

## **The specter of Kishenji, 'Peace-Talks' and Us**

### **Anubhav Sengupta**

Too tempted one might be to write on Kishenji, the Maoist leader and his gruesome death in the Lalgah Jungle as yet another instance of the Indian state being fascist and repressive. One might also be interested (as done by Saroj Giri, Trevor Selvam) to commemorate his martyrdom as a true revolutionary and make assessment of his political career within the authentic praxis of revolution. One will be tempted precisely because even after two weeks or more our heart is heavy, eyes are burning in helpless rage and we are feeling little empty with that glorious smile (one photo in media captures that everlasting smile, thankfully forever) lost with blown away, mutilated jaws of Kishenji. As one of my school friend who is a CPI(M) cadre also recognises — whether we say it loud or not, we knew— that man, contrary to our charismatic mainstream politicians, sacrificed thirty-six years of his life in underground for a dream of revolution never asking anything back in return but similar conviction from his comrades. Those who think he is blood-thirsty, gun-totting demon can think so; how does it matter they might just very well think George Bush is the liberator of the world.

One, however, sooner or later must try to overcome these impulses and sit down to think little concretely about one or two issues about 'politics' after Kishenji's death. As his life, Kishenji's death must also be understood as a political moment. He hinted something immensely crucial with his dying words — with a killing of a revolutionary the state just manages to kill a man. So when people like Kishenji die, a trusted soldier of the people dies indeed; but his politics descends into his death as well. There is always something excess in a revolution and in a revolutionary that the state cannot kill, omit and clean up in successful operation. It comes back to haunt us.

Kishenji's death is going to haunt us in its repeated questioning of 'peace' and 'non-violence' as one among many questions. This is exactly the authentic political aspect of Kishenji's death. It has robbed us off of our excess of toleration, non-violence and peace in which we have been too happy and settled. The catastrophic aspect of life which we were well aware of, but, too reluctant to see, is now inescapable as Kishenji came overground for the first and the last time in thirty-six years .

One may remember in Delhi's civil society and democratic rights activists circle, a debate was raging two years back with the commencement of

Operation Greenhunt. It was accepted that the state's covert war on its own people must be opposed. However, one section wanted Maoists to abjure violence like the state and come for talks. The other section tried showing reason to them that Maoist violence must be understood in its historicity and its context. One cannot see both, the state's and Maoists' violence, on the same plane. Few, like Radha D'Souza explained that how structural violence operates within the economy of the system and tried arguing that how such plea to non-violence is prone to fit into the ruling classes' agenda of limiting the violence within a profit-level as monopoly of themselves. It's not that the other section was too naïve to see these glaring figures. In fact a few of them, as activists, have disclosed staggering figures of such structural violence. However, again there was one more clinching logic to cite. The end does not justify the means. A metaphysical proposition, no matter how absurd it might be in a political-strategic question, has always its moral, ethical appeal to middle-class, intelligentsia and civil society from the time of Gandhis and Ambedakrs. Not to say that Gandhi or Ambedkar were wrong in their time, but, we perhaps better ask ourselves are we right in parroting the same today? Even after the death of Kishenji within a period of a peace-talk?

Amit Bhaduri wrote about the magic real character of the so-called encounter of the Maoists spokesperson, Azad, who was once again killed while facilitating a peace-talk and cease-fire agreement with the Centre. Now, it is for everybody to see how such magic realism in this part of the world is scripted. It is once again in the process of starting peace talk that Kishenji was killed in another fake encounter. Remember, both cases now are widely accepted as fake encounters. These were not only instances of the state-sponsored direct violence on the political dissenters. In Andhra Pradesh during 2004-2005, during another peace talk, the state massacred Maoists. Perhaps it's time we get our facts right and shout back to the media as liar. The media, in the eve of any peace talk process, has trumpeted the apprehension that it is yet another strategy of the Maoists to consolidate themselves. However, as is the case, in each and every instance, it is the state who proactively seized opportunity of seize-fire and wreaked havoc on the Maoists. It is precisely our democratic state which has consolidated their 'war of position' in the period of ceasefire and then fired back with all venom characteristic of fascist revenge. Sujato Bhadra, no Maoists sympathiser and a democratic rights activist heading the peace committee, ironically, seemed to be quoting another civil rights activist and yet again no-sympathiser of Maoists, K Balagopal (see Balagopal, K 2005, "Have We Heard the Last of

the Peace Talks?”, EPW) when the former gave a statement saying that how Maoists observed almost two weeks of ceasefire while the state kept on pursuing the guerilla fighters and harassing, torturing villagers in violent combing operation in Junglemahal. He single handedly blamed the state for not being serious about the peace talks.

Yes, of course, the state was never serious. They have never been. If they are, then just after the killing of Kishenji, Chidambaram cannot demand that possibility of peace talk will emerge only when Maoists surrender their guns ( it sounded ridiculous even to my 80-year-old grandmother, who with morning newspaper kept on wondering could Maoists be so stupid at all?). Or Mamata who had gone all the way to Delhi to demand a probe into Azad’s killing, however, could brush aside a probe on the face of glaring evidences in Kishenji’s murder as if she is declaring ‘chutti’ on ‘Kabiguru Rabindranath Tagore’s birthday’. It is a beautiful script. It works great as election propaganda. It worked for YS Rajasekhara Reddy, worked for Chidambaram facing criticism for launching war on the people, worked marvelously for Mamata who proposed peace talks with Maoists if she were to come to power. It shows them as credible politicians, pro-people, especially of ‘Ma-Mati-Manus’ (Mother-Earth-Human Beings— Mamata’s almost cult election slogan now in West Bengal). However, then there is a twist in the script as like in all Bollywood movies. The hero (or heroine, for that matter) comes, fights the goons one after another and then police, para military, CoBRAS, Greyhounds arrive in the last scene to carry their ‘clean and successful operation’.

Sympathies with Sujato Bhadra, but time has come to wonder where from force, rape, torture, mine, bullets, AK 47 come in the climax when our hero or heroine promise to fight the goon democratically and ethically. Mamata fought CPI(M) through election. She declared Maoists to be her comrades and pleaded them to come to peace talks. Somehow, it was materialising with the active assistance of Maoists as per the claim of Sujato Bhadra. Then from where did the not-so-democratic state and Mamata-in-new-avatar emerge suddenly with guns and bullets and that too precisely at the time of her own proposed peace talks? Things seem all too paradoxical at this juncture—‘Ma-mati-manus Mamata’ facing ‘Mamata with guns and goons’ (Bhairav Bahini). Or frankly to evoke Shakespeare, there is something rotten in West Bengal and actually everywhere.

Peace, as an end, we all love. Talk, we all prefer because it is defined as democratic. It is the means of dialogue, penchant of liberal enlightened human beings like us. 'The 'rogue' Maoists hiding in jungles just like goondas in locality do not see that civilised side of our existence. They don't understand that peace as an end cannot save everything. If we are violently trying to bring peace back, peace will always be elusive. It will always be subverted in the very beginning.' All very good! But what about the peace talks? Have we, the enlightened, ever bothered to think twice? After Kishenji's death, his broken jaw perhaps screamed out to us that there is no talk. The state does not believe in talk. Rather what they do is another trick of 'metaphysics'. They put democratic dialogue and peace side-by-side in 'peace talk' and subvert both. What we, the enlightened, never understood is that metaphysical doctrine can be ideal but must be put in real material concrete political test, our politicians understood right from the beginning. They took peace, the metaphysical entity; put into political context of the democratic dialogue i.e. talk; made it a strategic and tactical means i.e. peace talk and achieved their end — that of violently crushing political opponent ideologically and physically. In the hands of the system, the much-beloved 'peace' has been stripped off all virtues as an ideal end of a society; and it has turned into a mere means of bone-chilling strategising and calculations. If anything has gone 'rogue', it is our 'peaceful' democracy – a Frankenstein, grown over and beyond of our liberal dream. Hey Gandhi!

While petals of blood dropped from Kishenji's body dry up in the soil of the Junglemahal, we better recover our dead senses. We must understand that peace has been turned around into a powerful means to attain violent ends. Peace not only serves ideological function of structural violence; it has also become means to perpetrate physical violence and repression (what Zizek calls subjective violence as opposed to systemic (structural) violence) and, thereby, giving self-propelling justification within an empty rhetoric called 'talk'.

We may not have to agree with the Maoists' violent overthrow of the system to bring peace with justice; but can we rely on 'peace talks' anymore also? What alternative do we have? As the specter of Kishenji guides the people in jungles, through rivers, above mountains, we better think fast or accept our fate of being abandoned in our haunted enlightenment.

**[The writer is a research scholar in JNU, New Delhi]**