

Culture vs Counter-Culture

JANUARY 26 COMES, JANUARY 26 GOES. IT'S ONE MORE OCCASION for India's Republicans to reiterate their pledge to talk more of the same —economic growth, social progress, technology upgrading and exploitation of national wealth. Just on the eve of Republic Day Union Home Minister P Chidambaram came down heavily on what they call counter-culture thwarting India's industrial revolution. He was speaking at the inaugural session of the North-East Business Summit in New Delhi. The concept of 'counter-culture' has its origin in anti-Vietnam war movement in America in the 1960s. Voices against war were interpreted in official circles as regressive, standing in the American design of culture and pace of life, opposing the philosophy of the establishment. In other words Chidambaram was in reality justifying America's unjust war, in the name of defending 'culture'. He went on to extrapolate the 'counter-culture' syndrome to Indian scenario by blaming it on north-east insurgents and maoists for standing in their way of exploitation of natural resources and industrial progress associated with it. He asked the people to make choice between 'culture' and 'counter-culture', implying fossilised past and modern present. In truth he pitched development debate between museums and modern societies at a time when globalisation is order of the day. He was at pains to explain how 'counter-culture' was ruining several mining and power projects across the country and quite naturally insurgents, including maoists got the stick.

For Chidambaram the problem appears to be with localised protest movements against forcible land acquisition, mainly in mineral rich central India. A number of big mining projects involving huge investments, both domestic and foreign, as also massive eviction of original inhabitants, associated with those projects, are on hold, thanks to ethnic insurgency and maoist campaign for 'counter-culture'.

For one thing Chidambaram is right in saying 'protests are localised'. The reason is simple : all national or mainstream parties are with him in allowing corporates to loot India's natural resources in the name of development. All anti-landgrab agitations are led by locals, who are voiceless and have no place in Chidambaram's 'culture'.

Judicial exploitation of natural wealth for the benefit of the majority of the population is one thing. But plunder of land, forest, water and natural resources by a handful of people to accumulate wealth at vulgar levels is quite another.

Not that all of Chidambaram's colleagues are in agreement with him as localism also affects his party for political survival of local satraps. So they sometimes speak in multiple voices, at cross-purposes, contradicting the very idea of Chidambaram's 'counter-culture'. They are openly against Chidambaram's tough measures against the counter-culture of maoists in Central India where hills and plains are to be ravaged by more than a dozen of mining giants.

'Counter-culture' that is challenging the advocates of 'culture' cannot be ignored simply by dubbing it back-dated and lobbying for an economic atmosphere in which thousands and

thousands of people will go bankrupt and become destitutes once and for all. They will be marginalised beyond repair. Chidambaram cannot think of development with dignity. Nor can they visualise the possibility of sustainable development within the existing framework of social and economic management.

Scam related to illegal mining with its irreparable fall-out seems to be a secondary issue in Chidambaram's 'culture'. How the British destroyed some of the prime coal and iron belts of the country to meet their industrial appetite defies descriptions. Eastern Coal-fields are burning—fire underground has been continuing for decades causing cave-in and uncertainties for thousands of families fighting for survival.

True, Chidambarams don't like it but counter-culture is responsible for forcing the Union Government to revise the notorious Land Acquisition Act of 1894 while successfully putting some roadblocks on some state governments' neo-liberal onslaught. During the Raj market was small and tribals used to get some protection under different anti-land alienation acts in some scheduled areas and hill tracts. It's no more. Gone are those safeguards in the entire South Asian region, even before the arrival of dozens of reincarnated East India companies.

Tribals are equally ill-treated and dispossessed in every part of South Asia. After the formation of Bangladesh the Chakmas of Chittagang Hills Tracts were asked by the late Mujibar Rehman to become good Bengalis and forgo their traditional ethnic rights. One reason tribal Pakistan bordering Afghanistan is in revolt under the Taliban is the well-founded apprehension that they will lose their land rights and semi-independent status under any America-backed dispensation. And mining is one major reason for large-scale marginalisation and eviction of tribals in India.

Whether they like it as not 'counter-culture' reflecting the aspirations of majority of the population cannot be suppressed by brute force. The people of Central India can survive without their land and forest being extensively mined for diamonds. Nor is hydro-power any solution to ever growing demand of energy. Most hydel projects have created disasters for the people living in command areas. And in most cases original plan of hydel power has been replaced by coal-fired thermal power as it has happened in case of Damodar Valley Corporation—one of the earliest museums of modern India. Hydel power means destruction of rivers. Already Indian rivers are saturated with big dams and they are now trying to kill small rivers and rivulets, particularly in the North-east, arresting natural flows and going against the interests of indigenous people.

Not that what insurgents and maoists are doing is above criticism. But Chidambarams are attacking them for wrong reasons. After all their approach to people's concern and future makes counter-culture acceptable to a large section of people otherwise feeling insecure under the juggernaut of globalisation. In reality resistance to 'culture' has come too late, given the fact that destructive mining operations by corporates have long been at alarmingly high levels. □□□