

India: For Maoists, Kobad Ghandy's 'Mafia' Reference in Book Was the Last Straw

Tuesday 7 December 2021, by [BHATTACHARYA Snigdhendu](#) (Date first published: 3 December 2021).

The harshness of the CPI(Maoist) statement announcing his expulsion reflects their anger for Ghandy, who had been consistently raising uncomfortable questions since 2012.

Kolkata: Kobad Ghandy's series of articles, titled [Questions of Freedom and People's Emancipation](#), published during 2012-13 in Mainstream Weekly while he was still lodged in Tihar Jail, had created quite a stir among the activists, supporters and sympathisers of the banned CPI (Maoist), India's largest armed insurgent group. Some considered it important theoretical work, a much-required self-criticism, while others thought it reflected his ideological deviations from the principles of Maoism.

But the Maoist leadership maintained silence. They neither responded with criticism nor said the points he raised were worth pondering over.

Instead, an undated internal circular of the party's central committee (which this author managed to access) issued sometime in August-September 2013, had prioritised the task of getting four senior leaders out of jail: Narayan Sanyal, Purnendu Sekhar Mukherjee, Sheela Marandi and Ghandy. In August 2014, the central committee also issued a press statement, titled 'Immediately Stop Harassment of Veteran Maoist Leader Comrade Kobad Ghandy', which claimed that Ghandy was being tortured in jail and appealed to civil rights activists to take up the issue of his release.

Seven years later, the harshness of the language the CPI (Maoist) used in its statement, dated November 27, announcing the expulsion of the 74-year-old Ghandy, can be called unprecedented for a leader who has not surrendered before the police, such as central committee members [Lanka Papi Reddy](#) and [Jingu Narasimha Reddy alias Jampanna](#).

They stopped short of calling him a ['renegade'](#), an adjective they had used for Sabyasachi Panda, the former Odisha unit secretary who had a falling out with the party leadership.

The immediate cause of the expulsion appears to be his book, *Fractured Freedom: A Prison Memoir*, which was published earlier this year. But to close observers, it is merely a culmination of a conflict that has been cooking for a long time.

The statement described Ghandy as one who appeared "completely separated from Marxism-Leninism-Maoism," had "abandoned dialectical and historical materialism, principles of Marxism and class struggle," displayed "anarchist tendencies," had "lost integrity and (was) trying to satisfy the ruling classes," "stepped into the mire of bourgeois idealism," and "selected the way of getting happiness through mysticism."

He was charged with "violating the party constitution, democratic centralism and ideological principles" and "trying to inculcate pessimism in the revolutionary camp", labelling "false allegations against the Maoist party", releasing his book "in the service of [the] ruling class" and

“joining his voice with ruling class propaganda.”

However, it appears that they were most shocked about two things: 1) Ghandy has been repeatedly denying, since his arrest, that he is a Maoist, and 2) his writings linking Maoist prisoners with the mafia inside jails.

“He falsely alleged that the Maoists had links with the mafia and often led them in jail. But since the Naxalbari period, the Naxalites formed a revolutionary tradition and led so many struggles for the cause of the prisoners’ rights in particular and revolution in general with sacrifices. Ghandy made filthy allegations against the party in prison, he didn’t raise his voice against the jail authorities for the cause of prisoners. In addition to that, he is propagating that the party has no support from people, that the party is roving rebels. This is nothing but joining his voice with ruling class propaganda,” the statement reads.

Ghandy refused to comment on the statement. “I have nothing to say as one does not know the authenticity of the statement,” he said.

At the time of his arrest, Ghandy was allegedly a member of the politburo, or the highest decision-making body, and the in-charge of the central committee’s subcommittee on mass organisations and the publication wing, besides being entrusted with the task of maintaining international relations after the arrest of another politburo member, Sushil Roy, in 2005.

The Maoists’ charges

As for the charges against him placed by the Maoists, some of them might be valid. Take, for instance, the charge of never acknowledging in public that he is a Maoist. “Right from [the time of] his arrest, he was telling that he was not a Maoist. So many times he told in press meets that the police clamped concocted cases upon him. He categorically stated that he was not a Maoist. Being a member of the highest committee of the revolutionary party, he told untruth immediately after his arrest,” the Maoist press statement alleges.

While Gandy’s well-wishers argue that he was speaking cautiously keeping in mind the status of his legal cases, the Maoist party supporters highlight that leaders or cadre members, while keeping one’s organisational responsibilities secret, should never shy away from publicly speaking of their ideological conviction.

“Most of the jailed leaders, when presented in courts, shout ‘Long Live Maoism’ from prison vans or in the court’s corridors. But he was never seen doing that. Even in his first series of writing, he was described as a Marxist thinker,” a sympathiser of the Maoist party explained to this author.

Another charge against Ghandy is that he did not contact the party after his release from jail in 2019. According to practices in the Maoist party, leaders or cadres, upon release from jail, are supposed to ‘lie low’ for a few months, lead a public life, reconnect with the underground party in the meantime, and go underground at a suitable opportunity.

They cite the example of Sheela Marandi, who was recently [re-arrested along with Prashanta Bose](#), from Jharkhand. She was released in 2016 and subsequently went off the radar of the security agencies and rejoined the underground organisation. The same is said of politburo member Pramod Mishra, who obtained bail in 2017, and central committee member Varanasi Subramanyam, who obtained bail in 2019 but was re-arrested earlier this year.

Ghandy, after his release in 2019, made no attempt to contact the underground organisation, Maoists allege.

A third, and important charge is publishing the book without consulting the party.

Maoist sympathisers point out that the party's central committee's 2013 circular had clearly encouraged jailed leaders and cadres to write.

"Jails must be turned into centres of political training and struggle... we hope that all comrades will try to carry on studies with a long term view, to improve physical fitness, to preserve health, to write and send articles in various forms to the party magazines, to do literary work, to write experiences and send to the party and to well utilise the time in several ways," the circular had said.

They cite the example of Sushil Roy, whom the party helped after his release in 2013 to pen his autobiography, which was published in Hindi by the party's central committee a few years later.

Ghandy chose to publish all his articles on his own, with the publications that he preferred.

However, there are other alleged senior Maoist leaders who have written autobiographical pieces in publications that are in no way linked to the Maoist party.

Take, for example, the 80-year-old Anukul Chandra Naskar alias Paresh Da, a founding member of the erstwhile Maoist Communist Centre (MCC). He is also known to have worked as a central committee member of the CPI(Maoist) and is reportedly staying aloof since his release a few years ago. Naskar published his memoir in a Bengali independent publication. But this did not earn him the ire of the Maoists, like Ghandy's activities have.

Ghandy's words were stinging, indeed! In his book, he wrote, "The large number of 'Maoists' in the jail, instead of countering this mafia control, were often a part of it, sometimes leading it."

"In Jharkhand jails, many people commented that unlike the other Naxal 'leaders' I was portrayed as much in the media who had come to the jail, I was the first who lived simply. Others had pots of money and people would flock around them for that reason, including the lower-ranking Naxals. The main reason for gaining the respect, not only of the ordinary inmates (though not the Naxals) but also of most authorities, was the fact that they saw me living simply, eating jail food and taking no favours that money could buy," reads another paragraph in his book.

Ideological deviations?

His writings had alarmed the CPI(Maoist) leadership as early as in 2012-13, when he had started using rather harsh words or coinages in his attempt to introspect on the outcome and achievements of the global communist movements.

"What happened to our hopes and dreams of a better future? Was it to witness a mafia-type rule in the first-ever socialist country (Soviet Russia), or the billionaire princelings of China, not to mention the tin-pot dictators of earlier East Europe! Forget the autocratic rulers, why did the masses so easily choose a free market over freedom from want? If there are no clear cut answers and solutions, the communists of today may continue to live ostrich-like in their make-believe worlds; but the people will go their own way," he wrote in one of the articles of the series.

While Marxists have generally looked to effect changes in the people's external circumstances, or socio-political system, to leading to the making of new human beings under a new social system, Ghandy had argued that there will be no real change, despite a revolution, until 'there is also a simultaneous change in the very microcosm of society - that is, man himself'. This is where his stress on the value system comes from.

He also highlighted the culture of lack of democratic environment and tendencies to have “tight control” not only on the cadre but also public life. He asked, “What happens if the leadership betrays the revolution (as is the case in the USSR, Eastern Europe, and China) and there are no democratic institutions to counter those betrayals?” and answered, “The revolution collapses and the socialist system remains only in name.”

In his critique of the global communist movement, he added, “The international powers with their enormous ability at subversion and moral corruption, as also the force of past habits, tend to destabilise the process of change. In order to prevent these forces from impacting the process of change, the communist parties, and particularly their leadership, maintained tight controls over most aspects of peoples’ lives. But, did it stop the reversals (of roles)? Not only did they revert, in every case it was that very leadership, who controlled “tight” reins of power that were the first to revert.”

He cited the examples of Soviet Russia, China and Eastern European countries and added, “It was these very leaders who became the new elite. And ironically it was precisely these ‘tight controls’ that prevented any resistance to the reversals.”

The crux of his arguments was that no matter if one evolved the most democratic of organisational structures, if individuals within it (particularly the leadership) do not have a set of proper values, any organisation, whatever the form, is bound to get distorted and become autocratic.

According to a senior Maoist leader with whom this author spoke in 2016, the party had decided to deal patiently not only with Ghandy but also with other leaders suffering from ‘ideological deviation’ in the face of ebb in the movement. He had drawn my attention to a paragraph in the 2013 internal circular, known to have been written by the senior-most leader of the party, Kishan-da, who was recently arrested from Jharkhand.

It said that the party was aware of the possibility of ‘ideological-political deviations’ affecting some of the imprisoned leaders and cadres due to various difficulties the movement faced but they should be dealt with “patiently in a manner that is ideologically and politically convincing.”

But after he chose to publish his book without consulting the party, despite having more than a year’s time in hand, it became evident to the party leadership that he was not going to return.

For other leaders who chose not to reconnect with the party, the Maoists could afford silence. But Ghandy’s writings, questioning some of the basic premises of the communist movement and the armed stream, in particular, came as a theoretical challenge that no other leader threw so strongly.

Ghandy was “trying to divert the people from the way of attaining state power through struggle” and thus “opposing fundamental principles of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism,” they alleged, and compared him with Eduard Bernstein, the 19th century German political theorist who was among the first to attempt to revise Marx’s theories and subsequently became known as one of the most prominent ‘revisionists’, a term the Maoists abhor.

The Maoist statement also drew references to his ‘bourgeois past’ in explaining his ‘downfall’.

“He belongs to the upper middle class family. He came into the party from the national bourgeoisie class. He grew up in the corporate world,” it said, highlighting that Ghandy studied Marxism at the same library in London where Karl Marx once studied. “But he failed to apply theory in concrete conditions.”

“He argued dogmatically against dialectical materialism. It reflected a left adventurist tendency in

words and right opportunism in practice. These deviations are leading to forming groups in the party.”

The last sentence is quite revealing.

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