

How not to look at the 'talks'

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It may or may not be easy to lay down how the talks between the Government and the naxalites should be; that is to say, to lay down an agenda for the talks.

But it is necessary to state how they should not be, and how nobody – especially the Government - should not try to force them to be.

The police have already given more than a mere hint of the ultimate temptation, namely to demand that the talks should end in the final surrender of the naxalites. The issue is not whether it is better for all concerned if the naxalites give up the strategy of armed overthrow of the State and come out of the jungles, so to say, to organise mass struggles. There could be a number of answers if that were the question. But the question before us is, what could be the premise of the talks between them and the Government, and why.

Talks between outlawed political forces and the establishment that has made the law are always a political matter. They presuppose the mutual acceptance of each other's political existence. In theory the naxalites may regard the State as the armed agent of the exploiting classes, and the State may hold the naxalites to be unspeakable outlaws. But once they sit down to speak to each other, they do so only on the basis of mutual recognition, if not acceptance. The stand of the police, namely that outlaws cannot be spoken to only unless it be to negotiate the terms of final surrender, is ridiculous. Sensible politics requires that the outlaw is accepted as a real entity even if legally un-seeable. The law is no doubt a necessary and useful instrument of civilisation, but there is no need to make a fetish of it. And this prim abhorrence of legitimisation of an unlawful entity by talking to it lies ill in the mouth of the police, who are the most unlawful entity around, if the truth be admitted.

The police, in truth, are affected by an un-explicated source of discomfort. To see this one must put oneself not so much in their boots as in their state of mind. Naxalism, for the police mind-set (which is shared by a number of people who are not officers of the force), is merely a problem of violence. To such a view, talks with them implies at least a temporary let up in the suppression of their violence, as well as a certain legitimisation of it, and therefore an opportunity for the violent force to breathe easier and renew its energies. So long as such a view is dominant, no talks at all can or will take place. That is another way of saying that if the Government cannot make itself indifferent to the question whether the talks and the breather they offer will serve to strengthen the naxalites, no talks will take place.

They may well get strengthened. If, however, the talks result in forcing them to adopt a greater restraint in their militancy, and if they otherwise continue to take up issues that benefit the poor and weak, that should not be a cause of concern. No talks, in other words, will be possible unless all concerned learn to see naxalite politics as legitimate politics, even if one does not always see eye to eye with them, especially in their trigger-happy manifestation and their simplistic and reductive analysis of issues.

It is necessary to recognise that there are many in our society who do not see things this way and do not like the suggestion that we should. And that includes many who are not of the police. And if they call the shots in the matter, no talks can or will be held, though confusing noises will continue to be made in sufficient quantity, to camouflage the fact that it is their attitude that is the stumbling block.

Do all those who are supporting the idea of talks, as if it is an unproblematic matter, realise that this is what the idea of talks entails, or ought to entail if it is to have any meaning? And are all of them prepared to take the realistic attitude required to make meaningful talks possible? Or will they continue with the prim attitude that those who believe in violence have no place in our Society? I am not arguing for violence. Violent methods of struggle can never be guaranteed to confine their destruction only to their stated objects, and therefore they are better abjured.

But it is necessary to see that in a Society which is through and through steeped in violence of both physical and socio-economic character, it is neither realistic nor sensible to take a dogmatic attitude in the matter. One should be able to see naxalite violence in conjunction with the structural and physical violence that pervades our Society, and adopt a less hysterical attitude towards it. Unless this is understood, we will not see any meaningful talks between the naxalites and the Government, but only rhetorical posturing.

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