

NAXAL STORY

PART I: WAITING FOR THE DOOM 1 - THE PRESENT CONTINUOUS (1982)...

SILHOUETTED AGAINST the fading light of dusk at a remote hamlet, the man is often seen standing like a statue, creating an impression that he has arisen after his funeral by disowning the dilemmas and desperations, worries and expectations that pass for life.

The man, tall and dark with sharp slit brown eyes, sports a set of dusty, darned olive green uniform that seems to pride itself on his dirty, dog-eared shoes. A beret with a big hole near the temple perfectly matches the double-barrel gun with a bandaged butt hanging from his shoulder, as though to buttress the point that he is a poor imitation of a professional soldier.

He comes to the hamlet that lies between a range of bald hillocks and a rivulet without notice, sometimes alone and sometimes accompanied by a few comrades in uniform, spends a day or two, converses with the locals, takes a secret meeting with a chosen few, reads out booklets, or settle accounts. And then he slinks off through the hills and jungles like a cheetah.

The locals look at him with awe, except a few women, in whose enamoured eyes flash a bizarre fit of passion. The women, either

aborigine tribeswomen or Hindu Harijans, do not hide it, for they have not learnt to hide the colours of passion, be it love or hate. But the elders—the men and women who have lived the stories of many upheavals, of the droughts that burnt their fortunes, the epidemics that killed their souls, or the money-lenders who robbed them of everything they had—warn them with a grim foreboding: “Don’t try to litter him with your ugly bodies; he is our messiah... the only hope for us!”

In this land of hundreds of gods and god-men, he seems to be a strange sort of messiah. He talks of overthrowing the system, of creating ‘free zones’ and ‘guerrillasquads’, of annihilating the moneylenders and the police officers as the ‘class enemy’. The villagers believe this ‘messiah’, who is neither young nor old, will never fail, though they know nothing about him, except that he is a Naxalite called Mahendra, by caste a Chamar, an Untouchable. That his head carries a bounty of thousands of rupees is as irrelevant to them as the opulence of the big cities.

The villagers cannot recall exactly how many years ago the messiah came here, for they cannot count. Yet, they can tell anyone the exact timing in their own way: “He came to Kalipura during the year when the drought was so severe that even the skies burned, the earth became stone and the mighty rivers turned dry. When our souls too were smouldering, he came to lead us to our own kingdom.” This is something anyone in the proximity of the Magadh-Bhojpur region of Bihar can easily follow.

The villagers vividly remember how on that day he was looking desultorily at them, although he was a *mussafir*, though a beret-wearing one with a gun, the butt of which was not bandaged then. It was late afternoon and the harassing sun was going down towards the horizon, nonchalantly promising another fiery spell the next day. He approached through the fields filled with pebbles and shrubs, and then he stopped, scratched his spiky week-old stubble and looked steadfastly at the ramshackle huts and hovels where men and women walked in skeletons.

The villagers were scared, for their eyes were glued to the gun hanging from his shoulder. The women, their hair uncombed, skin giving off dry dirt, shoddy saris tattered, went hurriedly back to their cottages dragging along with them the children suffering from a spleen disease that made them pot-bellied, and the hens that laid precious eggs. The men, their bare bodies showing purulent abscesses and scabies, wore a grim contrite expression, though they had not done anything wrong. They were scared, but curious. They had seen men with guns before, but those were forward caste men before whom they cowered. But this man, despite his remarkable height, looked downtrodden; must be an Untouchable or a Backward caste man.

They waited tentatively without daring to disturb the tense equilibrium. The tall man took the gun off his shoulder, an act that made the villagers flinch, and then asked, "Where is Baguna Oraon?"

Baguna came running down within a few minutes and exclaimed, "Hey, Comrade, you have really come!"

The villagers were relieved. Since that moment, they too started calling him '*Comret*' with a degree of respect and love that remained unaffected even after knowing that he was a Naxalite, an outlaw. But a few months later, when he tried to galvanize a rebellion that he believed was dormant within their souls, when he spoke of their rights over the land and the jungle, when he made efforts to make them remember their link with the past that had become tenuous, they got confused. They convened the *panchayat* that was held on a night of no moon with clouds hiding the stars and a stormy wind whistling in their midst.

"He has come to lead us to a new life," a short dark man with stubby nose claimed. He was a Munda tribesman named Bhola. As the others kept looking, he explained, "There will be a revolution. No one will be able to dupe us, bully us, or play with the honour of our women, if we follow him."

Then Baguna came forward: "It has happened in many countries. In China."

"Where is China?" someone asked.

"Far away. Across the Himalayas," explained Sunder Besra, a Maoist belonging to the Santhal tribe.

That was too far to inspire the common aborigines, and after a long silence someone asked, "Will he succeed?"

“Why not? Haven’t you heard our tales that talk of a liberator who will lead us to our own kingdom?” Bholā tried to be decisive.

Still, not everybody was convinced. “Will Indira Gandhi support it?” asked Kailash who years back had attended a rally addressed by the then Prime Minister and had since developed the habit of dropping her name whenever and wherever a remote chance appeared.

However, to this, Mahendra retorted with a smile: “Indira Gandhi? No. But President Nixon may. He loves China.”

No one had anything to say to that as they had not heard of any Nixon.

Yet, there were questions and feigned thoughtfulness, forcing the head of the village to postpone the meeting till the next evening to seek unanimity. The villagers then lined up and moved their body in time to the wild beats of the drums. An hour later, they attended the community feast that always followed a *panchayat*, ate the meat of a deer hunted by the youngsters, and drank as much rice-beer as they could.

Several hours later, at the fag end of the night, a dream, an overwhelming and lingering dream descended over every roof, penetrating the sombre sleep of all the locals, keeping them awestruck for a long while and then waking them up slowly with hope and bewilderment. It was an exception after the endless nights of nightmares that made them look run-down.

The wives got up, looked at the husbands and asked, “Have you seen what I have seen?”

The husbands nodded, looked outside, and like driven by some inexplicable spirit, walked slowly out of their huts, only to find the others appearing in the open.

Just then the cocks crowed, and the first refractions of light from a primordial fireball brightened up the peak of the highest hill known as the ‘abode of the spirits’. The villagers looked at the brightened peak and their hearts started throbbing, for they recollected an old adage: ‘a dream at the end of the night is bound to be true’.

A while later, squatting at the centre of the hamlet they looked at each other, but said nothing, while Mangu the drumbeater took up his *dhamsa* and started beating it.

“Someday it will be our rule, and we will have land... we will own land... that’s what I saw in my dream, and that’s what the drum is telling us now,” the first man opened up apprehensively.

“True,” the next man said.

Another man declared, “I saw... the jungles would be ours again.”

It was the day of Sarhul, the day of worshipping the Sal tree, and the ceremony started. The *pahan*, an Oraon tribesman, built human figures with mud at the foot of the tallest Sal tree, offered it flowers,

sweets and incensed green powder. The women, almost each one of them in a shoddy red-bordered white sari, sat in a circle about the *pahan*, their hearts content with the dream still haunting them. After completing the puja, the *pahan* asked a young woman in Oraon language, “*Chikanbanamaibatda, hurum sukhubiure tan* (What have you brought that attracts the honeybees)?”

It was a part of the ritual held every year, and the woman was supposed to say, ‘Sal flowers’; but that year, the woman answered, “A dream in the form of Sal flowers.”

Many hours later, when the sun sank behind the hillocks and the shadows fell, the villagers came back to settle the question hanging on their heads. But there was nothing to decide anymore, as there was no dissenting voice, no question, no confusion; the dream had settled it for once and for all, enabling everybody to extrapolate the imminent victory. In the *panchayat*, they just dedicated their bodies and souls to the ‘*Comret*’, who would lead them to their own kingdom.

“Nobody will arrest us for taking anything from the jungle,” stated a villager.

“And we will be paid proper wages, won’t we?” another one, whose emaciated face looked like a skeleton, asked.

“Sure. Who wouldn’t pay? We will fix the wage.”

“Then fix it at five rupees per day.”

Now Mahendra intervened: “The minimum statutory wage for eight hours of work is Rs 25, cash and kind combined.”

The villagers were awestruck, and they tried to imagine how much money they would then earn in a month if they get work for 15 days. It was an intricate multiplication, so Mahendra came forward and uttered the figure. The sum humbled the villagers, who sat quietly and contemplated what they could buy with that much of money, an amount that they had never seen. After a few minutes, someone said, “Soon enough there will be money to buy a bicycle.”

The villagers were excited as they took that as the first step towards liberation. “When we worked in the road project last year, the contractor did not give us any money. Only one and a half kilo of wheat for one man and one kilo for a woman,” sighed someone.

“It will change,” Mahendra intervened. “But, be cautious. A dream is a dream; to translate it into reality one has to dedicate one’s mind, one’s life and, at times, even the dream itself.”

His audience heard him with confusion, cut quick glances at each other, and decided to sit silently in silhouettes like faceless entities.

Mahendra waited for an inquisitive one to come up with a question, but when none risked it, he said, “Nothing changes overnight. It takes time. Many years, perhaps. You will have to be bold and will have to fight.” He made efforts to prepare them for a long-drawn battle, explained to them how any drastic step could be dangerous, as well

as despicable, and reminded them of their actual condition in his characteristic style, "*Hamar to aagekuanpiche khain* (We are caught between the well and the gorge)." At the end, he added, his face still taut, "Someday we will win. Just remember that we are fighting for our freedom and honour."

That was too luring for the Dusadhs or Chamars, both known as Harijan or Untouchables, or tribesmen like Santhals, Mundas, Oraons and Kurmis, who often rued their lost glory as depicted in their age-old myths. Mahendra also lent them a slogan to assimilate them to what he described as the ongoing rebellion: "Power flows from the barrel of the gun."

Though the villagers knew it by their conventional wisdom—one who wields the stick takes away the buffaloes—it was now reinforced as they found men with guns among them.

That night, Baguna asked Mahendra, "Comrade, are you a magician? Otherwise..."

Before he could proceed further, Mahendra posed a question to him, "Did you see the dream that the others saw?" As Baguna shook his head, Mahendra explained, "You didn't because you are with us for a couple of years now. For them, it all came like a big jolt. The dream was always in their subconscious mind... it surfaced in their sleep."

"But they feel you are a god who can send dreams..."

"Explain to them later," Mahendra whispered. "Maybe after a year."

Over time, the dream began to spread, from one village to another, from one region to the other, making people believe that once the dream turned into reality, they would have a plateful of meal twice a day, would have cure for diseases and a steady means of livelihood.

Now, after a few years since he arrived at Kalipura, Mahendra goes about a much larger area, and tries to ignite the hearts of the people of those lands so that the dream overwhelms them too. In the invincible dark of the lingering nights, he conveys the same message to faraway places, to the tribesmen, to the Harijans and the Backwards. Often he addresses a small gathering even in the daytime, but only in a remote area. "This land, the rivers and the forests... all belong to you," he tells his audience. "You will pluck *kendu* leaves from the jungles, defy the contractors and the government... make and sell *bidi*... and make *kattha* from the catechu tree whenever you wish. Acquire anything from the forest. All these belong to you, and to no one else's father. And in the bazaar, we will fix the price of our products. The middlemen pay you less than even one-tenth of the price at which they sell it to the shopkeepers. Now you should fix the price. No one has the right to stop you. You till the land and no one can evict you."

They chant at the end "Long live CharuMajumdar" without knowing who they are referring to, probably mistaking him for a god. Someone among them, an inquisitive type, may dare to ask, "Who is this CharuMajumdar?"

“He was the first great leader of Indian Maoists,” Mahendra replies.

“*Mar chukaka* (Is he dead)?”

As Mahendra nods, someone else asks, “And what is that Maoist thing?”

“Mao Tse Tung was a great leader of China who taught us how to fight against the oppressors. He taught us how we can overpower the big cities by surrounding them from the villages. We follow him and call ourselves Maoists.”

With time, a few young persons are selected as ‘*comrets*’ for the armed squad and a handful, mostly aged, for the political wing. Mahendra strains to explain that the political wing is more important; but the younger lot looks unimpressed as for them guns and uniforms are the most sought-after things, the magical objects standing for pride and power.

For the comrades, Mahendra remains an enigma, showing up suddenly for a day, holding secret meetings, redistributing responsibilities, reading a newspaper that says ‘Prince Charles has married Lady Diana’, and then vanishing again. But, once in a while, in an odd dark night, a daring young man comes and sits beside Mahendra with a question: “Comrade, how long will it take for the conflagration?”

Fixing his gaze at the stars, Mahendra smiles indifferently, and chants in Sanskrit: "*Karmanyevadhikaraste, ma phaleshukadachana.*"

The comrade does not understand a word and gapes at the leader.

"That was what Krishna, the God, told Arjuna," explains

Mahendra. "You have right to work only, but no right to its outcome.

We don't believe in God, but the concept is applicable to us...

Have you read the *Mahabharata*? Do you know reading and writing?"

The comrade shakes his head slowly.

Mahendra seems worried. "You must learn it. I will arrange for that."

If the same question comes from a close associate, like Comrade Karma, the man whom Mahendra has given independent charge of the Garwa region, he answers, "Actually, it will be many, many decades before we reach a meaningful stage. I hope our impact will be felt two decades from now, in the new millennium. By then, we will probably be able to rule a large chunk of rural area, but only during the night. Eventhat will come after the loss of many more innocent lives, many more tragedies..."

For a moment, Mahendra seems upset, and he intently looks towards the dark horizon. But soon he recovers to carry on. "When I address the ordinary men, I never tell them how far the revolution is. I do it deliberately, for I know if you believe you are weak, you will cower before all those you feel are strong. But if you believe you are strong and capable, you will fight." He breaks into a pause to formulate a thesis, and avers, "You are what you believe you are."

Comrade Karma too looks at the dark horizon, as though the thoughts have wings and they come down from there, and asks, “You said we are what we believe we are?”

“Yes,” nods Mahendra. “People believe in God. At a very young age, I heard someone telling me that God has created castes and human beings cannot overrule them. She told me that being born as an Untouchable Chamar, I would have to cower before the highborn lot for the whole of my life.” He looks at the sky where thousands of stars have formed a canopy of light in a moonless night, sighs deeply and continues, “I decided to defy God... It may take a hundred years or even more. Maybe centuries. The gods will retaliate repeatedly. But we are sure to defeat the gods who have created castes, poverty and inequality. For that you have to have faith in yourself. That is why I say, you are what you believe you are.”

Karma ponders for a while and then asks, “But if really we are what we believe we are, why can't we overthrow the system now?”

Mahendra again looks at the skies, and mutters, “Nothing happens before time. The sun cannot rise in the midnight or set at noon.” He sounds distant and lonely, dwelling in a different world where others' efforts, thoughts, beliefs, or imaginations cannot reach him. He then sits silently, his eyes riveted at the sky from where a distant voice comes back to haunt him: “You have a long way to go. You will challenge the gods and the gods will retaliate... and at the end, you will be able to see through the stones.” He does not know

what is meant by seeing through the stones; but he knows well that the gods have already retaliated.

LOOKING STEADFASTLY at the distant hills and jungles, the abode of snakes and snails along with gods and demons, Sister Lillian feels she has changed a lot. The magic of the surroundings has cast a spell on her and has smoothed the rough edges of her mind away, curing her of an old hurt.

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