

Of Disruptive Signals

Revolutionary Violence versus Democracy: Narratives from India

Ajay Gudavarthy (Editor),
Sage, 2017;
pp. 248, Rs 750.

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Any act of political violence in a democracy raises serious questions about its legitimacy. It arouses enormous amount of debate, discussion and dissent. The reason, of course, is simple. Political violence is not a personal matter. Any act of deliberate political violence always incorporates the larger political message. It is a disruptive signal to the established order and the state like no other. It challenges its basic foundations.

Even though elsewhere in his work, Ajay Gudavarthy has aptly described India as a 'violent democracy', the revolutionary violence of the Maoist radicals has been a dominant challenge in Indian politics, like no other, for the last 50 years. First begun in the Naxalbari district in west Bengal, in 1967, it continues to pose a serious political challenge to the Indian state and society even though the state machinery exaggerates as when the former Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh declared that it poses 'the greatest internal security threat' in India.

In this context, the book under review is a welcome addition to the literature on political violence. Ajay Gudavarthy, associate professor, JNU, Delhi has put together these essays to reflect upon the nature and the need for revolutionary violence – effectively Maoist violence – in the context of democracy in India. In his introduction, he suggests that as "democratic sensibilities spread ... (and deepen), the question of use of violence as a legitimate and also effective means of bringing about social/political change has come under stress".

In the last 50 years, as Gudavarthy notes in his introduction, Indian society has changed significantly. Since the 1991 economic reforms, the new neoliberal economic order has redefined the role of the state in economy. With the rise of social media in the recent years, methods of political mobilisation for protest in democracies across the world have changed, viz., the Occupy movement and Arab Spring. And yet, the Maoists in India continue to hold on to their own politics of revolutionary violence for radical transformation in India. These essays in different ways critique the relevance of this revolutionary violence.

Varavara Rao's writes about experiments with governance under Maoists' Janatana Sarkar in Dandakaranya. He calls it an alternative people's development model under the leadership of the party with well-organised mass organisations, people's militia and village level party organisation. Its activities are wide ranging from agriculture development to education to health and medicine, justice and even public relations department. Unfortunately, the essay is

a simple, in fact, simplistic narration of what the party is doing without any self-reflection or critical analysis of these experiments.

Anand Teltumbde's insightful essay is an elaborate examination of the very logic of revolutionary violence. It traces the history of the practice of this violence from the time of Marx and Engels and how their view of revolutionary violence and its necessity for social transformation evolved over time. He distinguishes between structural violence and the physical violence. He decries that structural, systematic violence that denies human possibilities to millions of poor in a democracy like India and elsewhere is not considered violence by many and often the brutal violence by the state machinery goes unchallenged.

Simultaneously, he blames the Maoists for over-reliance on revolutionary violence instead of using it selectively and strategically though, according to him, revolutionary violence may be extra-moral but not immoral and "so long as it poses challenge to the present order, (this) violence... may be regarded as divine violence".

G Hargopal discusses kidnap as a revolutionary strategy by the Maoists, specifically the case of Sukhna district collector in Chhattisgarh, who was kidnapped by the Maoists to demand release of their arrested comrades, the immediate halt to operation green hunt, release thousands of innocent tribals in jails and putting a stop to combing operations by the police. Though in the end Maoists had to release the collector without any firm commitment by the state to their demands, in the process, they were able to effectively contrast the concern for the collector among the state and the media and even many civil society activists with their callous and even hostile attitudes towards the tribals who are being denied even their minimal basic rights by the state.

Neera Chandok attempts to evaluate the efficacy of revolutionary violence as a political practice within its own framework, to see whether it achieves what it sets out to do. Quoting extensively from Frantz Fanon, she suggests that even as he advocated violence as 'cleansing force' for the colonised, he also warned against its excessive use. However, according to her, the Maoists in India employ tremendous violence to coerce the local population into supporting them in various ways and thus inhibit the difficult task of political mobilisation. Besides, even though Maoists have achieved a few tangible gains for the people, their developmental model is far from an alternative to the state model.

Sumanta Banerjee questions the basic analysis of Indian economy and society by the Maoists. He suggests that from the very beginning their agrarian programme was a poor imitation of Chinese programme of the 1940s and was highly inappropriate in the vastly different economic and political conditions in India. He criticises Maoists for their inability to formulate a multi-pronged strategy for different layers of Indian society and their retreat to the remote, tribal areas. In his view, the Maoists have focussed too much on the tactics of armed revolution to the exclusion of mass movements and often at local level, they have formed opportunistic alliances with regional political powers without any tangible gains for their politics.

K Balgopal critically evaluates the Maoist strategy of violence in his case study of Andhra Pradesh. He describes how initially when the Maoists began to mobilise, for the first time, common people there experienced something resembling justice. But then the state swiftly responded through brutal repression. When the Maoists retaliated, the vicious circle of violence and counter-violence in the state began. Finally, the Maoists decided to simply move

to other neglected areas – and there is no shortage of these areas in India- instead of trying to reformulate their strategy. Further, Maoists also failed to adequately respond to the emerging politics of identity: caste, tribe or gender, among the next generation. The Maoists also failed to grasp that the use of excessive violence by cadres could easily degenerate into private vengeance.

Chitralkha looks at the motives behind a tribal becoming a Maoist. It is an ethnographic study of ordinary activists and soldiers of the Maoist movement. In a complex, rich narrative, she finds that activists on the ground were not always in sync with the larger political narratives of the Maoist leadership. Instead, they were often motivated by a deep “individual quest for recognition and self-actualisation”. Further, later, their motivation changed to the need for recognition among peers and amongst one’s own community as other avenues of differentiation and recognition dried up for the young and the restless.

Lipika Kamra and Uday Chandra find two dominant sets of representation of the subaltern in the context of Maoists: either as victims of Maoist vanguardism, to be rescued – a perspective that dominates the state policies and functionaries and among some left liberal intellectuals or they have “an already existing revolutionary consciousness” as illustrated by the history of their rebellion since the colonial times. However, according to authors, the agency operates in multiple ways among the tribals with a long history of the engagement of tribals with the state, the changing contours of the local tribal economy and the growing class differentiation within communities.

This edited volume is a wide-ranging collection of essays on revolutionary violence, its efficacy, limitations and relevance in a democratic India. The collection points out that even as democracies are failing in fulfilling their promises and populist authoritarian regimes are becoming popular once again across countries, including India, the alternative of revolutionary violence to transform the entire social structure remains deeply problematic and has become even more distant in people’s imagination.

I find two basic limitations in this collection. One that it has confined revolutionary violence in India to only the Maoist violence even though, in my opinion, at least the militant struggle for Azadi in Kashmir with all its faults would also qualify as revolutionary violence. Second, nothing in the book suggests any possible alternative to democracy and revolutionary violence for the dramatic transformation of an unequal and exploitative society like contemporary India. In other words, when both have their serious limitations, where do the people at the margin go to claim their basic rights?

Finally, a suggestion. How about a collection of essays on counter-revolutionary violence versus democracy in India?