

# **Mainstream Politics Not for Us, Says Koteswar Rao, a member of the Politburo of the Communist Party of India (Maoist)**

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\*This is a rare interview with Koteswar Rao, a member of the politburo of the Communist Party of India (Maoist), the party's highest decision-making body. He is also head of the party's guerilla operations in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Orissa. The original comments on this article said the 51-year-old Maoist leader refused to be photographed and set his own terms for the meeting. *Mints* reporters were asked to arrive at a school in Chakadoba where they waited for around 5 hours. At around dusk, they were escorted to where Rao was [at] a clearing in the jungle that was reached after a brisk 30-minute walk. In a conversation that lasted at least 5 hours, Rao, who greeted the reporters with the Maoist Lal salaam or red salute, explained the Maoist philosophy. And his groups ultimate objective.

\* Edited excerpts:\*

**\*The administration alleges that you ambush people and run away that you don't have the courage to fight them\***

Absolute rubbish they know we don't run away, but say so because they can neither ignore us nor can they fight us. Even on 2 November, when Buddhhababu's (West Bengal chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee) convoy was attacked, I was within a kilometre of where the blast took place. Huge forces were deployed, the area was combed, but I did not run away. All our comrades in (West) Bengal are sons and daughters of the soil. Where will they run away? For the last five years, I am camping here and helping the organization grow. The Intelligence Branch knows everything. They know what I look like; they even have a picture taken last year. We are not scared of appearing before people. Lakhs of villagers and tribals know what I look like since I interact with them regularly. That we do not go out of the area controlled by us is because our central committee has decided that the strategic leadership team would stay put in the forests. That's out of concern for our security. I hide only from a select few, such as the police and completely unknown persons.

**\*How do you forge ties with locals?**

\* We play very diverse roles, which the people don't get to know. Because they have lost faith in the administration, villagers approach us with their day-to-day problems. We organize camps in villages so they can voice the grievances. We deal with the villagers with a lot of compassion and kindness, which is why they love and protect us. We also work for women's liberation. There are many women who are tortured by their (parents) in-law, husbands or parents. But they cannot protest because they are dependent on them. We fight for liberation of such women. Women are very important for our movement. Many oppressed women have joined us in our struggle across the country. They have led from the front in many a battle that we have fought. However, in terms of the strength, our women cadre in (West) Bengal is slightly weaker compared with other areas such as Jharkhand, Dandakaranya and Andhra Pradesh. Whereas elsewhere the ratio of men to women is 50:50, and even 60:40 in favour of women, in Bengal, the ratio is around 70:30 (in favour of men). Besides our guerilla operations, we also lead strong mass movements in many parts of West Bengal such as Lalgarh and Nandigram. A lot of women are participating in such movements, though they may not be members of the party. Exposure to such movements leads to political maturity. We need mature organizers for the party and would look to recruit women who have actively participated in these movements.

#### \*How do you fund your operations?\*

We mainly depend on donations and mass collections. Mass collections are of two types. In the harvest season, we go door to door collecting quintals (1 quintal is 100kg) of rice. In (West) Bengal, we depend on cooked food from villages and so don't go for collection of foodgrain, but in Dandakaranya, Chhattisgarh and Bihar, where we have bigger camps and run our own kitchen, collecting foodgrain is essential. Apart from this, we also collect cash. We appeal to villagers, who earn their living by selling kendu leaves (used to roll bidis) or by selling bamboo to paper mills, to donate a day's wage—typically Rs50-160 each a month. That apart, we impose fines on rich peasants and charge 2-5% levy on government contractors. We punish corrupt landlords and drive them out from the village. The properties that we seize from them, such as farm equipment and cattle, are used for village development in places where we run a parallel administration. But we don't charge anything from people's pay from NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), or (from) contractors building infrastructure such as roads and schools for the poor. We also loot banks, both government and private banks, from time to time. The last time (we) robbed a bank it was a branch of ICICI Bank in Ranchi. We got Rs5 crore from the operation and we attacked another bank to seize the weapons of the security guards. Majority of our weapons have been seized from the administration. In (West) Bengal, for instance, 60% of our weapons have been snatched from the police. We have bought only 10% on our own; the rest has come from other states. Yet, I would say we don't even have a small fraction of the cache of arms and ammunition that parties such as the Trinamool (Congress it won a significant victory in the recent Lok Sabha polls and is a rival to the Communist Party of India-Marxist, or CPM, one of the ruling parties in the state) and the CPM have. We don't even have a small fraction of arms and ammunition that parties such as the CPM and Trinamool have. You see, power doesn't come through weapons alone. Look at the people of Lalgarh (where tribals seized administrative power after the police allegedly tortured some of them on the suspicion that they were harbouring Maoists) with just home-made bows and arrows, they have stalled police. Guerilla operations depend a lot on peoples support and because people are with us, we have managed to keep the

police from reaching us. Our party runs on an annual budget of Rs15-20 crore. That's what we spend on our operations across the country, and it's almost the same amount that we raise through donations, seizures and heists. Most of the money is raised in Dandakaranya, Bihar and Jharkhand. In (West) Bengal, we spend around Rs1 crore a year, but we manage to raise only 10% of that amount locally. So, the rest comes from other states such as Jharkhand and Orissa.

**\*How do you recruit people for your movement?\***

We don't recruit from the villages on our own. We have a party-controlled mechanism under which we receive proposals from the locals. After obtaining the consent of the parents of the applicants, we forward the proposals to one of our committees. It vets them and takes a final call on whether or not to recruit, based on the person's antecedents, class and disposition towards others in his or her village. The responsibility of the group that I lead is to train the new recruits. Many of them are initially intimidated by the difficult life we live, but most of them eventually learn to cope with it.

**\*How do you see this movement ending? Would you join mainstream politics?\***

There is no end to revolution. There is no time frame; it seems it will take time. But, if the war strategy is right, we will reach our goal soon. Otherwise, we will have to retreat and change course. But we are strictly against joining mainstream politics. Over the last few years, politicians such as Sonia Gandhi and Buddhhababu have been advising us to follow the example of Maoists in Nepal, but look at what happened to them. I met Prachanda several times and told him that they were on the wrong track and urged him to change his political stance. We won't make the same mistake.

**\*Didn't your party play a key role in mobilizing a mass movement in Nandigram (where the state government started acquiring land for a petrochemical hub, but had to abandon this in the face of strong protests by local farmers)?\***

We were there in Nandigram from the very beginning, in January 2007. One of our local leaders, Narayan, who lives in Haldia, had started mobilizing the local population ever since the government first announced its intention to acquire land there and prepared the ground for a mass uprising. We are still active there since the people of the area want us to be there. The main resistance in Nandigram came from the local youth who took up arms to protest against state-sponsored oppression. Our decision to go to Nandigram was based on our political ideology to defend the people against state oppression. We were there right from the beginning [of] January 2007, when the government announced plans to acquire land there. Initially, Narayan was our only person in Nandigram, but after the police killed people on 14 March, we started sending more people and arms—we sent some 150 rifles if I remember correctly—to sustain the fight. Narayan taught the local youth how to use firearms and how to face police firing. But even before we sent arms into Nandigram, the Trinamool Congress activists had gathered a huge cache of arms in the area. The CPM, too, was well equipped; in fact, they had more arms than we did. But in the end, the administration took the help of some retired army officers and attacked us from various points in November 2007 and drove us from there.

**\*Your party was there in Singur (where a Tata Motors plant was to come up. The plan was abandoned after land had been acquired for the project because of widespread protests led by the Trinamool Congress) too, wasn't it?\***

We were the first to take on the Tata (Motors) officials; we attacked their cars on the day they came for the first site survey. But we could not carry the movement forward because the central committee decided not to get involved. We are an underground political party and it is difficult for us to join a movement in which there are a lot of other political parties involved. We pulled out, but now, with the Trinamool having given up in Singur, I think we are going to intensify our movement there. The conditions are right; the CPMs Hooghly district unit is in a shambles. Our kind of movement thrives in places such as Lalgarh, where the terrain is favourable and there's mass support.

**\*How did your family react to your joining a militant organization?\***

My father was with the Socialist Party of Congress and I joined the Communists during my college days. He made it clear that two divergent political currents cannot exist under the same roof. So, I left home. But my parents have been my greatest inspiration. Like \*Jijabai supported Shivaji\* through all his battles, my mother has always been a great source of inspiration for me. The last time I met her was in 1984, after I got married. She told me that if I were to die, it should be the death of a hero on a battlefield. My wife Maina is now at Dandakaranya. She is in charge of a group in Bastar (district of Chhattisgarh). We met in Hyderabad when I was state secretary (of Andhra Pradesh) and she was a comrade. The last time we met was two years ago. We communicate through letters; use of mobile phones has been banned by our central committee. I write poems to her and make sure the Indian postal department delivers them to her. I wrote poems after the landmine attack on Buddhbabu's convoy and also on the day somebody hurled a shoe at (George) Bush.

**\*Have you ever thought of having children?\***

I don't have kids. Our party doesn't support the idea of having children. There is no ban as such, but the leadership expects the women in our party to undergo sterilization after marriage. This is done to ensure that their political careers are not compromised.

**\*Tell us about your daily life It must be difficult being a militant, isn't it?\***

We live a difficult life constantly on the move and with a 15kg load of arms, ammunition and water. I remember walking seven years ago some 116km in 24 hours without any rest. I sleep very little—maximum four hours (a day) and at times as little as 10 minutes. But because we live a disciplined life it doesn't matter. No matter how late I sleep at night, I rise by 5. The first thing that I do in the morning is tune in to BBC (Radio) for its bulletin at 5.30. By 6, we start our physical training and military drills we need to be fighting fit always. So, even at 51, I don't need glasses to read and can walk for hours without rest. We eat whatever we get. I love eating rice with mashed potatoes and green chilies, but at times, even that is difficult to come by. I was a south Indian Brahmin before joining the party and a strict vegetarian. But I have turned non-

vegetarian after I left home. I love eating mangoes and wild fruits that are abundantly available in the forests that we inhabit. I am a dreamer like all revolutionaries, and work hard to realize them. My dreams are about the people in the villages the people around me. We are soldiers, but we too have emotions such as love, kindness But without hatred, it is difficult to keep alive the fire of class struggle and to fight against oppression