

'NEGOTIATING PEACE'

[The Committee of Concerned Citizens (Hyderabad) has been conducting peace talks between government of Andhra Pradesh and Naxalite Parties for the last one decade. Despite stalemate in the peace process because of stubborn attitudes shown by the state government, the Committee continues to explore the possibilities of lasting peace in a supercharged situation. We publish below the concluding remarks from the Committee's latest publication 'Negotiating Peace' dated December, 2006.]

Why did the Committee of Concerned Citizens raise the issue of talks with the CPI(ML)-People's War and parties which have been spearheading the revolutionary politics for around four decades and the government in power? The Committee raised the issue because of the progressively diminishing space for democracy available for the people in the context of a powerful movement of People's War and the activities of the State to contain the growth of the revolutionary movement. The Naxalite movement is perhaps the first of its kind to question the authority of the Indian state. In this context, the Committee of Concerned Citizens stepped in to increase the democratic space to question the undemocratic and violent practices of both. The attempt was to redefine the democratic practices of the movements and the governments as well. The opening up of democratic space necessarily had to deal with state violence and the violence employed by the revolutionary groups, as this adversarial violence has made normal life of citizens difficult. A resolution of civil conflict will have to be preceded by certain minimal stipulation of restraint on either side followed by an agenda for debate. Legality is not necessarily the strength of the stipulations but a measure of Catholicism as a step towards an attempted resolution and peace.

The Committee, when it started its work, did not have "talks" as its specific objective. The effort was to interact with the people, the movements and the State in order to enlarge the democratic space, ensure that the State conforms to the Rule of Law and the movements bind themselves to human rights. The Committee was equally conscious of the need to intervene effectively wherever human rights were violated and more so where lives were at stake. The Committee endeavoured to learn from the people and initiate a public debate breaking the silence arising from fear. This witnessed an explosion of ideas and views of the people not just in newspapers and media but also in the series of meetings. From these beginnings, the possibility of what was initially termed as "cessation of armed action and a process of dialogue" emerged and in due course, crystallised into 'talks'.

The initiative of the Committee of Concerned Citizens, to start with, was for reduction of violence and the suggestions for peace talks are located precisely in this space. The movements and the state do recognize this imperative at some level but that recognition has yet to reach a point of realization that both of them together can do some good for the society and provide some relief from their poverty, helplessness and despondency. The movements should allow the state to address the problems of the people and the state should allow the movements to articulate people's aspirations which the "mainstream" politics have not been able to effectively and honestly articulate. In short, the state should realize that these movements are an offshoot of its failure instead of blaming the movements for breakdown of the system. This is important for understanding the initiative for peace talks. If government admits its failure to perform, then, peace is the opportunity to undo its mistakes ; on the contrary, if it places the

blame on the movement for the crisis, then, follows the logic of crushing the movement as a pre-condition for development and welfare activities.

The Committee believed that the governments would take the first steps in the initiative for dialogue as, all the political parties, at one point of time or the other, admitted that Naxalite movement had emerged from socio-economic causes. This was more so at the time of the elections to the State Assembly in 2004, when the Congress Party went to the extent of incorporating this line of thinking in its election manifesto. It promised the people that it would treat the movement as a socio-economic problem and address it through a dialogue while the other major party, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), sought a mandate from the people to put down the movement. The people expressed their preference in no uncertain terms when they voted the Congress party into power. While the Congress government initiated the talks, it could not carry it forward as it neither did adequate groundwork nor did it command the political resources to stand by it. The promise of talks appeared to be one of those routine promises that political parties make at the time of elections and forget once in power.

The Committee felt that these talks were also, in a sense, a continuation of the revolutionary movement, which has been in the state for the past four decades. The continuing and vibrant presence of such a movement would have imparted a sense of seriousness and a commitment to the talks on resolving people's problems. The effort, had it been successful, would have led to improving the quality of the life of the people in the State, particularly the poor and the landless. The continuation of talks would have enlarged the democratic space for debate and discussion as also enlarged the constituency of liberals who may become more active and articulate. It would have propagated the values and the need for social transformation. These efforts would also have halted the spread of fundamentalist forces.

The Committee had explained its own approach very clearly and extensively in its last publication (2002) and they hold good even now. Some of the observations made earlier need reiteration.

The state continues to portray the Naxalite movement as a law and order problem and does not wish to acknowledge the fact that the movement is essentially an expression of the people's aspirations to a life of dignity and self-respect. The response of the State continues to be brutal, including physical liquidation of people in the so-called encounters. The state leadership has shifted its political burden to the police, encouraging them, to indulge in encounters. The Committee considers that such encounter killings are not isolated aberrations or unintended transgressions of law by individual police personnel, termed as excesses but deliberate system response of the State which is adopting a policy of annihilation of individuals, unable to comprehend a complex problem which is the result of inequity and denial of justice. The conclusion is inescapable that the Government is bent upon solutions by force to what is essentially a complex societal issue. These indiscriminate killings termed as encounters introduce terror as a component of governance and erode its very democratic essence. The Committee has been repeatedly demanding the stopping of such brazen human rights violations done with impunity as it involves extinguishing human lives.

The thrust of the Naxalite movement is also more on the military actions rather than on the mobilization of people for social transformation. In several instances, indiscriminate, force has come to replace the democratic methods of spreading the movement. The Committee finds that political mobilization has come to be overtaken by

indiscriminate use of armed power and militarization, with little sanctity attached to human lives. The Committee feels that the policy of individual annihilation followed by the Naxalite parties is as flawed as the policy pursued by the Government which has come to believe that liquidation of activists and leaders will lead to the liquidation of the movement.

Often, in public perception, the Naxalite movement has come to connote essentially a confrontation between the police and the Naxalites, each having its agenda of violence. There is a general public feeling that people are sandwiched between Naxalites and police apparatus and this feeling cannot be wished away. It also appears that the Government and the Naxalites look upon loss of lives due to their actions as an inevitable step for the process of each side gaining dominance over the other. Again, in public mind, the violence by Naxalites has tended to create an uninformed justification for the police violence. This endemic cycle of violence has left no space for informed meaningful debate and people seem to be afraid of raising their voice against false encounters or Naxalite killings living in constant fear of death and destruction.

There can be no revolutionary movement which does not believe in democracy and any liberating movement should feel bound by well known democratic and human rights norms. The Committee would strongly reiterate the need on the part of the revolutionary groups to uphold human rights. It is time that the movements reexamine these actions in the light of the promise for a social change and vision for a new humane and democratic society. The challenge to alternative politics, is the challenge of creative enlargement of democratic space and judging every action on the touchstone of democratic, moral and humane standards. The Committee considers that revolutionary change is a qualitative alteration of the existing social relations and creating new human beings who are superior in material and moral terms. It is the responsibility of any revolutionary emancipatory movement to preserve all that is humane in the existing society. The Committee has accordingly been reminding and reiterating to the Naxalite parties that they should not lose sight of human rights and must establish a tradition of human rights and values as a part of their political perception and practice.

The Committee perceives itself, as mentioned in the earlier reports (1998, 2000, 2002), as a part of a large democratic section of the society which feels that there is a need for a meaningful search for a lasting solution to the social issues, bringing the people and their aspirations especially the right to life, the right to livelihood and right to dignified and honourable existence in society to the centre stage, be it the State policies or the revolutionary programmes of the Naxalite parties. The Committee is deeply concerned with the need to democratize the system and increasing the democratic space through the abatement of violence and accountability to people. The central concern of its efforts remains the same as observed in its earlier publications and needs reiteration—to humanize the Governments, humanize the political movements and humanize society and making the Governments and the movements accountable to the people.

What the Committee strived for is a respectable place for the people in society which can only happen in an atmosphere where fear has no place, where peace has primacy and where there is adequate democratic space for people in shaping their destinies. The Committee did its utmost by continuous interaction with the Home Ministers, the Chief Ministers and the political leaders in the State as well as with the representatives and leaders of the Revolutionary Parties. There was exchange of views through discussions, letters and statements. The Committee also sought the intervention of the Prime Minister of India to resolve the issues. During the four-day talks, the Committee, as part

of the team of mediators averted a breakdown of talks on the first day by effectively intervening on the issue of signing a formal agreement, an issue on which there was a serious disagreement. Again on the last day of the talks, when the statement initially prepared by the Government gave rise to a controversy, the mediators resolved it thus keeping the hope of talks alive. The Committee however notes with regret that in spite of all the efforts, the talks of 2004 also reached a dead end and the cycle of violence has returned.

Based on a number of discussions that the Committee had with both the sides, the Committee was led to believe that there was a change in the approach of the Government and the party as well. The Government side made statements during the discussions with the Committee that their earlier policy was flawed and was, in fact, pushing people towards the Naxalite parties. The non-extension of the ban and the permission for open political activity like public meetings created a feeling that the repressive policies were given up. The revolutionary parties, even if they were saying that the armed struggle was non-negotiable, were prepared to sit with the Government across the table, without arms and discuss people's issues. The news of death that often gave the impression that there was nothing more to revolution than killing and getting killed and nothing more to Government than police encounter killings almost disappeared from public view during the period of talks. The revolutionaries had a good chance to tell the public that they cared for a wide range of issues of justice. They also held a series of well attended public meetings at various corners of the State. The government had a good opportunity to show that they cared for their people including the revolutionary groups, These opportunities were lost.

At the least, the Committee hoped that the talks would prevent loss of life, and the talks would result in a peaceful atmosphere and enlargement of democratic space. If the talks continued with the spirit with which it began, this would not have been a misplaced hope. So long as the State and the Naxalite parties adhered to the mutually accepted code, there was hardly any loss of life, either due to State violence or Naxalite violence. The overall climate in Telangana villages was highly refreshing. The life became normal. The public representatives, the government functionaries including the police, moved freely and became accessible to common people. There were open, free and frank discussions on the issues that affected people's lives. A remarkable aspect of the process leading to 'talks' was the involvement of the civil society, the transparency and the enthusiastic participation of the general public through print and visual media, besides the support of most of the political parties. This is what the Committee worked for.

The Committee concentrated its efforts towards bringing both the sides to talks and facilitate this process keeping the people as the central focus. The Committee looked upon the talks as not just confined to merely State violence or Naxalite violence. It is about yielding democratic space to people and it is about the restoration of Rule of Law and equally about mature and humanized revolutionary politics. The talks, in this sense constituted a public debate and should have led to dismantling undemocratic and arbitrary structures in governance and in the working of political movements. The talks came to a stop but the Committee believes that the movement for democratic space cannot be stopped.

There is no change in the objective conditions that would suggest that the fulfilment of the democratic aspirations of the people are anywhere near. On the contrary, the reform led market driven growth, however high its rate might be, has clearly thrown up

the growing processes of exclusion of vast masses, while a small segment who are in power perceive any mass mobilization against the existing order as a serious threat. Besides widespread and persisting poverty, the pauperi-zation of the farming community, and agricultural labourers and the exclusion of masses from the basic services of education and health are all indicators towards the potential mass base for those aspiring for alternative fair and just order. The Committee firmly believes that there is no way that talks towards such an alternative society could be avoided.

The Committee is in no position to offer a blueprint for the future. But the Committee would like to reiterate its faith in the common people who have a great stake in the move forward towards a just and humane society and who are willing to respond to initiatives incorporating higher and nonnegotiable standards of democracy, human rights and Rule of Law.

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