

JANGALMAHAL DEBATE-I

Much Ado About Nothing

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THE MAOIST PARTY HAS chosen the path of armed struggle to overthrow the Indian state and build a people's democratic state in its place. The insurgencies familiar to the post-1947 rulers of India were centered around independence, that is, secession to form a state outside the Indian union. Such are the aspirations of the Kashmiri or the Naga people, while the Maoist party aims to overthrow and replace the Indian Union itself. It is for this reason that the head of the present Union government has proclaimed the Maoist insurgency to hold the greatest danger for the Indian state. Obviously there can be no talks on the strategic plane between sides holding such mutually exclusive views.

One cynical opinion regards talks to be aimed at rest and consolidation on the part of the Maoist party, and surveillance to locate, arrest and assassinate rebel leaders, on the part of the government. While it is true that there is no long term strategic meeting point of the two sides, and, in the short term, outwitting each other's surveillance, technically and otherwise, is bound to be attempted, it would be wrong to think that there is nothing more that can arise from talks.

Of course, the Maoists will not surrender arms. Their point of view would be that they might as well wind up their party. On the other hand, the Indian union is bound to resist militarily armed action by Maoist forces. It would be daydreaming if one expects the Indian union to give up the policing of whole regions to the Maoist armed forces or to allow even local government by *janatana sarkars*. Neither the Indian Union nor the states have the wisdom of allowing direct political space to sections of the people who want this. In Bengal this is the origin of the disaffection of the hill peoples, the Kamtapuri and greater Coochbehar movements.

So, as far as arms and armed action are concerned, the most that can be expected from talks is reciprocal sheathing of arms, a *ceasefire*. Now, if the ceasefire can include an agreement on "no murders, no arrests", withdrawal of the semi-military forces, release of political prisoners and the right of all political forces, including the Maoists and including their critics, to free political campaigning, this would be a step towards democratisation of the political process in the Jangalmahal. Such a beginning would have been a popular one at this juncture. It is strange that even so little 'a give and take' proved to be beyond negotiation, and this is the basis of the rumour of anti-talks lobbies being active on both sides.

Roughly half the members of the present Lok Sabha have criminal charges against them, and in the case of one-third of the members the charges are serious ones like murder and rape. Such 'political' elements dominate the countryside, forming part of the bad gentry. Their partners are the police and government officials. Such three-wheelers represent the Indian

union before the poor, looting their entitlements without shame and suppressing their protests in the name of resisting extremism. 65 years of this has resulted in a substantial loss of legitimacy of the state in the eyes of the poor in many regions. Hegemony is no longer possible in these pockets and the state can only preserve its dominance by frank violence as in Kalinganagar, Jagatsinghapur, Noida, Pune, Singur, Nandigram, Lalgah. The importance of the Maoists resides precisely in the fact that they are the only force which has come to the defence of the people everywhere, albeit with a programme of counter-violence which appeals to the people more and more as the state ratchets up violence against the people.

However, these forces are weak in most areas and the Indian union can think of physically annihilating them. The Union Home Minister has created a semi-military campaign, Operation Green Hunt, for this purpose. The Union is not too anxious to sit at the table with the Maoists just now. If the people can withstand Operation Green Hunt, and the pockets of Maoist influence expand, then only the Union will really become interested in talks.

Even then, there can be a positive outcome to such talks only if the Union sheds its narrow view that the problem in areas like the Jangalmahal is primarily one of Maoist insurgency and recognises the fact that a large section of the people are rejecting the legitimacy of the present Union and want more political space *directly for themselves*. If the Union talks to the people and accepts the principle of allowing political space to people to administer themselves, this would mean a transition of the Union to a really federal structure. The people are sovereign and if they want more direct political space, if they want a transition to a maximally federal state, they are quite within their rights.

The Maoists would not like this compromise, because, after all, the Indian ruling classes will retain ultimate power over the state. But, the self-governing enclaves will have more political power than the states do today, and land reform and democracy will expand in scope. In any case, it would be an interim step arising from the balance of forces. On the other hand, the ruling classes, and especially the big conglomerates would never like so federal a structure and their possible exclusion from such areas especially if, as is likely, the land was found to cover valuable minerals.

All sides would be dissatisfied, but this is the hall mark of a good compromise. But why would either side agree at all to a compromise they do not like? This can happen only in a situation of stalemate, a balance of power where neither side sees a quick victory on the horizon. And it would be temporary. The ruling classes will never give up their power over the state, and revolutionaries will never rest till they can do just this.

At present, the Union is sure of victory and would blow away consideration of such drastic diminution of its powers as poppycock. The governments at Delhi and Kolkata are upbeat after torturing Koteswar Rao to death. The Union dismisses completely the decisive factor against it - galloping distrust and alienation, leading to more and more widespread and determined opposition by the people. The Maoists, too, are sure of expanding their spheres of influence and would regard any agreement, however temporary, with the Indian state as liquidation of

the revolution. But they are yet to demonstrate that what they practise on the ground is tuned to Indian reality and radically different from the old formula of individual killing. Why have darlings of the people like Koteswara Rao to hide and die in forests?

Leaving aside the future and subjective evaluations thereof by the two sides, the present is not objectively a stalemate. It is an advantage Indian Union situation. So, talks are unlikely, today, and even if they occur, nothing more than a temporary ceasefire seem possible. □□