

Beyond violence and non-violence - K Balagopal

Via Jamal Kidwai

[We are posting this piece by K Balagopal, hoping to continue our reflections on violence and non-violence in political movements. - AN]

The public arena is witness to dispirited discussion of the ineffectiveness of people's movements, which are at the most able to slow down things, and nothing more. The discussion often turns around violence and non-violence, not as moral alternatives but as strategic options. Those who are sick of sitting on dharna after dharna to no effect are looking with some envy at violent options, while many who have come out of armed groups find the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) fascinating.

It is good that there is some openness in the matter now, for dogmatic attitudes have done considerable harm. To say that one should not be dogmatic about violence may be morally a little unsettling but it is a defensible position even without adopting a relativistic attitude towards the preciousness of life or a casual attitude towards one's moral responsibility for injury caused in the course of a struggle. More of that in the right context. But the discussion will unavoidably be based on assessments of the effectiveness of the alternatives, and a distant view is likely to colour the reality with hopes and assumptions, even illusions. A realistic assessment of what each strategy has been able to achieve would better inform the debate.

The plain and stark fact is that while all strategies have been effective in curbing some injustice, none has succeeded in forcing the government to take back a single major policy in any sphere. And none has been able to reverse the trends inherent in the structures of society and economy. Yet no serious political movement or social struggle we know of is only for softening oppression or improving relief. The general understanding is that governance of the country - and may be the systemic infrastructure of society - is fundamentally wrong and needs remedying, maybe overturning. Do we know of any

effective strategy for that? I am not talking of political strategies, but strategies of struggle that will successfully put pressure upon the State and the polity to stop them in their tracks. The struggle may be built around class or caste or any other social combination. It may in the end seek reform or the upturning of the polity. It may operate mainly or in part within the polity or keep out of it altogether. Whichever it is, the common problem is this: the experience of this country is that governments do not stop doing some thing merely because it has been demonstrated to be bad. Or even contrary to constitutional directives and goals. They stop only if going along is made difficult to the point of near impossibility. No democratic dispensation should be thus, but Indian democracy is thus. Short of that, you demonstrate the truth of your critique till you are blue in the face or shout till you are hoarse in the throat, it is all the same.

This is the question that haunts all movements, and none has an answer. All strategies, whether violent or peaceful, have found that they are not without success, if by success is meant stemming of local forces of oppression or the local manifestation of global forces, and improving the situation of its victims at the margin or even more. One does not wish to belittle these achievements, and in any case its beneficiaries are grateful, and belittling makes no difference to them. But any attempt to go beyond that has been faced with an insuperable wall which defines the limits of Indian democracy.

The naxalites - in particular the largest of them, the Maoists - are generally credited with having used strategies of violent struggle to great effect. That they have had substantial effect on the local social and political structures is beyond doubt. From Telangana to Bihar, local society would not be what it is but for their effect in turning much of it upside down. That they have often acted as a very effective deterrent to knavery and charlatanry of all kinds too is true. But looking back on nearly forty years of the naxalite movement, one is surprised how few are

the important policy decisions of the State or tendencies inherent in the logic of unequal development that the

naxalites have been able to stall. In fact, one cannot off-hand think of even one. They themselves may answer that it is because they have not tried. It is true that their strategic thinking does not turn around defeating the State politically but mobilizing against it militarily. Hence inflicting major political defeats or reversing trends of unequal or destructive development is not on their agenda. Yet it is also true that even if they tried they would not know how to go about stalling such decisions or forces. To put it simply, you can hold a gun to a landlord's head but Special Economic Zones or the Indo-US Nuclear Deal have no head to put a gun to. This degree of simplification of the issue may be criticized as unfair, and one would readily agree that Maoist violence is not just the armed action of individual Robinhoods. Nevertheless, after dressing up this skeleton with sufficient flesh and blood to make it real, you still do not get away from the basic truth of the caricature.

It is not just the abstractness of these issues that makes violence ineffective as an option against them. After all they do have concrete manifestations that can be confronted by violent mobilisation or armed action. But the subtlety of forms of power other than the feudal makes focused confrontation of a violent kind difficult to operationalise. Violence may be good or bad, necessary or

unnecessary, but it is always crude. Intelligent exercise of power, on the other hand, is subtle. So is capitalist rationality, in general. It is sometimes but not always crudely oppressive. It also comes with promises of a better life for the middle classes and employment for the poor. It spreads its operational incidents all over and each of them offers its own rationality. It gives a little and takes a lot but it gives at one place and takes at another. It speaks in a dozen tongues, each offering a limited rationality, while the totality is hidden behind layers of opacity and subterfuge. Its lies require intelligent nailing, and its logistics requires subtle handling to immobilize it. For in the better kind of agitational strategy the object of popular mobilization is to immobilize the opponent, and that is where violent methods score over peaceful methods. But whom or what do you immobilize to make an SEZ inoperable?

And then there is the law and its machinery of enforcement.

The law of course does not turn the other way when violent mobilization is used against a landlord or a local oppressor. But neither are the stakes as high nor is social disapproval so strong then as when alleged schemes of development or alleged policies of national security are obstructed by violent mobilization. Agitations

disrupt normal life, violent agitations more so. The insecurity and uncertainty this creates can be exploited by the State to either incite the people against the agitators even to the point of getting them lynched or to cover up for the violent methods of suppression it employs. It can even get righteously suppressive. And when the stakes are high social disapproval can be engineered beyond its normal levels. We are all aware of how much hatred the State can generate against agitations, especially violent ones, if it believes that its vital interests are affected. And that can be the justification for lawless enforcement of law, the more lawless the more righteous the anger it can whip up in society.

One option then is to throw up one's hands and say that it is futile to fight an evil beyond a point while it remains in power. And that the real task is to gain political power and replace the fount of evil. This makes sense from one angle but misses the point from another and begs the question from a third. It misses the point because at one level the question we are posing to ourselves is not about this society or this polity, but about democracy as such and the amenability of governance to correction by popular disapproval. To say that we need not spend too much time over this because we wish to come to power and then we will not face this problem is no answer. It begs the question from another angle because if you do not know how to mobilize people in effective numbers against evil governance, how are you sure you know how to mobilize them for capture of State power?

Peaceful mobilization has one advantage over violent mobilisation. A larger number of people can participate in it, and it can choose its targets and devise its methods of agitation more subtly. It gives space for dialogue even the while agitation goes on, dialogue not so much with the establishment as with society, and so the vital dimension of critique is alive without suspending the agitation to clear space for it, and this is essential in any struggle against an opponent who operates in a universe of intelligent rationality. This is one reason why peaceful methods of struggle are not only morally but also politically healthier. But in terms of its effectiveness in reversing policy decisions or structural trends, peaceful methods are even more ineffective than violent methods. Quite plainly, dharnas and street plays and hartals and half-an-hour-at-a-time road blocks and street corner speeches and jathas can go on for ever and ever and neither the State nor the Ambanis lose any thing. This is what often makes activists cynical and gives them that urge to seek an appointment with the Maoists. When they are so tempted they think the only problem they have had with violence is that it is morally problematic and physically unsafe. It is assumed that it is necessarily more effective. It isn't, and it has not been.

Can we turn to the law to make governance answerable to popular disapproval other than at election time? Constitutional democracy as we know it in India gives little scope for such a hope but PILs have held a lot of fascination for activists. Much of it is born of out of ignorance of the law as much as the sociology of adjudication. The average intelligent Indian thinks of PIL as the modern equivalent of the bell which the better kind of king is reputed to have strung outside his palace for the desperate citizen to tug at and get an instant hearing and instant justice. The average intelligent Indian also thinks that all the limitations of judicial power that he or she is otherwise familiar with will vanish when the Courts sit to hear PILs, namely that they become benign despots who can set every wrong right by passing a condign order. Desperation can be the only reason for these illusions. Less excusable is the ignorance of the sociology of adjudication. Judges, taken as a class, are at one with most of the political and economic tendencies since liberalisation for no more subtle reason than that they belong to the social class that has benefited and will benefit much more from these tendencies. Extremely derisive comments about PILs are made with juvenile exuberance by the Supreme Court these days to send out a signal that the activist or desperate citizen need not take the trouble to go all the way to New Delhi. Law journals report some divergence of opinion and even snide comments about judicial activism in the Supreme Court, but the divergence is between conservative judicial activism and conservative aversion to it.

There is no option but to devise ways of stopping the system in its depredations. Since Indian democracy has not learnt to respect reasoned criticism unless it is armed with the strength to physically prevent the execution of the policies criticized, ways of achieving such strength must be sought by agitational movements. In principle the best method is to mobilize the people likely to be affected in large numbers and physically sit in the path of the State and Capital. But then the people in their concreteness are riven by diversity of interests and insularity of communities, crushed by poverty and misery, weakened by the disease of opportunism even at the lowest levels which has been the greatest contribution of the Congress party to Indian political culture, enfeebled by attachment to their political patrons, and disillusioned with empty rhetoric and moral corruption of agitations and movements. In particular, they see that activists who were in an earlier generation characterized by sacrifice of personal concerns are no longer the same. To my mind, this is the greatest disservice done by the NGOs, but this culture is now common to a large section of political activists, too. On the other hand, the very effect of politicization has been that the people have lost their innocence and often weigh the costs and benefits of struggle with greater caution than in the past. One cannot blame them, especially when the caution is reinforced by the fact that activists themselves exhibit the same attitude these days. All this combines to make strong mobilisation difficult and tempts honest activists to look for short cuts, ranging from armed action to PILs. But

there are no short cuts.

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