

## JANGALMAHAL DEBATE

## The Problem Then, The Problem Now

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HAS THE KILLING OF Kishenjee dealt a deathblow to peace efforts? This question has become a subject of discussion. But the moot question is who is responsible for this situation? Both the Bengal Government and the Centre were never serious about talks. Some of the interlocutors had been desperately trying to bring both sides to agree for talks. Maoists cooperated with the interlocutors in creating a congenial atmosphere for talks. What they wanted was that both sides should observe simultaneous ceasefire. Aakash, the Secretary of State Committee of CPI (Maoist), declared ceasefire for one month from October 1, 2011, asking the State Government to reciprocate.

As Sujato Bhadra observed after a month that it was the State Government which violated it. The Government had not come forward to declare ceasefire simultaneously for one month. All the while Mamata Banerjee was insisting that the Maoists must give up arms, while the Central Home Minister Chidambaram, in September, said that Maoists must abjure violence, as if they are engaged in it.

It is the joint action forces and the Bhairav Bahini which were indulged in violence on Adivasis of Jangalmahal. This writer as part of a fact-finding team saw how these forces reigned terror on the people. The team, which comprised intellectuals and writers of Bengal that included Prof Saroj Giri of Delhi University, extensively toured Naigadh and Jargaon blocks for two days on September 20 and 21.

Before the team left for Jangalmahal on the fact-finding mission, they had asked the State Government of Bengal to tell the Central Government to withdraw the Joint action forces. Mamata Banerjee herself had demanded the State and Centre to withdraw the forces several times before she came to power. She had alleged that the Left Government was misusing the joint action forces to curb the political dissent in the State. She had argued that on the pretext of tackling Maoists, the Left Front Government was suppressing political opposition and other individuals who it thought were not with them. She also had demanded the release of political prisoners unconditionally as all they stood and fought for genuine democratic demands, braving the fascist rule of Left Front. She alleged that they were put behind the bars by the Government branding them as Maoists.

Well, here is a point to compare the situation in Andhra Pradesh as it prepared for talks in 2004. The Congress Party had never asked the Centre to withdraw the paramilitary forces such as CPRF or BSF engaged in combing operations to eliminate Maoists. It had only promised to

hold talks with Naxalites unconditionally if they came to power. To give the devil its due, when the Congress in Andhra Pradesh came to power in May 2004, it had

- a) called back the Greyhounds (the special police force created exclusively to kill Maoists) from combing operations and confined them to barracks as long as first round of talks were over in October 2004, with minor exceptions;
- b) Encounter killings were stopped. There were some covert attempts, though; The Congress Government had responded simultaneously to the declaration of ceasefire for six months from June to December 2004 with minor attempts on the part of Government now and then;
- c) The Government had let the ban on party go on July 21 when the stipulated duration of one year ban was over and finally the Congress Government in Andhra Pradesh had invited the CPI (Maoist) and CPI (ML-Janashakti) for talks on October 14, facilitating for safe passage for the whole contingent representing the two parties to reach Hyderabad for talks. They were to go to the State capital on October 11 and return to Nallamala forest on October 21. The team included Ramakrishna, Central Committee member and Secretary of State party, and State Committee leaders from both parties.

The Congress Government, however, did not keep its promise to invite the two parties for the second round of talks and violated the ceasefire on January 8, 2005, by killing Lakshmi, an executive member of Andhra Pradesh Chaitanya Mahila Samakhya in Kurnool. Lakshmi was running a tailoring training centre in Kurnool, leading a normal, legal life. She had gone to meet her husband Panduranga Reddy alias Sagar in Nallamala forest since there was no ban on the Party. She also thought that since a ceasefire was in force there was no problem and harm in meeting her husband. She was brutally tortured and killed by Greyhounds forces. It was just a beginning. The State Government went on killing spree, violating the ceasefire agreement. On January 10, it killed Raji Reddy of Janasakthi in Mulug forest of Warangal and on January 14 and 15, it 'encountered' legal, mass organisation leaders in Karimnagar and Warangal and tribal women in Nallamala. CPI (Maoist) was left with no option but to withdraw its ceasefire offer from January 17, 2005.

The Congress Government had violated ceasefire because it had scant respect for democratic rights (rule of law) and land reforms—the two main, broad demands put forth by not only the Naxalite parties but also the mediators.

While this was the case with a Congress Government in State, its national parent acted no different. The Government in Bengal too behaved the same way. Azad, the then spokesman of CPI (Maoist), had offered for talks. Kishenjje and Aakash had offered for talks in Bengal. Both the Governments never attempted to create any kind of atmosphere conducive for talks. They, in fact, were never in the mood to listen to public demand for talks.

Chidambaram, the Central Home Minister, had appointed Swamy Agnivesh as interlocutor and Mamata Banarjee appointed a full-fledged team. In Andhra Pradesh, the Congress Government in 2004 had given a letter to Sri Sankaran, one of the six mediators suggested by the party to act as interlocutors for talks. The Congress Government in Andhra Pradesh on its own did not appoint any interlocutor or mediator. It had accepted the mediators suggested by the two revolutionary parties and it had also accepted the modalities suggested by the party. There was a dispute on one aspect; the squads should not move in villages with arms. Both the parties, however, had agreed to discuss this issue along with the main agenda. This was not mentioned by the Government during the four-day talks about in October. It was advantageous for CPI (Maoist) not to discuss this issue.

The Central Home Minister Chidambaram had invited Swamy Agnivesh to play the role of interlocutor and asked him to write a letter to spokesman of the CPI (Maoist). Azad was picked up on July 1, 2010, at Nagpur, by anti-Naxalite force when he was going to Dandakaranya carrying that letter in order to discuss the proposal with the party leadership. He and the journalist Hemachandra Pande, who was also caught along with him, were killed the following day in Adilabad forests.

Though the CBI conducted an enquiry on Supreme Court instructions, it 'found' out that the encounter was *real*. Everyone knows how real it was and that it was a murder. Mamata Banarjee, within six months of her coming to power, never showed any inclination to withdraw the joint action forces. Instead, she declared that she would arm ten thousand Adivasis to fight the Maoists in Jangalmahal, announcing in ample words that she was ready to create a civil war. It was no less a crime than the creation of Salwa Judum by BJP Government in Chhattisgarh, which was struck down by the Supreme Court. Mamata Banerjee allowed her henchmen to create Bhairab Bahini replacing Harnad Bahini, the notorious private army of CPI (M) created during the Left Front rule to carry out attacks on people.

The fact-finding team listened to and talked to women raped by Bhairab Bahini in that area. They had seen houses burnt by that private army that had full backing of joint action forces. When the interlocutors warned that they would withdraw if the Government failed to create congenial atmosphere, Mamata Banerjee had persuaded them and promised that she would ask the joint action forces to remain in barracks. This promise was made in the third week of November. Instead of creating conducive atmosphere for talks, she had let the CRPF forces of Vijay Kumar and Manoj Varma's anti-Maoist joint action forces to surround Kishenjee, take him into custody, brutally torture and kill him on November 24, 2011.

The forces must have taken him into custody at least on November 23, the day media carried news that Kishenjee was surrounded in Jangalmahal area but managed to escape to Jharkhand. The Government deliberately leaked false news to buy time to torture him and kill him. He was tortured so brutally that his body was mutilated. As a civil rights activist this writer has not seen such horrendous wounds standing testimony to torture, in 40 years of experience in claiming dead bodies of encountered Maoist activists. There were three kinds of injuries on

his body. His feet were burnt, resulting in the removal of the left foot. Right eye was removed and right shoulder was broken into pieces. There was a deep cut in the throat. They had burnt his legs and body with an electric heater. Then they cut his body into several places with rifle bayonets. When he had become completely immobile, they shot six bullets into his body, including one in the mouth that smashed lower jaw and pierced through the back of brain. Though they had allowed team members into mortuary and permitted to take photographs, the transparency ended there. While the photographs show the world that he was killed in a fake encounter, the post mortem report given by forensic doctors speaks about firing from a distance to make people believe that it was a real encounter.

The Chief Minister, who was in Delhi on November 24, first feigned ignorance about the encounter. Briefed by intelligence department on her return to Kolkata, she claimed that the encounter took place for three days, that he had refused to surrender and that one thousand bullets were exchanged. The security forces were left with no option but to kill him, she claimed. Her statement is a proof in itself that she and the Centre (since she was in Delhi at that time) knew for sure that Kishenjee was in their custody when feigned ignorance about the encounter.

Did Kishenjee want to see Mamata Banerjee as Chief Minister of Bengal? Even if he wanted to see her as Chief Minister or not, it was writing on the wall during the elections that she would become one. Why, everyone, including the CPI(M) leadership itself, knew that they were going to be dumped. People were vexed with the 34-year-old fascist rule of Left Front. The democrats and intellectuals right from Mahashweta Devi to Sujato Bhadra thought that this unknown devil was better than the known demon. Did anyone hear Kishenjee say that he wanted to see Mamata as CM? Did *Ananda Bazar* hear? Did 'Intellectuals' in Delhi hear?

If it were to be true, then why did she choose to kill him? Far away from Kolkata, a Telugu paper (*Andhrajyothi*) published a letter written by Kishenjee to his 85-year old mother Madhuramma. He had put his heart out in the letter, relating the historic revolutionary struggles being waged in Bengal and other places. In that letter, written not long before Mamata Banerjee became the Chief Minister, he had clearly expressed his opinions on Mamata.

Was Kishenjee sectarian? Did he fail in bringing all democratic forces into a united front fold? This is yet another argument sans truth. If this argument is true, how does one understand his long march from Jagityal to Jangalmahal from 1978 to 2011? His life was an awe-inspiring revolutionary life, organising a wide variety of people from different walks of life and different economic, social and political levels. People who worked with him would still recall his extraordinary capacity to organize, inspire, grasp and explain things in a lucid way.

He participated and built a wide variety of struggles covering over three decades—Jagityal (1973–78), Karimnagar –Adilabad (1978–80), Andhra Pradesh, in general and Telangana in particular (1980–85 as People's War Secretary), Dandakaranya (1985–90) and Bengal. Building a great movement in Bengal itself was a major contribution because it was an uphill task for real Communist parties to go to people after the setback in Naxalbari and land reform laced with deceit in the name of *Operation Barga*. Ruthless repression by the Left Front

Government too posed a challenge. Kishenjee's role in building and gathering support to Nandigram and Singur movements was commendable. From lending support to PCAPA in Jangalmahal and alternative development model to building the Kanu-Sidhu Militia to fight back the State repression, he played a historic role. Is it not true that Bengal could see unprecedented and widespread support and solidarity of intellectuals and democrats to Nandigram, Singur and Jangalmahal movements that can only be compared with only Naxalbari? Jangalmahal was seen as another Naxalbari by many with great expectations. He along with many others played their bit to revive revolutionary spirit in Bengal.

When Concerned Citizens Committee (CCC) was formed in 1997, after an observation made by Justice M N Rao while delivering a judgment "All the while we are considering Naxalites as a problem and trying to find a solution. But it seems more and more people are looking at them rather as a solution not a problem". CCC had persistently asked the Government to recognise Naxalites as a political party and to hold talks with them. APCLC, PUCL, many other democratic organisations and individuals along with the media in Andhra Pradesh also supported the view that it was time for peace talks. People by and large also were for peace talks, without giving up arms as in the times of Telangana Armed Struggle (1951). People wanted a respite. A revolutionary party is there to serve the people, obey the people and make struggles and sacrifices for the people. The three top leaders of Central Committee of CPI (ML-People's War) killed in a fake encounter on December 2, 1999. Two among them (Nalla Adireddy @ Shyam and Erramreddy Santhosh Reddy @ Mahesh) had given consent for talks with TDP Government when CCC met them in forests and spent two days with them, discussing the issue.

Talks with TDP Government had taken place in June 2002 despite their killings. But the process could not progress much as ceasefire was observed only by CPI(ML) People's War unilaterally and ended in deciding modalities and failed in paving the way for the party leaders to come out of forests to take part in the talks. It is true that the party had suffered huge losses in Nallamala after the talks in 2004. It lost top leaders and several cadres. There were heavy losses in North Telangana, saving the leadership. But the movement in AOB (Andhra-Orissa Border) is intact and progressed too. So the Andhra Pradesh talks experiment cannot be compared with the Srikakulam setback. At the same time, one should also take notice of another positive development. During the AP talks only two main revolutionary parties in the country - CPI (ML) People's War and MCC - had merged to form the united CPI (Maoist). The movement had spread to 14 States in the country. In spite of heavy losses, the Communist party—united CPI (Maoist) could conduct its Congress in March 2007 after a gap of 37 years. The last united Congress was held in 1970.

Maoist movement had become 'greatest threat to the internal security' of the ruling classes. The guerrilla war has reached the mobile warfare stage in Dandakaranya. The State had declared a war on its own people in November 2007 in the name of Green Hunt Operation and now people are witnessing heavy deployment of Army in Dandakaranya. The so-called democratic intellectuals, who are craving for peace in Kashmir and happy about giving up

armed struggle by JKLF and show Nepal as a model, are saying that going for peace talks has turned suicidal for Maoist Party in India. Strange! A revolutionary party obliges wishes of the people. It will never discard any form of struggle in the armour of people. Dialogue is a respite in the long drawn people's war for New Democratic Revolution. □□□