

Rulers: Before and After

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WEST BENGAL CHIEF minister Mamata Bannerjee's abandonment of her pre-election promises of pursuing peace talks with the Maoists is the latest in a series of such policy reversals by other political leaders. N T Rama Rao and Biju Patnaik in their days started with much nicer words for the Maoists describing them as fighters for the poor people's rights. Yet repression had gathered momentum during their regimes. Andhra chief minister Rajshekhar Reddy had carried out peace talks only to see its failure and follow it with massive wave of killings of Maoist leaders and cadres in AP. Odisha chief minister Naveen Patnaik frequently announced his commitment to the cause of the adivasis and the rural poor during his first term in office. He often met representatives of adivasi organisations and civil liberty activists and promised concrete measures to address the problems of the tribal areas. But in the recent years Odisha has seen intensive operations by the security forces. Even the fourteen-point agreement that was announced by the mediators to secure the release of Malkangiri Collector Vineel Krishna in February 2011 was not implemented and instead mopping up operations and killings in false encounters were increased.

Some committees of the government of India have occasionally talked of treating the Maoist movement as a 'political and developmental challenge'; but in practice the Central government has led the states in increasing the coordinated drive to liquidate the Maoists and their support base. Thus the resort to a strategy of maximum coercion has emerged as the preferred line of action of all the ruling forces.

GUNS AND DEVELOPMENT

However, this strategy has failed to curb the spread of the Maoist movement and its political strength. The Union Home Ministry has identified 83 districts in nine States as affected areas. Other estimates mention as many as 150 districts in 13 States. At the current moment there are three major factors which need to be taken into account. Firstly, there is an escalation of the coercive strategy combined with a set of infrastructure-building plans launched as Integrated Action Plan in the Maoist movement areas which the government calls Left Wing Extremism (LWE) areas.

Besides giving sophisticated weapons and new training in jungle warfare and deploying additional forces, the Centre continues to add new techniques to anti-Naxalite operations. On 7 February 2012, for example, Home minister Chidambaram inaugurated a new CRPF Intelligence School in Gurgaon and said : "counter insurgency and countering LWE require a very different strategy and approach. It is not intervening and setting things right in a few days and returning to your group centre or your headquarters. It is remaining deployed for a long time to take on the adversary such as the CPI(Maoist) which is organised as a regular fighting army."

The Integrated Action Plan was introduced in 60 Maoist movement districts in nine States where the adivasi population is more than 25 percent, forest areas over 30 percent and poverty ratio is at least 50 percent. The Rs 25 crore budget, mostly for infrastructure building is managed by three officials, the Collector, the Superintendent of Police and the District Forest Officer. Union Rural Development minister Jairam Ramesh is the public face of the GOI pushing for the implementation of IAP as the development response of the ‘two-pronged strategy’—other being the law and order measure—to meet the Maoist challenge. In fact, in certain areas there are special plans in operation as the Saranda Development Strategy in Jharkhand. But it is very clear that this one-year old intervention has not made any difference on the ground. The new infrastructure-building and beneficiary—listing effort is seen mainly as aiding the security operations and partly as recruiting supporters for the government initiatives. The Chidambaram line of “first clearing the areas of the Maoists, so that civil administration can exercise its authority and then implement development plans” remains the dominant response of the Indian state.

THE CORPORATES

The second trend is the open alliance of the Indian and foreign capital backed by the Indian state, in the determined drive to clear the central Indian tribal belt of the rebels so that mining and other industrial development can take place. The FICCI Report on the Naxalite challenge came out clearly advocating this line of thought. During the past decade and more the movements against mega mining and industrial projects in Odisha, Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand and West Bengal have created hurdles for the multinational companies such as POSCO, Vedanta, TISCO, Jindal and Mittal to proceed with their steel, aluminium and power projects. Even though the Maoists did not launch or lead these movements, the many streams of resistance got linked because the peaceful movements of local people against displacement and in defence of livelihood were subjected to severe repression.

The third trend is equally significant, though of a different kind. The public opinion in the country is deeply disenchanted with the government policy on the Naxalites. Even though government of every major political party has fallen in line with the strategy of maximum coercion against the Maoists there are sections in practically each and every party which ask for a different approach. In some cases many of their local leaders have to depend on the local Maoists to enter their areas. Even in the police and para-military forces there are sections which are fed up with the failure of the prevailing line and privately complain against their assignments. The Army has been formally kept out of the operations, but in reality it performs crucial support functions in critical situations. But the army leadership has rejected suggestions to take an active counter-insurgency role in Naxalite areas. Of course, the experience from the Northeast and Kashmir has guided its thinking in this, or else here too it would have had to deal with a rebellious and hostile population.

PUBLIC OPINION

The work of the civil liberty groups has contributed significantly to the making of the public opinion. They have documented atrocities committed by security forces, approached human rights commissions and courts and the media. Some judgements like the one by the Supreme Court on *Salwa Judum* in July 2011 has persuaded many ordinary citizens to condemn the paramilitary operations in the adivasi areas where innocent people have been killed, tortured, women raped, schools destroyed and so on. The public demand to investigate every case of encounter death has become stronger day by day. There is a much greater public appreciation of the reasons which drive masses of adivasis and peasants to join the Maoist ranks.

For example, how a peaceful mass movement of the adivasis to reclaim tribal land under law in Odisha's Narayanpatna was subjected to severe repression paving the way for the spread of the Maoist movement to that area is a well-known story. The public also is shocked by the many instances of killings by Maoists in the name of punishing police informers and has condemned them. In some cases the Maoist leadership has explained or regretted many such incidents. There is a much greater public engagement with the government and the Maoists today than ever before. Thus there is ample evidence of a public opinion favouring an alternative to the current strategy of maximum coercion by the government.

All three developments: the escalated coercive action plan of the GOI which is failing to achieve its ends, the determined drive to locate mega plants in the tribal areas which is facing firm resistance from people and the increasing disillusionment about the government's approach present a qualitatively new situation for taking peace initiatives.

NEW SITUATION

The new initiatives have to be learnt from the earlier efforts such as the momentous initiative of the CCC (Committee of Concerned Citizens) in Andhra Pradesh in 2004 and the other attempts in different parts of the country. The Citizens Initiative Peace functioning from Delhi in 2009-2010 also gives the concerned citizens some lessons. At the same time the initiatives have to respond to the new situation obtaining today.

The first element of the new initiative has to carry the common orientation of all the earlier peace efforts, namely, linking peace with justice. Justice involves two components. One is the concrete problems of livelihood and dignity faced by the adivasis and peasants, their right to land, forest and natural resources which are under attack. The other is the enforcement of right to life and civil liberties guaranteed under the Indian Constitution. The demand that all the projects that are planned to be located in tribal areas must have transparency of their MoU is still not accepted by the authorities. Forest Rights Act and the proposed Land Acquisition Bill leave much to be desired to respond to the adivasis' right to self-determination.

As for respecting the right to life, the government's strategy of maximum coercion comprehensively violates it, often by staged encounters and sometimes under draconian laws. Every effort has to clearly negotiate the terms of peace and justice as the first premise. That

follows from the Constitution of India, its chapters on Fundamental rights and directive Principles.

The second aspect of the peace effort has to be a call to prepare physical conditions for face-to-face dialogue. The earlier attempts pleaded for ceasefire by the government and the Maoists. Now new methods have to be found out. The government's call to the Maoists "to abjure violence" has been a non-starter as it amounts to giving up their ideology of revolution. Making surrender of arms as a precondition is yet another presumptuous demand, for without the armed strength of the Maoists the government would not have taken them seriously.

One has to recognise that in vast areas of central India the Maoist Army operates with mass support and people feel a sense of dignity in such conditions that has freed them from the oppression of the forest guards, mining mafia and the police. The Maoist Army is also accused of many criminal abuses. But there is a vast zone of Maoist base where the government authority does not stand firm. At the same time the government cannot let that condition persist. In this situation conditions have to be created for talking about the agenda of peace and justice so that the actual problems of people can be addressed. That is possible only if organs of people's power are created and respected at the grassroots level to manage their political economy.

This is the third and the new element of the present situation. Forces of peace and justice must address the society to pursue the new initiatives rather than plead with the government and the Maoists. The broad masses of the peasants, adivasis, dalits, unorganised workers, lower middle classes who are suffering the consequences of the present-day neo-liberal economic policies and the democratic rights groups, liberal intellectuals and independent thinkers who side with the common people in their struggle for an alternative development strategy should be drawn into the movement for peace and justice.

Earlier peace initiatives have been mediations between government and the Maoists. The new initiative should be a mass movement in all parts of the country to defend the endangered rights given by the Indian Constitution. It should be a part of the new mass awakening for democratic transformation in contemporary India rather than securing peace and order for the ruling elite's growth strategy. □□□