

**POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS:
THE CASE OF NAXALITE MOVEMENT IN AP**

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Human Rights activists have generally found political violence to be problematic. By political violence I mean here the violence of rebel movements. There is no theoretical difficulty in understanding the kind of political violence that stems from the attempts of oppressors to sustain their domination over the oppressed. The Human Rights movement finds it easy and unproblematic to condemn it. Nor is there much problem with intra-elite violence. The Human Rights movement has sometimes ignored it as a matter of no concern, or else analysed it and opposed it from the point of the harm it does to the life, livelihood or other interests of the poor and the oppressed.

There is no difficulty here because the two major concerns of the Human Rights movement are congruent here. The Human Rights movement is on the one hand concerned about the taking of life by acts of violence; on the other hand it is also concerned about political, social and economic deprivation and subjugation. In other words, the Human Rights movement is equally concerned about physical violence and structural violence, the violence inherent in the social structure. When physical violence is resorted to in the cause of the beneficiaries of structured violence in society, the two forms of violence are congruent with each other, and then there is little philosophical difficulty in expressing simultaneous opposition to both, whatever the practical difficulty of fighting them.

But when rebel movements take up physical violence in the cause of their rebellion, they indulge in physical violence in order to fight the structured violence of social iniquity or economic deprivation. Here the two concerns of the Human Rights movement are at variance with each

other. One form of violence is undertaken to purportedly get rid of another form of violence. Does the Human Rights movement defend the choice and implicitly sanction the taking of life? Or does it defend the right to life and lay itself open to the charge that it is implicitly defending or protecting structured iniquity?

This is a very difficult but very real dilemma. It is frequently sought to be by-passed either by claiming that all resort to violence in the fight against inequality and injustice can always be rejected; or that the violence undertaken by rebel movements is precisely such as - in quantity and in kind - is necessary and indeed essential if the injustice being fought is to be overcome. Neither claim is sustainable. Nonviolence is certainly desirable but not always practical as a policy of the struggle against injustice; but the violence of rebel movements is rarely as well balanced and exactly sufficient for its stated aim of establishment of justice as the movements claim it is. It frequently results in injury of a kind and quality that cannot be justified as essential or unavoidable for the cause of justice.

The solution to this dilemma does not lie in closing one's eyes to this infirmity of one's position or that. Nor, therefore, in choosing one infirm position or the other. But in maintaining a balanced position that will do as much justice as possible to the totality of the concerns of the Human Rights movement.

Of course, at this level of discussion one is not going into certain tricky philosophical questions. Can it ever be said - and if so in what sense - that the taking of a particular life is essential or necessary in the interests of justice? How is the taking of a life today justified by the justice that is to dawn tomorrow? Or how is the loss of one person's life justified by the relief it gives to a dozen other people? These are familiar moral questions, but I am not going into them here. I am abstracting from these questions to reduce the human rights dilemma to manageable proportions. That is to say, I am presuming that there can be a goal - such as social, economic and political justice for all - whose realisation is

an overriding aim of human activity, so much so that if it really requires the taking of the life of a person who is an obstruction to that goal, then the taking of that life is justified, if there is no other way (that is not prohibitively costly) of getting over the obstruction he causes. This is already conceding a lot. Yet, the dilemma remains, as explained above.

A reasonably - though not entirely - satisfactory way of resolving the dilemma is to simultaneously educate society about the need to mitigate and minimise the iniquitous conditions that call for, or appear to call for, violence as a necessary answer, and to caution those who resort to such violence about the necessity of maintaining congruence between the need and the response, in kind as well as in quantity. Whatever the philosophical dilemmas that still remain, this is a response that affords a reasonable answer to the dilemma, provided one believes in it honestly and emphasises both sides of the response equally.

The naxalite movement:

The naxalite movement provides a convenient illustration. And while considering it one discovers that there are other problems with political violence as well. The violence of the naxalite movement finds justification in argument at three levels. At the primary level, an oppressor who lords it over the poor must be dealt with violently if the poor are to breathe freely. There is considerable attraction to this notion, though difficulties creep in the moment one qualifies it by saying that it must be demonstrated fairly that a given individual is actually such a person and that there is no other way (that is not too costly) of handling his oppressive domination, before acting violently against him. But then comes the second level justification. The poor and the oppressed must establish their authority or power over society and social relations if oppression is to be put an end to once for all. This provides justification of acts of violence that go well beyond the killing of an individual oppressor. The third level is that the poor and the oppressed, through their party, must capture State power and rebuild society by means of that power. This carries the range of acts of violence sought to be justified even

farther.

As a matter of fact, only a small fraction of the acts of violence indulged in by the naxalites can be said to belong to the first level of violence. Most belong to the second and third. At these levels, it is quite difficult to assess the congruence of ends and means or the price paid and the result achieved (ignoring, as already indicated, the question whether the price paid by one can ever be justified by the result obtained by another).

But I have said there are other problems as well. Let us see a few of them.

The election of systematic violence by the naxalites has gone hand in hand with the State electing a response of systematic violence to the naxalite movement. (Which of the two is the cause and which the consequence is a question that need not detain us at this point). The latter may in principle be totally condemnable while the former only an object of criticism when it exceeds determinable limits, quantitative or qualitative. Yet it is an undeniable practical observation that the two copy a lot from each other because they set each other's terms. One end product is that on both sides it is the weak and the vulnerable that get injured. Over a period one begins to see that this systematic violence on both sides bleeds society, something which one can accept with equanimity only if one is able to abstract oneself from the society in which it is going on and set one's sights on the millenium that is to result from it. That is a tall order, especially for one whose idiom is that of human rights, which allows one little freedom to abstract oneself from present suffering.

Systematic and calculated violence begins with the enemy, but soon turns to the agents of the enemy within and among one's friends. That is why all strategies of systematic violence consume more of their own social base than the enemy. The naxalites social base consists of the ladles poor, the peasants, and the miners and factory labor, with the middle

class as a potential ally. Yet the majority - overwhelmingly - of the victims of naxalite violence belong precisely to these classes/groups.

Another problem with systematic violence used as a method of struggle is that it creates a gap between the leaders and the led that in turn enlarges the questions ever present in human affairs about the congruence between ends and means. `Popular militancy` is frequently glorified by observers, the more romantically the more distant the observer, but a close look shows that in the strict sense militancy is never 'popular' if that expression connotes majority participation therein, though on occasion it may be popular in the weaker sense that the majority is supportive of it. But in such situations there is no natural mechanism to ensure that the aims of the militants remain close to the needs and aspirations of the supporters. Frequently, the latter have to adjust to the former, leaving one with little basis for assessing how 'necessary' (and with reference to which standard) the acts of physical violence of the militants are. This question is all the more urgent because it is the supporters who willy nilly bear the brunt of the State's counter-attack, leaving an unanswered question hanging in the air about the correspondence between the benefits they have obtained from the militancy and the suffering they have undergone, and whether their general support is an adequate endorsement of the militancy and the suffering it has wrought upon them. The poor of Telangana have undoubtedly benefited a lot in social and economic terms from the militancy of the naxalite movement, but as it has gone ahead with its political agenda of a military struggle against the State, without regard to how many among its social support base endorse this fight, it is again they who have borne the brunt of the State's counter-attack, leaving unanswered the question whether the social and economic gains they have obtained cancel out this suffering, and if not then why they should put up with it.

A greater evil is the constant possibility (though one cannot call it a certainty) that systematic violence, from being a means to a noble end,

may reshape not only the ends but the agents as well in less than noble mould. Political ideology and ethical awareness can -and do - certainly counteract this trend, but not always with success. Weapons are usually described as 'ugly', perhaps with a prescience that their systematic use has a tendency to make us ugly.

These are general considerations relevant to all systematic use of violence by rebel movements. When the violence attaches itself to a political path that is mediated by establishment of political and social domination at each level, as in the case of communists in general and the naxalites in particular, it raises more questions for the human rights movement. A defining characteristic of the human rights movement is its attitude of suspicion towards all power and authority, whether political or social. It may be utopian to believe that human society will at any time be fully free of all power and authority. And moreover, the human rights movement has positively welcomed the use of the authority of the law for ameliorative purposes in the context of social and economic deprivation. Yet it cannot be gainsaid that a major and quite necessary concern of the human rights movement is to reduce the quantum of authority and power in society to the strictly necessary level, which includes the need of positive discrimination by the authority of law in favour of the disadvantaged, eliminate all arbitrariness of authority, and free society totally from oppressive forms of social, political and economic power.

Such a concern cannot be indifferent to the consequences that spring from a political strategy of 'liberation' through establishment of the authority and power of the 'right' agents, whether the rightness is defined in moral terms or 'scientific' terms. It cannot be content with the assumption that when power is exercised by the 'right' people, there can be no occasion for human rights concern. Most of us do not need to be told this about putative benevolent dictators, but we do not find it equally obvious about communist dictators, whether in power in the State or in power over local society preliminary to such ascendance. How can the Human Rights movement not look at how this power is being established,

with how much real backing and support it is being exercised, what norms it is following, how democratic the norms are, how accountable this power is to the people in whose name it is exercised, and so on? Can the fact that the purported final aim of the authority is total liberation of as human beings from all oppression render one blind to these questions?

Such questions usually give rise to the suspicious observation that their effect is to render political activity impossible. It need not be so. Indeed, the purpose of raising these questions is not to tie up political activity in impossible moral restraints but to ensure that there is as much congruence as possible between the stated aims and the results of the activism; that such activism is as truly reflective as possible of actual popular aspirations; that the activism does not destroy the positive heritage of past activism in its eagerness to rebuild the world; that supra-human Reason does not substitute itself for actual human agency in self-critical search of more humane modes of life; that in the end, in other words, we get something good out of it all with as little harm as possible.