

Maoists and the Poor: Against Democracy?

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Sections of the left do not want to intensify the political struggle of the poorest of the poor, but to – in one way or the other – revert to bourgeois “democracy”, which is nothing but an instrument of class rule. The mantra seems to be to critique the present system without breaking with it in any fundamental way, and yet, condemn the Maoists as undemocratic.

Perhaps we can put it this way: fortunately for the state today, the poorest of the poor who have been organised by the Maoists in the different parts of the country have not come up with a movement good enough for the middle classes or the urban democratic left to join, as in Bengal in the first half of the 1970s or during some phases of the struggle in Andhra Pradesh. This time around, one might say, the poorest of the poor have failed the urban middle class left, which is wedded to “democracy”; they have betrayed the cause of “democracy” by going ahead with the undemocratic Maoists! How else can we understand the fact that large sections of the non-Maoist radical left refuse to join the raging struggle, instead posing as “civil society”, trying to instil the due process of law and bring “peace”, that is, when they are not busy pointing out the faults of the “uncivil” Maoists.

While the charge against the Maoists is that they are getting the worst out of the state by provoking it to unleash its armed might, what if the state’s response is reflective of nothing more than the real nature of the present unjust order and its fake democracy. In spite of the supposed pretext provided, the state is careful not to lose democratic legitimacy while using repressive force: it wants to cover its flanks.¹ But the “undemocratic and violent” Maoist injunction is such that it erodes the privilege of the ruling order to perpetuate itself in the name of democracy: in Lalgarh and elsewhere, there was massive popular opposition to the holding of parliamentary and other democratic elections, for example.² This “erosion of democratic spaces” must be hailed as an achievement of the Maoist intervention, to the extent that it undermines democracy as an instrument of rule for the state and the ruling order.

Turn the Maoist movement into a list of demands, democratise it into something like what Santosh Rana and some

Marxist-Leninist organisations argue for (tribal autonomy, revive gram sabhas, language rights, etc), and you will soon see democracy as an instrument of rule back in place.³ The great Hindu civilisation, awe-inspiring Indian democracy absorbs everything in its way, has (or rather has) had an answer for all problems without shaking its foundations: secularism for Muslims, reservations for dalits, directive principles for the poor and marginalised, now a “separate Constitution” for Nagas, any number of really smart rights for whoever challenges the ruling order. This democracy is one where, for example, the database of the progressive National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, which keeps records of the poorest of the poor, easily feeds into Nilekani’s technocratic Unique Identification Number.⁴ Will then the Nilekani-type, enlightened bourgeois utopia solve the Maoist problem by directly transferring cash to the bank accounts of the poorest of the poor, adivasi Maoist – bribe as welfare, democracy in lieu of the military option? To venture a sweeping statement, perhaps it is only the Naxalite/Maoist movement which this great syncretic civilisation and secular democracy has not been able to co-opt – thankfully the “idea of India” is far too exclusive and sophisticated for this movement of landless labourers and adivasis.

So now, the message from Dantewada is that the democratic game is over – instead of lamenting over the loss of democracy, the erosion of democratic spaces, it is precisely this end of the democratic game which is the most laudable achievement of the Maoist movement. It is the poor saying that “democracy” only seeks/extracts our mandate for your well-entrenched power. We do not want to be exploited *and* given a democratic voice, we refuse to be drawn into mandating our own exploitation; we are fed up with your gram sabhas and panchayats, just as we resent your *bhoodan* movement and inclusive democracy. It is the poor saying that it is not just the undemocratic nature of capitalism we have problems with, but with capitalism as such, with, in fact, democratic capitalism. They seem to be saying: We have narrated our miseries too many times in courts and *jan sunwais* and deposed before honourable

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commissions and now we only want to *act and go our way*.

However, any attempt at structural transformation which does not allow the ruling classes to reconfigure their power in new forms is easily and immediately labelled “violent” – “easily” since it readily contrasts with the peaceful, routine exploitation of the masses called democracy. How is this right wing trashing of structural transformation as “violence” different from the left wing understanding and critique of revolutionary violence, the idea of representation by the Party which apparently knows the inner logic of history, the tenuous relation with the masses and so on? Here we see that sections of the left today raise such questions not to intensify the political struggle but one way or another revert to a democracy which is nothing but an instrument of class rule. In Lalgargh, for example, where large masses of people had already broken all relations with the ruling order, including the police, the armed forces and the parliamentary political parties

and constitutional bodies, and sections of the left ridiculously called upon the Maoists to “allow” the holding of parliamentary elections, gram sansads and panchayats.⁵

Beyond Armed Conflict

Thus, the audacity of the present struggle following from the Leninist injunction, “dare to struggle, dare to win”, is sought to be undermined by blaming it on Maoist violence or as just a desperate measure of the poorest of the poor. A humanitarianism or humanism, treating violence in the abstract, or forcing an image of the revolutionary masses as just suffering, innocent people looking for relief, today stands as a hegemonic discourse among large sections of the left. In trying to “save” the masses of the people from “armed conflict” it tries to detach them from the political struggle to transform the existing order, implicitly reducing the Maoists to just an armed band – thereby actually precipitating an “armed conflict”, as a self-fulfilling prophecy, and definitely

fulfilling the wish of the Indian state’s security establishment.⁶

The Maoists have been precipitating a wider revolutionary political crisis precisely by mobilising large masses of people for a thorough social transformation. Those who attack them for destroying mass movements cannot be selective here and withhold their commitment to mass participation when it is apparent that it is the Maoists who are leading the charge. Balagopal’s “invariant laws of the sociology of armed insurgencies” suffered from this.⁷ Talk of peace and dialogue, which depoliticises and tranquilises the masses instead of unleashing their force, can therefore be highly ideological.

The “solution” then lies in the intensification of the “problem” – that is, not one but two, three, many Dantewadas, Lalgarghs all over the country. This means, of course, that the urban left, the non-Maoist radical left comprising different Marxist-Leninist parties, among others, must give up the narrow, well-trodden, ill-trodden path of “democracy” and join the raging struggle



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in order to broaden it – so that it does not narrow into a military conflict. Similarly, for the Maoists, it is futile to think that they will be able to take this struggle to new heights on their own.

End of History?

Large sections of the left seem to understand the repressive nature of the state and capital but not the political subjectivity of the poorest of the poor. A moral, almost subjectivist critique of the state as to its repressive “nature” is however a bit too invested in presenting the poor as victims or innocent civilians – who then gets preserved as that all along. Most denunciations of the state’s impending armed offensive therefore derive their power and legitimacy in being able to present the poor as victims or at best only protecting their extended homesteads against rapacious corporations backed by the state and its democracy. Or, at best, that they have been forced to take up guns since they had no other means, since they could not wait any longer for the state to deliver the much-needed goods and services. There is a refusal to accept that the poorest of the poor might have short-circuited themselves out of being either the beneficiaries of some benign, welfare state or being just victims or innocent civilians, or merely acting out of desperation.

Against this humanitarianism of sections of the left, it is precisely the conjugation of being poor and being political which needs to be imagined and asserted, and which the ruling classes fear.⁸ Referring to the radicalism of Tommy Spence, a proletarian in 18th century England, scholar Peter Linebaugh states that “what made Spence dangerous to the bourgeoisie was not that he was a proletarian nor that he had ideas opposed to private property but that he was both” (p 89).⁹ Here is the formula, if you like: you can be rich and radical but not poor and radical – the ideal combination allowed in today’s rights-based capitalism is poor and needy, poor and asking-for-some-rights.

Is the refusal or inability to view the poorest of the poor as political subjects, another instance of how we can all gleefully laugh at Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis and yet it is bloody difficult to disprove it in practice? Any attempt to make

(universal?) history, we are sternly warned, will involve the use of force, of violence, a party and hence will lead to totalitarianism... so let us keep playing the democratic game! Thus we are told, the poorest of the poor are not a problem as such; it is their articulation as political subjects, as Maoists or Naxals, which is the problem, carrying the seeds of totalitarianism. Thus, the sad happenstance: that it is around the Maoist movement today that the political struggle of the poorest of the poor against the ruling order has sharpened and assumed new heights.

Livelihood or Politics?

It is against this “repression” of the political subjectivity of the poorest of the poor that we perhaps need to assert that they are not just fighting a battle to save their livelihoods and resources – rather the poorest of the poor, in rising up, are actually passing a verdict on the political system and democracy in this country and the armed offensive is actually not just the voice of big capital but more fundamentally reveals the true nature of what passes for democracy in India. It is clear how it is today misleading to attack only Chidambaram and the hawks in the home ministry, intelligence bureau and the jungle warfare vultures. It might be only the Chhattisgarh Director-General of Police Vishwa Ranjan who openly calls for finishing the Maoists the way the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam were vanquished, or using “strategic hamlets” of anti-Vietnam, us counter-insurgency fame, but there seems to be a silent yet wider consensus. None of the major democratic political parties have launched any agitation in support of the poorest of the poor, against the government’s armed offensive. Much like the Gujarat pogrom in 2002 or the numerous aerial bombings and killings in the north-east, the present armed offensive can take place and Indian democracy will still go about its routinised, sterile normalcy. Indian democracy stands thoroughly exposed: the question today is of democratically exposing it ad nauseum or going ahead with the political struggle against it, something that is raging in front of us.

The Tatas and Essars are of course out there to grab resources from the adivasis

and the armed offensive is related to the interests of big capital. But this does not mean that the fight of the adivasis is only to protect “their” resources, that they cannot go beyond “livelihood issues” and the “struggle for survival” and in fact inaugurate a larger political struggle in the country.¹⁰ Actually it is not they who cannot go beyond these issues, beyond livelihood issues, but it is large sections of the left and progressive persons who cannot.¹¹ In reaching out (an element of performance seems inescapable here) to the trapped innocent civilians in Dantewada, we are trying to block from view the fact that they are actually reaching out to us, calling on us to join their struggle, by going beyond the livelihood issues and *jal jangal jamin* that we are bent on offering them. Sections of the left think that Dantewada and Lalgargh areas, without their intervention, are just waiting to become cesspools of violence and conflict; they refuse to see them as possible cauldrons of change that have dared and trashed Indian democracy and the existing political system – and perhaps propose an alternative political system.

Ruling class strategists like K P S Gill seem aware of this when he states that the “Naxalite ideologues believe that they have an alternative political model to offer”.¹² Clearly, the poorest of the poor have thrown the ball in the court of the privileged democratic forces of the country, urging them to join a political struggle shorn of political imbecility and a juvenile belief in the nature and possibilities of the present democratic order. Is the democratic left in the country willing to accept that the poorest of the poor can try to rewrite the history of the country? Is that considered too ambitious a project to be undertaken by the “masses”, in a country whose history has always been decided by the elite, by Nehru-Gandhi-Jinnah-Patel in round table conferences?

Balagopal’s Critique

K Balagopal criticised the Maoists for being unable to make a dent in national politics, with a biting comment: “you can hold a gun to a landlord’s head but Special Economic Zones or the Indo-us Nuclear Deal have no head to put a gun to”.¹³ However, while the statement is true as far as it goes,

what if one is not really opposing this or that policy of the state like SEZs or the Deal but challenging social relations as such that support the existing state structure and political order? (The CPI(Marxist) too opposed the Deal). Does Balagopal suggest that there is no relationship between transforming social relations at the “local” (he lets out a dismissive attitude to the local as opposed to the national) level and fighting so-called national issues? It is his inability to see the connection between the head of a landlord, in fact wider “local” power relations, in some nondescript remote village, and the more refined machinations of bourgeois democracy, between the landless labourer with a gun and a revolutionary political subjectivity, which led him to claim that the Maoists are not interested in “defeating the state politically but (only) mobilising against it militarily”.

There is, in other words, an inability to imagine that the poorest of the poor, as political subjects, can lead a political transformation which can take along other classes in its stride. In the name of ending violence, ending the suffering of ordinary people, in the name of democratic, peaceful movements, what takes place is, as it were, setting “ordinary people” up, brought up on rights, to just endlessly struggle and democratically expose those in power, questioning their democratic legitimacy, without ever imagining bringing them down. Exposing the system, its corruption and right wing machinations, whose apogee was perhaps the Tehelka sting operation on those responsible for the 2002 Gujarat pogrom, seems to only create a demoralising overload on “ordinary people”, in the absence of a new political subjectivity, a political alternative.

The mantra for large sections of the left seems to be to critique the present system and democracy without breaking with it in any fundamental way: unable to break with the “idea of India”, just work to make it more democratic, composite, inclusive! Perhaps this partly explains the readily felt, deep, almost subconscious discomfort today in imagining the Maoists as a credible political force. This contrasts so much with the 1970s when thousands of middle class youth, out of some

impulse, joined the Naxalite movement. The influence of neo-Gandhian social movements in the post-Emergency phase perhaps partly explains this distance kept by the middle class urban left from the Maoist movement.

History of Resistance

Today when the country is promoting itself as a modern global democracy, with technocratic, security-centric, good governance replacing populist, messy ways of governing the masses, the combination of Maoists, who are literally the adivasis (“old, obsolete ideology”) of left politics, with the adivasi masses, seems to give rise to not just an “undemocratic” force but something almost primordial, pre-political in refusing to participate in national politics or enter into any symbolic politics of images, rhetoric, identity, “catchy slogans”, charismatic leader, and so on.

Almost reminding one of something like a non-hegemonic “particularism”, the Maoists seem to be playing neither the symbolic, hegemonic game nor really one of representation in any full-blown sense. They seem to be just there for good with the adivasis (how does one understand the fact that the Maoists have been silently “working” in the Jangalmahal or Dandakaranya areas for the last 20 or 30 years?). The symbolic, hegemonic, representative dimension is often missing; but even the supposed unmediated, revolutionary oneness between the Party and the masses is not fully played out since, presently, the Maoists do not really seem to be anywhere near to taking power, making history, and so on.

Thus in saying, as Balagopal does, that the Maoists are not able to make a mark on national policy, or hence, as some say, they are not even “the left”, and that they are only a military, armed force, what is unexplored is the dimension of immediacy

of their relationship with the masses, which is what keeps them away from “national politics” and its everyday rhetorical, symbolic banalities. It is perhaps this lack of movement arising from such immediacy that Prachanda hinted at when he once said that the Indian Maoists “do not have a strategic view of base areas”, that they do not know how to advance to the level of revolutionary power at the national level.¹⁴

India – with its well-developed middle class, a well-grown media, and populism of perhaps every kind – is a polity full of symbolic politics, hegemonic moves, high-decibel rhetoric, and so on. So here someone becomes a high-sounding, almost spiritual, saintly Mahatma and the other becomes an almost pedestrian, Shaheed-e-Azam who simply cannot measure up to the stature and grandeur of the Mahatma (the Father and the little rebellious child?). Bhagat Singh is heralded by the Maoists as also by those upholding the legacy of Naxalbari. But in that line-up (pantheon?) you also have Siddhu, Kanhu, Birsa Munda, who never had “a critique of Western modernity” but perhaps fought colonialism “better” than the critics. Now there are reports that the “Maoist-backed” People’s Committee against Police Atrocities in Lalgarh area recently started calling themselves Siddhu-Kanhu Gana Militia. No wonder then, it is said, when the Maoists are attacked, the adivasis think that it is an attack on them, on this their long history of resistance. Also little wonder, as B D Sharma once put it, the Maoists have more to learn from the adivasis how to fight than to teach them. There is here a long tradition of resistance, of a particular legacy which better remain outside of the “idea of India”, splitting it instead from its very core, refusing to be included in the most inclusive of democracies on offer. Is it in the Naxalite/Maoist movement

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that this long struggle reaches its own awareness and self-consciousness, its political moment?

NOTES

- 1 Careful not to lose democratic legitimacy in the course of the army operations against Naxalites in West Bengal in the 1970s, no (written) records were allowed. The man in charge to destroy the Naxalites, Lt General Jacob, head of the Eastern Command, reveals: "I then asked for orders in writing. Manekshaw replied that there could be nothing in writing, no publicity and no records were to be kept. Govind Narayan concurred" ("Hamlet and the Naxals", 18 June 2009, <http://sify.com/news/hamlet-and-the-naxals-news-defence-jgsnxMbjcdh.html>)
- 2 Recall Lenin's critique of Kautsky's upholding of universal suffrage and democracy in "The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky", 1918.
- 3 Such an argument is made by, among others, Santosh Rana. See his "The People's Uprising Destroyed by the Maoists", 23 August 2009, at www.kafila.org.
The recent list of demands put forward by the Maoists is such that there is no way the state can fulfil them without transforming itself into a revolutionary state, or effecting its own withering away!
- 4 Nilekani: "As we look at creating the next stage of transparent, effective governance in NREGA, we think the UID (Unique Identification) initiative is very, very closely aligned with that, because the goals are very similar" (20 August 2009, posted at http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/india-news/rahul-gandhi-attends-national-workshop-on-nrega_10023529.html).
- 5 Such an argument is made by, among others, Santosh Rana. See his "The People's Uprising Destroyed by the Maoists", 23 August 2009, at www.kafila.org.
- 6 Differentiating Maoists from other "terrorist groups", security experts therefore argue that the challenge for the state is to win over the masses from the Maoists who have a strong base. See for example B Raman, "Dealing with the Maoist Insurgency", *Global Geopolitics Net*, 28 October 2009.
- 7 K Balagopal, "Maoist Movement in Andhra Pradesh", *Economic & Political Weekly*, 22 July 2006.
- 8 You can of course be rich and radical, but you must not then side with the poor and radical. Isn't that the reason why Kobad Ghandy, apparently from a well-off family, was indulged in by the media, giving him massive coverage, and yet he was consigned behind bars?
- 9 Peter Linebaugh, "Jubilating, or How the Atlantic Working Class Used the Biblical Jubilee against Capitalism, With Some Success", *The New Enclosures*, posted at <http://www.midnightnotes.org/pdfnewenc12.pdf>.
- 10 The Maoist movement is not fighting for the government to fulfil its "demands", so that the problem can be solved. It is interesting how other left or civil society groups tend to substitute for this by throwing in their own demands almost on behalf of the adivasis or Maoists! These are mostly calls for withdrawal of big capital's mining and industrial projects, tribal rights over forests, ending Salwa Judum-type vigilante groups, and so on. Interestingly, the recent list of demands put forward by the Maoists is such that there is no way the state can fulfil them without, that is, transforming itself into a revolutionary state, or effecting its own withering away! See "Chidambaram Cannot Fool People with Drama of Talks at Gun-point", CPI(Maoist) Press Release, 30 October 2009.
- 11 This is the problem with demands of ML groups like that of Santosh Rana who want to fight for tribal autonomy and identity, with their demand for an autonomous council in Lalgarh region. These are demands that can be addressed by the state and hence, to that extent, potentially involves dilution of the level of political struggle existing today. Rana seems to be missing the point when he criticises the Maoists for not allowing identity demands to be taken up. Indeed, Kanu Sanyal went to the extent of calling the Lalgarh uprising an ethnic, identity-based uprising. There is an attempt to bring the movement into some kind of a negotiable plane vis-à-vis the state and the present democratic order. See Open Letters between the PCC CPI(ML) and CPI(Maoist), April-May 2009, posted at <http://sanhati.com/articles/1663/>.
- 12 Interview with K P S Gill, *Tehelka*, 24 October 2009.
- 13 K Balagopal, "Reflections on Violence and Non-violence in Political Movements in India", January 2009, posted at <http://www.sacw.net/article1169.html>.
- 14 Prachanda, "Red Flag Flying on the Roof of the World", Interview with Li Onesto, *Revolutionary Worker*, 20 February 2000, posted at www.rev.com.us/a/v21/1040-049/1043/interv.htm.