

JANGALMAHAL DEBATE-I

## Aiming for Peace?

Dipankar Bhattacharya

THE UNFOLDING TRAJECTORY of the much expected ‘peace initiative’ of Mamata Banerjee runs perilously similar to what people witnessed in Andhra Pradesh a few years ago. In Andhra, Maoists had helped the Congress return to power in 2004, openly calling upon the people to vote for the Congress. The YSR government duly launched a ‘peace offensive’ inviting the Maoist leadership to talks in Hyderabad. This gave the Maoists some sort of a breathing space and enormous publicity. But the negotiations between the state government and the Maoist leadership were over almost as soon as they had begun. Some noise about the state ‘completing land reforms on a war-footing’ was aired, but nothing of that sort happened on the ground. Instead, the state was seen unleashing a targeted campaign to exterminate the Maoist leadership.

In West Bengal too, the Maoists had backed Mamata in no uncertain terms. On her part, Mamata too seemed quite responsive, lending vocal support to the demand for a judicial inquiry into the killing of Azad in an Andhra jungle and the call for release of political prisoners including Maoist leaders and supporters languishing in various West Bengal jails. But once she rode the ‘paribartan’ wave to power it became increasingly clear that the issue of release of political prisoners or negotiations with Maoists or the Jangalmahal/PCAPA leadership was not really on her agenda. Her government began to distance itself even from the limited recommendations made by concerned committees of reviewers and interlocutors.

Mamata’s changing stance should not have come as a surprise to the discerning political observer though. She had never called for an end to the joint campaign by security forces or withdrawal of central paramilitary troops—her objection was only to the state component (because the state still had a CPI(M)-led government). Also she never really expressed any particular sympathy for the Maoists, rather she always tended to attribute the entire Maoist phenomenon to the CPI(M), often equating in her characteristic style of sweeping generalization all variants and shades of Red in West Bengal politics. Once ensconced in power, she has quite seamlessly and naturally extended her ‘oust CPI(M)’ campaign to target every inconvenient political voice and every shade of independent social protest.

At a time when the central government has repeatedly and categorically branded Maoists/Naxalites/Leftwing extremists as the single biggest threat to internal security, it is difficult or rather impossible to expect any chief minister or state government not to comply with this doctrine. As far as the state is concerned, the politics of peace or the tactic of talks can only be subservient to this overarching strategy of ‘war on Maoism/Naxalism/Leftwing extremism’. This has been borne out by the experience of both Andhra Pradesh – where talks had actually been initiated – and West Bengal, where talks were only expected to be held. Any ‘civil

society' stream that seeks to facilitate talks between the state and the Maoists cannot do so by ignoring, and certainly not by legitimizing, this hard political reality.

Ironically, Maoists too had made a major mistake in reading the politics of Mamata Banerjee. Thanks to her populist rhetoric and strong individualist streak, they had expected Mamata Banerjee to defy the strategic parameters of the Indian ruling classes. Kishenji had even said that parties led by dominating individual leaders could transcend the class dictates of bourgeois politics. But for all her pronounced individualism and mercurial temperament, Mamata Banerjee has already proved to be a ruthless practitioner of bourgeois politics; and none but Kishenji has become the first victim of a fake encounter in Mamata's dispensation. Quite unmistakably Mamata's gospel of 'peace' has begun resembling the infamous autocratic order epitomized by Indira Gandhi in the 1970s.

Anybody having a stake in the rule of law and constitutional democracy cannot but feel concerned. A determined battle will have to be waged in Mamata-ruled Bengal to rescue and reclaim democracy on every front, whether to save the land of sharecroppers and peasants threatened with eviction and dispossession, or the democratic rights of students and workers whose unions are being forcibly taken over by TMC storm-troopers. Sections of the civil society and Left intelligentsia who had rather uncritically endorsed Mamata Banerjee as the icon and instrument of 'paribartan' in Bengal to end the CPI(M)'s seemingly interminable hold on state power will surely have a lot of rethinking to do in the coming days.

The Maoists too have a lot to rethink. They resent the revolutionary criticism that they have been rejecting politics and moving in an essentially *anarchist* direction. They would like people to believe that they are very much intervening in the political process rather 'political intervention by military means'. Their ideologues and propagandists would cite the ruling class doctrine identifying 'Maoism' as the biggest threat to internal security as an incontrovertible proof of their political success. They also claim that simultaneously they are ready for talks to explore the possibilities of a just and democratic peace. But the Bengal developments have once again showed that much as they may claim to be powerful on the military front, in the political arena they remain as helpless and bankrupt as ever.

The crux of the problem facing the Maoists is how they really go about the whole process of talks. Even if the state agrees to holding talks without stipulating preconditions like Maoists having to lay down arms (as had actually happened in Andhra), the question remains as to what do the Maoists really talk about. Evidently the Maoists are not in a position of strength where they can force the state to make any strategic concession or agree to a calibrated transition to some new order preferred by the Maoists. The talks will invariably have to focus on specific issues like release of political prisoners, implementation of land reforms, issues of rural development, cancellation of specific projects and so on. But even if the Maoists succeed in securing some assurance or agreement from the state, how would they ensure the implementation of what the state promises?

If the Maoists are to pin the state down on specific issues of policy or implementation of government schemes and policies, they will have to enter the arena of politics that deals with bourgeois reforms and calls for everyday mass practice, something which continues to remain alien to the Maoist scheme of things. Lalgarh is a tragic example of the Maoists intervening in a powerful mass movement and ending up handing over the initiative to the state, both militarily and politically. Only time will tell if Indian Maoists who express all readiness to help bourgeois parties come to power are ready to rethink their own strategy and proceed towards any kind of independent political articulation following their disastrous experience first in Andhra and now in Bengal. □□□