

Citizens Initiative For Peace And The Maoist Challenge

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The Resolution (entitled “Stop Offensive, Hold Unconditional Dialogue” in *Mainstream*) made by the Citizens Initiative for Peace has put forward six “simple yet urgent demands”. The demands are addressed to both the Central Government and the Maoists because it calls upon both parties to stop the “offensive” and the “hostilities”, and start a dialogue. However, the Resolution states that the Government should take the initiative.

If one closely examines the six demands it is clear that the Resolution has fallen into the trap of the Indian State which wants the focus to be on the question of violence and not on the very real problems that the Maoists have focused on. It is interesting that many of those people who have very deep ideological differences with the Maoists, including Gandhians committed to non-violence, have also taken the position that the basic political issues must be addressed before there is any discussion on the use of violence by the Maoists.

There is a very real danger that the State will not only try and crush the Maoists but will put down all resistance to the very unjust and unconstitutional economic policies being pursued which have deprived hundreds of thousands of fellow citizens of their rightful share in development.

The whole debate (and this includes other initiatives such as the one under discussion) around the issue of the Indian State’s response to the Maoist challenge reflects a certain political bankruptcy and poverty of philosophy. It lacks political imagination.

Let us examine each of the six demands and see if the demands formulated by the Citizens Initiative for Peace will help create democratic space for discussions on the real political issues or will in effect close the space and unwittingly justify the State action against the Maoists and so allow the repression of all protest, dissent and criticism of the State’s economic policies which are clearly in violation of the Directive Principles of State Policy (Part IV of the Indian Constitution).

The first demand states: “The Government should stop the offensive in the areas where the CPI (Maoist) and other Naxalite parties are active, in order to facilitate a ceasefire.”

The second demand states : “The CPI (Maoist) and other Naxalite parties should cease all hostilities against the state forces to facilitate a ceasefire.”

The third demand is : “There should be no attacks on civilians and their lives must be secure.”

Does the Citizens Initiative for Peace make a distinction between civilians and combatants in this “war”? Are those adivasis who have some arms to protect themselves from *Salwa Judum* or the COBRA to be counted and equated with State forces and denied the protection to be given to civilians?

The first question is: who is to cease their offensive first and why? Even those people who have fundamental political differences with the Maoists have warned that if the Maoists lay down arms it will only allow the State not only to crush the Maoist organisation but also the tens of thousands of adivasis—the poorest citizens of the country. Many adivasis have armed themselves to protect themselves from the brutal repression let loose by the security forces which include cutting off breasts, shooting women in the legs and torture.

It is true that the brutal tactics used by the Maoists have repulsed many people. The beheading of an intelligence officer and the threat to carry out the same is reminiscent of the Taliban type justice. But violence or brutal tactics has to be distinguished from disciplined armed resistance.

The second question is: with whom are citizens having a debate on violence?

The Home Minister states that the Government would be willing to have talks if the Maoists abjure violence. He obviously does not acknowledge the institutionalised violence against the adivasis which has resulted in their starvation deaths, their deaths from curable diseases and the alienation of their land and means of livelihood.

And what does the Resolution of the Citizens Initiative for Peace mean that the Naxalites “should cease hostilities”?

Does the Citizens Initiative for Peace want the Maoists to lay down arms and disown armed resistance or do they want them not to use violence on individual State officials?

If the Citizens Initiative for Peace really wants “peace” they must demand that the Government of India must first address the very real grievances of the adivasis in the region when the Maoists and Government enter into a dialogue. Those issues which have been raised by the Maoists have also been raised by other organisations and parties working in the region (the so-called Red corridor). Above all, those are the issues around which there has been a sustained adivasi movement since Indian independence.

The political and economic issues in question are broadly related to:

1. hunger, malnutrition and starvation deaths of adivasis largely due to massive land alienation and the dispossession of adivasis due to development projects;
2. the secret dealing with the Trans-national Corporations by which hundreds of MoUs have been signed which will allow the TNCs to exploit the rich mineral resources of the region without benefit to either the local people or the nation as a whole; this is an issue related to corporate governance;
3. denial of basic rights to health, water, housing, education and above all food.

The Citizens Initiative for Peace must make a list of specific demands for each of the affected States: Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar and West Bengal. And then demand that the State governments and Government of India announce the measures they will take in a time-bound fashion on each of these issues. This will bring back focus on the real urgent issues.

The Resolution of the Citizens Initiative for Peace includes the demand: “People’s basic livelihood rights and democratic control over their natural resources must be urgently ensured. We resolve to work for this.” But it does not state what those demands are and how the people have systematically been deprived of their means of livelihood. More importantly, how the Citizens Initiative for Peace intends to work on these issues—something which would be of great interest to those who read their Resolution.

After all, the systematic denial of citizens of food, medicines and homes is institutionalised violence which cannot be equated with the beheading of a state official. Apart from the violence on the entire adivasi population of this region (not to speak of other parts of the country) the security forces have been committing human rights violations of individual adivasi activists, and anyone else they decide to dub as Maoist. The law does not allow the torture of even the members of a banned organisation.

If the Resolution is genuinely meant for the people at large then it must spell out the political issues; otherwise the language of the Citizens Initiative is indistinguishable from that of the language of the State.

Does that mean this writer is condoning the violence (as opposed to armed resistance) used by the Maoists? Not at all. It is not a question whether one condones or supports a particular act. The basic political question is related to the efficacy of armed resistance and the relationship between armed resistance and democratic means of struggle. Lenin in *Left Wing Communism*, an Infantile Disorder had warned that the communist resistance should not result in increasing the resistance of the opposition.

In truth the Maoists always increase the resistance of the class enemy by their tactics and then claim there is no democratic space in the system. The human rights groups have exposed the State’s role in repression and how it always intervenes in favour of the rich but they have no understanding of how democratic space within this system works and how it can be enlarged.

By way of example, a certain revolutionary group in Central America had abducted a government official and in exchange for the person they demanded masses of food for the entire slum population. Instead, the whole drama of exchange of prisoners took away the focus on the real issues and wasted the valuable time they had on national television to mobilise public opinion.

There is a need to evolve tactics to effectively intervene within the system and radically engage with the democratic institutions such as the courts, media, legislative assemblies and Parliament etc. This entire area of work has been appropriated by the NGOs who have depoliticised the democratic space.

Thus there is an urgent need to have a dialogue, debate and discussion among Marxists, Communists and others who support the Maoists. But that debate is not a debate that can be mixed with the debate between citizens and the State.

The fourth demand of the Citizens Initiative for Peace is: “Unconditional dialogue must begin between Government and CPI (Maoist).”

Nobody is at all sure what the word “unconditional” means. It could refer to the Home Minister’s pre-condition for talks must be cessation of violence by Maoists. So, the Citizens Initiative’s call for unconditional talks would mean that they think the Government should not put this pre-condition. Perhaps it needs to be spelt out.

The premise of this demand seems to be that the Citizens Initiative for Peace has implicit faith in the honesty of the Government of India or the Indian State to have a genuine dialogue. The history of independent India clearly shows that the Indian State does not represent the interests of the poor. Experience in the North-East shows that the State uses the peace initiatives as part of its counter-insurgency strategies to weaken and penetrate the organisation. Peace processes are never used to raise awareness of the basic political issues such as the nature of Indian federalism and the inability of the Indian State to respond to the democratic aspirations of the peoples of the North-East.

Does that mean dialogue or peace processes should be shunned? No. However, the militant or revolutionary organisation involved in political negotiations has to have a clear idea of strategies and tactics and use them to reach out to the people and explain the political issues and mobilise them around those. However, neither the militants nor the civil society have shown any ability of effective lobbying, advocacy or other democratic means to pressurise the State. The Indian State will not change its basic policies, but people must know what can change if they are able to have a sustained campaign.

Sustained campaign of course means the need for time and funds. The professionalised activist has little time, quite a lot of money and very little political understanding. Campaigns degenerate into shoddily written resolutions, glossy posters and occasionally in-house meetings with songs and candles.

There is no systematic documentation exposing the State with facts and statistics, effort to reach out to the general public and raise political awareness of the political issues and follow up on each issue.

There is one other matter. Does the Citizens Initiative for Peace recognise the Maoist party as the only representative of the people? The dialogue between the Maoists and the Government would include specific demands of the Maoist organisation such as lifting of the ban on the party, release of political prisoners etc. But there is a need to have a time-bound process by which the Government is made to take specific steps to alleviate the suffering of the adivasi people living in the region.

The fifth demand of the Citizens Initiative for Peace is: “Free Access to the affected areas should be provided to the independent civil organisations and media.” There is nothing wrong with the demand but why is the Committee fighting on behalf of the media which is in any case reducing the whole issue to violence versus non-violence. They have done nothing to focus on the basic issues of the Indian citizens who have been victims of institutionalised violence, bad governance, and now brute repression.

The Citizens Initiative for Peace needs to engage with the media on a sustained basis. Take the example of Vir Sanghvi’s editorial entitled “Let’s Listen to Common sense” where he attacks the activists and intellectuals who are arguing that “we care about the poor” only if we “support murderers who behead policemen”. He argues that “peace first and everything else second”. The resolution of the Citizens Initiative for Peace sounds almost like Vir Sanghvi’s editorial because it has not once talked about the institutionalised violence of the state and society.

In fact one of the demands should be addressed to the media to report on the basic issues and not make it a debate on violence versus non-violence. There is a need to have a media watchdog which continuously exposes the lies and distortions of the media. There was a magazine in the USA called *Lies of our Time* dedicated to exposing the lies in the *New York Times*. Indians need something like that to expose the electronic channels.

The greatest danger of the Resolution of the Citizens Initiative for Peace is that the focus on peace, ceasefire and dialogue will take away public focus from the real, urgent political, economic and cultural problems faced by lakhs of people living in abject poverty while surrounded by natural resources which are going to make the transnational corporations richer.

This is a historic opportunity for Indian citizens to intervene and stop natural resources from being handed over to the transnational corporations. It is an opportunity to demand that the

Indian State make public the MoUs signed with these transnational companies. This is the time that people should demand a moratorium on all land transfers and mining leases or licenses till there is an informed public debate on the economic policy for this region.

It is the duty of every citizen to stop the State from destroying the means of livelihood of Indian citizens, from wiping out their culture and crushing their resistance—all in the name of national security and dealing with Maoists.

In the light of the above discussion the Citizens Initiative for Peace, if it wants to make a meaningful intervention, must set itself the following tasks :

1. Make a list of concrete demands of the adivasis in each State and make concrete suggestions how the Government can ameliorate the situation. An example is of how Shankar Guha Neogi challenged the Government policy of mechanisation of iron ore mines by providing a detailed study to show that semi-mechanised mines would be economically be more viable.

The making of this list involves talking across to many more people including those who have expertise and those who have experience.

2. Widely publicise these demands through whatever ways that can be found. This is essential in order to keep the focus on the real political issues and not allow the State to hijack the whole momentum and reduce it to an issue between violence and non-violence. People need to be constantly reminded that what is being described as a war against the Maoists is in fact a war against the citizens of India who are economically the poorest and politically the most disempowered.

3. If there is to be a real dialogue then there must be a transparent framework for the dialogue process that needs to be put in place. This means it must be a dialogue between responsible members of the Maoists and political representatives of the State. So far all the talks between the Indian State and militant groups have been handled primarily by the intelligence agencies. The role of intelligence agencies has not even begun to be questioned by the human rights groups.

In fact the whole process of dialogue between militant groups and the State has raised the question of the role of intelligence agencies and democratic polity.

Of course the Maoists too have little understanding how to effectively use the dialogue to increase the democratic space. And it is also not clear whether they have worked out concrete proposals for a talk and whether they have any strategies or tactics other than using the process to gain time.

4. A careful monitoring of the media and exposing how it is manufacturing consent for the ultimate State repression on the adivasis and the victims of development who are the main targets of this offensive and not the Maoists.

Ever since the public attention has been focused on the Maoists the intelligence agencies have been working overtime, creating a lot of confusion in the minds of the civil society, trying to create divisions and take away the focus on the critical issues and concrete situation in the region.

There is an attempt to undermine their credibility in the eyes of the public and create an atmosphere where the violence of the State against its own citizens would be justified. The Maoists and their sympathisers have done little to counter this trend by their narrow sectarian approach and lack of commitment to norms of political democracy. There is an urgent need for a debate with the Maoists on democratic norms and democratic politics. Their recent announcement that henceforth they would treat their prisoners as Prisoners of War and their decision to release the policeman is an indication that the Maoists may have learnt something from the public reaction to their brutal tactics designed to shock rather than educate.

Lastly, the name of the Initiative is rather unfortunate. It seems to suggest that if the Maoists and Government of India start negotiations Indians would have peace. It smacks of the non-violent conflict resolution promoted by foreign funded NGOs who are responsible for the depoliticisation of all issues. Should it not have been Citizens Initiative for Justice? □□□

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