

The Maoists movement in Andhra Pradesh – a Retrospect

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The Maoist movement is the focus of more than one paradox today. One of them is that on the one hand a lot of movements which would have unequivocally condemned it a decade ago for its violent methods are prepared to see if it has some thing to offer that they may learn, keeping the question of violence open. Extreme insensitivity of governance has wrought this change which ideological persuasion failed to achieve. But on the other hand, the Maoist movement is receding farther and farther from any meeting point with such movements, by relying more and more on violence, and more arbitrary forms of it. Violence in the interests of the people is as such no longer objected to by many activists in the era of neo-liberalism, which is universally seen as an instrument of visible and invisible violence of a high order, whose victims are the most vulnerable communities. But most would perhaps like to see the use of violent methods as an exceptional option whose unintended ill-effects do not outweigh their utility.

Andhra Pradesh offers a good case study of the compulsions that underlie the choice of violent methods of struggle, and the often unpleasant consequences of the choice. The Maoist movement owes its political character to the vicissitudes of its unfolding in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, perhaps Andhra Pradesh more than Bihar Today, it is at its lowest ebb ever in Andhra Pradesh, pushed to the corners of the forest hideouts of its armed squads, and into Orissa and Chattisgarh. Yet as said above it is probably much more in the thoughts of politically active persons than ever in the past. Whether that interest can help it break the shackles of repression is a question that no close observer can avoid posing.

Too frequently, the discussion of revolutionary violence proceeds from the theoretical formulation made by the naxalite movement, namely that given its characterisation of Indian society and its stage of development within the Marxist-Leninist paradigm of history, armed struggle is the only path to revolution. However, neither the Naxalbari uprising nor any of the violent struggles undertaken by the naxalites thereafter arose purely from this political belief. There was always a ground situation that made the choice a rational possibility, and therefore the theoretical belief persuasive. Dogmatists on either side of the violence-nonviolence debate rarely realise that the average human being is not dogmatic in the matter. Moral pragmatism in the matter of violence as such, coupled with abhorrence of any unnecessary or unjust use of it would about sum up the common person's attitude to violence, and whatever theoreticians may say, the political

activist in the field cannot be indifferent to it. When the very capacity for large-scale violence leads the activist to ignore this attitude, a gap develops which the activist will perform rue some day.

Coming to the course of the naxalite movement in Andhra Pradesh, the initial political dogmatism – usually blamed on Charu Mazumdar, though he was probably not the only one to be blamed for it – which branded all mass activity un-revolutionary, gave way to a realisation that even for violent overthrow of the State, there is need to undertake the organization of the people on their immediate social and economic demands, while educating them politically about the preferred long-term strategy of armed struggle. Soon after the lifting of the Internal Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi on 25 June 1975, there was a mass upsurge in Karimnagar district, followed soon in the other Godavari basin districts of Telangana. It was the poorest and socially lowest communities that were organized, on the issues of wages, land and social oppression that turned around caste and gender. The targets of the movement knew that the naxalites were behind the organisations of the poor that came up in village after village, and also that the naxalites believed in violence, but the struggle itself was by the unarmed poor, though of unprecedented determination and confidence. A few landlords of particularly vicious disposition were killed by the naxalite cadre but that was an act supplementary to the struggle of the people, not a substitute for the struggle. The organisational center of the struggle was the agricultural labourers union or Rytu Coolie Sangham, simply known as 'Sangham', and not the underground armed squad, known as the 'dalam'.

The naxalite movement, especially the party that is today known as CPI(Maoist), got its best cadre from this phase, many of whom grew into its most steadfast leaders. Mass activity gives a maturity to the cadre that no amount of radical heroics can and, equally importantly, it quickly weeds out the dubious ones. The patience and tolerance it teaches are invaluable assets in a leader. Mass struggles have another very important effect: their politics does not remain merely economics or the pursuit of power. It enters the realm of philosophical opinion and educates society about the radical values espoused by it. Andhra Pradesh has been a beneficiary of extensive communist including radical mass activity in this sense. Ideas born in political radicalism are the stuff of common social consciousness.

It is history that the State came down heavily on this phase of the naxalites movement, pointing to their violence as the justification. At that stage, however, the violence was no more than what the mainstream political parties themselves indulge in, except that it was not in individual or factional interest, but in the interest of the most downtrodden communities. That should have put it on a higher plane morally, but morality is the last thing that dictates Government policy, then or now. In reality, the fear was palpable in political society that the rural socio-economic structure, whose preservation intact is one

of the fundamental compromises that the Indian polity is based on, would be shattered irreparably by the naxalite movement.

The paradox is that this is what in the end did happen, inspite of all the repression the State indulged in, for upsetting social hierarchies is an idea as much as actual redistribution of property and position, and if the redistribution could be halted by force, the idea could not. It was unstoppable, and went ahead unstopped. It cannot be said too often that if the downtrodden no longer feel downtrodden in Telangana, the credit goes substantially to the naxalites. It is some times said by wise people that commercialisation of the rural economy would have had the same effect sooner or later, because commercialisation was ready to set in sooner or later, but that is no answer unless one is taken to be saying that no other force would have achieved the result the naxalite movement did. Secondly, while commercialisation may have put an end to some of the more obnoxious forms of social relations and aspects of social thought, it would not have engendered social consciousness of the type the naxalite movement succeeded in creating in the socially lowest classes.

It is a cliché that the 'might-have-been's of history are an idle pastime, and so it is better to note what the naxalites groups in fact did in response to the repression rather than formulate a putatively ideal response and work out the results in imagination. The party known for a long time as Peoples War decided on retaliation without in theory at any rate giving up mass struggles, and the other major party known by the name of Chandra Pulla Reddy decided on resistance based primarily on the people, while not giving up the notion of armed struggle and the organization appropriate to it. At the end, neither can be said to have succeeded, though it could conceivably be said about the Peoples War [now the CPI(Maoist)] that the opinion is premature. It is so, inasmuch as any statement of finality concerning a live organism is premature, but only in that sense. The stream known by the name of Chandra Pulla Reddy underwent many splits, and most of the splinters have been reduced to insignificance. And the one or two which remain cannot be said to have succeeded spectacularly in overcoming repression. Of course about this stream too it could conceivably be said that its demise is due to other reasons than the failure of its strategy of resistance.

The retaliation which started in the middle of 1985 resulted in a spiral which is yet to abate. Correspondingly, the 'dalam' replaced the 'Sangham' as the organisational focus of the struggle. It did not happen once for all but over a period. A study of any of the struggles would chart the change over time. To take one instance, the raids on shops of traders and granaries of landlords by the poor in times of food shortage is a form of forced redistribution of food in times of acute want. In the late 1980s there was a major

raid of that type by the tribals of the highlands of central Adilabad in which there was mass voluntary participation by the Gond tribe under the leadership of the Peoples War. It led to severe repression including the filing of dacoity charges under Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act by the police and long incarceration. Later too that party undertook such raids but soon it started taking the colour of looting by the dalams with a few people in tow. Often, people of the village where the raid takes place would be inert and anonymous outsiders would participate. Not only food but money and clothes too would be looted and in some cases the household goods destroyed wantonly.

In the place of struggles by the Sangham for higher wages, villages started seeing wages go up because 'posters have been put up by the Party'. Visitors started reporting the experience of asking labourers about the wage rate and being told that it had not been increased because 'they' were far off and would go up again once 'they' came back and put up posters. Settlement of disputes by the Party in the presence of and with the participation of the people gave way to decisions by the dalam in the presence of a few villagers. Those who may have disagreement stopped going to such 'Peoples Courts' so that the only audience at the adjudication would consist of the loyal few. None of this happened in one day, but over a period. Many years after the Adilabad famine raid, there was an equally genuine incident in Mahbubnagar district in which the Chenchu tribe participated in large numbers in a particularly bad year of drought. But a trend had set in by the beginning of the 1990s and no attempt was made by the then Peoples War to reverse it.

All this happened in the midst of heavy repression by the State agencies, and was justified in terms of the repression. Killing in 'encounters' by the police set new records each year. The number killed in a year crossed 200 for the first time in 1992, but after 1996 it was in a rare year that less than 200 were killed. In turn, the Peoples War killed in equal numbers, mostly 'informers' whose identification is wholly subjective and not capable of any kind of objective verification. In 1992 the Peoples War was banned and so were all its mass organisations: the student wing, youth wing, the Sangham, etc. Police torture became routine and vicious. The police armed themselves with more and more sophisticated weapons, till today, not even a constable on routine duty will be seen with anything less lethal than a self-loading rifle in most parts of Andhra Pradesh. The 'dalams' in turn acquired equally sophisticated weapons and became experts in operating mines of various types, not only on remote by-ways but on highways too. Police jeeps were blown up at will, until the police stopped using vehicles on any of the roads in the areas of naxalite activity. In any such incident, not only the one who is targeted but all others traveling with him would be killed. This has done a lot to anger and alienate the ordinary police constable, a class which would often express sneaking sympathy and respect for the naxalites in the early parts of the 1980s. Many activists of not only the naxalite parties

but of allied mass organizations too remember instances of those days when the constables would wait for the officer to leave and get down to a friendly talk with the activist in custody about the ills of the world. Blasting of police jeeps put a quick end to this.

All this had the effect of making the battle with the State the central activity. And the 'Sangham' was replaced by the 'dalam' and the secret party committee of the village as the focus of organizational activity. As it was in this period that the Peoples War spread to the other parts of the State (excepting the Scheduled areas of East Godavari and Visakhapatnam districts, and Anantapur district of Rayalaseema), in those parts their movement began in this form, which has had a perceptible ill-effect on the political sense, maturity and durability of the cadre that party has found in those areas.

There are many vantage points from which excessive reliance on violence may be criticised. That it displaces the agency of the people and makes the revolutionary the agent of change is a central political critique. The human rights critique is to some extent parallel to this but not identical with it. Generalised violence draws a shroud of silence over events. It has the effect of shutting out critical thought and the faculty of assertiveness, which is fatal to the well being of human rights. Initiative rests with those who hold the guns, on whichever side they may be. Rebels who employ violence systematically often attribute their decisions to 'the people', but the people in truth have little say in the matter. They become spectators of the political process, which is a denial an essential democratic right. Those who agree with the rebels may well be content, and to the extent that the majority agree with them the contentment may appear universal, but contentment is no substitute for democracy, a fact that comes alive the day the agreement ceases.

Secondly, generalized violence deadens sensitivity and increases insecurity in society. The effect insurgencies have on children who live through them has often been commented on. But the effect is not on children alone. It is a paradox that radical movements begin in response to pain and suffering, but the spiral of violence and counter-violence that accompanies radical movements and the State's repressive response to it can and does engender considerable insensitivity in society. Insensitivity, insecurity and fear. And this complex of moods is an enemy of human rights. Repressive laws and extra-legal measures adopted by States rest their defence on images of brutal violence which conjure feelings of insecurity and fear. Nobody then looks at what exactly the repressive laws say and the repressive practices mean. This helps the law spread a wide net that catches much more than the images would demand. And arbitrary acts of radical violence too has its way easily in the climate of deadening fear.

Even the judiciary is not immune to the temptation to play on these insecurities. A Full bench of the Andhra Pradesh High Court recently rendered a judgement on 'encounters', in which it is almost said that those who do not mind infringing the right to life of others for their own goals cannot ask for protection of their right to life against agencies of the State. In less violent times the proposition would have met with immediate disavowal but in the climate of fear and insecurity created by frequent acts of arbitrary violence in the battle between the State and radicals of various kinds, there is considerable sympathy for the proposition, which would in effect mean that a 'terrorist' or 'extremist' can be straight away shot dead by the police because he himself does not hesitate to take life in the pursuit of his aims.

Thirdly, strategies of violence can never be as careful in the use of the strategy as they may wish to be. They begin by targeting only the enemies of the cause they espouse, but frequently they fall prey to the logic of terror, that it is not eliminating individual 'bad guys' but creating a climate of fear in which enemies dare not function that effectively establishes the dominion of the radicals. Preventive violence in which you claim a right to retaliate even before an enemy is fully formed is not the brain-child of George Bush. It is an assumption common to strategies of violence of all kinds.

It is one of the remarkable facts about Andhra Pradesh that the fact that radical politics is part of common social consciousness has inhibited the easy proclamation of arbitrariness as a justifiable form of revolution. For a long time the Maoists used to apologise for arbitrary use of guns. It is in recent times, after their spread into Chattisgarh and Jharkhand where the penetration of radical ideas in society's common sense is less extensive, that a cavalier attitude towards trigger-happy conduct has become possible. Now one finds that the Maoists no longer apologise for arbitrary acts of violence. The analysis they put out on the net these days follows a tested strategy. Come down heavily on State repression by setting out instance after brutal instance of it, and then sign off with a hint that in these circumstances it is muddle-headed to ask revolutionaries to be principled in the use of violence.

The need to safeguard and secure the lives of revolutionary fighters puts a premium on suspicion as a political strategy, which is in contrast to openness as the strategy of democratic mobilization. Informers, moles and covert operatives are identified and killed ruthlessly but there is often nothing more than mere suspicion against them. Since only the poor have information about a poor people's movement, it is the poor who get killed in large numbers in the process. Each such killing leaves a very uncomfortable question mark as to the basis of the suspicion.

Yet, as said above, the total insensitivity of the State to popular opinions and aspirations is impelling many who were hitherto altogether against violence to consider the

possibility that there may be some thing to what the Maoists have been saying. However, if this is to be the straw that will help the Maoists pull themselves up, they need to pay back the compliment by incorporating common human scruples into their understanding of violence: that it may be useful or even unavoidable, but it should never set the terms of political activity. And its invariably destructive impact on democratic processes and practices must set the limits of its use.