

## **Towards a Political Engagement with the Maoists**

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I am here as a representative of the Human Rights Forum which is based in AP but is not concerned only about AP. I also happen to be a lawyer by profession and was introduced as an advocate. But I am not here as an advocate. I think we are here because we are concerned about the declaration by the Union Home Minister that he is going to send the paramilitary and maybe even the army to what the Maoists call the 'Dandakaranya' region, that is the Orissa, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand and parts of WB. These areas are, maybe not a majority but definitely preponderantly tribal areas. The decision of the Home Ministry that they are going to send the paramilitary forces to crush the Maoists is due to the challenge thrown by the Maoists partly by the comments they have made in the context of Lalgah and partly by some of their actions in Chattisgarh, Rajnandgaon recently where they blew up a police van and killed some policemen. This is creating and has created a certain apprehension. That is the reason we are here. Hoping to mitigate the likely consequences to the people living there, the question is not whether the state will succeed in suppressing the Maoists or the Maoists will succeed in overthrowing the state. Definitely they are serious political concerns but today we are here motivated by the concern that the people living there, preponderantly the adivasis, are likely to suffer a lot if this goes long. What we can do to mitigate the likely suffering is our concern. I'll put it in less broader terms than Prof. Mohanty because the broader we make it, the more contentious the politics of this will become. The very title of this 'Militarisation of Democratic Space' can be critiqued for half an hour by various people. The state can say that the Maoists have destroyed the democratic space therefore we are militarizing what you call militarizing. The Maoists will say we are part of the democratic space, why are you putting us outside this democratic space, the debate can go on forever. I'm aware that there are people here who have various ways at looking at the Maoists and the state's response to them. Let us incorporate all those different political views into our concern that whatever happens, the people shall not suffer beyond what may be unavoidable in a conflict. The people shall not suffer, that is our concern.

I was asked to talk about a similar experience we had in AP. AP has had by now, what is its 40<sup>th</sup> year of the Maoist movement, it used to be called the Naxalite movement, now it is called the Maoist movement in AP. There was no militarization of the kind that the Home Minister intends today but there was heavy deployment of the police and

extremely cruel, barbarous kind of actions by the police including extra-judicial killings but much more than that, which affected the ordinary people to an extent. And the Maoists themselves, their own response was to identify agents of the state, attack them, and isolate them. It is a whole process that went on and most people are familiar with this. It came to a situation where the people living in those areas would get up every morning with a sense of relief that nobody came and knocked on their door the previous night. It could be one side or the other side. You could be suspected of being an informant of the police, you could be suspected of being an agent of the Maoists. If you act as a Maoists sympathizer the whole process of violence, injury, suffering and deprivation was yours. A feeling of threat was there that quite irrespective of the rights and wrongs of the whole issue, whether we sympathise with the Maoists and agree with their politics about whether India can only be liberated by armed struggle or not, whether we accept the State's contention that the Indian constitution provides scope for achieving justice or not. Independent of and irrespective of these political positions, an effort must be made to see that in the process of the practical working out of this dialogue, it is a debate but it is also a dialogue between the State and the Maoists, it is working itself out in a violent way. In the process of this working out, the people shall not suffer and the kind of suffering they are undergoing shall be mitigated as much as possible. There was this concern and a committee was formed about 12-14 years ago in AP called 'Committee of Concerned Citizens' who thought that the State and the Maoists should be brought together to have a dialogue, a discussion, whose parameters can be worked out. But the purpose of that will be to ensure that while whatever is positive in the achievements of the Maoists, we are engaging them in a positive way only because we do respect them; they have done a lot for the life and welfare of people in lots of parts of the country especially in adivasi areas and other backward areas. It is Maoists who have given strength to the people to stand up and demand their rights and talk about their rights and sufferings. That is a fact and that's why we respect them. But in spite of that, taking the response of the state and taking the counter-response of the Maoists, a spiral goes on, it keeps building. Taking this into account, the idea behind trying to bring them together to have some kind of a dialogue will be to mitigate the suffering of the people as much as possible without imposing. This is very important because if you talk about demilitarization or stopping the militarization and ask the State and the Maoists to come together for a dialogue, the first statement from the government will be, 'let them put down their arms then we will talk to them. Let them give up armed struggle, let them give up their notions of extra constitutional struggles and then we'll talk'. That's obviously no way, because they believe in something, right or wrong, it's a political view they have. Without asking them to give up their strategy of armed struggle, and naturally without

asking the State to give up its perceived duty to uphold the constitution and as both continue to do whatever they believe is their duty or their responsibility towards history or towards society, to nevertheless work for mitigating the suffering of the people. This was a very concrete agenda that the Committee of Concerned Citizens did have. It was a long process. One suggestion is that we start such an effort. There are many reasons why it is much more difficult today in the Central Indian area than it was in AP. A long process which required, firstly a group of people whom both would respect while both would be suspicious of, they are suspicious of them because they are criticizing them but both would respect to the extent of talking to them, being willing to discuss with them, talk to them and answer to them. Such a group was formed in AP because we have had a history of persons in some position of society speaking out against the State violence, which has been extremely brutal in AP. Such people would be respected by Maoists irrespective of the political criticism that they may have of the Maoists. And otherwise these people are known as people of integrity in society therefore State cannot also condemn them outright. Such a group of people was formed who had a really long process, for 4-5 years they went around talking to the Maoists and getting back to the State and talking to the State and getting back to the Maoists. The first barrier to break was to make the State accept it shall talk to them without insisting on them putting down arms. That was the most difficult part because the State would go on saying 'they are an extra-legal force, an extra-constitutional force, how can you talk to somebody who holds arms?' It's a ridiculous position; it's a fact of life that they have arms. It's also a fact of life that in spite of all the suffering the people go through when they encourage or support or sympathise with an armed movement, people are supporting them, are sympathizing with them, are giving them shelter, are taking their problems to them and trying to get them resolved, this is also a fact. A democratic administration has to look at this as fact, accept it as a fact and then respond. So that took some time. And on the side of the Maoists, their question was 'what are we supposed to talk? Are we supposed to bargain about the revolution? Are you supposed to have revolution and give up your struggle?' National Liberation Movement for Resistance asked 'instead of complete secession from India, we'll ask for autonomy, the possibility of a bargain? There can be no bargain about the revolution when they want a different kind of a society and state power to build that kind of a society. So what do we talk?'

So this went on. So the question is, because when we tell the State not to militarise, not to send the armed forces to Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa and other such areas, the government would naturally ask us, 'what is your appeal to them, what're you asking them to do?' We'll have to ask them to stop their attacks on the police and incidents of violence. So where does it go? Naturally they have their political beliefs, their political

organization, and their political activity so some kind of dialogue between the two would necessarily follow an appeal for peace. Some kind of a dialogue, some kind of political engagement would necessarily have follow an appeal for peace.

What can the political engagement be about? This is a question that has come up. One idea was, as it was discussed in AP, was a large number of issues which the State ought to have been cognizant of, but was not, was raised by the Maoists and they agitated about them. They built some kind of a people's movement around those issues, they won the support of the people because they were raising those issues which the State ought to have recognized and ought to have remedied. So the idea was that the dialogue would be a process of education for the State which would realize that there are real problems, real issues, real concerns here which have to be addressed and not just sending the army, the paramilitary and the police to finish them off. And on their side it was hoped, as part of this process that once the Maoists realise or recognize that the State is willing to address these issues they would also mitigate, reduce the levels of violence maybe going for mass movements or mass organizations instead of depending so much on actions of violence. The idea was that the State would be democratized and the Maoists would also be persuaded to emphasize less on violence and more on mass activity and organizing the people by mass means and peaceful means. That was one kind of, one level of hope. Maybe it was too idealistic but that was one of the hopes which existed in the beginning when the whole process of dialogue was discussed. This was the maximum expectation.

From there you can come down to various levels of expectation from the dialogue. The least expectation, and to be frank, my level of expectation, because I thought the first one was too idealistic, was that once they bring them to a table to sit and have a dialogue they can arrive at some kind of an agreement on the modalities of their mutual functions so that the injury they cause to the ordinary people is as less as possible. In a sense it is desperation because you can't stop them anyway. You cannot stop them from using armed struggle as a method to liberate the society nor the State from enforcing its power, its authority under the law. So the way we would have two warring nations to come to an agreement over the rules of war, the same way have some kind of rules to this civil war, whatever one might call it, civil war or civil conflict or what the government calls it. This was the least expectation; the maximum was that both would learn from each other. The State would learn from the Maoists in which case in turn, the Maoists would also accept a method of function which would be less violent and more oriented towards mass organization. This was the maximum expectation. It took a long time to convince the two sides that this is a realistic proposal which would in fact be beneficial for both. We must take cognizance of the fact that both are political identities and they are not going to

accept any proposal which is not for their political benefit. One has to be honest about it. We can talk of demilitarization, stopping militarization, peace, ceasefire, whatever it is, they are not going to be persuaded unless it is to their political advantage, both being political entities.

In AP we feel what really convinced both of them was the conviction that ordinary people living in the areas of conflict wanted a dialogue. This became apparent during the period in which the Committee of Concerned Citizens went and held these kinds of meetings. Just announce it in the newspapers and hold it in a hall in various small towns mostly in Telengana region of AP which has been a theater for communist struggles for a long time and also in other parts of AP where the Maoists were strong. A lot of people attended without any effort by anybody to mobilize people. Strikingly, none of them except a few spoke against the Maoists. All of them had the recognition that the presence of Maoist activity has helped ordinary people, poor people; the processes of democracy had sustained themselves. But all were critical of the Maoists because what happens with a Maoist kind of struggle is that on one hand it bases itself upon the people, bases itself on the issues of the people, mobilizes, organizes around those issues and does give them benefits. Parallely it's also a political struggle for smashing the state and capturing the state power, two things which proceed parallely. The second aspect of this struggle can often have negative effects on the very people whom the first aspect serves, whose interest the first aspect serves. This is the characteristic of any kind of an armed struggle, the struggle for the capture of state power, while basing itself upon the aspirations, the needs of the ordinary people. So the people were in appreciation of the first aspect and were critical of the Maoists in their struggle against the state and the state, given its cunning, converted this into a process where the struggle around issues of the people gets minimized and the struggle against the state gets maximized and the Maoists also respond in such a way that they also reinforce the maxim of the same ding-dong battle between the militants and the state. This is a process which has gone on and therefore there has been a lot of criticism of that aspect. In fact as we have been repeatedly saying, whether it is the Maoists or the Khalistanis or the Kashmiris or anybody else, in any of these armed struggles, the way the armed struggle takes place, the response of the state, their counter, again their response. The way it works out is that ultimately all of them are found to kill more of their own social base than their declared enemies. This is true of Kashmir, true of Punjab, true of Maoists, true of everyone. You count the persons they have killed, majority turn out to be from their own purported social base that's how the armed conflicts work out. That's some kind of a law, I would declare it to be a sociological law of armed conflicts and therefore there was criticism of that aspect and people were repeatedly asking for a dialogue so the negative aspects could be mitigated but as I was

telling my friends just now, repeatedly people would say, 'we don't want the Maoists to go away, their presence has been beneficial but we want this situation to be mitigated so that we don't get up every morning feeling happy that the previous night nobody was taken away from the family by the police or by the Maoists. This became apparent to both sides. And one mainstream Telegu newspaper, at that time it was the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest circulated Telegu daily though now it has fallen in circulation, opened its editorial page to letters from the people and there was flood of letters from affected areas by ordinary persons, again only a few expressing any enmity towards the Maoists but majority of them calling for a dialogue. The response from the ordinary people living in the areas of conflict sent out a message both to the state and to the Maoists that ordinary people want a dialogue and after that it became difficult for the two sides to say it cannot participate in talks or dialogue. Then in process came the present Chief Minister Y.S. Rajasekhar Reddy when he came back to power in 2004 after 9 years of TDP rule. One of his campaign promises was that he had been watching this process going on and that once he comes to power he would have a ceasefire and have dialogue with the Maoists which he did do. After 9 years of being out of power and coming back to power he had to keep a few promises and so this one he kept for 6 months. There was a ceasefire for 6 months. I was part of a monitoring committee, and we were supposed to monitor the ceasefire. Some of our friends like Prof. Hargopal and Mr. Shankaran and **Mr. Karanawar** were part of the mediating group of citizens who would mediate between the two sides. 2 or 3 sittings took place. What happened in those sittings was that the Maoists were able to articulate their critique against the state, against the establishment, why have they taken to arms, what is the process by which the armed struggle became, in their understanding, necessary. The state came forward with some of its own answers. The process went for 6 months and there was not a single encounter. AP is known for encounter killings and especially for the 6-7 years preceding these talks, almost 1-2 persons would die every second day and very few of them were armed militants, most of them were sympathizers or village militants who would help the militants and lead an agriculturalist's or a shepherd's life thereafter.

But then the police establishment stepped in. We'll find that the police, the military or the paramilitary whoever it is, their understanding is that any political dialogue has to be predicated upon ultimate surrender of arms or as a precondition, surrender of guns. So whenever we make an effort for any such dialogue, except for these 2 conditions, any political dialogue will only result in strengthening the militants, this is an understanding the armed forces, the paramilitary and the police have. It is true that certainly any political group would strengthen itself if there is peace but for that matter the police also, they would get much more information because they can go to places they earlier

couldn't go because now there is a promise that the Maoists would not blow up their police vans because they also stuck to the promise. Both sides stuck to the promise for 6 months. As far as the information gathering or increasing intelligence goes, both sides took the advantage but they want to blame only the Maoists like the Sri Lankan government repeatedly used to blame the LTTE. It used every ceasefire to strengthen itself, that's what the Sri Lankan army also did. But that is regarded as legitimate. If the militants do it, it is regarded as illegitimate. This was there but ultimately the police in our state prevailed upon the government that these talks, are not going to end in peace. From their point of view the only legitimate goal of talks is the complete surrender of arms. If it does not lead to it, it will only strengthen the militants and though YSR wanted to keep his promise, he broke his promise in 6 months, not that he was ever honest about it. With one major encounter, a killing, the process broke down and conflict started. Now you may say, what is the lesson we have from that? What would we like to do today? This is because we have a threat that soon, paramilitary forces will be sent to Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, parts of West Bengal, Medinapore district and so on. If today we are to appeal to stop the militarization, naturally the appeal has to go to both sides. That's what the resolution that has been prepared says. There can't be merely appeal for peace, it has to be followed by some kind of a political process or dialogue. What could be dialogue about, what could they talk about, what could we expect from this process and how do we go about persuading the sides to come forward and accept is a very difficult task for 2-3 reasons. One the side of the Maoists, they have taken an official position so as to declare it that their participation in the dialogue has in fact weakened them and after the talks entailed, the assault on the Maoists increased manifold and today they are pushed to the wall to the extent that has never happened in 40 years. Today in Andhra Pradesh they are, I wouldn't say wiped out, but their presence has fallen to a substantial extent except the areas bordering Orissa and Chattisgarh. Their presence could increase again but that is a different matter. They have come to this conclusion which many of us feel is not a realistic conclusion but they have come to it. So that is an obstacle in persuading them to come forward for some kind of a peace process today. On the side of the state I don't know how many of you have observed but the success of the Sri Lankan state in suppressing the LTTE has had its impact upon the state in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, that they can too. Earlier it was thought that these militant movements cannot be finished off. Now they think they can be finished off purely by military means like the Sri Lankan state has done. And this coincided with the kind of talk we have seen from Chidambaram, the Home Minister of India who has, as we have been jokingly saying, been duly appointed an inspector of police who has given out AK-47s. Whatever

was wrong with Shivraj Patil, he never entered in this kind of talk. Chidambaram is indulging in that kind of a talk.

Now there are 2 major obstacles for any kind of a dialogue process. But as I repeat, we are concerned that the area where this deployment of the paramilitary is likely to take place, the area where there is going to be a conflict, the Maoists are not going to keep quiet. They are going to hit back. They have their capacity, how much they can withstand is a different matter. In an area which is very backward, where very poor people are living who have not received any of the benefits of the welfare or development in the last 60 years and many of them are adivasis. If we keep quiet, it'll be a whole episode of intense suffering for them. Whatever the suffering, and once again, without necessarily prejudging anything, if this is to be a wide effort, I feel and we do feel there has to be a wide response from the society against the militarization in spite of whatever be about the title of the discussion today. There has to be a wide support which would necessarily mean that we reduce the possibility of political conflict or differences as much as possible in this effort. There can be persons who believe that the Maoists agenda is the only one for liberating this country and creating a just society. There can be people who believe the Constitution is capable of doing this but for the corruption of the Congress party and so on. But all of them should be accept the argument that, whatever happens, whatever is done, the ordinary people living in those areas shall not suffer. They are suffering a lot and it's an intense suffering. The conflict was created by Salwa Judum, being a private vigil-ante group, armed by the Chattisgarh state and allowed to go on a rampage as we have seen in Chattisgarh. The result is that 40 - 50 thousand ran away and are now living on the margins of destitution in AP and in spite of all the efforts that the human rights groups are trying to make in Andhra to ensure that they get at least the minimum of livelihood, we're not able to persuade the government of our state to give them BPL cards or jobs cards. Continuous dialogue and argument goes on. This is the suffering we know will be the consequence and the one we want to mitigate. So what kind of an effort should we put in, this is a very major issue. And we are aware of all the other dimensions. Bandyopadhyay will talk about how the Government of India itself wanted somebody to tell it what could be the other way of approaching and handling the Naxalite problem. They call it a problem. Do not call it a problem, Naxalism is not a problem, it is a political process, a political process which has become a problem for the government more because of the government than because of the Naxalites. Though the use of armed force also creates problems for the ordinary people even if is used by very disciplined revolutionaries, that's all set aside. So a report was prepared and Mr. Bandopadhyay will talk more about it. It completely ignored the basic point. The whole point was that a large number of day to day issue concerning the basic democratic rights and freedoms, humans



rights of the people are not being addressed by the government, which are being addressed by the Naxalites in their own way, but as a part of their agenda of building a guerilla army then perhaps a standing army and then perhaps finishing the Indian state and capturing power. The problems stem from that agenda. And the suggestion to the state could be that you address those problems within your law. You have your PESA, you have your constitutional obligations under Article 244, under the 5th Schedule in the tribal areas and even otherwise you have a number of other obligations. Address the same problem from your own law, your own powers, and your own constitution. That could be the beginning of the way of tackling; exactly the opposite method is being adopted right now. Throwing away that report and relying upon much more force than was used in Andhra Pradesh for instance, contrary to the advice sought from the expert group. This is what we want to avoid because of the pain it would cause to the people living there and the effort is worthwhile, the effort to persuade the Maoists without necessarily saying that their methods are wrong. One can believe in it and believe that their methods are wrong. But they also have an obligation, a responsibility to ensure that the very people for whom they speak, from whom they recruit their cadre on whom they rely shall not be put to too much suffering beyond what is unavoidable in any kind of a political conflict. The state has also to be categorically told that you shall not handle a problem which stems from deprivation, stems from poverty, stems from marginalization, by the use of force. It is a long and difficult process but I think the appeal of this meeting today is to all people or organizations, whatever they call themselves, Gandhians, Marxists, whatever it is. Basically those who believe that in the process of political change, sufferings of the people should be reduced, mitigated as much as possible. In the process of governance, the process of struggle also should come forward and participate in the effort. This is the experience and we'll all answer more if there are specific questions which we would like to share from Andhra, others from Andhra would come some day and talk to you. Let us learn from that experience and try to do the best, our best that is possible for us in the interest of the lakhs of adivasis and other poor people who are living in that area.

Thank you.

**Abhay (JNU):** Sir I am a student Abhay from JNU, I have listened to the talk by Balogopal and Himanshu. Sir I have one query. There is violence we know and that thousands of people are killed, Salwa Judum, state terrorism and how the state is going to militarise the public sphere. That is fine, we all know about it. But I think we are also trying to put blame on the Maoists. We don't know much about what is the reality out there and since you are out in the field, we know about what state can do. So if you can please tell us how Maoists also contributing for the deterioration of these conditions,

what they can do better and what are they doing that is leading to more violence, some strategic failure from their side. The second thing that if we take the example of Palestine and Israel. If we read our mainstream media, instead of taking any clear side or siding with the just cause they are saying that look, they are also attacked and the security of Israel is also important, so I think both should not be seen on the same level. So if get could your reply.

**Balogopal:** See whether we put the state and the Maoists at the same level or not is not the issue. We must recognise that Maoism as practiced in our country is not just a struggle of the oppressed against oppression. It's a political movement which has a political strategy of overthrow of the existing state power by armed struggle, by building a people's liberation army. Ideologically, politically and strategically, it bases itself upon the oppressed people. Not just as a cunning strategy but also as a matter of political faith, political ideology. It bases itself on the oppressed people, mobilises them, recruits its cadre comes from them. Even the leadership, up to a point comes from those sections. But they're not merely fighting against oppression. It is fighting against oppression, helping the oppressed people to overcome oppression, creating opportunities for them to express themselves but simultaneously it is also fighting a war against the state. There are 2 aspects to Maoism; both have to be kept in mind. Often one tends to emphasize one, ignore the other to remind us of the Maoists, ignore the one, emphasis only on the other to show them as terrorists. Both are farce. It is this recognition of the duality of the two aspect of the Maoist phenomenon, their presence that leads to our understanding that the state responds to the second aspect, sends the police, sends the army and attacks them. And please remember one thing, as far as the Indian state is concerned, it has had a consistent counter-insurgency strategy in all parts of the country. Kashmir, Telengana, Nagaland, Vidarbha, everywhere that is, attack the social base of the militants to isolate the militants and finish them off. This is consistent, single counter-insurgency strategy and that's vicious, brutal strategy. In response to that, the Maoists build up further violence, to attack the agents of the state, to attack the state. That leads to further violence. This is a spiral that is part of the whole issue, part of the whole problem. And that's why I'm saying, the Human Rights Forum is at least saying that the strategies of the Maoists for liberation of country as many people believe in, I'm not commenting upon it as a matter of fact, does result in problem for the people also. Whether it is unavoidable, inevitable or not is a matter of political debate and discussion. Our job as human rights persons is to see that it is mitigated as much as possible without totally ruling out the space for their kind of belief, their kind of political strategy. It is there, let it be there but to mitigate the violence, the suppression, the oppression, the suffering it causes the people becomes part of our task as human rights activists, without denying them their

political space altogether. This is what we believe and this is the reason why the Human Rights Forum is likely to be a part of this process while recognizing that it is not a gang of people fighting to capture state power but a political movement with a base, with an understanding, with a political process which is part of the oppressed people and their aspiration.