

JANGALMAHAL DEBATE-II

‘A Spark, Not A Praire Fire’

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THAT THE GOVERNMENTS, both central and provincial, consider the brutal killing of Koteswar Rao alias Kishenji a major success in the operation to crush the popular struggle in the Junglemahal, is apparent from the unabashed glee exhibited by the government spokespersons in their reaction to the incident. In fact, both the Central Home Minister as well as the chief minister of West Bengal expressed their satisfaction for the successful operation and boasted of delivering a mortal blow to the struggle in Junglemahal launched by CPI(Maoist), popularly known as Maoists. Naturally the fate of the struggle in Junglemahal in the post-Kishenji period has come up on the agenda of concerned quarters and is doing its rounds in the media. It has become a matter of public enquiry.

That Kishenji had been an important leader of the Party and his loss will be felt deeply in Junglemahal, cannot be denied. But, as pointed out by Plekhanov, the role of an individual, however important, can never be a decisive factor in determining the fate of any course of history. Only prevailing objective condition has a determining role. So long the objective condition demands, the struggle will remain relevant as it will go on representing the hopes and aspiration of the people.

It is a pity that awareness regarding the actual condition of Junglemahal is very poor in the rest of the country. Even urban intellectual friends whose sympathy lies with the people of Junglemahal and who often are vocal about the poverty and underdevelopment in the troubled zone, do not understand the depth and dimension of the misery of the people there. The real cause of the rebellion of the people can never be understood without proper understanding of the poverty of the people and its root cause, their exploitation and oppression, their deprivation and apprehension of losing their self-identity based on their culture and lifestyle because of continuous onslaught from outside.

Actually Junglemahal is the victim of the tyranny of the rich as well as of Nature. Blessing of nature in the form of fertility of land is almost absent here. The land is mostly composed of laterite soil. As one moves from the fertile land of the south Bengal to the western region of the state, the land becomes increasingly barren, hard and stony with low water-absorption capacity. It makes multiple crop production impossible. So, mono-crop production is the rule without any option of intensive cultivation round the year. Naturally the wage-level here is very low. The irrigation system is almost non-existent. Crores of rupees have been spent on the much talked-about Kangshabati river reservoir Project. Though its command area is quite large, the area under effective irrigation is small.

The people of Junglemahal traditionally depend on the wealth of the forest for survival. But the forest laws after independence have deprived them of their traditional forest rights. The situation has improved marginally after adoption of Joint Forest Management Bill. But the plunder of the forest wealth by the forest contractors persists through the unholy nexus of forest officials and contractors.

Joblessness is rampant in Junglemahal. Almost all the government jobs, including the teaching posts, are filled up by outsiders. Local people do not get any opportunity here. Though “Kurmali” is the local language, the medium of instruction in the schools is Bengali, which the local students are not comfortable with. Teachers, mostly outsiders, do not understand Kurmali. So, there is little communication between the teachers and the students. Social scenario is equally disturbing. High caste residents, though small in number, are vastly influential. Of the local population of Junglemahal, consisting of Jhargram subdivision of West Midnapur, a part of Bankura and a part of Purulia, 20% are Scheduled Tribes, 22% Scheduled Castes and almost 50% are Other Backward Class people, including Mahatos. Yet Junglemahal suffers from acute high caste domination.

The resentment of the people against this injustice done to them over the years is, no doubt, just. CPI(Maoist) took up these issues and worked diligently to earn the confidence of the people. They successfully mobilised the people, organised them to take to the path of revolt against the existing unjust system. It cannot be denied that the people of Junglemahal supported the Maoists wholeheartedly at that time and Maoists developed a strong mass base there.

In this backdrop, the present day development of the political scenario in Junglemahal is astonishing. That the Maoists at present are facing severe setback, is no secret. Maoists have lost their mass base and are actually on the run. The loss of Kishenji is a clear pointer to this disaster. One may wonder over the real reason for this debacle. Already leaders of the ruling parties have claimed credit for it. Others think that this disaster denotes the success of the operations of the joint forces deployed in Junglemahal. All these are over-simplification.

Real reason for this disaster lies with the Maoists. Maoists themselves are responsible for it. Deviations inherent in the political line pursued by the Maoists are the real reason. The correctness or incorrectness of the political line decides the fate of any struggle. What are the deviations? Long ago many including this writer have pointed out these deviations.

Firstly, over-dependence on modern weapons. Arms, no doubt, are necessary, but over-dependence on arms leads to non-reliance on the people. Long ago Mao pointed out that the revolutionary war is the war of the masses. Revolutionary war can only survive by unleashing the initiative, activity and creativity of the masses. Secondly, over-dependence on the forest terrain. The question of terrain is, no doubt, important, but its role is never determining. Thirdly, establishment of party hegemony by force over mass organisations. One can cite the case of People’s Committee Against Police Atrocities or PCAPA as an instance. PCAPA initially was a vibrant organisation consisting of different groups and parties opposed to police atrocities

where Maoists were the only armed group. Maoists later drove out all other parties. As a result, PCAPA became a rubber stamp organisation of the Maoists, but in the process PCAPA lost the effectiveness in mobilising the people. Experience shows that whenever revolutionary war degenerates into a war of the party supremacy instead of war of the masses, it becomes suicidal for the war as well as for the party. Fourthly, in the name of fighting revisionism, Maoists carried annihilation of lower-rank CPI(M) cadres and supporters, mostly poor tribal peasants. Fight against revisionism is a political struggle and not a military war. The culture of seeking military solution for any contradiction among people is self-defeating and suicidal. Fifthly, there was weakness in their approach to the class question. Maoists often ignored the class question, as it became evident from the class analysis of the victims of their execution. Most of them were poor people who had been branded, rightly or wrongly, as police informers or agents and executed according to the verdict of the kangaroo courts where Maoists played the role of prosecutor, judge and executioner.

But it is more evident in their selection of areas, which they would turn into their bases. In the late sixties and seventies, when this writer and his co-workers started organising peasants for armed struggle, Gopiballavpur, Debra in West Midnapur and adjoining Baharagora of Singhbhum district of erstwhile Bihar, now Jharkhand, were chosen as struggling zone because of sharp feudal contradictions in those areas. The hilly or forest areas of Belpahari or Lalgahar were consciously avoided. One should not forget that armed struggle to the communists is the product of the development of class struggle. It is evident that the forest or hilly terrain was more important to the Maoists as strategic areas than the question of class contradiction.

Thus the struggle that started with great promise degenerated into a series of startling military adventures of roving guerrilla bands. Many people wonder about the relationship of this struggle with the past Naxalite movement of the sixties. The present Maoist struggle is both continuation as well as vulgarisation of the past movement. It denotes not only deviation from Naxalbari, but also departure from it. In truth, time has come for the Maoists to reconsider their positions on two questions seriously. Firstly, the question of strategic boycott of elections. One cannot but note the fact that Maoists, while mouthing the slogan of boycott, have tried to use the assembly elections in Andhra by extending support to YSR in 2004 and recently in West Bengal to TMC. As a result their position on election has become opportunistic. Secondly and more importantly, comes the question of establishment of Red political power through the formation of base areas in Chinese style. Applicability of this theory in Indian condition needs reconsideration. Dealing on this issue, Mao in his article 'Can Red Power Exist in China' had laid down certain conditions, most of which are absent in Junglemahal. But more important is Mao's emphasis on the existence of historical circumstances in China that created the opportunities for the establishment of Red base areas. According to Mao, Red political power can exist in China because of the war among the ruling classes. Elsewhere, Mao had pointed out that whenever the wars among warlords would intensify, the base areas could be extended and vice versa.

In contrast, in Indian situation, there are contradictions and splits among the ruling classes, but there is no war among them. Therefore, the historical circumstances that led to the establishment of base areas are absent here. Of course, establishing base areas in hilly regions or forest areas is possible. It should be established and taken advantage of. But it cannot be the mainstream strategic goal. Commenting on the Chinese Revolution, Stalin had said, "In China, armed revolution is fighting against armed counter revolution. This is one of the peculiarities and one of the advantages of the Chinese Revolution." After all, this situation does not exist in India.

Now, that the TMC led by Mamata Banerjee is in power in West Bengal. Earlier, when she was not in power, Mamata demanded withdrawal of Joint Forces from Junglemahal, judicial probe of Azad's murder, political solution of the Maoist problem and release of political prisoners at the Lalgarh rally along with Swami Agnivesh and Medha Patkar. But, after coming to power, she made a volte-face. She asked for more para-military forces, maintained silence on the 'encounter deaths' and, instead of unconditional release of political prisoners, announced 'case-to-case review' of all cases pending against the political prisoners through a review committee formed by her government.

This is not at all surprising. As everyone knows, TMC is a party without any definite ideology or programme. The party always takes ad-hoc suitable positions on every issue. After all, expecting consistency from a party without any ideological-programmatic commitment is ridiculous. Those who forget it are condemned to be ridiculous jokers in the eyes of the people. It is a pity that concerned social activists from the civil society movement who took responsibility of the peace initiative on behalf of the government, ended up being puppets of the government. It is now evident that the peace initiative was untimely, premature and cosmetic. For buying peace, Mamata declared attractive packages for Junglemahal. But packages are not on the agenda of the Maoists—they are after political power. It is no hidden agenda—they have declared it openly. They cannot be blamed for it. After all, the question of political power is the central question of every political party. There are two paths of achieving it. One is the transfer of power through elections—the path taken by Mamata, while the other is seizure of political power through armed struggle—the path taken by the Maoists. And the two will never meet.

As it stands even temporary meeting is not possible. Earlier, both fighting CPI(M), Maoists were natural ally of Mamata—they stood side by side. After TMC came to power, earlier alliance became irrelevant—they stood face to face. Now, for the success of the peace initiative Mamata demanded total arms surrender from the Maoists, which was not acceptable to them. As for the Maoists, they demanded a safe sanctuary in West Bengal as well as unconditional release of their prisoners. This is not acceptable to Mamata. So, the strife will go on making it clearer everyday that a military solution of the problem is neither desirable nor possible.

If these points as well as the deviations mentioned earlier are taken care of and rectified, the Maoist struggle still has great potentiality. Otherwise, a single spark cannot make a prairie fire. A spark will remain a mere spark—splendid but impotent spark only. □□□