

# Road to Peace

At this late yet critical stage, compromise seems inevitable. But the hard question is whether it really opens the door to lasting peace or closes it. Optimism is the real challenge. Everyone hopes somewhat against hope that the Centre might be flexible and responsive to peace stance shown by the Maoists. While inaugurating the budget session President Pratibha Patil didn't forget to refer to Maoist violence and its pitfall but at the same time she said, in no uncertain terms, the Union government was ready to talk to Maoists. Nowhere in the world Power concedes anything without a demand. What the Maoists demanded against the backdrop of initiation of talks was very logical. They said they would hold fire if the government "stopped its state-sponsored violence and repression of innocent villagers". Not that the Maoists made such peace gestures for the first time. Earlier, a month or two ago, the general secretary of CPI (Maoist) in an interview to journalists in his jungle hideout emphatically denied that they were not eager to start dialogue. What all they demanded before starting any kind of meaningful talks was cessation of offensive by security forces and release of political prisoners who are behind bars without any trial under draconian detention laws. Also, they made it clear that if their simple and yet just demands were met then it was no problem for the same leaders who were in custody, to lead the process of peace talks.

Faced with national and international outcry against the 'Operation Green Hunt', the Centre seems to be thinking twice, in an apparent bid to buy time, before launching its genocidal programme. Union Home Minister P Chidambaram's statement that if Maoists halted violence for 72 hours the government would be ready for talks with them, was a calculated move to finally shift the blame on the Maoists for escalation of violence while doing everything possible to neutralise the civil society in this unequal war in which 'poor cleansing' is becoming increasingly institutionalised. Already six battalions (a battalion consists of 700 soldiers) of paramilitary forces have taken up position in the states of Maharashtra and Chattisgarh. More than 60,000 security men are likely to fight against 6000 or 7000 odd armed Maoist cadres.

Violence begets violence. If paramilitary forces go back to barrack and stop indiscriminate arrest of the poor, Maoists too would have no apparent reason to resort to what they call 'senseless violence'. Their counter-offensive is defensive in nature, it is sheer desperation for mere survival. In all the sensitive areas otherwise euphemistically called naxal-infested, they are under encirclement. Cobras are everywhere. They are not allowed to lead democratic struggle. 'If there is no struggle there is no progress'.

If the policy of Maoists is to hit and run, the same is true of the administration. The authorities have long been trying to cripple them politically and logistically by spreading misinformation and demonising a political force that represents the voice of the voiceless. To some extent they are successful in the sense that civil society looks passive despite ruthless oppression against the poor toilers. But it was not the case even six months ago, liberals and democrats were vigorously campaigning against police atrocities.

The maoists never explain why organised sector workers and employees—the most vocal section of the society—are in the opposite camp. Gun alone cannot create mass base. Even in the seventies urban middleclass was in the forefront to add momentum and vigour to the then naxalite movement. As for their failure on mass fronts they think lifting ban on their party and allied organisations would enable them to mobilise masses for their cause. So said their secretary in his interview. When there was no ban they failed to offer any viable alternative and discarded everything legal as revisionist. Strange it may seem they never try to understand pre-liberated South Vietnam. All their strategic and tactical lines are basically drawn from Chinese experience. True, revisionism was weak, very weak in pre-liberated China as also in Vietnam. That was heavily in favour of Chinese and Vietnamese communists to get organised quickly even under difficult conditions and succeed in mobilising masses in their millions on popular issues. But that is one aspect of the story.

Unilateral declaration of cease-fire by the maoists means they are serious about talks. The problem with the Union Home Ministry is that state governments that are supposed to work in unison in their holy crusade against the naxalites, are not really doing that. What is more sometimes they work at cross purposes making the peace process bizarre, if not elusive.

While these opposing groups—government authorities and maoists—are driven by different impulses, they have one thing in common. Both of them need breathing space. If the government increases state-sanctioned violence and begins a visible drift toward hard authoritarianism while asking the maoists to abjure violence, the much publicised peace initiatives will have little meaning. □