

People Power

Millions on the Margins

The spate of brutal killings of Salva Judem members by Maoists in Chattisgarh and encounter deaths of Maoists in Andhra Pradesh expose the fault lines of our society and polity. These are not acts of violence inspired by extra-territorial terrorist agencies to destabilize our nation. These are the products of anguish, despair and bitterness resulting from decades of misgovernance and an economic growth process which relegates millions to the margins. The causes are internal and rooted in the alienation of large segments of population on account of denial of opportunities and elementary justice.

Organized violence of all kinds undermines economic growth, destabilizes the society and weakens the nation. However, ideological violence can only be eliminated by addressing the causes of alienation and bitterness, even as the assaults against the constitutional order are firmly repelled. Mere counter-violence and intelligence may deplete Maoists for the time being. But as long as the underlying causes are not addressed, more and more disenchanted citizens are likely to take to the gun to fight the injustices of the system, however misplaced their methods are.

Centuries of vertical fragmentation and social hierarchies led to unimaginable misery and denial of justice and opportunity. The social movements that accompanied freedom struggle gave some semblance of hope to the oppressed sections. The work of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule in Western India, Narayana Guru's remarkable efforts to liberate Ejhavas in Kerala from caste oppression, and Ramaswamy Naicker's Self Respect Movement are three noteworthy examples of such social mobilization for inclusion of sections which were hitherto on the margins of Indian society. The leadership and intellectual vigour of Babasaheb Ambedkar gave a new meaning to the quest for equality and justice, and made it an integral part of our constitutional order.

Sadly, independent India witnessed the decline of social movements. Simultaneously, the political commitment for the inclusions of Dalits and oppressed segments in the mainstream society has been symbolic at best. Issues of real empowerment have been neglected, and politics of tokenism have become the norm. If India pursued robust policies for human development and rapid economic growth, the situation might have significantly improved by now. But excessive state control led to politics of patronage and rent-seeking, and depressed economic growth. Politics of tokenism became a substitute to genuine empowerment and human development. The result is the extremely uneven growth process, and exclusion of large sections of population from the benefits of self government.

Ideally, economic liberalization, competition and the unleashing of the entrepreneurial potential should help bridge the social divide. As skills and capacity for participation in wealth creation determine social mobility, birth and patronage should cease to matter. But tragically, the Indian state did not create conditions for

such social mobility. India never created conditions for human development of the disadvantaged sections. The limited educational opportunities created in the early decades after freedom benefited the upper castes, and created a sizeable body of people with skills, knowledge and entrepreneurship. But the Dalits and other disadvantaged sections were largely denied the fruits of education and development. Over the past three decades, the unmet demand led to growth of private education, and state institutions declined. The poor too started sending children to private schools, adding to their financial burden. But much of private education too is sub-standard. As a result, most of the poor children never fulfil their potential, despite the genetic endowment.

Today, the future of nearly 70% of children can be predicted with reasonable certainty on the basis of conditions at birth – caste, literacy level of parents and income. The bulk of the children have no opportunities for vertical mobility. Near collapse of public health systems, and low level of skills even if some smattering of education is imparted have further compounded the misery of the poor. Ubiquitous corruption, over-centralization, oppressive state machinery, and failure of rule of law broke the backs of the poor already groaning under social inequity. Discrimination by birth is thus institutionalized, despite a liberal constitution and democratic trappings. Justice is denied to most of the people, and law applied to different people in different ways. Dominance of money and muscle power in elections made politics a huge part of the problem, not the solution.

It is these cruel circumstances which breed anger, alienation and violence. If we do not address these fundamental issues, violence will undo all fruits of freedom and economic growth. And growth itself will be stunted because of violence, and non-participation of the bulk of the people in wealth creation. As the illiterate eke out a precarious livelihood through drudgery, the 'educated' are unemployed for want of skills.

This spiral of violence can be reversed only if we focus on education, healthcare and skill promotion. All parties claim to be committed to these worthy goals. But for these fruits to reach the poor, we need to redefine politics. Politics as business should give way to politics revolving round the people's lives and empowerment. The oppressed sections which depend on state for education and healthcare must be enabled to truly participate in politics and decision making. Total decentralization of power, comprehensive political reforms to restore the spirit of service to politics, and radical reforms of police and justice system to ensure swift and real justice to all sections must be integral to the new political culture.

As Martin Luther king said, the silence of good men is far more dangerous than the brutality of bad men. The thinking sections need to mobilize the people whose future is at stake, and act now.

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