

The Maoists, Elections, Boycotts and Violence

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The Maoists want a provision in the electoral rules to arm the voter with the right to reject a candidate, but if the voters are granted such a provision, will they allow them to participate in the elections, or still insist on boycotting them? It is high time the Maoists recognise that the vast majority of the Indian electorate, despite their disillusionment with the present political leadership, are not going to boycott elections.

The Lok Sabha elections were inaugurated with a fanfare of bomb blasts, killing of security personnel and poll officials, burning of polling stations, and a sensational hijacking of a train, where the hostages were served *sattu* and biscuits before being let off after about four hours!

This mixed display of violence and charity was a demonstration of the muscle power of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) [CPI (Maoist)], which had given a call for the boycott of elections. By disrupting the electoral process through such acts, it managed to make its presence felt in its pockets of influence in Jharkhand, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, and a few other states. Significantly, its activists and guerrillas physically targeted only the candidates and the state's representatives – the security forces, the poll officials – and thankfully refrained from attacking the voters who came in large numbers (often representing 50 to 60% of the electorate in these areas).

The Maoist call for boycotting the elections, the party's attempts to bring this about by large-scale attacks on the electoral machinery, and yet, the willingness of the villagers in their strongholds to queue up to cast their votes, present a peculiar web of complexities. At one level, the boycott call by the Maoist party may make sense if we follow the arguments that it has put forward in its bulletin released on the eve of the elections. Its spokesperson Azad urges us:

...go to grassroots level (where)... you can see the apathy, disillusionment, even hatred and anger against the parliamentary system and the parliamentary parties. Both have lost their credibility as never before...

While analysing the past opportunism of the different contesting parties while they were in power, Azad comments, in particular, on the latest move to forge a Third Front by the parliamentary left, which he describes as "...a congregation of self-seeking

discredited opportunists, all of whom had proved themselves to be hypocrites and double-dealers in their respective states..." He recalls the "infamous history" of Chandrababu Naidu, Jayalalithaa, Mayawati, and Deve Gowda, who had "at one time or the other, shared power with the Hindu chauvinist BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party] (and who are) being given a clean and secular democratic image by the so-called Left" (10 April 2009, *Maoist Information Bulletin* – No 7).

Azad further observes in the above-mentioned bulletin:

...the elections this time are the most complex, most crisis-ridden and most fragmented in the annals of so-called Indian parliamentary democracy. Extreme instability and contradictions plague every party and candidate. No party or candidate seems to be certain of the electoral outcome...Neither the BJP nor the Congress is in a position to hold their respective alliances together and centrifugal tendencies will continue to weaken these further.

Frankly speaking, one is tempted to agree with every word of the above critique – starting from the description of the mood of disillusionment among the voters, to the double-dealing of the leaders of the so-called Third Front, to the crisis within the Congress and BJP. There can also be no disagreement with another proposal made in the Maoist bulletin: "...allowing the voters the minimum democratic right to reject the parties and candidates contesting the election." Incidentally, there is a growing demand among sections of civil society also for some sort of provision that would allow the voter to say no to all the available candidates in a constituency whom he/she may find undesirable. The CPI (Maoist) suspects that the politicians are against this provision since, if given this option, the majority of the Indian electorate "would perhaps vote against everyone and prove in categorical terms the futility of parliamentary democracy".

Right to Reject Candidates

Although one may not go the whole hog with this rather rash assumption about the total collapse of popular faith in parliamentary democracy, there is no harm in including in the electoral rules a provision

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to arm the voter with the right to reject a candidate. Will our elected representatives in the next Lok Sabha display enough courage to amend the electoral rules by incorporating such a provision? It can be a healthy method of testing public opinion about the nominees put up by the political parties (corrupt politicians, criminal gangsters and power-hungry weathercocks, in favour of whom people often exercise their voting right in the absence of better candidates). Such an officially recorded expression of public rejection can also be of immense help to the various civil society groups (like *Wada Na Todo* and other voluntary agencies) which are playing an important role in the present elections by mobilising the electorate in certain areas to put pressure on political parties to eschew criminals and corrupt people from their lists of candidates, and compel the nominated candidates to adopt in their programmes popular demands for environmental protection, gender equality, and maintenance of communal harmony among other things.

To come back to the CPI (Maoist), if the voters are given what it considers “the minimum democratic right to reject the parties and candidates”, will the party allow them to participate in the elections, or still insist on boycotting them? Will the Maoist leaders recognise that even such minor electoral reforms – admittedly falling far short of their final goal of a revolutionary transformation of our society – can empower to some extent our poor and deprived masses to articulate their protests? Will they, in their programme (which jettisons elections altogether) allow some space for dissenters among voters – who may express their dissidence through the parliamentary system? In other words, will they recognise that the vast majority of the Indian electorate, despite their disillusionment with the present political leadership, are not yet ready for boycotting elections?

In fact, on this issue, the Maoist leadership seems to have climbed down a bit from the earlier Naxalite position which was encapsulated in the notorious slogan in Calcutta in the 1970s: *Vote diley, porbey laash!* (“If you cast your vote, you’ll end up as a dead body”). The present Maoist leadership claims in the above-mentioned bulletin: “You cannot show a single instance where

the Maoists had resorted to force on the people for having attended election meetings or having stopped them from casting their votes”. In a curious paradox, such small mercies by the Maoists have allowed the villagers in their strongholds to cast their votes without fear, instead of heeding to their boycott call. This should be an eye-opener to the CPI (Maoist) leadership.

But although they spare the voters, the Maoists have shown no mercy for the parliamentary political parties and their candidates. “We warn the parties”, the bulletin says,

not to venture out into our areas, and when they do not heed our warnings, we stop their campaign, beat them up if they are notorious elements, burn their vehicles, conduct people’s courts where possible and make the party representatives confess the misdeeds of their leaders....

By resorting to such violence to stop campaigns by the candidates in their areas, how do they expect the voters to exercise their “minimum democratic right to reject the parties”, without even allowing them to listen to the various viewpoints of the contending parties? Is there not a basic flaw in their proposition? Further, by its generous gesture of “not stopping them from casting their votes”, the Maoist party has indirectly acknowledged that there are vast numbers of people even within its areas of influence who do not accept its politics of boycotting elections – a fact proved by the moderate to high percentage of polling in Naxalite areas in Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Bihar and Jharkhand.

Among other targets of their physical violence are “the police and central forces that are used by the reactionary rulers to enforce elections at gun-point”. But in the course of what they describe as “active boycott”, on 16 April in Chhattisgarh they killed five polling officials – innocent citizens who through no fault of theirs were appointed by the authorities to conduct the polls. A few days later, the party came out with a press statement apologising to their family members, stating that the jeep that they were travelling in was “mistaken” by the Maoist guerrillas for a security forces’ vehicle (*The Hindu*, 25 April). Little consolation for the families! Such “mistakes” had been committed and admitted to by the Maoists in the past also – the burning of a train in Andhra Pradesh that killed a

number on passengers, the derailment of the Howrah-Delhi Rajdhani Express that took a heavy toll on innocent lives some years ago, and the frequent killings of poor villagers by paranoiac Maoist guerrillas who suspect them of being police agents. How long will they go on repeating such “mistakes”, and dismissing them as “collateral damages” on their path of revolution?

Right to Boycott Elections

Incidentally, it is not only the Maoists who have given the call for boycotting the present elections. The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and other militant groups in Assam, and the Hurriyat and several secessionist outfits in Jammu and Kashmir, also urge the electorate in their states to boycott the polls. But instead of leaving the choice to the electorate, in their determination to bring it about at gun-point, like the Maoists, they have also tried to subvert the electoral process itself by killing candidates, targeting the polling booths, destroying the equipment, threatening the poll officials. All these insurgent organisations (including the Maoists) have adopted these tactics in pursuance of their respective political strategies – the goals being different for each organisation.

But in the present elections, there are cases of another type of boycott which springs from a spontaneous groundswell of protests, rather than from coercion by armed cliques of organised political forces from the top in the interest of their selective goals. All over Assam for instance, while almost 65% of the voters rejected the ULFA’s call for boycott (thereby refusing to buy their brainchild of a *Swadhin Asom*), in a number of constituencies (Dhubri, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh and Tezpur) a large number of voters refused to cast their votes – not in response to the ULFA call, but to register their protest against bad roads, and inaction by the government to prevent floods. Similarly, in the Poonch district of Jammu and Kashmir, villagers in some constituencies boycotted the polls (not in response to the Hurriyat’s call) in protest against the government’s failure to provide them with basic amenities like *bijli*, *sadak* and *pani*. It is these grass roots demands which have been ignored both by the candidates of the political parties who participate in elections and those

anti-parliamentary insurgents who try to enforce their boycott call at gunpoint.

The CPI (Maoist) in particular, which claims to fight for the rights of the poor, has shown a cruel disregard for these basic amenities demanded by the people by disrupting power supply and obstructing road building in the backward districts – purely out of their partisan interest to cut off communication so that the police cannot raid their hideouts. They claim that they do not need such infrastructure from the government, since in their pockets of control they have set up their own parallel centres of governance where they have helped the poor with economic reforms and social justice. But even if we accept their claims, the fact remains that their achievements are confined to a narrow stretch of territory. Their model of development is based on a system of autarky, which can function for a while within an enclosed enclave of self-sustained economy. Apart

from occupying a fragile position, threatened as it is by a superior militarily powerful state (which has already destroyed their traditional bases in Andhra Pradesh), the Maoist method of governance in their strongholds still consists of ad hoc responses to immediate local problems rather than a part of a well-thought-out long-term strategy of countering challenges and coping with problems at the national level. Their jungle hideouts in Dandakaranya, Orissa and other areas, are a far cry from the Yenian that their mentor carved out in China, who had a wider vision – which is sadly lacking among the present CPI (Maoist) leadership. They have not yet been able to offer a wide-ranging viable alternative model that appears convincing and acceptable to the various sections of the poor all over India.

Further, the Indian Maoists seem to be lopsided in their choice of priorities. They dissipate their armed resources in

onslaughts against obscure riff-raff among candidates in the parliamentary poll, but are scared of confronting the better-organised goons of the Sangh parivar – who pose a more dangerous threat to the democratic rights of our people. The Maoist critique of the present electoral system does indeed give voice to the popular misgivings about its efficacy. But till the CPI (Maoist) succeeds in convincing the people about the justifiability of its programme of revolution, and in the meanwhile comes up with an alternative workable system of democratic functioning in its areas of control (where the violent acts of extortion and revenge by its cadres are fast alienating its sympathisers), the electorate have no choice but to continue willy-nilly to participate in the elections. Proud of their democratic right and hopeful of some change through the electoral process, they will cast their votes – though they are doomed to be betrayed by the victorious candidates.