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Lessons from Maoist abduction of Malkangiri Collector

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The latest episode of abduction and release of District Collector Malkangiri by the Maoists has the potential to trigger off a paradigm shift in the Orissa's system of governance, should both Government and civil society imbibe and internalize its cardinal lessons. It won't be an exaggeration to look upon the Malkangiri episode as a miniature replay of a grand historical event that took place 75 years back involving the ideological parent of Maoists themselves Mao Tse-tung (1893-1976). It was on 12th Dec 1936 that one Zhang, a Military Commander under Kuomintang army, out of his patriotic zeal had abducted his leader Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975), then the formal head of China and produced him before Mao-led Communist Party to decide his fate in view of his vacillation in fight against Japanese occupation. Though Chiang as the head of Chinese State had declared a formal war against Japanese imperialism, he was more active in fighting his ideological adversary the Communist Party than in fighting the Japanese. Such a dubious policy of Chiang had led to an overall weakening of the anti-Japanese patriotic war across China. Chiang was confined for 13 days in the custody of the Communist Party, which could have executed him for his sworn enmity against the Communists. But not only the Communist Party treated him with dignity, but also made him the Generalissimo of the united anti-Japanese struggle by both Kuomintang and Communists.

Back home what the abducted District Collector confessed on his release from the 8day long Maoist confinement is worth perusing. He was treated with dignity, shared the food that Maoists took and didn't suffer any illness during his stay among the Maoists. As the video footage revealed, he was given the opportunity of defending his case in the People's Court organized by the Maoists to decide his fate. Further summing up his experience about the Maoists he said that Maoists wanted to make him a rallying point for flashing their message across the society. Though he didn't elaborate on what that message could be, it is now upto the Government and civil society at large to decipher what it is.

The message is loud and clear from the charter of 14 demands that the mediators representing the Maoist side could impress upon the Government for acceptance at policy level. Except a single demand i.e. release of 7 imprisoned Maoist leaders, the rest were concerned with the long persisting issues of public interest, which the civil society has been agitating for over years. To recount some important ones from the said charter- release of about 700 innocent tribals booked during the anti-Maoist operations, compensation to the families of those prisoners who were tortured and killed by the police, release of the imprisoned members of Chasi Mulia Sangh of Narayanpatna, cessation of anti-Maoist Green Hunt Operation, restoration of tribal land illegally transferred to non-tribal persons, cancellation of MoUs with foreign companies involving land acquisition, immediate cessation of bauxite mining in Mali and Deomali hills, construction of an irrigation canal in Kalimela area, compensation and rehabilitation of left-out displacees of Balimela and Nalco Projects, accord of ST status to Konda Reddy community and cancellation

of Polavaram Project. Except the last demand around which the Government of Orissa is at one with the Maoists, the rest of the demands used to be ignored by the Government over the years.

The question arises, how is it that the Government immediately nodded in favour of the above long standing demands simply as a swap for the release of a District Collector? As a matter of fact, this is to do with the typical culture of bureaucracy that has taken deep roots in our system of governance in the post-independence period. When an individual writes a letter mentioning his/her grievances or a forum presents a Memorandum on their charter of demands, the administration hardly bothers about it. When the people visit the public offices in pursuit of their pending works, they are treated with indifference, and even with scorn and misbehaviour on some occasions. However, when they hold a rasta-roka or burn the offices and vehicles or beat the officers, the slumbering system suddenly responds to them, and quite often favourably. This accumulated experience of the people about such peculiar dynamics of the system has led them over the years to resort to all sorts of violent agitations to achieve any demand, be it for the recovery of tribal from the non-tribal occupiers or for the cancellation of the license for a liquor shop, or for the rehabilitation of the displaced people or even for the construction of a road or bridge in a village area. Read in this light the act of abduction of the District Collector by the Maoists to highlight their demands was merely an extension of the very strategy which the common people have been adopting to press for this or that demand. There is only a difference in degree, but not that of quality between the acts of the common people and that of the Maoists in respect of a strategy to achieve their respective demands.

It is therefore very much possible that if the present system of administration is so reformed as to readily and properly respond to every grievance of the people, as it happens in mature democracies in the west and USA, then not only the Maoists who avowedly subscribe to the force as the agent of change but also the people at large who seem to be acculturated to the histrionic violence as the means of achieving their ends shall undergo a transformation which is overdue. This is perhaps the cardinal message that the latest episode of Maoist abduction of Malkangiri Collector holds forth before all of us.

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