

'I Am the Real Desh Bhakt [Patriot]'

Kishenji Interview on Armed Struggle, Peace Talks and People's Democracy



Kishenji speaks to media 1.5 kilometers from police camp in Lalgarh area.

Tusha Mittal, [Tehelka](#), November 13, 2009

In this interview, underground Maoist leader Kishenji speaks on issues such as peace talks, armed struggle, the party's sources of funding, the difference between people's democracy and India's formal democracy, and the goals of the CPI (Maoist).

With unmistakable pride, he says he's India's Most Wanted Number 2. CPI (Maoist) Politburo member **Mallojula Koteswar Rao alias Kishenji**, 53, grew up in the interiors of Andhra Pradesh reading Gandhi and Tagore. It was after understanding the history of the world, he says, that he disappeared into the jungles for a revolution. During search operations in 1982, the police broke down his home in Peddapalli village. He hasn't seen his mother since, but writes to her through Telugu newspapers. After 20 years in the Naxal belt of Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh, he relocated to West Bengal. His wife oversees Maoist operations in Dantewada. Now, at a hideout barely a few kilometres from a police camp in Lalgarh, he reads 15 newspapers daily and offers to fax you his party literature. If you hold on, he'll look up the statistics of war on his computer. Excerpts from a midnight phone interview:

Tell me about your personal journey. What made you join the CPI (Maoist)?

I was born in Karimnagar in Andhra Pradesh (AP). In 1973, after a BSc mathematics degree, I moved to Hyderabad in to pursue law. My political journey began with my involvement in the Telangana Sangarsh Samiti, which has been pressing for a separate Telangana state. I launched the Radical Students Union (RSU) in AP. During the Emergency in 1975, I went underground to take part in the revolution. Several things motivated me: Writer Varavara Rao, who founded the Revolutionary Writers Association, India's political atmosphere and the progressive environment in which I grew up.

My father was a great democrat and a freedom fighter. He was also vice-president of the state Congress party. We are Brahmins, but our family never believed in caste. When I joined the CPI (ML), my father left the Congress saying two kinds of politics can't survive under one roof. He believed in socialism, but not in

armed struggle. After the Emergency ended in 1977, I led a democratic peasant movement against feudalism. Over 60,000 farmers joined it. It triggered a nationwide peasant uprising.

The Home Minister has agreed to talks with CPI (Maoist) on issues like forest rights, land acquisition and SEZs [Special Economic Zones]? Why did you reject his offer? He's only asking you to halt the violence.

We are ready to talk if the government withdraws its forces. Violence is not part of our agenda. Our violence is counter violence. The combat forces are attacking our people every day. In the last month in Bastar, the Cobra forces have killed 18 innocent tribals and 12 Maoists. In Chhattisgarh, those helping us with development activities are being arrested. Stop this; the violence will stop. Recently, the Chhattisgarh DGP [Director-General of Police] called the 6,000 Special Police Officers of Salwa Judum a force of pride. New recruitment continues. These people have been raping, murdering and looting tribals for years. Entire villages have been deserted because of the Salwa Judum. The government can say whatever it likes, but we do not believe them. How can they change policy when they aren't even in control? The World Bank and America is.

On what conditions will you de-escalate violence?

The PM should apologise to the tribals and withdraw all the troops deployed in these areas. The troops are not new, we have been facing State terror for the last 20 years. All prisoners should be released. Take the time you need to withdraw forces, but assure us there won't be police attacks meanwhile. If the government agrees to this, there will be no violence from us. We will continue our movement in the villages like before.

Before it agrees to withdrawing troops, can you give the State assurance you won't attack for one month?

We will think about it. I'll have to speak with my general secretary. But what is the guarantee there won't be any attack from the police in that one month? Let the government make the declaration and start the process of withdrawing. It shouldn't be just a show for the public. Look at what happened in AP. They began talks and broke it. Our Central Committee member went to meet the AP Secretary. Later, the police shot him for daring to talk to the government.

If you really have a pro-people agenda, why insist on keeping arms? Is your goal tribal welfare or political power?

Political power. Tribal welfare is our priority, but without political power we cannot achieve anything. One cannot sustain power without an army and weapons. The tribals have been exploited and pushed to the most backward extremes because they have no political power. They don't have the right to their own wealth. Yet, our philosophy doesn't insist on arms. We keep arms in a secondary place. We faced a setback in AP because of that.

The government says halt the violence first, you say withdraw the troops first. In this mindless cycle, the tribal people you claim to represent are suffering the most.

So let's call international mediators then. Whether it's Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal or Maharashtra, we never started the violence. The first attack always came from the government. In Bengal, the CPM [Communist Party of India (Marxist)] cadre won't let any non-party person enter villages under their control. Police has been camping in the Lalgadh area since 1998. In such a situation, how can I press for higher potato prices and drinking water? There is no platform for me to do that. When the minimum wages in West Bengal were Rs 85 per day, people were being paid Rs 22. We demanded Rs 25. The Mahabharat [war] began when the Kauravas refused to grant the Pandavas even the five villages they asked for. The State refused our three-rupee hike. We are the Pandavas; they are the Kauravas.

You say violence is not your agenda, yet you've killed nearly 900 policemen in the past four years. Many of them came from poor tribal families. Even if it is counter violence, how is this furthering a pro-people goal?

Our battle is not with the police forces, it is with the State. We want to minimise the number police casualties. In Bengal, many police families actually sympathise with us. There have been 51,000 political murders by the CPM during the last 28 years. Yes, we have killed 52 CPM men in the last seven months, but only in retaliation to police and CPM brutality.

How is the CPI (Maoist) funded? What about the allegations of extortion?

There are no extortions. We collect taxes from the corporates and big bourgeoisie, but it's not any different from the corporate sector funding the political parties. We have a half-yearly audit. Not a single paisa is wasted. Villagers also fund the party by voluntarily donating two days' earnings each year. From two days of bamboo cutting in Gadchiroli we earned Rs 25 lakh. From tendu leaf collection in Bastar we earned Rs 35 lakh. Elsewhere, farmers donated 1,000 quintals of paddy.

What if a farmer refuses to donate?

That will never happen.

Because of fear?

No. They are with us. We never charge villagers even a paisa for the development activity that we initiate.

What development have you brought to Maoist-dominated areas? How has life improved for the tribals of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand?

We've made the people aware of the State's real face, told them how rich people live and what they're deprived of. In many of these areas the tendu leaf rate used to be one rupee for 1,000 leaves. We got it hiked to 50 paise per leaf in three districts of Maharashtra, five districts of AP and the entire Bastar region. Bamboo was sold to paper mills at 50 paise per bundle. Now the rate is Rs 55. But these victories came after we faced State resistance and brutality. In Gadchiroli alone, they killed 60 people on our side, we killed five.

The CPI(Maoist) also sends medical help to 1,200 villages in India almost daily. In Bastar, our foot soldiers are proficient doctors, wearing aprons, working as midwives in the jungles. We don't give them arms. We have 50 such mobile health teams and 100 mobile hospitals in Bastar itself. Villagers go to designated people for specific illnesses: for fever go to Issa, for dysentery to Ramu and so on. There is so much illness in these areas that there are not enough people to pick up the dead bodies. We give free medicines to doctors for distribution among the people. The government doesn't know that the medicines come from their own hospitals.

If the State sends civil administration to the Naxal belt, will you allow it?

We will welcome it. We want teachers and doctors to come here. The people of Lalgarh have been asking for a hospital for decades. The government did nothing. When they built one themselves, the government turned it into a military camp.

What is your larger long-term vision? Outline three tangible goals.

The first is to gain political power, to establish new democracy, socialism and then communism. The second is to make our economy self sufficient so we don't need loans from imperialists. We are still paying off foreign loans from decades ago. The debt keeps increasing because of the devaluation of our currency. It

will never be repaid. This is what the World Bank wants. We need an economy that works on two things — agriculture and industry. First, the tribals want land. Until they own their land, the State will exploit them. The people should be entitled to a percentage of the crop depending on their labour. We are not opposed to industry; how can there be development without it? But we should decide which industries will work for India, not America, not the World Bank. Instead of big dams, big industries, we'll promote small-scale industries, especially those on which agriculture depends. The third goal is to seize all the big companies — from the Tatas to the Ambanis, cancel all the MoU's [Memoranda of Understanding], declare their wealth as national wealth, and keep the owners in jail. Also, from the grassroots to the highest levels, we will create elected bodies in a democratic way

But look at the history of communist governments the world over. They became as oppressive as the ones they overthrew. There are ample examples of coercion and absence of dissent in Maoist regimes. How is this in the best interest of the people?

These are all stories spread by the capitalists. People in the villages are dying by the hundreds, but all our doctors want to live in the cities. All our engineers want to serve Japan or the IT sector. They reached their positions using the nation's wealth. What are they doing for my country? The State cannot insist you become a doctor. But if you do, it should insist you use your skill for two years in the villages. How oppressive the State is depends on who is controlling the reigns of power.

We want to have a democratic culture. If there is no democracy, ask the villagers to start another revolution and overthrow us. In an embryonic form, we already have an alternative democratic people's government in Bastar. Through elections, we choose a local government called the revolutionary people's committee. People vote by raising their hands. There is a chairman, a vice-chairman, and there are departments — education, health, welfare, agriculture, law and order, people's relations. This system exists in about 40 districts in India at present. The perception that Maoists don't believe in democracy is wrong.

What exists in India today is formal democracy. It's not real. Whether it's Mamata Banerjee, or the CPM, or the Congress party, it is all dictatorship. We negotiated the release of 14 adivasi women in Bengal to show the world who the State is keeping in jail; to expose their real face.

If you believe in democracy, why do you shun the democratic process that already exists? The Maoists in Nepal contested elections.

To create a new democratic State, one has to destroy the old one. Nepal's Maoists have compromised. What elections? There are 180 MPs with serious criminal charges. More than 300 MPs are crorepatris [someone who is worth more than 10 million rupees]. Do you know the US Army is already conducting exercises at a base in Uttar Pradesh? They openly said they can take the Indian Army with them wherever they want. Who allowed them this audacity? Not me. I am opposing them. I am the real *desh bhakt* (patriot).

What kind of nation do you want India to be? Pick a role model.

Our first role model was Paris. That disintegrated. Then Russia collapsed. That's when China emerged. But after Mao, that too got defeated. Now, nowhere in the world is the power truly in the hands of the people. Everywhere workers are fighting for it. So there is no role model.

When communism hasn't worked elsewhere, why will it work for India? China now admits Mao's theories were fallible. In Nepal, the Maoists are already seeking foreign investment.

What the Maoists in Nepal are doing is wrong. Following this path will only mean creating another Buddhadeb [the "Marxist" Chief Minister of West Bengal] babu. We have appealed to them to come back to the old ways. Wherever socialism or communism took root, imperialism tried to destroy it. Of course, Lenin, Mao, Prachanda — all have weaknesses. After winning the Second World War, Lenin and Stalin replaced internal democracy with bureaucracy. They disregarded the participation of the people. We will learn from

their mistakes. But capitalism too has had to stand up after being shot down. How can you say that capitalism has been successful? Socialism is the only way out.

But in power, you could be as fallible as the Nepal Maoists or the CPM?

If we change, the people should start another *krantikari andolan* (revolution) against us. If the ruler — no matter who — becomes exploitative, then the people need to stand up to demand their democracy. They should not have blind faith in a Kishenji, or a Prachanda or a Stalin. If any neta or party deviates from their own ideology, then end your faith in them and revolt again. The people should always keep this tradition alive.

Have you ever faced any personal dilemmas? Is violence the only way you can mount pressure on the State?

I believe we are trying to do the right thing. We are waging a just war. Yes, there can be mistakes along the way. Unlike the State, when we make mistakes, we admit it. The beheading of Francis Induwar was a mistake. We apologise for it. In Lalgarh, we are trying different strategies. We have recently made concrete development demands and given the government a November 27 deadline. We've asked for 300 borewells and 50 make-shift hospitals. I have also knocked on the doors of Left Front parties – Forward Bloc, RSP, CPI and even CPM. I'm even in touch with ministers within the Bengal government. I've spoken to the Chief Minister himself.

The CM office has rubbished this.

I have spoken to the CM. I told him to stop State brutality and said we have mailed our development demands. He said he is under pressure from his own party and from Home Minister Chidambaram.

Why isn't the police able to catch you?

In eight states, there are day and night search operations on for me. I'm India's Most Wanted Number 2. In 1,600 villages in Bengal, people are currently on night guard to ensure the police can't find me. There are 500 policemen in a camp 1.5 kilometres from where I am right now. The people of Bengal love me. The police have to kill them before they can get me.

The Home Secretary recently alluded to China giving you arms. Is this true?

Clearly, he doesn't know the basics of our philosophy. To win a war, you need to know your enemy. Our position is diametrically opposite to China. I thought Chidambaram and Pillai were my competition, but never imagined I have such low-standard enemies. They are flashing swords in the air. Victory will be ours.

What is your opinion of the Lashkar-e-Taiba? Do you support their war?

We may support some of their demands, but their methods are wrong and antipeople. LeT should stop its terrorist acts because it cannot help accomplish any goals. You can only win by taking the people along with you.