespective of the nature of the movement.

Democratic opinion cannot take the stand that the state is justified in unleashing terror unless the movement is avowedly non-violent.

Having said this, one must indicate that this opposition to state terror does not imply acceptance of any other kind of terror. The oppressed have the right to fight back but civil society cannot accept methods involving terrorizing adversaries and their supporters, for example, killing people just because they belong to the adversary's political organization, and forbidding other political formations from carrying on political work.

In particular, if a party declares that they will administer justice in regions where their writ runs, that is if they want people to believe that they are taking up some powers of the state, and if one accepts this contention for the sake of argument, they must be prepared to have the acts of this state power of theirs to be judged by civil society as stringently as civil society judges the acts of the Indian state.

Civil society cannot accept the cruel and, occasionally, deliberately terror-inspiring way people are being killed in the jangal mahal on the charge of spying for the police. The way the courts are set up, charges framed, and often quite poor people meted out sentences of death, cannot be said to be a great improvement on the judicial practice of the Indian state. The deliberate taking of a life is a serious thing and it should not be easy to do this in any sort of a power structure. Also, if there are so many police spies and enemy agents, one wonders if there is something in the politics which drives so many people away to do something quite perilous.

The state and the media have pilloried the Maoists exclusively for what they call acts of terror, disregarding such acts of other political players. In fact, there is little doubt that the most violent party and one which has carried out intimidation, murder and arson quite deliberately to create terror for the last 32 years is the CPI(M). The regions served by the police stations of Keshpur and Garhbeta are run like penal settlements by Sushanta Ghosh, a CPI(M) minister, no dissident voices being tolerated. To achieve this enviable status the CPI(M) created terror through wanton killings, the most notorious of the massacres bearing the name of the village of Chhoto Angaria. Here, the CPI(M) has raised the *Ghoshkar Harnad* army in addition to the vigilante assassination squads of the Gana Pratirodh Bahini in Lalgah and Belpahari. Armed camps with bunkers and ordnance stores were set up on the three sides of Lalgah, exposed when the Maoists attacked the camps at Enayetpur, Teshkona, Hanrimara, and Porbandh.

All over West Bengal, in fact, all opposition parties including the TMC are facing the terror tactics of the CPI(M). People of segments which voted against the CPI(M) in the recent Lok Sabha polls are being attacked, after immobilizing the police either physically or politically. Leading elements of opposition parties have been singled out for murder.

The moral high ground taken by Chidambaram crumbles when one sees him unwilling to declare the CPI(M) to be a terrorist party, or send an expeditionary force to Garhbeta and Keshpur. (Civil society does not, of course, believe in sending expeditions against the people anywhere, or declaring any political party to be terrorist and thereby banning it under the UAPA and preventing it from functioning normally, normal functioning being defined to include propagation of its political views.)

So, the basic position of civil society should be unchanged: withdraw the joint armed forces and start talks.

A word on talks. Chidambaram raises the question of the Maoists abjuring violence. It seems that both sides are rigid on the right to use violence. The state will not apologise for its use of violence on the tribal women of Chhotopelia in Lalgarh (Chintamoni Murmu lost an eye and Panmoni Hansda's ribs were broken) and will not guarantee that force will not be used on ordinary villagers, and the Maoists are unlikely to announce that they will abjure violence because this will entail surrender of arms, which even the Nepali Maoists have not done. With these present positions, all that is possible is an armistice. But civil society should fight even for that limited objective to prevent the bloody civil war which faces the country due to Chidam-baram's adventure. □□□

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