

On the Election Boycott Tactic of the Maoists

SPOKESPERSON, CPI (MAOIST)

A spokesperson of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) responds to Sumanta Banerjee's critique of the party's election boycott call in the recent Lok Sabha elections, and various other aspects of the party's political practice.

In his article entitled "The Maoists, Elections, Boycotts and Violence" (EPW, 2 May 2009), Sumanta Banerjee (SB) makes an attempt to analyse the boycott call issued by the Communist Party of India (Maoist) [CPI(Maoist)] in the recently held Lok Sabha elections. This is based on the "Interview" of Azad, the spokesperson of the Central Committee of CPI(Maoist), which appeared in *Maoist Information Bulletin No 7*. SB begins his article with the following comment:

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!

That even a shrewd political commentator and progressive intellectual like SB was carried away by the propaganda let loose by sensation-craving commercial media shows how powerful the latter is in moulding and influencing even saner minds. There are two fabrications in SB's above-quoted remark. Allow me to briefly explain.

Trumped-Up Story

The first untruth – or distortion, if one would like to call it so – is the so-called hijacking of the train. Either to sensationalise in order to add some colour to drab news stories, or with the evil intention of projecting the Naxalites as the biggest threat to internal security and thereby to provoke the rulers to raise and deploy more central forces in Maoist areas, the media intentionally magnified and exaggerated the incident. A mass protest in which a few hundred people stopped the passenger train proceeding from Barkakhana to Mughalsarai at Hehegada station in Latehar district of Jharkhand for four hours is made into a sensational hijack! If

one news channel flashes the news thus, no other such channel wants to be left behind and the story goes on and on, non-stop for 24, 48 or even more hours, depending on the interest it generates among the viewers. Who first propagated this sensational news is not known but in no time it spread like wildfire with every news channel and newspaper jumping into the fray and making even independent thinkers like SB their prey. Even if one gave a little thought to the meaning of the word "hijacking" one would not become such an easy prey to the media sharks. From where had the Maoists hijacked the train? Had they diverted it from its usual route by forcing the driver or guard? If not, how could one describe this as hijacking? Let us ask SB: If stopping a train by hundreds of people squatting on the railway tracks is termed as hijacking, then, what term would you use to describe the seizure and forcible diversion of a train by a handful of armed people?

It must be emphasised that the so-called hijacking by protestors who stopped the train by squatting on the tracks for four hours is not related in any way to the call for boycott of elections issued by the Central Committee of CPI(Maoist). As made clear by the spokesperson of our party in Jharkhand soon after the incident, the protest was organised as part of the bandh demanding a judicial enquiry into the brutal, cold-blooded murders of five village youth by the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel in Badhania village that falls under Barwadih PS in Latehar district. The five youth were picked up within an hour after the mine blast triggered by Maoist guerrillas killed two CRPF men on the morning of the 16th of April. The villagers were shot dead within two hours after the CRPF had lost its men in the ambush by Maoists. The fake encounter generated widespread protests throughout the state for almost a week in some places. The top police brass had to publicly concede that it was a fake encounter and by the end of the month three top police officials were removed from their posts as a direct fallout of this brutal incident. Thus, at least now it should be clear that the train was held up in Hehegada by

unarmed protestors to object against the fake encounter, and not, let us repeat, for boycott of polls.

sb appears to be quite relieved that the Maoists had

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).

But here again he displays a sense of cynicism and states this as if it was the first time that the Maoists had spared the voters. In fact, even the unfortunate attacks on poll officials were an aberration and not a policy of our party. It was due to mistaken identity that a polling party (instead of the police party) became the victim in Kasamsur in Manpur area of Kanker district in Chhattisgarh (Dandakaranya). In fact, our Dandakaranya Special Zonal Committee had tendered an apology immediately after the unfortunate incident and reassured the people that it will take all precautions that such unfortunate incidents would not occur in future. Our statement was covered in the local media widely. A serious review of the mistake was also made by the concerned committee. While expressing our condolences to the families of the five polling officials who died in the landmine explosion, we made it very clear that it is not our policy to harm polling staff. Even after this it is surprising that sb includes polling officials in the list of our targets.

The Main Questions

Now taking up the main questions raised by sb, is it correct to conclude that the “vast majority of the voters are not ready for boycotting elections”? But, is it true that voters had gone in “large numbers (often representing 50 to 60% of the electorate in these areas)”? Is it a fact that there has been “moderate to high percentage of polling in Naxalite areas in Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Bihar and Jharkhand”? sb further tries to paint a picture of the Maoist party attempting to enforce a boycott over an unwilling population that has enthusiasm for casting their votes. He writes:

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.

Let us take up these questions in turn.

How far is the contention of sb that the vast majority of people are not ready for boycotting elections true? Does sb know the facts regarding the actual percentage of votes polled in the Maoist strongholds about which he asserts so authoritatively? Did he tour any of these areas at the time of the elections or has he drawn his conclusions from the concocted stories floated by the police and the media? In the psychological war waged against the Maoist revolutionaries by the reactionary ruling classes, intelligence/police officials, and faithfully represented by the commercial media, the most common theme has been the supposed gap between the aspirations of the people and the goal of the party, besides the beaten “caught-in-the-crossfire” theory put forth not only by police officials but also people like K Balagopal as seen in his critique of the novel, *Raago*, where he cynically concludes that the interests, aspirations and goals of an adivasi girl like Raago are different from those of the party and hence one cannot expect people like her to continue in the revolution until the end. The statistics are deliberately distorted

to present such a picture to show that the party is isolated and uses force to obstruct the people when the latter go against the decisions and goals set by the party.

sb's conclusion sounds subjective and biased and hence ridiculous, particularly after seeing the apathy, disillusionment and boycott as a major trend by a significant chunk of the population in the 15th Lok Sabha elections. In fact, never before had boycott become such a potent weapon in the hands of the people as during the Elections 2009. Hence the reactionary rulers had to spend hundreds of crores of rupees to refurbish the image of the rotten parliamentary system. Bollywood and Tollywood, cricket stars, industrialists, multinational corporations, media foundations, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) carried out non-stop propaganda about the virtues of democracy, the sanctity of the vote, how not casting the vote was tantamount to aiding criminals win, and so on. There was no end to web sites and blogs calling on people to exercise their franchise. To lend an air of credibility to their propaganda they asked the voters to use their wisdom to choose between the good and the bad, to reject the criminals and corrupt elements, and to elect the virtuous, as if there were virtuous people left in the parliamentary pigsty.

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The reactionary rulers have grasped the dangerous trend of boycott emerging throughout the country in the 2009 elections – a trend that SB failed to recognise. Hence they were desperate to prove that democracy was the victor. The day the first phase of elections to the Lok Sabha was completed on 16 April, the media tried to show how democracy had won against anarchy, how ballot proved to be superior to bullet, how people defied the Maoists and came forth to exercise their franchise braving the bullet, and such endless rhetoric. “Bullet vs Ballot: Voters Give Mandate on Maoist-hit LS Seats” wrote a paper. “Maoist Warnings Fail to Deter Voters in Red Zone” claimed another, pointing to the 45% votes polled in Gaya district. “Despite Red Terror 50% Polling in Jharkhand” crowed another paper. “Ballot Wins against Bullet” ran another headline. There was no limit to such hollow claims and empty phrases to prove that the so-called democracy got the upper-hand in this sham drama. The Chief Election Commissioner-designate Navin Chawla howled that “democracy triumphed over Naxalism on 16 April”.

Despite such appeals to the voters by all and sundry, hardly 50% turned up at the polling booths. In Mumbai, where the shrill cries of these apologists of parliamentary democracy were the loudest, the percentage of voting was a paltry 43.2%; in Thane even less. Then on whose behalf is SB speaking? If he comes to a conclusion based on the 43% who voted in Mumbai, then how undemocratic would his stand be for neglecting the majority of 57% who had refused to be drawn to the polling booths even when popular actors and NGOs engaged in intense campaigning calling on them to vote? He agrees that people had indeed used boycott as a form of protest relating it to their local issues. Yet, he concludes:

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.

Our party had never denied the fact that people will cast their votes but not because they are “proud of their democratic right and hopeful of some change through the electoral process” as imagined by SB. What percentage of the electorate actually

exercised its vote and how much of the vote was rigged? What percentage of the voting population voted out of compulsion, material and other incentives, caste, communal, ethnic, regional and other factors? And, how many voters were forced into voting due to threats and intimidation by gun-toting khaki goons or local rowdies? If all these are taken into account what would be the percentage of voters who actually exercised their franchise freely and of their own accord?

Voting in Naxalite Areas

As regards the conclusion that there has been “moderate to high percentage of polling in Naxalite areas in Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Bihar and Jharkhand”, where did SB get his figures from? If he goes through the local media in each of these states instead of relying on the Delhi-centric press, then he cannot afford to miss the reports of zero to nominal polling in hundreds of booths, and re-polling in several centres amidst unheard of security. He cannot afford to miss visuals of empty booths and security forces all around with hardly any civilians in sight. For instance, during the assembly elections in Chhattisgarh in last November, polling was held thrice in a centre called Gougonda in Konta constituency. In the third re-poll, over a 1,000 policemen and CRPF personnel were deployed but only 10 out of a total of 711 votes were polled. The attempts of the police to terrorise the people and force them to cast their votes simply did not work as elsewhere since people had fled upon seeing the police. We had cited several such instances in our *Bulletin No 7*. In Anthagadh constituency, polling personnel did not go to the polling centre in Partap Pur, Chota Pakhanjur, Chote Bethiya, and Aakmetta. About 1,50,000 voters in 176 villages spread across 13 Lok Sabha constituencies in the state of Jharkhand boycotted the polls this time. In Lalgarh, in West Medinipur district of West Bengal, no votes were cast in several booths. Of the 30,000 voters in Lalgarh, not more than 100 voted. In Malkangiri in Orissa, almost no polling was reported from booths in remote areas like Manyamkonda, Kurmanur, Poplur, Tangurkonda, Bodigeta, Karkatpalli, etc. The list of successful boycotts or nominal polling runs long.

In Andhra Pradesh, it is true there has been a setback to the revolutionary movement. No wonder, there has been an increase in the polling percentage. But even in the best of times rigging and voting at gunpoint ensure that in the villages considered to be the strongest bases of the Maoists the polling percentage would go up to even 80 to 90%. Deployment of the police can ensure a high percentage of polling even in Maoist strongholds. And in the native villages of the party leaders, the percentages go up to 80 to 90%. All the political parties are one in ensuring such an outcome to show that people do not heed the call of the Maoists and that democracy had won. In the recent elections, the headlines in most newspapers and the electronic media show how paranoid the rulers are about the boycott call of the Maoists and their desperation to prove that democracy was, after all, the victor. SB must do some homework before venturing to make sweeping comments and conclusions that people in Naxalite areas also do not heed the call given by the Maoist party.

What exactly he is driving at is not very clear. But from his remarks and the tone and tenor of his arguments it seems he wants the party to contest the elections as the “vast majority of the voters are not ready for boycotting elections”. Or at least, he does not want the party to issue a call for boycott since that, he feels, is not the aspiration of the people. He naively asks:

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?

He strongly believes that the boycott call should not be given as the majority of the people are not ready. He asks the CPI (Maoist) leaders:

(W)ill 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?

He agrees that our party does not use force and intimidate the voters and hence gives scope for “villagers in their strongholds to cast their votes without fear, instead of heeding to their boycott call”.

And hence he concludes: "This should be an eye-opener to the CPI(Maoist) leadership".

We think that the trend of boycott will grow stronger as the revolutionary movement grows stronger, the organs of people's revolutionary power come into being in vast tracts of the country, the armed strength of the people grows and the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA) makes impressive gains and wins decisive victories in some areas. Without the consolidation of the party, people's army and revolutionary mass organisations, organs of people's power, and without gaining an upper hand over the enemy in a significant area, one cannot imagine people coming out in huge numbers to boycott the polls. The emergence of an alternative to the parliamentary institutions will bring about a qualitative change in the perception, preparedness and approach of the people towards Parliament and the contesting political parties.

Learning from Our Mistakes

We welcome any frank and meaningful criticism of our line, policies and practice such as SB's criticism on the choice of priorities by the Indian Maoists. He says: "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." This criticism is partially true. Given the vastness of the country and the weakness of the Maoist movement, the model that is being developed in Dandakaranya and parts of Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa and some other states, is not yet seen as a viable alternative by various sections of the poor all over India. Moreover, the problems in the advanced areas and plains, and in the urban areas are of a different nature and we admit our party has not been able to address the problems of the poor living there. Thus, whatever has been achieved in a few pockets of the backward areas does not provide a wide-ranging viable alternative model by itself. A lot more has to be done to convince the people about a viable alternative model.

While such a constructive criticism is to be welcomed, one cannot understand the rationale behind some of his unwarranted comments like citing some mistakes on

the part of our party which are of no relevance here. For instance, ridiculing the apology tendered by the Maoists to the unfortunate deaths of five polling personnel in Chhattisgarh on the 16 April, SB recounts some serious mistakes committed by the Maoists in the past, like the three decades-old Kakatiya train incident, and a few incidents of punishments to police agents, and questions: "How long will they go on repeating such 'mistakes', and dismissing them as 'collateral damages' on their path of revolution?" There are also comments such as "the frequent killings of poor villagers by paranoiac Maoist guerrillas who suspect them of being police agents" based on concocted police reports or the biased reports in the media.

The Kakatiya train incident has been a blot in our party history and was due to the sheer inexperience of the comrades who were involved in the early years of our party's life. But, the above allegation needs some explanation from the party. We Maoists have never dismissed our mistakes and justified the deaths of innocent

civilians as "collateral damages". Every such incident is thoroughly reviewed by the concerned party committee, and where needed, by a higher party committee; those responsible are censured, lessons are drawn, and measures are initiated to rectify such mistakes and weaknesses. The hue and cry of the police, the mainstream political parties and the media over the punishments to police agents should be seen in the correct perspective. The police lure poor people into their informer network, create covert agents to work from within the party and the revolutionary movement, and attempt to cause the maximum damage to the party and the movement. Our failure to break the back of the intelligence network of the police is one of the main causes for the setback we had suffered in Andhra Pradesh. Learning from the lesson, we have been more cautious and have succeeded in breaking the enemy intelligence network to a considerable extent in Dandakaranya (Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra), Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal, which is one of

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the reasons that we are able to survive in the midst of the severest repression in these pockets. It is not paranoia but sheer necessity that is driving us to smash the enemy network that is dangerously spreading into the areas of struggle.

Do We Disrupt 'Development'?

Let us now briefly deal with SB's critique of our approach to the state's "development" activity. He writes:

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.

The reality is the CPI(Maoist) owes its entire existence to its work among the poor and deprived sections of the society. It has been able to build the longest sustained revolutionary movement in the history of India and south Asia, confronted the mighty Indian state for over four decades and had grown from strength to strength despite losing thousands of its cadres precisely because it has its roots firmly entrenched among the masses. It is by solving the burning problems of the people, particularly the problem of land alienation, lack of basic amenities and means of livelihood that our party has gained the active support of the masses, succeeded in involving a considerable section of the people in militant struggles and in the ongoing people's war. And this is precisely the reason why people continue to extend all kinds of support to the party even in the midst of the severest state repression. To say that our party has shown a "cruel disregard for these basic amenities demanded by the people" is to play into the hands of the establishment and some so-called civil society groups funded by the big business and imperialist agencies. Alleging that we have been "disrupting power supply and obstructing road building in the backward districts" and to attribute it to our "partisan interest" is another baseless charge that has been taken out of the police files.

The question is: why are the rulers interested in building roads, pucca school buildings and even helipads in a place like Maad (known to the outside world as

Abhujmad or the unknown land) at the present juncture? The fact is the rulers have a long-term strategy to exploit the natural resources of the region and had arrived at an agreement with the comprador big business houses and the MNCs to loot the natural wealth that is lying unexplored and unexploited in the bosom of these regions. They are planning to exploit the entire natural wealth from Raoghat to Maad and it is for this purpose that road-building is taken up at a hectic pace. As the Maoists are well-perched in these regions it is essential for the reactionary rulers to suppress them first in order to loot the wealth. None other than the prime minister himself spoke of how the natural wealth is locked up in these regions under the control of left wing extremists. Thus the so-called Red Corridor is sought to be "liberated" from the Maoists so as to hand it over to the vultures waiting with greedy mouths to prey on these regions. Hence school buildings are required as they provide fortified shelters to the CRPF and other state forces in their bloody onslaught against the Maoist revolutionaries.

More important, the plan of the rulers is to evict the adivasis from the region and settle them elsewhere permanently. The region is home to one of the oldest surviving tribes in India – the *madia gonds* – and now their very existence is at stake due to the so-called development that SB is worried about. We oppose only such development projects that harm the interests of the adivasis, facilitate the unhindered exploitation of the region's wealth, displace the indigenous tribes and the inhabitants of the forests from their homes and lands, and destroy their way of living and their culture. It is a mis-giving that we are opposed to every kind of road construction or that we disrupt power supply and communication. It is in fact our party that has been in the forefront of people's struggles for basic amenities and we ourselves had taken up some development activity that directly benefits the people in areas where we have our embryonic organs of people's democratic power. Yes, power supply has been disrupted as part of our resistance to the state offensive, fake encounters, etc. However, our party committees had reviewed this and decided to take up such sabotage

activities in a selective manner with least inconvenience to the people at large.

Boycott and Democratic Rights

And finally, coming to the key question posed by SB: 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? Boycott of elections and the minimum democratic right to reject the parties and candidates are complementary to each other. There is no contradiction between the two rights. Just as right to vote is being described as a democratic right, right to boycott is also a democratic right of the voter. But in many instances, the police and reactionary gangs force the voters to cast their votes. In such circumstances, provision of the right to rejection of candidates will give the voter a chance to reject everyone in the fray. It is a curious logic to substitute this for the general call of boycott, which is meant to enhance the awareness of the people regarding the futility and irrelevance of elections to their lives and in solving their basic problems.

Our boycott is taken up in different forms depending upon our strength, people's consciousness and preparedness. In some places it is at the level of propaganda, in some it is done passively in the sense that we do not attempt to stop the process of election but mobilise the people to question the parties and candidates and obstruct their campaigns. And where we are strong enough and have our own organs of people's power and have emerged as an alternative before the people, we organise active boycott and do all that is possible to prevent the election from taking place. In a country where the revolutionary movement and the people's consciousness are at various levels of development, our form of struggle too takes different forms of expression. Hence stopping or not stopping the people is not the point here. It is the people themselves who have actively stopped the election process in many places either due to their anger against parties for not solving their problems and non-fulfilment of promises, or because they see the futility of the very system of parliamentary democracy and the drama of elections.