

Between Left And Right

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It is hard to decide which is more unappetising--the spectacle of Buddhadeb Bhattacharya declaring that the CPI(M) had paid protestors back in their own coin at Nandigram, or the BJP and Congress condemning the violence there, ignoring their own culpability for similar behaviour in Chhattisgarh and Gujarat. The use of vigilante groups or armed cadre, supported and sanctioned by a pliant bureaucracy, to *physically* defeat an opposing group--whether defined in religious or political terms--rather than relying on legal means and political discussions, is evidently the latest fashion in governance. It is time, we are told, to forget the old expectation that it is the police which is meant to maintain law and order and not gangs of party members, or that Chief Ministers will rise above their individual parties to represent the people of the state as a whole (the logic behind the first-past-the-post system where the elected member equally represents those who voted against her or him), or even that, there is a Constitution which all elected officials are sworn to uphold.

Let us take the bare facts of Nandigram, as scripted by the Chief Minister of West Bengal himself--villagers protesting against land acquisition formed the Bhumi Ucched Pratirodh Committee (BUPC) and drove out supporters of the CPI(M) who were in favour of the proposed chemical hub. In November 2007, these CPI(M) cadre 'reclaimed' their villages, and this time, it is the BUPC members who were driven out, their houses burnt and women raped. In essence, this is not very different from the Salwa Judum being run jointly by the Congress MLA of Dantewara, Mahendra Karma, and the BJP government of Chhattisgarh, where armed vigilantes, some of them given official positions as special police officers, burn villages, kill people, and rape women with impunity, on the grounds that they are wresting these areas back from the Naxalites. In both cases, the local administration has ceased to exercise its own judgement--officials take orders from the goons of the party in power. In Dantewada district, a letter from the Chief Secretary carries less weight than the orders of a lumpen Salwa Judum camp leader.

In both cases, the presence of Maoists is used to imply that anything goes, that once an area is declared 'Naxal-affected', all the normal protections of the rule of law and fundamental rights cease to apply. Government presence in these areas then depends solely on the power of the gun, and the relative superiority of its police and vigilantes over the 'other side', including unarmed civilians.

Yet, the differences between Nandigram and Dantewada are as striking as the similarities, and they lie not in the hubris of the ruling party, which is much the same, but in the responses of the media and civil society. Even though the scale of Salwa Judum terror is far greater than Nandigram, it has gone almost entirely unreported.

According to the figures provided in a PIL before the Supreme Court, at least 540 persons have been killed by the Salwa Judum and security forces from June 2005 till the present, including 33 children (some as young as two and five), and 45 women. This is a small

fraction of the killings by the Salwa Judum, most of which have gone unrecorded, and does not include the approximately 550 civilians and police personnel that the Naxalites have killed in escalating retaliatory action for Salwa Judum. At least 2,825 houses have been burnt by the Salwa Judum and at least 99 women have been raped. Approximately one lakh people, or one-eighth of the district's population has been displaced--half of them are in government controlled camps to which they were forcibly evacuated, and the other half are refugees in neighbouring states.

A petition--one of hundreds--submitted along with the PIL, after describing the killing and torture inflicted by Salwa Judum, asks despairingly, "Why is this happening in our country, why is this happening in Chhattisgarh? Why has the Chhattisgarh administration been running this? Has our Chief Minister been elected only for this?" And yet, not once have the atrocities committed by the Salwa Judum figured on the front pages of any national newspaper; not once has any team of parliamentarians gone to talk to the affected people; and not once have NHRC members visited.

When two lakh people rallied in Jagdalpur on November 5th this year to protest against the Salwa Judum and land acquisition by the Tatas and Essar for steel plants, there was not even a whisper in the national press; it is hard to imagine that a rally of even 10,000 would have gone unreported had it been in favour of Salwa Judum or industrial acquisition.

In part, this silence is explained by the natural anti-leftism of the media, and its warped notion of 'balance'. As Michael Tomasky pointed out in the American context, but which could as well apply to the Indian media when dealing with the BJP: 'they now bend over backward to demonstrate that they can be 'tough' on liberals and 'fair' to conservatives'. But the media is not everything.

The difference also needs to be further explained in terms of the lack of the appropriate kind of organisations to feed the media. Nandigram and the Gujarat genocide of 2002 both became front page news, in part because they were located next to major cities with concentrations of journalists (Ahmedabad and Calcutta), in part because of the presence of middle class local activists, in part because the issue was taken up by opposing parliamentary parties. Chhattisgarh, by contrast, lacks a tribal middle class or a density of civil/political society organisations; many national newspapers do not have correspondents there since it is a new state; in an unprecedented show of unity, both the Congress and the BJP are jointly prosecuting the counterinsurgency.

Above all, Chhattisgarh, unlike Bengal, also has a Public Security Act, which is even worse than POTA in terms of its censorship, and which has been used to arrest and intimidate people who have protested, like the General Secretary of the PUCL, Binayak Sen.

But, finally, the real difference lies in the principles of the Left and Right, between a state ruled for many years by the Left as in Bengal and one ruled by the BJP as in Gujarat. Whereas the citizens of Gujarat let no hint of remorse taint their restful nights, even after

having witnessed the murder and maiming of their fellow citizens, the people of Bengal are an anguished lot, anguished at the betrayal of the principles they voted for.

Decades of CPI (M) rule may not have done much for Bengal's human development indicators but it has expanded the constituency of those who believe in democracy and equality; it has entrenched a conscience in its supporters. The strongest critics of the CPI (M) come from within. Decades of BJP rule, on the other hand, may have created Gujarat Shining, but has destroyed the very possibility of humanity. As for Chhattisgarh, let us all go back to pretending that it doesn't exist; at the rate that villages are being emptied and people killed, there will soon be nothing and nobody left to destroy.

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