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The Ambiguities of Political Violence

Introduction

Revolutionary violence, it has been suggested in the previous section, can be *prima facie* defended in a very specific set of circumstances, the overlap between three avatars of injustices – social discrimination, extreme deprivation and lack of voice. Let me as a prelude to the argument below reiterate briefly the distinguishing feature of revolutionary violence. This avatar of violence is distinguished by, at least, three features. First, the proponents of revolutionary violence believe that in deeply unequal societies such as India, the grip of threefold injustice upon the lives of people is intractable and can be broken only through acts that involve coercion. Second, revolutionaries renounce political obligation to the state, but they do not renege on moral obligation to the rest of the citizens. They seek to replace a state that has displayed remarkable and a somewhat stunning incapacity to provide justice to its citizens, with one that will be responsive to precisely those people who have been abandoned on the sidewalks or consigned to the ditches of the pathway treaded by history. Third, revolutionary violence in the form of guerrilla war is less about the use of instruments of force and destruction and more about the political mobilisation of, in particular, the constituency on whose behalf the group has picked up arms and, in general, society.

The last is a necessary precondition for guerrilla war. Strategically, armed guerrillas fighting an unconventional war have to rely on the support of constituencies to provide assured sanctuaries, information and sustenance. Politically, people within and without the

constituency should be convinced of the need for and of the rightness of the cause. It is only then that they can, metaphorically, stand up and speak back to a history not of their making. The objective of revolutionary violence is to transform the politics of voicelessness into the politics of voice. For those of us who prefer politics in the progressive mode, revolutionary violence proves a far better bet for the recovery of agency through the repossession of voice than other forms of politics.

Grey areas in revolutionary politics

Even so a great deal of ambiguity proscribes clear and unconditional endorsement of this particular mode of politics. We simply cannot turn a blind eye to the multiple pitfalls that disfigure the preferred route to political Utopia in the imaginaries of the revolutionaries. Etched starkly onto the political horizon, in blazing alphabets of mayhem and gore, are the costs of violence unleashed by the state, as well as by our revolutionaries. So many lives lost, so many innocent people killed, so much arson, so much destruction of public property, so much turmoil and so much insecurity. The condition of people living in regions of India that the Maoists have made their base is nothing short of the Hobbesian state of nature – ‘nasty, brutish and short’.

Apart from carrying out indiscriminate killing of persons targeted as police informers, moneylenders and forest officials, the Maoists have been deeply compromised, charged as they are with extortion, and accused as they are of terrorizing local populations, of demanding shelter and succour at gun point, of destroying school buildings, railways, health facilities and government establishments and of creating an atmosphere of rank dread. Children between the age of 6 and 12 years are, reportedly, recruited for combat operations, indoctrinated ideologically, used as informers, trained to fight with sticks and other weapons and employed to loot armouries and purchase explosives. Viewed from this vantage point, the appeal of an ideology and strategy

of a revolutionary political agenda appears greatly reduced. The glitches in using violence in often irresponsible and disproportionate ways appear starkly visible and much less defensible.

Let us frontally confront the paradox of revolutionary violence. As responsible citizens of the Republic of India, we recognize the sheer stubbornness of particularly vicious forms of injustice. *Prima facie*, there seems to be no way out of this spiral of injustice, suffering and state-sponsored violence, except revolutionary violence. As persons capable of making informed political judgements, we might also accept that revolutionary violence is far preferable to other forms of 'violence as protest' simply because the avatar acknowledges moral responsibility not only to one creed, region or language, but to the impoverished and vulnerable people. Contrasted with other users of political violence bent on extracting concessions from the state for their group and their group alone, revolutionary violence aims to not only redress institutionalized injustice, but also to fundamentally transform state and society so that all people can live and work in a context free of everyday humiliation and vulnerability.

The paradox is that this mode of politics need not always add up to political wisdom or marked by prudence. It is bad politics to wave away losses of human lives, and destruction of habitations as collateral damage, and focus on the goal instead. It is also completely unethical. For we cannot, ever, be confident that the objective for which the guerrillas have picked up arms will ever be attained. None of us, not even a prescient and exceptionally gifted fortune-teller, can predict with certainty that the route of violence *will* lead to the desired goal and nowhere else. Despatches from history tell us that contingency and fortune is the name of the game.

Evaluating revolutionary violence

I am, note, not bringing into the argument the consideration that violence is a moral bad. Certainly, violence is a moral bad, but

multiple injustices under which some of our own people quake are also a moral bad. The issue is different. Even if we justify revolutionary violence with reference to the immediate context as has been done in the previous section of the essay, this cannot be the end of the story. We cannot exempt revolutionary violence from political judgements on the basis of the here and now and ignore the wider dimensions of the issue. As a form of politics, revolutionary violence impacts our collective existence. Our collective lives are shaped by the political context we live and work in, in association with others, and our choices are enabled or circumscribed by this context. We cannot possibly be indifferent to acts of the state as well as of non-state actors that impress this context with their brand of politics.

Moreover, as members of a political community, we hold obligations to our fellow citizens. If they have come to harm, we need to engage with the state that has seriously lapsed on its responsibility to citizens. But, at the same time, we also need to engage with the revolutionaries who pick up the gun on behalf of the vulnerable and the deprived. There is need to politically evaluate the efficacy of revolutionary violence as a means of achieving given objectives.

In any case, are political theorists not bound to adjudicate this avatar of politics much in the way we evaluate other forms of politics from collective action, to political parties, to the high politics of the state? Why not? Political practices, especially those that carry great costs, cannot be their own defendant, judge and jury. They have to be judged on some criterion because they impact our collective lives deeply. Concerned observers and analysts have to be Janus-faced, with one face turned towards the state and its policies and the other towards political practices in society. But, then, we must be reasonably sure of how to evaluate practices in the violent mode or violence in the revolutionary mode.

On balance, we can and do evaluate politics and political practices from different vantage points, the ends a specific practice espouses, its tactics, its conventions and its procedures of mobilization. If as democrats we are committed to equality, we should be assessing

political practices by reference to the following question. Does a particular mode of politics enable vulnerable people to 'stand up', speak back to a history that is not of their making and thereby acquire agency? It is vitally important that politics in the transformative mode should aspire to a society in which people, particularly the most disadvantaged, are actors or agents in their own right, and that they can participate in the multiple transactions of society from a position of confidence. In a society stamped by inequality, oppression and injustice, democratic politics is about facilitating and catalysing the transition from subject to agent.

The proviso is that leaders or aspirant leaders can be, in the political battlefield, only catalysers and facilitators. They cannot force people to believe 'this' rather than 'that'. Ultimately, it is the people who decide and realize agency because they make choices. A passionate desire to transform society and rid it of all warts and flaws may well throw up the option of revolutionary violence. This cannot be ruled out. What is important is that people must have political choices. They must know what they pick up arms for, why they should support the objective of this form of politics and what the problems of revolutionary violence are. They should be able to speak back to society, but they should also be able to speak back to the sort of politics that enables this sort of power.

Accordingly, when we as democrats set out to evaluate political practices whether of collective action or of revolution, we ask whether a particular sort of politics has allowed individuals and groups to exercise or to recover agency. Politics is not judged only by the goals it defends as its rationale and chief legitimacy claim because we may never reach there, but on the basis of what political practices do for ordinary people, and what they do not do for them.

Therefore, I suggest that instead of resorting to empty and sanctimonious arguments on the immorality of violence we should proceed to investigate revolutionary violence from its own parameters, its principles and its conventions, and not from a moral standpoint outside the practices of violence. This will enable us to judge whether

the main presupposition of revolutionary violence; that of giving the marginalized agency, are borne out by strategies of revolutionary war.

Reclaiming selfhood I

In deeply hierarchical and unjust societies, does revolutionary politics as praxis enable people who are triply disadvantaged to recover agency and make their own histories. Of course, the history ordinary people make might not be the history they wanted to make in the first instance, or they might make these histories badly. But that is not the main issue, the issue is whether people have claimed voice. Have people, who for decades have laboured under the multiple burdens that our unjust history has placed on their shoulders, recovered agency through political practices? Do they need to resort to violence to do so or support those who wield AK47s?

Take the case of India. Sumanta Bannerjee, who styles himself a one-time Maoist, suggests that the objective of the earlier Naxalite movement was not only to assure access to basic material goods, but also to secure justice and equal treatment for the landless labourer and the tribal. The Naxalites, he suggests, gave back dignity to the downtrodden peasantry, which had been socially discriminated against and exploited for centuries. In a world where the upper-class landlords treated the 'doubly disadvantaged' as untouchables, denied them civic rights and had no compunction in abducting and raping their women, Naxalite politics inspired precisely these people to assert themselves as equal human beings. Revolutionary violence enabled them to resist humiliating codes of conduct imposed by the upper castes. He cites the voice of an old Bauri (depressed class) peasant in a village in Burdwan district who said in 1969 that Naxalbari had authorized him to walk with his head held high. He no longer had to make way for the upper castes when they crossed his path.¹

In a similar vein, George Kunnath, who has carried out considerable fieldwork in Bihar, seems to suggest that violence, involving very often

the killing of notorious landlords and moneylenders, occupation and redistribution of land, imposition of fines and summary executions, might well be necessary precondition of the recovery of self-respect.²

In the mid twentieth century Frantz Fanon, the author of the celebrated work 'The Wretched of the Earth' had made much the same argument.³ Born in the Caribbean, in the French colony of Martinique in 1925, Fanon was greatly influenced by his celebrated teacher Aime Cesaire. Cesaire's volume of essays, *Discourse on Colonialism*, had quickly attained the status of a classic, and he became famous as the founder of the intellectual and ideological movement *Negritude* that celebrated blackness. At a very young age, Fanon was exposed to the savage racism of the French army stationed in the island. At the age of 18, he left Martinique and fought with the Free French Forces in the Second World War. After the end of the war, he stayed on in France to study medicine and psychiatry in Lyons. The intellectual atmosphere in France in that period was shaped by the existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, by Hegel and by Marx. These intellectual streams of thought deeply impacted Fanon.

In 1952, Fanon took up the position of chief of staff for the psychiatric ward of Bida-Jonville hospital in Algeria. In 1954, the series of attacks launched against military and civilian targets by the Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN) heralded the Algerian war of independence. Within a period of four years, Fanon deeply critical of French policy towards Algeria resigned from his job and dedicated himself to the cause of the FLN. Algeria was liberated from French rule in July 1962, seven months after Fanon's death from leukaemia. His *Wretched of the Earth* was published posthumously. Till today, it is seen as a classic that dwells not only on the production and reproduction of violence under colonialism, but also on the violence of the post-colonial elite and resultant loss of hope.

In this much acclaimed work, Fanon brings out in fine detail the subtleties and the power of violence, as well as its waywardness. He wrote elegantly and powerfully of the crippling effects of settler

colonialism on the collective psyche of the colonized. The reach of violence, he theorized, is widespread, timeless and enduring. Footprints of the cloven hoof of violence are practically ineradicable. It is perhaps not surprising that the post-colonial elite cannot, but, be cast in the mould of the same violence it had led the struggle against. The colours of violence do not wash out quite so easily.

But violence, theorizes Fanon, is double edged, both lethal and liberating at the same time. The violence of settler colonialism hammers the colonized into submission. Logically, the only way 'natives' can speak back to a history that has enslaved their minds and bodies is to use the weapon of the colonizer against him. This may even be advantageous because violence enables the 'native' to shrug off the crippling inferiority complex produced by colonialism. Violence rescues natives from inertia, restores their self-respect and enables men to recover 'manhood' translated as agency. 'At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect. Even if the armed struggle has been symbolic, and the nation is demobilised through a rapid movement of decolonisation, the people have the time to see that the liberation has been the business of each and all and that the leader has no special merit.'⁴ The form of violence adopted by the colonized is reactive but nevertheless beneficial. Violence develops consciousness of a common cause, of a national destiny and of a collective history.⁵

The theme of violence as liberation was highlighted in the preface to the *Wretched of the Earth* written by Jean Paul Sartre. 'When the peasants lay hands on a gun, the old myths fade, and one by one the taboos are overturned; a fighter's weapon is his humanity. For in the first phase of the revolt killing is a necessity; killing a European is killing two birds with one stone, eliminating in one go, oppressor and the oppressed; leaving one man dead and the other man free, for the first time the survivor feels a national soil under his feet.'⁶ Fanon too is clear about the advantages that violence delivers into the hands of the colonized, notably recovery of the self.

Reclaiming selfhood II

The passionate advocacy of violence as a tool of emancipation is, however, only one part of the story Fanon told the world. The paralysing influence of colonialism can be broken only through the use of violence. This is incontrovertible. Spontaneous violence has its uses, but it can be self-defeating; it can subvert liberation. You do not carry on a war, he wrote, nor suffer brutal repression, nor look on while all other members of your family are wiped out in order to make hatred triumph. But '[r]acialism and hatred and resentment – "legitimate desire for revenge" – cannot sustain a war of liberation. Those lightning flashes of consciousness which fling the body into stormy paths or which throw it into an almost pathological trance where the face of the other beckons me on to giddiness, where my blood calls for the blood of the other, where by sheer inertia my death calls for the death of the other – that intense emotion of the first few hours falls to pieces if it is left to feed on its own substance'.⁷ Not only do hatred and bloodlust peter out within a short span of time, 'hatred alone cannot draw up a programme'.

At this point in the argument, Fanon warns against excessive or sole reliance on violence. This course of action, he suggests, is hardly prudent, politically speaking. Unless those who wield violence are clear about the purpose of what they are doing, they tend to capitulate easily to the blandishments of the settler. The objectives of the struggle ought not to be chosen without discrimination, Fanon tells us, for people might begin to question the prolongation of the war the moment the enemy offers concessions. So seductive is the need to be recognized as a human being that the 'native' can easily cave in.⁸ The headiness of the gun is replaced by another sort of headiness; that of being recognized as a human being by the very people who had denied to the Algerians humanity. People engaged in liberating themselves from brutal colonialism must not imagine that the fight is won by these small concessions; their demands must not become modest. Placated easily by meaningless sops, the revolution will certainly collapse and the recovery of agency through violence will prove short-lived.

Hatred for Fanon is not a political agenda; it can never be an agenda, just one temporary and dispensable milestone on the route to liberation. The users of violence have to be constantly patrolled; the use of violence has to be moderated and educated by the leaders. The activist and the leader must take control. 'Once again, things must be explained to them; the people must see where they are going, and how they are going to get there.' Politics has to control violence otherwise the entire project of liberation can go haywire. In order to prevent this, in order to politicize people into the intricacies of the issue at hand, the war has to continue, but not as a project of violence but of that as politics.

The task of bringing the people to political maturity demands certain preconditions: the political organization leading the revolt must be structured thoroughly, and leaders must exhibit a high degree of intellectual excellence. The task of party vanguard is not easy, it has to educate people so that they can take stock of a situation, it has to enlighten consciousness, and also advance knowledge of history and society.⁹ Revolutionary elements, which form the embryonic political organization of the rebellion, argues Fanon, have to establish a mutual current of enlightenment and enrichment with the people. It is only then that in each fighting group, and in every village, people who have begun to 'splinter upon the reefs of misunderstanding [can] be shown their bearings by these political pilots.... Such a taking stock of the situation at this precise moment of the struggle is decisive, for it allows the people to pass from total, indiscriminating nationalism to social and economic awareness.'¹⁰

Hatred alone cannot draw up a programme, wrote Fanon, cautioning us against excessive reliance on violence as the architect of history. Spontaneous and passionate outbursts of violence will disintegrate if the users of violence do not graduate to a different level of political consciousness. A transformative agenda can be created only when people seek horizons hitherto undreamt of, horizons that are beyond violence. If nationalism 'is not enriched and deepened by a very rapid transformation into a consciousness of social and political needs ... it

leads up a blind alley', writes Fanon in the chapter on 'the Pitfalls of National Consciousness'.¹¹ In the concluding paragraph of the chapter on 'Spontaneity: Its Strengths and Weaknesses' Fanon pens this politically significant sentence '[v]iolence alone, violence committed by the people, *violence organised and educated by its leaders*, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths and gives the key to them'.¹²

Though Fanon has been conceptualized as *the* theorist of an unreflective and muscular violence, which is a means of recovering agency, his theory, we see, is much more nuanced. Colonial violence stripped the colonized of self-respect. They wilted before the sheer brutality of colonialism. In the specific context of dehumanization and disempowerment, Fanon sees violence as the only way out of the impasse. The arrogance of the settler cannot be broken by any other means; the agency of the colonized cannot be recaptured in any other way. But violence, warns Fanon, has to be viewed instrumentally, as a mode of recovering agency, as a mode of connecting to others and as a mode of constituting a collective. Violence confers power on its users, but power in the abstract can turn out to be a mirage, an illusion. For these reasons and more, violence for Fanon is not a political programme; its use has to be constantly patrolled, controlled and educated by the leaders. Politics have to control violence otherwise the entire project of liberation will collapse. The proper aim of liberation is to destroy the circle of violence and counter-violence, to destroy the exploitation of existing elites as well as the potential project of exploitation by future elites, and to fashion another sort of politics. The psychic and physical costs of perpetrating uncontrolled violence are far too high.

Fanon, always the psychiatrist, understands and appreciates that for the colonized and the subjugated violence might appear to be the only mode of regaining selfhood. When there is no archive outside the one fashioned by the violence of the ruling elites, whether colonial or postcolonial, it is easy for people to opt for violence as a resolution to what they perceive as a problem. But rather than being a solution

to problems, unrestrained violence is a problem in itself. In suggesting that violence needs to be channelled and restrained by another form of politics, Fanon tells us that though violence cleanses, there is also a politics outside violence. The politics of violence cannot be allowed to transform itself into a permanent mode of violent politics. Much as the argument in this essay theorizes political violence contextually, for Fanon the advocacy of violence is purely contextual.

We have to learn from Fanon when we set out to evaluate revolutionary violence in cases such as India. It is true that picking up the gun to confront the agents of the state and upper castes for whom suppression and exploitation of the so-called lower castes and tribals is an unquestioned creed, and for whom the marginalization of these groups is neither here nor there, appears justified. When the upper castes show no compassion, no solidarity, no pity, no charity, let alone consciousness of human rights, and when they lack vision of what it means to be human, what does one expect the oppressed to do, except try to reshape society? Yet, the benefits of violence are limited.

Preconditions of guerrilla war

At an earlier time and another place, Mao Zedong, the architect of China's revolution against semi-feudalism and semi-colonialism, said much the same thing about revolutionary violence. Mao Zedong's contribution to the theory of revolutionary violence, which we can safely assume is both the Talmud and the Bible for Maoist revolutionaries, is well known. He overturned the Marxist theory of revolution and proceeded to stand it on its head, much like Marx had stood Hegel's theory of history on its head. Taking China as his empirical referral, he argued that predominantly agrarian countries lack a working class which, or so it is expected by Marxist orthodoxy, is endowed with political consciousness of exploitation and alienation. In agrarian societies, it is the peasantry that is politically significant. In semi-feudal countries, where the hold of landlords over landless

peasants and small cultivators is particularly stark and brutal, revolution can only come through guerrilla or unconventional war, either waged by the peasants or supported by this class.

Notably, guerrilla war is not specific to Maoism. In the immortal classic *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy evocatively and powerfully describes how segments of the Russian army and civilian groups harassed Napoleon's army. The latter was in full retreat from a Moscow that had been burned to the ground.

One of the most conspicuous and advantageous departures from the so-called rules of warfare is the independent action of men acting separately against men huddled together in a mass... In this kind of warfare, instead of forming in a crowd to attack a crowd, men disperse in small groups, attack singly and at once fly, when attacked by superior forces, and then attack again when an opportunity presents itself... Such were the methods of the guerrillas in Spain; of the mountain tribes in the Caucasus, and of the Russians in 1812.

Thousands of retreating soldiers of the French army under the command of Napoleon were slain by Cossacks and the peasants. The latter killed French soldiers as instinctively as dogs set upon a stray mad dog, wrote Tolstoy. The irregulars destroyed the *Grandee Armee* piecemeal. By October, when the French were fleeing to Smolensk, hundreds of these companies, some detachments following the usual routine of the army, some consisting of only Cossacks, others of mounted men and bands of men on foot, and still others consisting of peasants or of landowners and their serfs stalked the retreating army. Concluding his account of the retreat of the French army from Russia, Tolstoy tells us that the country was cleared of the invaders primarily because the flight was promoted by irregular warfare. Guerrillas wrecked the French army. It was also obliterated by the Great Russian army following in the rear of the French, ready to use force in case there was any pause in their retreat.¹³

Guerrilla techniques of warfare have been employed against invaders, against colonial powers, against autocratic regimes and sometimes against democratic regimes as well. In the middle of the

twentieth century in South America, a specific variant of guerrilla war, the Foco Theory, is associated with the name of Che Guevara. Born in village Rosario in Argentina in 1928 as Ernesto Guevara de la Serna, Che Guevara or simply the iconic Che, whose face today adorns T-shirts worn with designer jeans, gained immense fame as a theorist, as a tactician of guerrilla war, as an anti-imperialist and as a left radical who played a significant role in the Cuban revolution from 1956 to 1959. Travelling across the continent of South America as a young man, Che came to the conclusion that the only way out of the morass of poverty that saturated and diminished the lives of millions of people in South America was a continent-wide violent revolution.

In the 1950s, he met the two brothers Fidel and Raul Castro in Mexico. The brothers were planning to overthrow the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista in Cuba. Che joined the force put together by Fidel Castro, and in the region of Sierra Maestra in Cuba, he constructed a nucleus of a guerrilla army to fight the dictatorship. It took two years for the guerrillas to overthrow the Batista government. In 1966, he went to Bolivia incommunicado to create and lead a guerrilla group in the region of Santa Cruz. In October 1967, the group was annihilated by a special detachment of the Bolivian army. Che was captured and shot.

In 1960, Che had published an extremely influential manual *La Guerra de Guerrillas* or *Guerrilla Warfare*. This work on armed struggle was augmented by another work, *Guerrilla Warfare: A Method and a Message to the Tricontinental*. Che argued that unconventional war, which aims to capture political power, is a people's war and any attempt to carry out this war without the support of the population will be a prelude to inevitable disaster. The guerrilla band is an armed nucleus; 'it draws its great force from the mass of the people themselves'.¹⁴ The guerrilla, he went on to argue, is a social reformer, the war gives voice to the angry protests made by people against their oppressors, and he fights to change the social system that keeps his unarmed brothers in ignominy and misery. 'He launches himself against the conditions of the reigning institutions at a particular moment and dedicates

himself with all the vigor that circumstances permit to breaking the mold of these institutions.¹⁵

The Cuban revolution, he suggested, made three fundamental contributions to the laws of revolutionary movement. First, people's forces can win a war against the army, second, it is not necessary to wait until all conditions for making revolution exist, and third, armed fighting in underdeveloped countries has to be in the countryside.¹⁶ Che's interpretation of Marxist theories of revolution to fit the specific conditions of South America proved highly influential. His eclectic theory of revolutionary war was institutionalized in Cuba in the 1960s and influenced guerrilla struggles in other parts of the continent. Marxist theories emphasized the need for political mobilization through trade union activism, general strikes and political action led by mass organizations before the onset of armed struggle. Che emphasized the primacy of the *foco*; that is of the band of revolutionary cadres in generating revolutionary consciousness through armed struggle. Unconventional wars cannot wait, he reiterated for the development of revolutionary consciousness of the mass of the people; neither is it necessary to wait until all conditions for making revolution exist. The guerrilla has to create such consciousness through armed struggle.

At the same time, Che's interpretation of the objective and subjective conditions for revolution marked a sharp departure from orthodox Marxism and prompted sharp criticism from a section of Marxists who subscribed to gradualism for two reasons. First, his revolutionaries did not have to await the maturation of objective conditions, but the primacy given to the political can lead them into blind alleys. Second, since the guerrilla is responsible for leading the war as well as revolutionizing peasant consciousness, Che obliterated the distinction between a communist party and its armed wing. The guerrilla played a military as well as a political role. It is not surprising that the military aspect of the war overrode the political aspect of guerrilla war, or the task of the vanguard party to mobilize collective consciousness.

The problems are manifest. If guerrillas head directly into armed struggle without any serious mobilization of the people, argues Chaliand, they are cut off from popular support. Considering that in the basic political strategy of revolutionary war, factors of time, space and costs are important, the scant taste exhibited in South America for the sense of the long haul on which revolutionary war depends is more than surprising. According to Chaliand, two months before his death Che noted in his diary, regretfully we can presume, that not one peasant had joined the guerrilla group.¹⁷

Preconditions of people's war

Compare this strategy with that of inviting people into history through imaginative techniques of mobilization. An instance of the latter is provided by the remarkable armed struggle in the Portuguese colony of Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde. The struggle was inspired by one of the most extraordinary thinkers and strategists the world has known – Amílcar Cabral. Compared to China and Vietnam, the case of Guinea Bissau is lesser known. But under the leadership of Cabral a small and poor country in the west coast of Africa was to fight a people's war against Portuguese troops backed by the might of the NATO, drive them to the edge of neuro-physical exhaustion and unilaterally declare independence in 1973. The armed struggle in Guinea Bissau, Mozambique and Angola against Portuguese colonialism catalysed a coup in Lisbon against the military regime in 1974 and brought an end to Portuguese colonialism.

More significantly, Cabral's theory, painstakingly constructed out of a welter of fine empirical detail about lives his people led under Portuguese colonialism, performed after Mao another dramatic U-turn in the Marxist theory of revolution. As a poor primarily agrarian economy, Guinea Bissau lacked an urban proletariat. There was of course the peasantry, but the peasantry, argued Cabral, lacked *prise de conscience*, or political consciousness of its own exploitation.

In 1956, Cabral in association with other radicals set up the PAIGC. Interestingly, the party drew strength from a class that Marx had dismissed contemptuously as the *lumpen* proletariat.

The political significance of this class had been first recognized by Fanon in his theory of urban guerrilla war that broke out in the capital of Algeria, so magnificently captured in Giles Pontecorvo's 1966 *Battle of Algiers*. Cabral was to term this class, composed randomly of beggars, dockworkers, unemployed youth, sex workers and other marginal sections of the urban populations as *de-classe* or outside the class system. At the same time, he concluded that in a society, which neither possessed a working class nor a politicized peasantry, it is this assorted group that could provide the warp and weft of a vanguard party, with cadres reaching into the countryside to construct a political support structure. Cabral and the cadres of the PAIGC patiently worked among the peasants and convinced them that a nationalist as well as a social revolution was indispensable for their well-being.

'Father why is there no chicken on your plate?' This deceptively simple question over a scant lunch provided by the peasant was, but, a prologue to a more detailed discussion of colonial exploitation. Slowly but surely popular support was built up, and the early 1960s armed struggle erupted in the countryside. By 1966, the party had consolidated control over half of the country. At the same time, the PAIGC established alternative political, administrative and economic structures in the liberated regions. Representative institutions took root, and party cadres made special efforts to bring women into these structures. Villagers were trained to manage militias, as well as the organization and supervision of production and distribution.

In liberated zones, the party carefully and patiently constructed participative and democratic institutions and practices, made serious efforts to eliminate constraints on women, established organizations to disburse health and education and replaced the commodification of agricultural products by the barter system. Through these processes, the party created and nurtured a close connection between the guerrillas and their constituency. The dual strategy of building up popular

support as a prelude to the launch of war, and constructing institutions in liberated zones, impacted both the colonized and the colonizer. The latter initiated countermeasures in order to improve the material conditions of the peasantry and neutralize the revolution. The colonial state also instituted strategies to encourage identity politics and divide the people on ethnic lines. Yet the PAIGC managed to successfully undermine these strategies and the colonial army, and won some notable victories.

The political visionary Amílcar Cabral was assassinated on 20 January 1973, about eight months before the declaration of independence. His death dealt a grievous blow to the struggle, but the party continued to tread the path he had patiently carved out of a daunting social landscape. General elections were held to the People's National Assembly in the liberated zones. The party also launched a diplomatic offensive in order to convert other countries to its cause and organized party congresses. In 1974, the 1973 unilateral declaration of independence was recognized by Portugal, and Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde became independent.

A backward, agricultural country had launched war on a colonial power that was supported by the mighty forces of NATO and won a political victory! The achievement was nothing short of stunning and bore witness to the success of the line of people's war. Interestingly, Cabral did not at any point of time admit that he was a Marxist or a Maoist. His strategy emerged out of detailed empirical study of the possibilities and the potentials of an underdeveloped peasant society.¹⁸ That his technique reflected that of Mao Zedong who had tailored the theory and strategy of revolutionary war to the specific conditions of China is manifest.

Two models of guerrilla war are at hand. The first model is prevalent in South America. Here warfare, which has been influenced heavily by the Foco theory, has had little success, mainly because the leaders have not differentiated between the military and the political arm of the party. The military aspects of the war are not, in sum, controlled by the political. In the case of Guinea Bissau, China and Vietnam,

revolutionary movements have been simultaneously national and social. In these cases, the party saw wide-ranging political mobilization as an essential precondition of revolutionary war.

The primacy of the political

Specific to the Maoist theory of guerrilla war is the notion of a people's war. The decisive factor in armed struggle Mao theorized is not weapons but people who are convinced of the rightness of a cause. 'Without a political goal, guerrilla warfare must fail, as it must, if its political objectives do not coincide with the aspirations of the people and their sympathy, co-operation and assistance cannot be gained. The essence of guerrilla warfare is thus revolutionary in character.'¹⁹ Guerrilla operations are not an independent form of warfare; they are one step in the total war, one aspect of the revolutionary struggle.

The recognition that guerrilla war in the radical mode will simply not work unless a highly organized political party is linked to the people was the particular contribution of Mao and later Cabral, among others, to theories of revolution. Of importance is the recognition that popular consciousness, catalyzed by the vanguard of the party, aspires towards not only the abstract goal of liberation, but also to the establishment of concrete institutions and practices that make liberation possible. Under the leadership of the vanguard, villagers who extended support to the guerrilla army in China and Guinea Bissau, in Vietnam and in Mozambique realized that it was possible to create a society free of the debilitating hold of oppressive power. In the process, political consciousness was transformed, and the subjects of a history not their own became agents of a history that they would make with the harnessing of energies and political passions to the project.

Let us in light of these considerations begin to enquire into the nature of politics espoused by the Maoists in India who subscribe to the objective of peoples' war, and who believe that the political mobilization of the constituency is of prime significance. Political mobilization can,

arguably, be seen in two ways. In a pejorative sense, we can dismiss political mobilization as indoctrination or as rhetoric and propaganda designed to turn public opinion in precisely *this* particular direction and in no other. The other sense in which we can think of political mobilization is as a catalyst, or a facilitator. In this sense, the strategy assumes that people, howsoever ordinary be the lives they lead, possess the capacity to make practical judgements and to make sense of the lives they live.

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) called this intrinsic human capacity common sense. Common sense in the Gramscian vision indicates that each individual holds a certain set of beliefs, which may well be unreflective, spontaneous, incoherent and even contradictory. What is significant is that these belief patterns give to the holder a certain idea of what the world is about, and how to judge it.

For Gramsci, all people, and not just scholars trained in academic departments of universities, are philosophers. They possess beliefs that help them make sense of the world. These beliefs are composed of notions and concepts, common sense and good sense and popular religion. After having shown that every person is a philosopher in so far as she or he possesses a specific conception of the world, Gramsci tells us to move in a second direction, that of awareness and criticism. Should we, he asks, think without critical awareness in a disjointed and episodic way? Or, is it better to work out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world?²⁰

The second question enables us to understand the limits of popular psyches. In most cases, 'good sense' tends to mesh and inextricably so with superstition, folklore and religious understanding. What we call common sense, or the way we see the world, is dominated by the ideas of the ruling class. These classes, according to Gramsci, present their particular interests and worldviews as universal and proceed to disseminate this 'trick' through social, political, economic and cultural institutions and practices in civil society. The strategy is enormously effective, and people begin to believe that this is how things are, and

this is how the world works; it does not, it simply cannot, work in any other way. The generation of consent through practices of everyday life, cultural institutions and pedagogy Gramsci called hegemony.

Thereupon the specific task of intellectuals and activists, wrote Gramsci, is not to dismiss pervasive beliefs as cases of mere 'false consciousness'. The task of the revolutionary is to engage with the chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions that add up to common sense. The intellectual and the activist have to patiently work towards dismantling the old and instilling in its place new beliefs, a new common sense, a new culture and a new philosophy that allows people to articulate a critical and an alternative world view.

In sum, Gramsci tells us that the intellectual, the activist and vanguard cadres have to accept that all persons possess common sense. This is a given. They have to work with and within popular attitudes, but they also have to prise open and dismantle processes that normalize inequality and exploitation, injustice and denial of humanity. It is only then that they can go beyond common sense to create critical ways of thinking about the world. The interior world of individuals and groups has to be thoroughly shaken up; they have to be persuaded to realize that things do not have to be quite this way, and that they can be changed. Political mobilization requires hard work. This is integral to any project of revolutionary transformation.

The theory of people's war goes further than this and insists that along with armed struggle it is necessary to build popular support structures and to establish alternative institutions and practices in liberated areas. These alternative institutions can be seen as the nucleus of a future state. Alternative ways of thinking, practices and institutions introduce the constituency to the possibilities of politics or prospect of another world without hierarchy, exclusions and injustice. Revolutionary violence as a form of politics holds aloft the idea of politics in the transformative mode. It follows that the more mobilized a population is for warfare, the more revolutionary the outcome will be.

In order to foreground awareness of the political and symbolic economy of injustice, and the pressing need for justice, revolutionaries

have the task of explaining to people what the war is for, what the stakes are, what each person is entitled to, what the pitfalls are and why such war has to be waged at all. Above all, they have to communicate their vision of a future society. It is only then that they can carry public opinion along with them.

Popular support is politically significant for people must be convinced of the rightness of a cause. But the need for popular support is also strategic. Unconventional war demands that the guerrilla army skilled at advancing when the enemy retreats, and retreating when it advances, finds ready sanctuary in hamlets and villages and is assured of access to food, shelter and information. Above all, political mobilization is essential. Whereas violence propels the recovery of agency, reliance on violence alone, as Fanon told us, can prove deceptive. The long forked tongue of violence poisons everything from the psyche of the victim to the psyche of those who think they have been liberated. Violence possesses an uncanny ability to reproduce itself in new guises: today in the persona of the colonizer, tomorrow in the persona of the new political elite. In order to prove genuinely liberating, this form of politics should be yoked to a project that seeks to overturn existing injustices. Political mobilization has to precede actual fighting. In short, violence has to be controlled by politics and subordinated to political mobilization and to the realization of political visions. These are the principles that can help us to evaluate the armed struggle in the heartland of Maoism. They are not external to the ideology and the strategy of Maoism; these principles stem from the political philosophy of revolutionary violence – the primacy of politics.

The case of India: The primacy of violence

In the 1980s, cadres of Peoples War Group were hounded out of the state of Andhra Pradesh by state-sponsored irregular forces called the Greyhounds. Intent on escape, the cadres entered the Dandakaranya

forest region. Here they began to organize the villagers to claim rights over land, resources and forest produce. In the process, they garnered support from the tribals. The party established front organizations and membership of these organizations, such as the peasant-worker front and the womens' front swelled considerably.

It is not as if the people among whom the Maoists came to work, and on whose behalf they picked up the gun, lacked political consciousness. Peasant and tribal rebellions have been an integral part of the history and folklore of central India. What the Maoists have done is to integrate memories of and revolts against oppression into a broader vision that is ideologically informed and historically grounded. This is an essential part of political mobilization. Yet when it comes to the question of whether the Maoists have followed the script authored by theories, practices and the history of people's war, we run into a raging controversy. The jury is still out on this question. On balance, even sympathizers of the Maoists are forced to accept that the struggle is more military than political for reasons that are not difficult to fathom.

Normally, guerrillas set out to cultivate popular support through political education and transmission of a political vision through various modes of visual and oral representation. An unconventional peoples' war cannot be run on coercion alone. At the minimum, cadres of the party have to excite a certain amount of popular sympathy for the cause and for war. In regions in central and eastern India, the Maoists began to disseminate a vision of a future unshackled from bonds of caste and class, through village meetings, community groups, theatre performances, speeches, public meetings and lectures in schools. In pursuit of a just order, they fought for higher wages, redistributed land and charted out agrarian strategies.

Yet scholars and activists who have done fieldwork in Maoist areas tell us that in Bastar, Jharkand and parts of Andhra Pradesh, the Maoists employ tremendous coercion to bring the constituency to heel. Kangaroo courts sentence suspected informers, landowners, moneylenders, errant revenue officials, delinquent party members,

school teachers and government officials to brutal punishment and certain death by slitting the throat of the offender. Can this be accounted for as collateral damage, or as the costs ordinary people have to pay for revolutions?

Moreover, the reported participation of the Maoists in corruption, whether pricing of tendu leaves, or taking a cut from the contractors or imposing taxes on infrastructure projects, has deeply compromised the political dream of building an alternative to the system that exists. Alpha Shah's argument that the Maoists run protection rackets in Jharkand has dented the image of our flaming revolutionaries to quite an extent.²¹

Armed cadres have of course the power of coercing local populations into supporting them and their ideology and dispensing with political mobilization. They have guns; the villagers do not. But if the objective of revolutionary war is to liberate people whose lives have been since birth yoked to threefold disadvantage, and if the intention is to create a new society based on redistribution of material resources and recognition of equal worth, this strategy will necessarily prove not only counterproductive but also subversive of the basic tenets of revolutionary war.

Violence without politics

From the perspective of peoples' war, the indiscriminate use of coercion to herd people to the fold of Maoism runs up a number of problems. First, it catapults an issue that many are familiar with, and many are unfamiliar with; that people who lead the armed struggle need not be the people who are subjected to triple injustice, to the centre of the political stage. We simply do not know whether the tribals and the Scheduled Castes in the Red Corridor have been persuaded, coaxed or coerced into sharing the goals of the party. Neither do we know whether they prefer immediate solutions to pressing problems, compared to the long-term objectives of seizing state power. It is also

debatable whether villagers line up behind cadres of the party out of fear, or whether they are genuine converts to the ideology of the party. Is the party characterized by the use of force rather than mobilization? Reports from the field suggest that the former is more prevalent.

Ironically, suggests Bela Bhatia who has carried out fieldwork in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, a movement that promises liberation can actually land up making people feel less free. It is also problematic that members of mass fronts pay the price for actions taken by the underground party. These actions, again ironically, are taken on behalf of the people but without their knowledge or consent. The use of violence has taken a heavy toll, she concludes.²²

Second, we can hardly overlook the political context of democracy in which the Maoists have launched armed struggle. No village in times of competitive democracy and an even more competitive market economy can remain a political *tabula rasa* or a neutral site into which an armed group can march and proceed to persuade, influence and rouse people to action. It is doubtful whether any social collective in history has ever been without tensions and rivalries, but competitive electoral democracy creates its own schisms. Resultantly, each village is earmarked by complex pecking orders, competing structures of loyalty to 'this' leader or 'that' political party, feuds large and small, with each group wishing to score points off another, and modes of garnering profit through informal economies.

Guerrillas might use villagers instrumentally to secure shelter, food and information. Villagers can also use a man with a gun instrumentally; this might help them to settle disputes. These complexities make the task of sorting out the issue whether this is a people's war; a war conceived and executed by elites, or a war that serves the interest of some group or the other, a difficult one.

Third, if the use of coercion to harvest and retain support inhibits the task of political mobilization, the task is further truncated by the tremendous coercion deployed by the state. In response to the guerrilla war launched by the Maoists, the Indian state has marshalled formidable military arsenals, mounted a military onslaught on the

region termed the 'Red Corridor' and surrounded guerrilla zones. Counter-insurgency doctrines learnt from guerrilla struggles and the war against terrorism have given to security forces strategic advantage. The consequences are serious, for the military offensive launched by the Indian state against the Maoists has forced the guerrilla militia to concentrate energies on rearguard action and protect fields of operation. That this strategy has come at the expense of the political component of the peoples' war doctrine is manifest. The ultimate objective of launching a people's war to overturn existing forms of power, and to create a people's democracy, has been pre-empted if not aborted by the onslaught of the security forces.

Both time and space for intense, sustained and prolonged political mobilization is denied to the Maoists. When the energies of the armed wings of the party are focussed on defending their regions of engagement, opportunities for unremitting political mobilization through dissemination of ideology and the harnessing of energies to a cause cannot, but, be scarce. The Maoists, as Barnard D'Mello, a keen observer of party strategy, points out, have not succeeded in turning any of the guerrilla zones into base areas where they can establish a miniature state based on self-reliant economic development and land to the tiller.²³ If that is so, the one factor that makes radical armed struggle acceptable, notably that cadres introduce people into alternative ways of doing things, whether production or regulation of social relations, and the belief that these alternative ways will enhance agency, is greatly subverted.

Fourth, if the Maoists seem to have underestimated the military power of the Indian state, they also seem to have underestimated the legitimacy that Indian democracy, howsoever flawed be that democracy, commands, even among people who continue to be triply disadvantaged. Sumanta Bannerjee suggests that in India, a parliamentary republic, despite large-scale corruption and criminality, still enjoys democratic legitimacy among wide sections of the people, and major contending social groups find democracy useful for their own ends. 'The system apparently has not yet exhausted all its

potentialities of exploiting the hopes and aspirations of the Indian poor and underprivileged sections.²⁴ The sophisticated bourgeois Indian state, skilled in evoking and harnessing loyalties to its own cause, is even more skilled in neutralizing challenges and upping the ante.

The state has taken the initiative to introduce a number of measures designed to reverse legacies of underdevelopment, ameliorate poverty that was fuelling the conflict and embark on development. Bureaucrats now concentrate energies on the most neglected districts in which armed struggle prevails, try to establish secure access to education, organize camps on preventive and curative health care, repair infrastructure and improve the distribution of food grains. The central government has given financial support to the state governments for the purpose of instituting long-term development projects as well as provision of social goods. In sum, the 'clear, hold, and develop' strategy uses the 'magic mantra' of development to win back tribal populations.

After decades of neglect, the government has now taken up projects such as constructing infrastructure, particularly landmine proof, roller compacted concrete roads in Maoist zones, under the protection of the combat forces of the Central Reserve Police Force. The parallel with Fidel Castro, who built modern highways in the Sierra Maestra region of Cuba to reward inhabitants for their support but also to ensure that guerrilla onslaughts would not be repeated, is striking. The history of guerrilla war highlights the importance of remote and difficult terrains. Modern means of communication and information technology have managed to neutralize the potential of guerrilla war to fight an army that is technologically superior in many ways.

Achievements of Maoism: The irony

We, of course, cannot say that nothing has been done by our revolutionaries. Whereas the long-term goal of the Maoists is the takeover of state power, their immediate objective is to carry out land reform, construct irrigation projects to protect the villagers from

drought, protect peasants against moneylenders, fight atrocities on the lower castes and launch struggles against mining corporates intent on displacing villagers from land. Analysts and field reports tell us that in some regions land has been transferred to the tiller, aid extended to poor farmers, cooperatives set up, measures to obtain just prices for agricultural commodities and minor forest produce put in place, modern knowledge about agriculture disseminated, better quality seeds gathered from elsewhere have been distributed and voluntary labour to construct tanks with canal systems deployed.²⁵

Will this go a long way in building up popular support for the cause? Do measures initiated by the Maoists provide the sort of alternative structures that were put in place in liberated zones in Vietnam, China and Guinea Bissau, alternative both to feudal structures of exploitation and the many injustices of capitalism?

Nirmalangshu Mukherji has made an interesting point in this context. Even if wages in the region have increased because of the bargains the Maoists have finalized with the contractors, he suggests, these are far less than the minimum wages paid in other parts of the country, for example Kerala.²⁶ The irony is that the initiatives taken by the Maoists appear but a pale resemblance of development projects in other parts of the country, projects initiated by the same state they wish to overthrow. Nandini Sundar makes roughly the same point. The Maoists have established mass organizations in Dandakaranya guerrilla zone and carried out development work. But, these initiatives simply cannot match what the government could have done for the villagers, if only it had the political will to do so.²⁷

Far from providing alternative modes of social and economic relationships, the Maoist development agenda seems to have become a mirror image of dominant worldviews, doppelgangers no more. This is an ironic reversal of revolutionary imaginaries. Compared to the development models established in the rest of the country, these strategies of agricultural development are at best routine and primitive. Thirty years of occupation of a backward region has neither resulted in the establishment of alternative development models, nor in the

construction of schools and hospitals that might have lessened illiteracy and ill health. The inhabitants of these regions continue to be severely malnourished, and high levels of infant mortality and illiteracy mark the area. The cadres of the party could have formed democratically constituted cooperatives to administer livelihoods in tribal-controlled panchayats, collected and delivered tendu leaves and eliminated contractors.²⁸ But, they chose to go the way of mainstream development.

What is it, then, that the Maoists have accomplished even as they have let loose violence in pursuit of a radically new society, and even as this violence has catalysed extreme violence by the state? John Harriss holds that the Maoists have tapped into and to some extent, at least, have articulated the long-standing grievances of Dalits and landless peasants against high-caste landowners and the grievances of the tribal people against the state for what it has done, notably displacement and sanctioning of repressive policies, as well as what it has not done, that is provision of basic necessities.²⁹

What has the revolution accomplished?

Indisputably, revolutionaries dramatically foregrounded the interests of the poorest of the poor, an agenda that had been washed off the economic success story that countries in the global south have written for themselves. Yet the use of violence to focalize ill-being casts a sorry reflection not only on the inability of the state to provide for needy citizens, but also on the political worldview of revolutionaries. Do democratic governments come alive to the needs of the triply oppressed only when they take recourse to violence or back those who employ violence? Has revolutionary violence in India become the harbinger of a world that is not significantly different from what exists in other parts of the country?

Revolution is justified when people have been denied what is their due according to the creed of democratic justice – an equal share in the burdens and benefits of society. Injustice has to be reversed, and

people who have suffered under triple disadvantage have to be assured that they will participate equally in sharing the benefits and burdens of society. Instead democratic states come to them as a bearer of rewards if they were only to shun the revolutionaries and threats of coercion if they fail to do so. And the Maoists do what a bourgeois democratic state should have done for its own people. They too promise rewards and threaten coercion in case people do not support them.

In order to placate discontent and delegitimize the Maoist agenda, the government has undertaken development. Yet these measures concentrate on either one or a cluster of immediate issues, leaving the big issues untouched – huge social inequalities, skewed landholding patterns, the dominance of corporate capitalism, greed of industrialists for more mineral-rich land irrespective of consequences and the tremendous poverty that stalks the steps of large numbers of Indians. Where there is inequality, there must be unfreedom. But, the state simply does not tackle the source of powerlessness and helplessness, offshoots of triple disadvantage. Its response to the armed struggle is piecemeal and partial. Along with threats of coercion, piecemeal practices – building of a school here and building of a clinic there – strengthen the hold of the state over its people. It turns citizens into consumers. What then of justice? Development cannot provide justice; it may even exacerbate injustice in other forms, pace displacement?

If the objective of revolutionary violence is to reshape the political context in which we live, then we need a politics that has an infinitely broader vision than that replicating the development project of the state: that little bit more income, a little bit more land, a little bit more control over one's own life. Revolutionary politics demands that people be brought into a relationship of solidarity with each other, that inequalities be seriously tackled, and that citizens participate in the constitution of a public and critical discourse, where each participant is heard with equal respect.

We have to ask this question with some regret. Are the Maoists fighting a people's war at great cost to themselves and to their

constituency only to implement the agenda of mainstream parties? Tilak Gupta has put the point across well, to tell the truth, he writes, there is not much of a difference between the Maoist programme and that of communist parties functioning within the system of parliamentary democracy. The correspondence between clauses relating to land reforms, fair wages for labour, recognition of the right to work as a fundamental right, improvement of farming methods, removal of gender discrimination in matters of wages and ownership of land and promotion of peasant cooperatives is striking. It is true that no political party has followed the cause of the rural poor with so much zeal. The Maoists have tried to fill this vacuum. But they are more eager to propagate the path of armed revolution than to pursue revolutionary aims.³⁰ The diminution of the Maoist agenda has become painfully apparent. Can people who have been rendered voiceless under the burden of triple injustice regain agency?

Moreover, when the central and the state government of the 'affected areas' delivers to the people social and economic political goods, is not the immediate agenda of the Maoists rendered redundant? History bears witness to this. Sumanta Banerjee tells us that in Naxalbari, the rural poor who joined the armed Maoist insurrection have today dropped out of from the movement and accepted instead economic benefits, such as a small piece of cultivable land, higher wages for labour and participation in decision-making offered to them by the parliamentary Left. While travelling in the Bengal countryside, he writes, 'I listen to a new generation of rural people who nurture dreams of a better future within this system rather than change it through an armed revolution'.³¹

When it comes to converting people into stakeholders in the system, no institution works as well as that of private property. Private property dissolves radicalism and fosters the status quo. It is this very strategy which is being used by the government to divide poor and landless peasant from each other, and from those who would fight their cause.

Political violence without the political

The main problem, it seems to me, is another one. Given the context of a democracy that is considered legitimate by many, and given the military might of the Indian state, the space and time for political mobilization of the constituency of the Maoists has shrunk dramatically. Without the political in the concept of political violence, we are left with violence. Fanon had warned us that though anger, rage and revenge lead to violence, these sentiments are not enough to liberate people. Spontaneous and passionate outbursts of violence will disintegrate if the users of violence do not graduate to a different level of political consciousness. A transformative agenda can be created only when people seek horizons hitherto undreamt of, beyond the reach of violence. Otherwise, the political elite will do little except reproduce the violence of the order.

When Charu Majumdar called for annihilation of the class enemy in the first phase of Naxalism, his idea was not only to challenge a system that had consigned people to penury, but also to reinvent a new self in direct opposition to a subjugated and passive self of the pre-violence days. The problem is that without politics in command, violence goes berserk. It can best be likened to a quagmire that relentlessly sucks people into its murky depths. From here there is no escape. When violence holds individuals and groups in thrall, moral disintegration follows. For we cannot control violence, violence controls us. Fanon had told us long ago that when the colonial finger writes the alphabet of power in blood and gore, the script is inefaceable and the imprint it leaves on the body politic, indelible. Violence leaves stigmata much like the murder of Duncan left blood on Lady Macbeth's hands: 'What, will these hands ne'er be clean?' How can, then, a new society free of oppression and exploitation be created? All we will have on our hands is a blood-stained history, not a political history that can show the way out of the highly exploitative society that we have on our hands today.

If revolutionary violence is about politics more than violence, then Maoism has to be judged in terms of whether it has managed to (a) go beyond Gramscian common sense and introduce people to critical perspectives on and engagement with Indian society (b) set in place alternative institutions and practices that introduce beleaguered communities to the wider goal of the armed struggle, an alternative society, economy and politics (c) enabled ordinary people to realize agency. Political mobilization serves to catalyse political consciousness and encourage people to stand up and be counted as actors in their own right. This is the basic criterion on which we judge the efficacy of political practices. Indisputably the project of Maoism is geared towards all these objectives.

Yet the political and the military context proscribes sustained political mobilization of people caught up in the trap of triple injustice. Politically, the Indian state despite the many injustices it perpetrates is seen as legitimate in the eyes of the citizens, largely because it is democratic. The village is thus not a neutral site, receptive to political mobilization in the radical mode. The village is apt to be divided and fragmented between those who back the state and those who back the Maoist agenda. The outbreak of armed struggle has compelled the Indian state to introduce and accelerate development initiatives in zones of conflict. The Indian state has also launched a major military onslaught against Maoist strongholds. Caught between the Scylla of massive military operations and the Charybdis of state-led development initiatives, the Maoists are denied both time and space in which they can engage in sustained mobilization and establish institutions that code a radically different perspective.

Whereas a people's war is more about politics than coercion, and more about political visions mediating the course of armed struggle, things seem to be different in the case of Maoism. The use of violence against class enemies and against the state not only leads to loss of lives but also to fear. We do not know whether people line up behind the Maoists out of fear or out of conviction. Whether agency can be

realized in an environment where the guerrilla forces are engaged in a rearguard action against the might of the Indian state, and when the constituency is terrorized by the same weapons used to fight the state, the political agenda is put by the wayside. This is incontrovertible. No politics that focuses on telling people what they are owed by society can succeed when the environment is stamped by violence. Moreover, whatever alternative institutions have been built by the Maoists, observers tell us that these are mirror images of dominant development agendas. In sum, the Maoist agenda is diminished because it has unfolded in a context very different to the colonial context in which guerrilla wars proved successful. Revolutionary violence without revolutionary politics further truncates the agenda. And, the case for justifying revolutionary violence because it enables agency is deeply compromised.

Conclusion

Political violence without political mobilization, for all seeming heroism and daredevilry, is a lazy way of doing politics. It is executed by a handful of cadres, and it eschews transformation of either the body politic or of its members. Violence as spectacle reduces people into an audience or bystanders. In the process, nothing changes, perhaps nothing ever could, not even the recovery of agency.

In sum, we have to be aware of the indeterminacy and the unpredictability of this avatar of politics, and the incapacity of human beings to control violence, or rather the relentless impulse of violence to control those who handle it for definable ends. Any study of revolutionary violence has to track the dilemmas, the quandaries and the political predicaments that stalk the practice of revolutionary violence. This is the lesson from history. The lesson from history and from an investigation into the practice of revolutionary politics is outlined in the conclusion.