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Maoist cult of death

“We are sorry,” said a Communist Party of India (Maoist) spokesperson after a bomb went off under a crowded bus in Chhattisgarh earlier this month, killing 24 civilians, “but it could not be helped.” Friday’s tragedy in West Bengal’s Paschim Medinipur district, which has claimed at least 75 lives, suggests Maoist groups see the death of ever-larger numbers of civilians as an acceptable part of the macabre war they have inflicted on large swathes of central and eastern India. West Bengal authorities have announced the Maoist-linked People’s Committee for Police Atrocities left posters at the site where the Mumbai-bound Gyaneshwar Express derailed, saying the attack was carried out to protest unspecified Communist Party of India (Marxist) “atrocities.” In recent months, there have been other attacks of this kind. Last week, two people were injured when extremists in Paschim Medinipur opened fire on a Tatanagar-bound express train. Two days earlier, a bomb went off under a train carrying oil through Bihar; 14 freight cars caught fire. On May 19, Maoists bombed a freight train near Jhargram, injuring two engine drivers. Last year, two people were killed and 38 injured in an attack on another train in Jharkhand’s Simdega district. During the three-day bandh called by Maoists between February 7 and 9, 2010, railway lines, which by their nature are difficult to protect, were targeted 11 times. Each of these incidents could easily have had outcomes just as horrific as the latest.

A movement that used to claim it targeted only ‘combatants’ is increasingly resorting to excitative terrorism against ‘non-combatants.’ Eight years ago, when Maoists blew up a bus near Chintagudem, in Andhra Pradesh’s Warangal district and 14 adivasis were killed, CPI(Maoist) leader Muppala Laxman Rao, alias Ganapathy, issued a public apology — although it bears mention that he did little to punish the perpetrators, choosing only to demote squad commander Akula Indraiah. In general, Maoist groups in Andhra Pradesh offered apologies, and sometimes even compensation, for civilian deaths. In recent months, dozens of local-level opponents of Maoists — many of them poor peasants — have been tortured and executed; CPI(Marxist) cadre in West Bengal have been among the principal victims. Maoist leaders have been unrepentant, claiming, for example, that they had issued circulars and warnings that civilians “should keep away from buses and lorries ferrying government forces” but “they did not listen and paid a heavy price.” Language like this advertises the fact that a movement carried out in the name of India’s poor has, for all practical purposes, degenerated into an inhuman cult of death.

Water crisis of east & west Punjab

M.S. Gill

As the long hot summer sizzles, one’s thoughts in Lahore and Amritsar turn to water. It is scarce on both sides of the border. When the British finally and fully took over the Punjab in 1849, their thoughts turned to the possibility of engineering for agriculture. In the 1860s, they built the first canal in the Gurdaspur-Amritsar area. During 1880-1920, they built the great canal colonies, in west Punjab. Life-giving water was spread over the Baars, pushing back forever the great story of herdsman Ranjha and the peerless Heer. The open scrub lands dotted with Kikar and lusty rivers were replaced with wheat and cotton fields, and vast citrus gardens. The graziers disappeared. Sikh farmers having little land in the impoverished east went west, and by the 1930s, they became fat and prosperous zamindars. Sadly, just when the fruits were coming, they were pushed back east.

The political battle of the 1940s was also a battle for land. Someone told me in Lahore once “we are land rich.” They added to their holdings, howsoever. In the east, Tarlok Singh, ICS, devised the graded cut for Nehru to settle far too many farmers, on much less land. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Punjabis, helped with cooperative loans, sank nine lakh shallow tubewells, built the Bhakra, and created the Green Revolution. I remember in my Amritsar village, sweet water was available at just 15 feet in the well; by our land passed a small canal, perfectly designed by the British. In summer, we grew green,

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sweet-smelling lucerne and other fodders, and the buffaloes yielded plenty of milk. In west Punjab, the farmers did not share the land bounty fairly. The few at the top took the most. But still in their skewed farm sociology, they prospered with good harvests, more citrus orchards and plenty of water to waste.

In the new century, all this changed. In 1960, Jawaharlal Nehru and Ayub Khan signed the Indus Waters Treaty in Karachi, mediated by World Bank president Eugene Black. For 50 years, this worked well for both Punjabis. Both built the Bhakra, the Beas, and the Tarbela dams, and expanded irrigation. My Punjab added nine lakh tubewells through cooperatives. The other Punjab failed with the public sector tubewells, and remains largely dependent on canal water.

Sixty years have drastically reduced the comfort of 1950 on both sides. In Pakistan, the population growth from 50 million to 175 million has put an unacceptable burden. This has reduced the water availability per capita, per year, from 5,000 cubic feet in 1960 to 1,500 today. In our Punjab too, the population has increased over 60 years but at a lesser rate. In 1947, in east Punjab, 6,000 cubic metres of potable water was available

per person, per year. Now it is only 1,600 cubic metres. It is estimated to fall further to 1,147 cubic metres in 2050. However, the nine lakh shallow tubewells now dangle dry. The rich have started digging deep to 300 ft or more with submersible pumps to grab water. Small farmers who predominate cannot afford the cost and their wells are drying up. One deep tubewell will dry up a hundred around it. The water table has gone far down, and this situation will lead to social tension. We read every day that 95 per cent of east Punjab’s development blocks are in the grey area, for tubewells. In southern Punjab, and some other pockets, the underground water, in any case, is salty. West Punjab too faces these grave questions.

As a child I went to Sargodha in west Punjab to stay in the new lands. The land, the cattle and the people smiled. Now I read of Ghazafar Ali, a farmer in Chak 95, Sargodha, and his woes. He says the water crisis means life and death to him. He does not get his regular supply. He cannot grow fodder and the cattle starve in summer. There are extended closures of the canal. According to him, the crisis is in the entire State, but particularly bad in Sargodha-Faisalabad. He worries about the weather changes, and la-

ments, “we are tied to river water, dams, rainfall and tubewells. You take away the river water, and this place will turn into a wilderness it once was.” This is what Calvert, ICS, warned of in 1928 in his classic book, *The Wealth and Welfare of the Punjab*. In Lahore, aggressive leaders challenge the IWT and accuse India of not being fair. Swiss arbitrators are brought in to adjudicate. The Americans with their satellite studies have recently put out ominous reports, of severe and steady groundwater depletion, in both Punjabis, and western Uttar Pradesh. In a convocation address at the Punjab Agriculture University in Ludhiana on November 5, 1998, I warned that there would be a crisis and tension within and without on the question of water. We see it already and I worry about the situation 10 years hence with more population, more demands, more anxiety and hysteria.

What should the two Punjabis do? What should my Punjab do? I know we will have to rise above, and beyond, politics and focus on the crisis, which requires difficult and bitter solutions. Scientific solutions exist, and more can be found. But they will have to be applied with a will, and firmness, over long periods, to make any visible difference. As Development Commissioner, Punjab, from 1985 to 1988, I visualised that the time had come to license and regulate tubewell sinking, including the permissible depth. All must share fairly, and not take the maximum, by means of wealth and power. I also felt that it was very easy, in the computer age, to monitor all nine lakh tubewells all the time to know the depletion and recharge; to be able to plan and administer the fair share and use of groundwater. I would appoint a High Commissioner, for Ground Water Management, for the Punjab, with full scientific staff, and powers, reporting only to the Chief Minister. He should also present an annual detailed written report to the Assembly. A more balanced crop plan has to be insisted upon. I had said in Ludhiana that the Punjab is not a great agriculture State. It is only a grain growing factory, and factories have lockouts. We are facing one now.

In our Punjab, we faced an unprecedented crisis when far too many people returned from the west to be settled on too little of poor quality land. We created a new Punjab which, since 1966, has been providing the surplus for the country to avoid imports. If we face up to this new crisis, in the new century, we can certainly overcome it. Like Israel, let us use the full scientific knowledge of the world to lay out an efficient system of water usage. Our British canals are in a state of collapse and flood irrigation will not do. We also need to have a more balanced crop regime. This requires revival of the Punjab Agricultural University and making it efficient. As for my friends in west Punjab, they should, as their Foreign Minister said, stop wasting 40 per cent of the canal water, rely on their collective will and effort, and not allow people to mislead them with the comfort that they have no shortcomings and that others are to blame. Both Punjabis should face up to the water crisis, with courage and steady application of science. Else, they will be in trouble which won’t go away.

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