

JANGALMAHAL DEBATE-II

'AN INFANTILE DISORDER!'

Sumit Chowdhury

Those who created the world did so by 'walking while asking questions.'

—Sub-Commandant Marcos

ON 25 NOVEMBER, newspapers splashed a gruesome picture on their first pages: a middle-aged man, with partially blown-up jaw and a deep gash across the only eye visible, his rather mundane clothes grubby with blood, lying face somewhat up but sideways on the ground, dead as dead can be. The big headlines accompanying the picture were brazenly euphoric, perhaps to drive home that the dead man in the picture didn't even deserve the respect normally accorded to the dead. After all, he was one of the lead-runners of left extremist insurgents who constitute, in the oft-repeated words of India's Prime Minister and echoed by media and political go-getters of every hue, 'the biggest threat to our internal security.'

The dead man in the picture, Mullojulla Koteswara Rao aka Kishenji, happened to be, the contempt shown by newspapers notwithstanding, a citizen of this country, a 'child of the Republic,' who according to the same country's apex court, 'the State cannot kill'. 'Killed', of course, he was—that's what the cheering in newspapers and news-channels was all about—but 'how', 'when' and 'where' were ugly questions which, like ugly questions, were destined to raise their heads. Did he really die in a gun-battle, euphemistically put as an 'encounter'? Or, was he captured earlier, tortured in custody and then murdered in cold blood, his body later dumped in the forest for news-gatherers to click their Nikons.

The paramilitary, sent by state and central governments together to nab him and his armed comrades, claimed, as they've always claimed, that they had to spray him with bullets and mortars in self-defence since the man was firing a flurry of shots at them. Bengal's new Chief Minister—who the dead man had wished to see as Chief Minister when she led the opposition in the state—even went to the extent of saying, almost by way of an explanation, that for three whole days Kishenji was repeatedly asked over microphones to surrender but he just wouldn't and kept firing. 'He fired a thousand rounds,' she added to impress upon her audience how dangerous or what a lunatic the dead man was.

The deceased's kin, the political setup he belonged to, upholders of civil liberties and democratic rights as well as several left parties, fact-finding teams and even a few columnists, however, cried foul. How it was that Kishenji—Commander-in-Chief, People's Liberation Guerilla Army (PLGA)—was the lone person to be knocked out while none of those deputed to provide him security cover was as much as spotted in the battle arena, let alone killed or injured? How come not a single of the 800-1000 jawans engaged in the high-profile operation

was hit at least by a stray bullet, given that, if paramilitary and Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee were to be believed, Kishenji was shooting from his AK47 like a man possessed? Wasn't it odd that the termite hill behind which his body lay didn't have a single bullet mark? Why had villagers around Burishole forest not heard anything when for three whole days microphones were supposedly blaring appeals to give up? Why did they hear gunshots only in the afternoon of that day, and for a mere twenty odd minutes, a time span in which it was impossible to fire a thousand rounds even from the fastest automatic? And, finally, what caused the slashes and burns on his body that Kishenji's niece, who had come all the way from Andhra to identify the dead, found?

Questions there were many but answers government was not inclined to provide and media bound to ignore. Post-mortem, ballistic and forensic reports, it could safely be assumed, would get a dusty burial in one of the messy filing cabinets in a messy office in either South Block or Bhawani Bhaban. The State reserved the sole right to information on 'encounter deaths.'

Be that as it might, human rights principles demanded that every 'encounter death' be probed by a judicial or independent body and the investigation begun by filing murder charge against the armed arm of the State. In a bid to pre-empt public suspicion and possible outrage, West Bengal Chief Minister did order a CID probe; but CID was directly under her wings and, thus, couldn't, by any stretch of imagination, be impartial. Mamata had herself doubted the even-handedness of CID and demanded instead a CBI investigation when Tapasi Malik was battered and burnt to death in Singur and the dastardly carnage was perpetrated in Nandigram. At that time, she was the opposition and her arch enemy government in the state; but now that she was ensconced in Chief Minister's chair, the same CID, she indicated, had overnight shed its baggage of bias.

Neutral look at the circumstances leading to the insurgent leader's demise was ducked in this manner. The State had the right to kill, and kill at will. How could it be subjected to scrutiny, like a common criminal, for an act of killing?

Meanwhile, three months have gone by. With new leaves appearing on dry Sal and Mahul branches, the forests are preparing to put behind yet another winter of terror and bloodshed, misery and discontent. Kishenji, who used to be so much a part of their Junglemahal myth, has already faded from media's memory; and ordinary folk didn't know him. Maybe, there're still those in the forests fired by his revolutionary ideals, others who'll remember him with a drop of tear and yet others who'll judge him by his defeat or the futility of his political persuasion; but the circumstances of his macabre end will forever remain a mystery.

Remembering Azad while writing about Kishenji comes almost involuntarily. Not only did they come from the same region and speak the same language, but they also were very senior leaders of the same political party—CPI(Maoist)—and harboured the same political belief. Both of them led the life of rebels on the run, taking both chances and hardship with dreams in their eyes of a revolution that was not to be. And, this likeness, coincidental or because of it,

extended more overwhelmingly to their deaths—both of them were ‘killed’ in ostensible ‘encounters’ by armed mercenaries of the State.

There was, however, a paradox glossed over by many among the far left as well as the selectively forgetful media: Kishenji died in the hands of a government whose supreme administrator had once—when she was not government but trying every means to oust the then government—condemned the killing of Azad, albeit in mumbles, and demanded an appropriate investigation. At that juncture, there was a certain bonhomie prevailing between the two widely divergent, even antagonistic, political forces. Kishenji’s party, there’re good reasons to believe, were sincere about that relationship. For her, on the other hand, it was simply a matter of vote-catching expediency. The rapport had inevitably to break in a betrayal.

Mamata-CPI (Maoist) ties had begun in Keshpur at the turn of the millennium and was re-established during the historic people’s struggle in Nandigram. In that creek-laden estuarine land, a few of Kishenji’s men and women, though they arrived on the scene rather late, had battled the harmads arms for arms, allowing Mamata, then opposition, to easily expand her vote-base. In Lalgarh’s red and rocky soil, on the contrary, the disposition of the people’s uprising was such that sowing electoral seeds was not at all a realistic idea and she had to let the insurgents have a free run. The trade-off—‘you take Nandigram, I take Lalgarh’—worked fairly well until Maoists—perhaps, considering the overall political equation in the state and unnerved by merciless onslaught of joint forces—made a tactical blunder by overtly rooting for her. The mole-killing spree Kishenji’s cohorts indulged in further weakened their position by alienating their support base among the villagers and their sympathisers in urban areas. ‘Infantile disorder’!

In all likelihood, Maoist soft spot for Mamata came from their veiled admiration of her mass appeal and her relentless line of attack in taking on the common enemy. ‘Enemy’s enemy is my friend,’ maybe that was their premise. She, on her part, made excellent use of this covert friendship, bagging in the Assembly polls half the seats in Junglemahal – where earlier she didn’t even have a toehold. Maoists were so enamoured of her that they stayed dormant as Chhatradhar Mahato, the most known face and voice of the Lalgarh movement, decided to contest independently from jail. Mamata took advantage of this, using Maoists to serve her own end; Maoists, on the other hand, served none, not even themselves. End of the day, Mamata came out all winners and Maoists lost everything. Maoists’ was the stupidity of ideological bankruptcy, hers was the ingenuity of pragmatic opportunism.

Mamata’s terrific performance in the elections, the massive mandate she received from the people of West Bengal, changed the Junglemahal scenario dramatically. As she moved from street-power to State-power, she reneged on all that she had promised before. Not only did she not pull out the paramilitary and release the hundreds of activists and ordinary folk rotting in jail, she also let loose her fearsome goon-gangs –*bhairab bahini*—to make quick inroads into the forest-dotted territory. Kishenji’s forces, who had already crumbled under the security

operation launched by previous regime, were caught unawares and faced absolute demolition. His sudden but inevitable death made the picture complete.

Where Kishenji's party—and many of sympathisers in civil society—erred was their inability to comprehend the eruption in recent years of a series of astounding people's movements in West Bengal, which had been quite sedate until then. Maoists imagined that people in the state were fed up with over three decades of tyranny and misrule, stranglehold of the ruling party in every sphere of life and stifling of every voice of democratic dissent, more and more through use of violence. True, those issues were at the back of people's minds, and sometimes they took centrestage; and yet, at the root of it, Singur and Nandigram happened not because people were venting their anger at an authoritarian regime but to save their land and livelihood from the aggressive paws of ever-hungry corporate lions. To put it in a macro perspective, the turbulence in West Bengal was the fallout of the neoliberal dispensation the Bretton Woods institutions had been imposing on the people through a submissive State; all the power-greedy political formations, Mamata included, were zealously pursuing that agenda whenever and wherever they wielded power. Instead of the offensive by global financial capital, targeting the 34-year-old regime and befriending Mamata to boot them out was like missing the woods for the trees.

Lalgarh certainly was a major challenge to the Indian State, since it dwelt on police atrocities. It, nonetheless, was not aiming at destroying or uprooting the State machinery or the existing political system. Spearheaded by Pulishi Santras Birodhi Janasadharaner Committee—People's Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCAPA)—it was purely a mass democratic movement seeking justice and dignity for an oppressed and deprived people. From its spontaneous inception, PCAPA had put up a 'no entry' sign for party banners; activists and supporters from a whole range of political formations, discarding their affiliations and loyalties, took an active part in its functioning; meetings were held in open fields, under trees where thousands, carrying bows and arrows and thumping dhamsa-madal, took part in debates, discussions and decision-making, almost in festive mood.

Under these conditions, no mainstream electoral party could influence the course of the movement or use it to their advantage. That's how CPI(Maoist), being a clandestine setup, could steal a march over all the others who worked explicitly within the recognised political arrangement. Within a few months, Maoists established their hegemony over the movement and took full control of PCAPA.

What Kishenji and his co-workers did in Lalgarh, Mamata had done it in Singur and Nandigram. Whereas Maoist agenda was setting up a people's State under their patronage after pulling down the existing repressive one, Mamata sought her share in the affairs of the State already on hand. Both snatched the reins of autonomous people's movements from the people in their bids to accessing political power, the former through bullets and the latter by way of ballots. Is that why they came together?

Azad, it was said, was picked up on his way to meet the official peace mediator appointed by central government —and, thereafter, shot at point blank. Though the mediator had no hand in it —he was, obviously, taken for a ride by the Union Home Minister—the State’s peace initiatives had become suspect. A point to note, in this context, is that the peace process was undertaken almost at the same time as the most vicious war was being carried out by the Indian State on a section of its own people. Was ‘peace’ then the other name for ‘war, one supplementing the other?’ Was ‘peace’ a weapon of ‘war?’

These questions would be logical to ask if one was to observe Mamata’s Junglemahal policy. Soon after assuming power, she launched the peace offensive by appointing a set of six mediators to open the gates for talks without making a single move to removing the main obstacles blocking that gate. Paramilitary operations—accompanied by raids in villages, indiscriminate beatings, arrests and tortures, even rapes—continued as before, caught considerably less by prying media eyes; and none of the prisoners were given any hope of being free in the near future. Who were they going to talk to, if the leaders of the movement were confined to dark and dank cells in Medinipur jail? How’d state government’s peace efforts be trusted when violence was being unleashed by its own forces?

Did such questions never occur to the dear mediators before accepting the appointment? Were they blind to the reality of Junglemahal, so anxious they were on ushering in peace in those unquiet woods? If they were so serious about opening dialogues between the conflicting sides, shouldn’t they have delved into what transpired in the talks held before. The last talk between government and PCAPA took place on 13 June 2009, which this writer attended as representing Lalgarh Andolan Sanhati Mancha (LASM)—Solidarity Forum for Lalgarh Movement. In that meeting—held amicably and government accepting all the temporary demands made by PCAPA—a written agreement was signed which stated the next round would be held exactly a month after, on 14 July. Five days later, on 18 June, joint forces moved into Lalgarh and nothing ever was heard about the agreement. Why didn’t the mediators insist that Mamata’s government abide by the spirit of that written piece of paper? It could’ve acted as the ‘open sesame’ for peace talks.

PCAPA, it need be told, had been keen on ‘talks’ right from the beginning. Even when roads were being blockaded and police boycotted, the Committee was interacting with police and administration at various levels. Negotiations, Chhatradhar Mahato said, were also a form of struggle.

In truth, Maoists, too, had shown their interest in talks time and again. A few hours before PCAPA President, Lalmohan Tudu, was brutally annihilated by security forces, Kishenji had, in a fax to news-channels, declared 72 days’ ceasefire in response to the Union Home Minister’s offer of 72 hours. The only reaction received till now from government was Lalmohan’s corpse. If the State was not desirous of peace, peaceniks had to hit the dead end. And, so they did.

Maoists were in a quandary. They wanted to participate in the talks—without, of course, giving up arms—but were not ready with a plan of action; so, they could make only half-

hearted pokes at 'peace.' Their confusion were further confounded by their own doing when they killed two of Mamata's men and a well-known Jharkhand activist in the area. It was yet another example of adventurism. Eventually, Kishenji had to pay with his life the price for his inconsistency. With his killing, the peace process was dispatched to oblivion.

Mamata, in the meantime, has been winning kudos from every quarter for the slew of development projects she announced for Janglemahal every time she went there. Without going into merits of her packages or whether they'd ever be implemented in letter and spirit, one may well ask a basic question: Did the Lalgarh uprising take place because those projects were lacking? Did the quiet woods turn unquiet because a bridge was not constructed over Kangsabati or a polytechnic missing in Binpur? What about the original demand that the police officer who took Chhitamoni's eyes come to Dalipur Chowk and apologise in public?

Actually, the packages are an extension of the war on people. The peaceniks have no hope of preventing the bloodshed, violence and destruction that awaits Janglemahal. The only way is to intensify the people's struggle. □□□