

Violence of the Oppressed

We have to seek what preceded and provoked the Maoist ambush of 25 May.

The chorus of righteous indignation against Maoist violence has made a comeback. The commercial media has returned to baying for the blood of the “left-wing extremists”. “Why are human rights groups not condemning the terror the Maoists unleashed?” screamed one of the TV news anchors. “Why has the government lost track of the fight against Maoist terror?” yelled another. In the safety of their studios, the big guns on TV have been booming! They cannot stomach a successful ambush by the Maoist guerrillas. “This is a major setback for Operation Green Hunt (OGH)” (the anti-Maoist counter-insurgency campaign). “Shouldn’t OGH be overhauled and intensified?” or better still, “shouldn’t the Army be deployed on the frontlines in Bastar?” Rather than be swayed by such hawks, maybe we should first try to put what has happened in its proper context and then weigh it all up.

The ambush on 25 May by Maoist guerrillas of a convoy of Congress Party leaders of Chhattisgarh with their retinue and the Z-plus and other category of armed security personnel has shocked the state apparatus in Raipur and New Delhi. The targets of the attack were the chief of the Congress Party in the province and a former home minister of the state, Nand Kumar Patel, and the founder of the state-financed and armed private vigilante force, Salwa Judum (SJ), Mahendra Karma, and the assassinations were on the dot, for the state’s security personnel accompanying the convoy were no match for the guerrillas in the two-hour long battle. The convoy was returning from a *Parivartan Yatra* (march for change) rally in Sukma in southern Chhattisgarh in the Bastar region and the Maoists not only knew that Karma and Patel were in the convoy, but even the route that it was to take.

The Congress now seems bent on intensifying OGH with the despatch of additional central paramilitary forces. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) chief minister of the state has however suggested that the union government go in for talks with the Maoists. It may be noted that the latter have always been open to negotiations, even as they have insisted that they will not give up on the use of force. Nevertheless, with the BJP fiddling to discover what may serve its politics of one-upmanship, the Congress must surely be pleased with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) politburo’s statement demanding “firm action” to put an end to “these Maoists [sic] depredations” and urging “all democratic forces to fight the politics of violence by the Maoists”.

We refuse to join this chorus of righteous indignation against Maoist violence. Why? The credentials of these so-called anti-terrorists are well known – in the eyes of the victims, whether ordinary adivasis in southern Chhattisgarh or Muslims in Gujarat, they stand convicted of terrorism on a scale that constitutes “crimes against humanity”. They have no moral right to talk about democratic values. The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government sanctioned the “security-related expenditure” that funded the SJ. The state BJP government turned the other way when the funds for internally displaced person camps went into the personal coffers of SJ leaders. And, the mining companies contracted with the SJ warlords for “protection and ‘ground-clearing’ services”. The SJ which Karma led was “a land and power grab masquerading as a local uprising”, as Jason Miklian, writing in the journal, *Dialectical Anthropology* (33, 2009, p 456), put it.

In Dantewada, Bastar and Bijapur districts in Chhattisgarh, in the context of large-scale acquisition of land by corporations in what is a mineral-rich region, entire villages were evacuated and villagers forcibly herded into camps, from which those who escaped were branded Maoists and hunted down. Indeed, SJ, which organised the evacuation and forced herding “was created and encouraged by the [state] government and supported with the fire power and organisation of the central forces”. No, this quote is not from a report of one of the country’s civil liberties and democratic rights’ organisations, but taken from chapter 4 of a 2009 draft report authored by Sub-Group IV of the Committee on State Agrarian Relations and Unfinished Task of Land Reforms, set up by the Ministry of Rural Development, New Delhi. Without mincing words, this report referred to “the biggest grab of tribal land after Columbus” in the making as being initially “scripted by Tata Steel and Essar Steel who want seven villages or thereabouts each to mine the richest lode of iron ore available in India”.

The period from June 2005 for about eight months witnessed the depredations of the SJ backed by the state’s security forces – the murders of hundreds of ordinary Gondi peasants, the razing of hundreds of villages and the forcible herding of people into camps, the sexual atrocities against women, vast stretches of cultivable land lying fallow, the total disruption of the collection of minor forest produce, lack of access to the weekly haats (local markets), the schools turned into police camps, the complete

