

# People's War and the Government

## Did the Police Have the Last Laugh?

*Sustained efforts by civil society organisation finally brought the Andhra Pradesh government and the People's War to the negotiating table last year. But suspicions have lingered on both sides with encounter killings continuing and the state government refusing to respond favourably to offers of ceasefire by People's War. Moreover the process has been stymied by the government's insistence on unilateral surrender by the group prior to the start of any dialogue.*

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Unreasonable tenacity usually has a way of proving itself, establishing perhaps that reasonableness lies in nothing other than perseverance.

About five years ago, when a retired IAS officer of the Andhra Pradesh cadre by name S R Shankaran gave voice to the idea conceived by a small group of his associates, that responsible citizens of this state cannot be content watching the naxalites and their foes killing each other, blaming the state off and on for violating the law, and perhaps the naxalites too sotto voce for violating revolutionary norms, he was forgiven only because he was known to be a good man. Otherwise, the idea that middle class people can do anything in the midst of class struggle except dwell on the sidelines, encouraging the heroes of the people, gathering public opinion in their favour, and perhaps cautioning them against excesses once in a while, has been unknown in this state. How could the middle class, any way, judge how much bloodletting was too much, and on what authority could they intervene to put a quietus to it? Even out of the sight of probing revolutionary eyes, the deep self-doubt that Marxism infects intellectuals with (among the more debilitating of the negative features of that highly intellectual world view) would have made the effort seem outrageous in its presumptuousness.

S R Shankaran and his associates however decided to get on with the work of reining in the guns on both sides without making any effort to pose to themselves the very unsettling question of their moral authority. Some of them are avowed Marxists, but one of the happy things about Marxists in this country is that most

of them are not conscious of the philosophical complexities of their practice, and therefore do a lot of quite 'petty-bourgeois' things without ceasing to be good Marxists. And the effort in question has been helped by a good liberal faith in the universal worth of all individuals – a faith that is foreign to all radicalisms that view universals in general with suspicion.

The group called themselves Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC), a name that does not render itself happily in Telugu. They set about asking both the naxalites and the government what exactly they thought they were doing, and why. Initially, both sides were slightly amused at being asked such questions, for they are accustomed to regarding their acts as self-subsistent in meaning and justification (rather like the Upanishadic Brahma). Yet the group was humoured by both sides because it consists of persons whom the naxalites have relied upon for mediating with state authority whenever such need has arisen, and so too the state in reverse. The CCC proceeded on the assumption that this killing match could not go on forever, and that both sides owed the public the responsibility of keeping their violence to the minimum, and perhaps working towards a long-term solution to the violence. Without explicitly rejecting the idea of class struggle, the group has taken it as self-evident that conditions of endemic violence cannot be regarded as normal, however abnormal the times.

Some among the group perhaps feel that a civilised society cannot accept perpetual armed conflict, whatever its immediate justification, and that if it is a civilised society at all it should be able to resolve peacefully the issues leading to the conflict. Some are perhaps humanists of the

type who feel uncomfortable with violence, whatever its source. Some are certainly motivated by the concern that naxalite violence, even as it has ensured the rights of the poor, is damaging the prospects of development (whichever way it is understood) of the region of conflict: Telangana. Some perhaps feel that societal pressure upon both sides to reduce the levels of violence may help modify for the better the present unequal balance between mass activity and weapons in the practice of the People's War. Some probably feel that the same pressure will force the government to implement welfare measures such as land reforms with the degree of honesty commensurate with the aim of reducing the violence of the revolutionaries. Some may be motivated by a hope of facilitating a historic compromise that would put an end to bloodletting in Telangana. It is doubtful that the group has clarified to itself the deeper reasons why each of its constituent members is part of it. But they have been persisting with their efforts with a doggedness worthy of the cause.

The revolutionaries, perhaps rightly at a certain level of analysis, understood that the assumptions underlying the effort of the CCC negated the notion that violent class struggle is a necessary outcome of existing social reality, and is indeed nothing more than a political choice made by the revolutionaries, as arbitrary as – which also means as rational as – any other political choice. Many of their intellectual sympathisers therefore expressed considerable hostility at the political meaning of the effort, even as they pretended to be only amused at its naivete. Until, that is, they realised that there was considerable public sympathy in the very areas of functioning of the naxalites for the effort being made by the CCC. Thereupon they of course reacted with a characteristic ability to denounce yesterday's truth in favour of today's realisation.

### Spiralling Descent into Violence

But one way of looking at the effort would perhaps have made it acceptable even to those who are politically with the People's War, without straining their belief that violent armed struggle is the ineluctable form of revolutionary class struggle today. About 20 years ago, the naxalite parties, including the party that is now called People's War, conducted themselves with no more violence than would be a normal part of any conflict between the rich and the poor. At that time it was the state which behaved in a manner blatantly

partial to the landlords, and thereby started the spiral that has led to the present state of affairs. If there is any one in the police establishment capable of reflecting self-critically, they must be ruing what they started two decades ago. As a matter of fact, many who were instrumental in adopting this policy as superintendents of police in the districts in those days – whether they did it on their own or upon instructions from above – are in quite senior positions now, and so the fact that there is no re-thinking in the police establishment shows that they have no interest in learning.

It is true that the CPI-ML, as a matter of political belief, held that the Indian state cannot be overthrown by means other than armed conflict, and none of the parties/groups that it later broke up into has given up this fundamental belief, but that does not mean that from the beginning they were thinking in terms of remote controlled RDX and AK-47 rifles. They came to that after a while, in tandem with the state's response to their politics. It is also true that even when they were mobilising the masses by lawful means, they intentionally used methods that would challenge the very authority of the law and push the state, inch by inch, to repudiate law and legality, a repudiation that the Indian state of course is not at all reluctant to make, for reasons of its own. This is a conscious stratagem of precipitating crises – and 'The Crisis' as well – that all revolutionaries use even as they are championing popular causes. It is their 'hidden agenda', though it is a matter of choice whether one agrees to associate that expression with its usual pejorative connotations. The stratagem marks an essential difference between revolutionary militancy and non-revolutionary political activism which, even when it is militant, seeks not to stretch the rule of law till it breaks, since it has no aim of causing break down of the state as such, but rather to attain political ascendancy by mass support which would set the stage for change of the substantive law concerning resources and opportunities. In such a strategy, violence would be only defensive, including the occasional offence that is part of defence.

More to the point is that the presence of this more or less conscious stratagem justifies in the eyes of the state its brutal overreaction. It will say that it is entitled to react to more than the immediate need, for to behave otherwise is to let the cunning of the military strategy disguised as a socio-economic struggle on behalf of gullible masses succeed in its aim of progressively weakening the legitimate state power. The response to this would

depend on what degree of legitimacy one concedes to this state, and it is unlikely that there will be unanimity in this matter, but even if the absolute claim to legitimacy is taken at face value, when masses of people and their genuine grievances are involved in such revolutionary stratagems – for there is nothing fake about the espousal itself – society as well as the state would not be right – quite apart from legality, which is indifferent to alleged or real inner motives – in treating the masses as expendable because they are 'gullible', and are being 'misled' for opaque purposes, and deal with the phenomenon with the kind of brutal insensitivity that successive governments have exhibited in Andhra Pradesh over the last three decades. For that would injure the most vulnerable classes of the population.

In many ways the most objectionable part of the insensitivity is the succumbing to the insistence by the police that policy-making and execution in this matter be handed over to them because the revolutionaries have an ulterior motive in their well rationalised use of violence in defence of popular causes. As for gullibility, while the masses for the most part may not be conscious that the way their concerns are espoused by the revolutionaries contains within itself a different agenda as well, whose congruence with the interests of the masses is contestable, not all of them are unaware, and if and when they are made aware they may not react with the kind of horror that the white-collar class is liable to. And why would they, so long as their concerns too are addressed by the violence along with its other objects? They certainly have no cause to love the Indian state as much as the white-collar class does.

Armed with this doubtful justification but impelled by much less righteous considerations, the state in the early 1980s, came down very harshly on the agricultural labour unions (the 'Rythu Coolie Sanghams') of the naxalite parties. Youth of poor families were arrested, beaten, tortured and jailed in their hundreds. Killing them would start later. For the naxalites, or at least the ideologues among them, this perhaps merely proved the nature of the state, hastened the revelation of its true nature, as it were. It therefore justified the acquisition of revolutionary hardware, which they set about doing soon. They could not have been insensitive to the brutal impact that the way the 'truth' was being proved had on their poverty stricken followers, since their concern for the poor – to which class most of them belonged any way – need not be doubted. But the power of ideological faith is such that they

proceeded nevertheless with the second rung of the spiral, with the satisfaction of having beheld historical truth unfold in front of their eyes.

They began by coming down very brutally on those who sided with the police. Chopping of arms and legs was the favourite way of treating them in the latter half of the 1980s. Some of them were landlords, but over time, there was a greater proportion of the poor among the victims. The frequent sight of 'enemies of the people' hobbling around on amputated legs was calculated to unsettle the most ardent supporters of the revolution. But parallel with this chopping spree the People's War also acquired progressively more lethal weapons. Its activity gradually went underground as its legal activists became targets of police brutality.

The spiral had begun in real earnest. The state formed special anti-extremist wings of the police, and filled them with tough men armed heavily and given liberal amounts of unaudited funds. 'Encounter killing' gradually increased from the late 1980s. Policemen moving in the villages in jeeps, catching hold of youth, torturing them and more often than not killing them at the end became a dreaded but common happening in Telangana. Police camps were set up in remote villages creating terrible fright among the people. The People's War reacted by direct attacks upon the police, killing them ruthlessly and grabbing their weapons and ammunition. It discovered the efficacy, in the kind of hillocks-and-bushes terrain that defines Telangana, of landmines controlled from a distance by electrical/electronic devices. Police vehicles were blown up by powerful detonators at regular intervals. These methods drove the police away from the villages to the towns. Police camps were wound up, and patrolling on jeeps was given up. For a short while it looked as if the People's War had succeeded in 'liberating' its villages from the state. Local leaders of the Telugu Desam Party and the Congress in Telangana would be killed at will by the People's War, and there would be no police around to protect them.

## State Response

But soon the state found for itself maniacally dedicated killers dressed up as policemen. They would spend long days and nights roaming around on foot without rest, almost on par with the most dedicated revolutionaries. Both sides, in the process, updated their weapons like nobody's business. Police stations in Telangana were relocated outside the township, at a height,

in the model of an impregnable fort. Nobody thereafter would go to the police station to complain of a stolen goat or bicycle. The police stations ceased to be civilian institutions, but became fortified camps for the armed forces of the state to fight the naxalites.

Inevitably, the common people have got caught between the two parties. To live in a Telangana village means to live in perpetual fear: you must be careful not to give the police the slightest cause for suspecting that you have anything to do with the naxalites. That is bad enough, but you must also make sure you don't give the police the slightest opportunity to pretend that they suspect you of having such links. On the other hand, you must also make sure you don't give the naxalites the impression that you are a partisan of the state, or that you believe you know better than they how to make a revolution, or even that you have your own views of how to make this a better world.

At the end of the 1980s, Marri Chenna Reddy came to power as the Congress chief minister of Andhra Pradesh. His reign inaugurated a brief but significant experiment in a 'liberal' approach towards the naxalites, from whose ill-effects, paradoxically, the naxalites including the People's War are yet to recover. They were permitted to move around openly, hold meetings, conduct dispute resolution in villages, and in general have their way. The People's War conducted some big demonstrations and meetings in those days, much to the exhilaration of its followers, but its cadre in many places also went around openly displaying their weapons and having their diktat enforced at will. It recruited a large number of new cadre, little realising that they were attracted more by its weapons than its politics. An armed group that is able to easily have its way offers an attraction to the wrong kind of 'rebel', whose entry into the group can turn fatal for the group. Repression therefore is good for the moral integrity of such groups. The damage was already done by the time the 'liberal' period came to an end. It came to an end quite soon, but the new culture had by that time permeated the naxalite organisations.

Soon – from the early 1990s onwards – one started hearing the kind of complaints about the naxalites that one had never heard before. Acting peremptorily with the people, subjecting dissent or criticism to physical violence, knowingly attacking 'soft targets', misbehaving with women inside or outside the party, playing faction politics in the villages, allowing the village factions to use them as hitmen,

salting away 'party funds' for private purposes, and so on. Cataloguing the complaints this way may well give the impression that the revolutionaries have totally degenerated, but any such impression would be misleading. But there has been a recognisable deterioration of quality as well as political depth in the naxalite cadre.

On the other hand, for this among other reasons, the people of the Telangana districts and other districts having naxalite presence were no longer as loyal to them as they used to be. The very awakening brought about by the naxalites encouraged people to train their critical faculties at, if not necessarily against, the naxalites. That is of course a positive outcome, if somewhat embarrassing for the revolutionaries. But there have been less positive reasons for the change, too. A hitherto unknown attitude of using the naxalite movement for personal benefit, whose concomitant is the willingness to help the police against the movement if that is more beneficial, has raised its head over the years. In other words, Telangana society has become cynical to a degree unknown hitherto. The cynicism has been reinforced by unsavoury developments in the revolutionary movement. An impression has gained ground that being a revolutionary is a fling one has at a certain age, followed by abject surrender to the police, acceptance of a handsome rehabilitation package accompanied by the mouthing of a scripted denunciation of the movement of which one was a part till the other day, and feeding the police with information about not only the movement but every poor villager who has fed and sheltered one when one was a militant: so many have taken this route so cynically that even if they do not represent the majority of the naxalite cadre – they certainly do not – the people are bound to get progressively cynical about the whole thing.

And a cynical people are easy for the police to prey on. They make more eager informers and agents. It is not impossible to find youth willing to enter the movement as police agents, or to buy agents within the movement. There was a time when the police would get no information about the presence or movement of naxalite squads even if they were right in the backyard of the police patrols. And in particular, senior cadre would be sure that their whereabouts would never be leaked. Those days are now irrevocably gone. The police are able to find informers to lead them to armed squads as well as well-regarded senior leaders. They are able to inject/buy agents who are willing to kill

their supposed 'comrades' for a price. Such developments in turn make the movement more paranoid and therefore more arbitrary in dealing with supposed enemies within and outside.

Of course, this is one side of the picture. On the other side the normal activity of the revolutionary underground goes on, and the People's War in particular has been expanding territorially quite steadily, though how intensive the expansion is in terms of political depth as well as depth of activity, is a matter regarding which definitive information is difficult to come by. However, any unbiased observer could with justification entertain doubts in the matter. One evident indicator in support of the doubts is the recruitment of juveniles – one might as well shed politeness and call them children – into the armed movement, an objectionable practice indulged in on an extensive scale by the LTTE. Another is that while expansion into new areas – more particularly the central and east Indian region across the state's northern border – is taking place steadily, they are not able to recover lost ground in Telangana and in their earlier tribal strongholds in the scheduled areas of the eastern ghats. Such recovery, if it takes place, could only be based on a more mature and knowledgeable cadre, and on a people devoid of illusions, and would therefore indicate real strength. First generation revolutionaries do not prove the strength of revolutions. They only prove that hope is a live human quality. It is the survival of the movement with its integrity intact into the second and third generations that proves its strength. Whether that can be achieved remains the real test for naxalites, especially the People's War.

That the People's War is expanding and can further expand short of such recovery is however evident. Indeed, as economic restructuring in the mode of the World Bank's dictates goes on apace, there will be no dearth of new cadre, whatever the political maturity and ideological reliability of the expansion based on such cadre. That the People's War is bent on utilising the opportunity offered by economic restructuring/liberalisation/globalisation is clear enough, and only to be expected of any dedicated revolutionary party. What is strange is that those who glibly discuss globalisation as if it is only a matter of competing economic policy options do not appear to realise that the ill-effects of restructuring will not be confined to sudden discontinuities or sharp gradients in the graphs economists draw. They will have serious impact on the way the large mass of disadvantaged people of this country

perceive the country and their future in it, which in turn will have serious impact on the kind of political choices they make, and therefore the kind of political framework the rulers of this country will tolerate in the days to come. That cannot only have a devastating impact on the lives of those masses, but in the narrowest possible sense, it should be everybody's concern even otherwise.

That is by way of an aside. What is relevant for the present purpose is that in such a situation created by an unhappy spiral not wanted by the revolutionaries, though certainly not unrelated to the strategies and tactics knowingly adopted by them, an external effort that may change the contours of the confrontation between them and the state for the better should not be unwelcomed to them. They could welcome it without giving up their politics one bit.

### CCC Interventions

Maybe they have realised it now. But in the initial stages of the effort of the CCC, the main response was a mixture of umbrage at the presumptuousness of intellectuals-sitting-at-their-desks presuming to tell revolutionaries what is good for the masses, and the realisation that this particular set of intellectuals could not be antagonised. So they answered them off and on, sometimes politely, sometimes impatiently, always in the offensive framework customary with all total ideologies, which not only have an answer to your questions, but also presume to know why you are asking the questions: that is, they not only answer you, they interpret you in the process. But since the CCC decided to play along with these attitudinal irritants, the exchange between them developed into quite a fruitful dialogue. The People's War responded in writing on more than one occasion to the CCC and there were quite candid face to face exchanges, too.

The dialogue that the CCC had with the state government has been less fruitful. It need not have been so, if this state had been ruled by a party or person more cultured even within the establishment framework than the Telugu Desam Party of Chandra Babu Naidu. But the CCC could only deal with the establishment as it is – and has been – for about seven years now. An establishment that has the mind, not of an administration as envisaged when the Constitution was written, but of a scheming faction guided by the most narrow calculations. This may occasion surprise to people who are fed on the media image of Chandra Babu Naidu as a very

intelligent and sophisticated moderniser, but then that is what media images do to truth. But the CCC played along with his insensitive and foolish arrogance too. In the nearly six years effort made by the CCC the state government has never once put down its responses in writing, but the CCC continued to address the government through letters and statements published in the press. The two volumes of documents published by the CCC is indicative of the intensive efforts it has put in.

That has included visits to villages where naxalites have killed or been killed; meetings with a cross-section of political parties, trade unions and other organised groups; public meetings held in the 'affected' districts – at Warangal, Karimnagar, Mancherial in Adilabad district and at Nizamabad – to address the local people; frequent appeals to the state government and the National Human Rights Commission to intervene in individual cases; and publication in both English and Telugu of documents reflecting the effort. The effort was not a purely civil rights effort of the kind this state is well acquainted with, that is to say a critique of state repression. It has included that too, and indeed the CCC has unequivocally taken the stand that the state shall not transgress the norms of rule of law in the name of tackling extremism, but it has taken upon itself the wider job of expressing a 'third voice', a voice that will give each of the sides in the conflict its due – for good and for bad – but will ask questions of wider import for the well-being and progress of the people in question. In due course it did, as it had to, lead to the proposition that the two sides sit across the table and talk to each other. It was in mind-2000 that the CCC first proposed that the two sides declare a ceasefire and start a dialogue.

Throughout the year 2001 and more so in 2002, the issue of talks between the state government and the People's War became the talk of the state. A few diehard naxalite-haters sulked, and revolutionaries of the kind who thought that talking with the state meant compromising with the state also sulked, but the overwhelming response cutting across all possible divisions was that it is time the two sides sat across the table. Letters in the press – it must be added that the press was quite cooperative, in its attitude towards the CCC – reflected this response. Perhaps sensing this, *Vaaritha*, the second largest circulated Telugu daily newspaper, opened up its centre page to letters on the issue of talks, and it was flooded with letters written from multiple viewpoints, but all wanting the two sides

to stop killing and start talking. There were only a few letters, mostly from persons living outside Telangana, who expressed a theoretical inability to comprehend how revolutionaries who aimed to liberate the masses from the oppressors could talk to the state of the oppressors. Put that way, the answer could only be that they should not be talking to each other, but that only shows that the matter should not be put that way. But we will come to the agenda of the talks later.

For about a year and a half there was no concrete response to the CCC's suggestion of ceasefire and talks. Meanwhile the killings continued, and punctuated the CCC's efforts at peace with crises of confidence. Until Chandra Babu Naidu's regime, the statistics of killing in Andhra Pradesh showed roughly equal numbers on either side, that is to say the naxalite groups and the police in their anti-naxalite operations killed more or less equal numbers (a marked difference with Kashmir, where killing by the state is approximately double that by the militants). This had been so for more than 30 years now, taking one year with another. It is since the regime change from NTR to Chandra Babu that the balance of dead bodies has tilted sharply in favour of the state. From the year 1996 to 2001, more than 200 have been killed by the police each year in 'encounters', whereas the count on the other side was consistently less. In fact, it is the 'confidence' in the efficacy of policing that this imbalance has engendered that is at the root of the unwillingness of the government to lend its ear to the CCC; but more of that by and by.

The year 2002 being the year of the talks-that-never-really-took-place, both sides killed less, and (it appears) at the end of it the police killed less than the revolutionaries. Some of the killings in these six years when the CCC's efforts have been going on were politically traumatic. Nalla Adi Reddy, Erramreddy Santosh Reddy and Sheelam Naresh, three top rung leaders of the People's War, were arrested by the AP police at Bangalore and brought and shown as dead in an 'encounter' near Koyyur in the interior of Karimnagar district, on December 2, 1999. On the government's side, the killing of ex-home minister Madhava Reddy by the People's War on March 8, 2000 was the biggest blow. The killing of a scheduled tribe MLA of the Congress Party, Ragya Naik, by the People's War on December 30, 2001 upset the climate in favour of talks to a considerable extent, and the killing by the police of Padmakka, a senior and respected People's War leader of Karimnagar, on

July 2, 2002 was the final straw that sabotaged the talks.

### Inconclusive Peace

As a matter of fact, it is evident in retrospect that in the six-month period February-July 2002, when the air was heavy with expectation of talks, never once did the government of AP unequivocally express its willingness to talk to the naxalites on reasonable and mutually acceptable terms. It was not clear at that time, since the habitual shiftiness of the chief minister and the disarming openness of his home minister served the same purpose: of obfuscating the fact that the government had no desire to talk to the naxalites at all: it had been able for the first time in 30 odd years to beat the naxalites in the number count of dead bodies, so why talk? On January 15, 2002 the CCC issued a press release asking both sides to abide by certain suggested conditions conducive to the holding of talks and sit down for talks. The People's War responded inconclusively at first and more clearly later by offering to observe ceasefire from the second week of February if the government was willing to reciprocate. (It appears that it was the CCC which introduced the expression ceasefire into the idiom of its effort. It was merely a properly impressive war-like expression indicating that the two parties should not kill anyone pending conclusion of the talks).

The government responded by saying that it would hold an all-party meeting and take a decision. The meeting took place inconclusively on February 12, and was adjourned. Then, on March 11, there was a major 'encounter' at Tupakulagudem in Warangal district in which 10 of the People's War cadre were killed. Since anybody who knows anything about 'encounters' knows that they do not happen by accident but by design, the killing was evidently a signal from the police establishment that there was no need of any talks with the naxalites. As they hoped, the People's War withdrew its offer of a ceasefire on March 14.

In fact, the police officers in charge of anti-naxalite operations, especially in the Telangana districts, had made it clear that they were not at all happy with the idea of talks. The rational part of their objection was that talks would mean at least temporary cessation of police operations which they believed had been successful in recent days in pushing the naxalites to the wall; they had no desire to cooperate with a process that may help the naxalites to regain lost ground. If there were nothing more involved in the matter than crime control,

that would of course be a rational attitude. Apart from that, there was a less honourable objection, namely that counter-insurgency operations give the police and other armed forces a range of privileges and money-making opportunities that they are always loath to give up. That is why they are never happy with political attempts at solving problems of militancy, whether in Telangana, Nagaland or Kashmir. And so the police officers of the state, and a section of the Telugu Desam Party leadership outside Telangana, kept harping on the theme that the People's War had no real interest in the talks, and wanted to use it as an opportunity to regain lost ground.

It would of course be naive to believe that the People's War had no such intention in mind when it responded to the CCC's pressure to hold talks with the government. In fact, the police in the course of search operations got hold of a letter or two written by People's War leaders to their cadre assuring the cadre that the party's willingness to sit for talks with the government signified nothing more than a tactical move to strengthen their movement again. While this was explained away by them when questioned as a ruse aimed at reassuring their cadre who were perturbed at the possibility that their leaders were surrendering before the state, it is quite likely that it was intended to convey exactly what it did. After all, it is a fact that the People's War has been pushed back as never before in its areas of traditional influence, and that it could use the opportunity a ceasefire would offer to regain its original position.

It is understandable that the police and the establishment in general found this objectionable, and indeed made it the excuse for their own lack of enthusiasm, but why should it necessarily be objectionable to a democratic viewpoint? Here it becomes necessary to address the question as to the purpose and object of the talks. In doing so, one need go no farther than the common views expressed in the spate of letters the press carried on the issue. Some of the correspondents did express ideological positions, namely that communism has failed internationally, that violence is outdated, and therefore the naxalites has better hand over their arms and join the non-violent non-communist mainstream. For such a view, talks were a means of honourable surrender, and so any suggestion of using the talks to regain lost strength would amount to duplicity. But the majority opinion as reflected in the letters to the press was quite pragmatic: it was taken for granted that the political practice of naxalism was a legitimate thing,

and in any case it would continue to be there, and also that the government did not and could not welcome it, but both the sides could and should modulate their conflict in such manner as would minimise the pressure on the masses involved. If that pressure was eased, and the people could breathe easier, it should be a matter of indifference to them if in the process the People's War manages to become stronger. Indeed, to the extent that they belong to the social classes that would benefit from a less trigger-happy and more responsible revolutionary party that may emerge from the talks, they may even rejoice in the possibility.

To understand this viewpoint, and indeed the positive response the CCC got from day one of its job, we need to go back to the spiral that was spoken of in the beginning. The consequence of this spiral has been that a pall of fear hangs over much of Telangana and the tribal belt of the eastern ghats. Most of the poor suffer the constant fear of being branded naxalites or sympathisers and shelterers of naxalites by the police, a suspicion that can be fatal; or of becoming victims of police wrath for the reason there is a member of the family or a friend or a relative in 'the Party'; or because they have tilled a landlord's or a farmer's land forcibly occupied and distributed to the poor by the naxalites; or because they distributed some leaflets or pasted some posters published by the naxalites; and so on.

No, the next sentence is not that the rich are afraid equally of naxalite wrath. That would at least have made matters morally simpler. But the traditional rich left these villages more than two decades ago, in the very first days of the naxalite movement. The new rich are too intelligent to put themselves in a position here they will be suspected of opposing the wishes of the naxalites. It is again sections of the poor and the lower and middle classes who suffer the fear: that they will be suspected of being police informers; that they will be attacked for being in the TDP; that they will be harmed for having taken a tractor load of people to attend the minister's programme; that they will be attacked for having worked enthusiastically in any of the chief minister's pet schemes in villages; that they will be harmed because their opponents in the village politics have the blessings of the local militant, or because they sided with a person in some conflict wherein the naxalites took a contrary stand; and so on. The most visible symbol of this double pressure is the thousands of acres of cultivable land lying fallow in the Telangana districts. It is land

of landlords/farmers which the naxalites got forcibly vacated and distributed to the poor, but the poor cannot cultivate because the police will not let them.

It is this pressure that the people seek relief from. The two sides blame each other for the pressure they put upon the people. We cannot act too gently when desperadoes carrying AK-47s and landmines meant for blowing up our vehicles are going around, say the police. We too cannot be too gentle or considerate when the police not only torture and kill people at the slightest suspicion, but obstruct every avenue of expression available to us, say the revolutionaries. It follows that if the two can sit across the table and accept certain rules of behaviour, that would ease the pressure on the masses involved. For instance the police could agree that they will not harass the kith and kin of militants merely for being their kith and kin; that they will not punish people for reading or distributing the literature of the naxalites; that they will not force people to give up the economic benefits obtained with naxalite assistance, even if it is in the strict sense an illegal benefit, that they will not brand every popular protest naxalite-inspired, etc. And the naxalites could agree

that they will let people work for TDP or Congress if they so please; that they will not physically obstruct elections; that they will not prevent government programmes from being held in the villages or attended by the people; that they will not seek revenge against the village sarpanch for the state government's repressive policies, etc.

If such an agreement is realised in the talks and if in the process the People's War manages to regain its lost ground, why should that worry the common masses? And if it is the real grouse of the police that the talks will force them to reduce their levels of violence and withal face an enemy who looks prettier to the masses, then why should that fear be accepted as legitimate? The answer to both the questions can only be in the negative unless one has a fixation with the idea that a civilised society cannot permit armed groups other than the state to exist at all. I am not for a moment suggesting that the idea of armed groups not answerable to the law (as the state, at least in theory, is) going around doing good or bad as they please is unproblematic. But there is no need to make a fetish of that.

To get back to the narrative, after the People's War called off its offer of ceasefire on March 14, the state government held

the much postponed all party meeting on March 22, and declared that it would create an atmosphere conducive for talks and hold talks directly with the People's War. The pre-conditions for the talks – such as ceasefire – would also be discussed there, they said. It was not elaborated further nor was it followed up with any steps. Evidently, the categorical stand taken by all opposition parties excepting the 'friendly' BJP at the all party meeting had impelled the government to make the announcement, and it had no desire to go beyond the declaration.

Then, after some further exchange of views with the CCC, on May 7 the People's War again announced a unilateral ceasefire effective from May 10 and called upon the government to respond by reciprocating the ceasefire offer, and inviting that party for talks. No formal offer a ceasefire was made at that time or thereafter by the government. This reluctance to reciprocate the offer of ceasefire is on the face of it a little inexplicable, since it appears that quite early in the process there was a hint from the government to the police to go slow in killing, and they did go slow throughout the period from February to July, though they struck at the

## *Call for Papers*

### **The Indian Society for Ecological Economics (INSEE)**

#### *The Third Biennial Conference of the INSEE on 18-20 December 2003*

The Third Biennial Conference of the Indian Society for Ecological Economics (INSEE) will be held in Kolkata, at the Indian Institute of Management, from 18-20 December 2003. The main theme of the Conference will be "**Biodiversity and Quality of Life**". There will be Plenary Sessions, Concurrent Technical Sessions and Panel Discussions on topics around the main theme. Papers are invited on sub-themes as indicated below:

1. **Mountain Ecosystems**
2. **Wetlands and Mangrove Ecosystems**
3. **Coastal Ecosystems**
4. **Desert and Dry Land Ecosystems**

Under each sub-theme papers can be proposed addressing one or some of the following:

- Status of biodiversity
- Uniqueness of components
- Traditional knowledge systems
- Potentials for economic upliftment and improvement for Quality of Life
- Ecological and economic dimensions of biodiversity use
- Finding options for sustainable management

Papers should highlight issues and problems in India and developing countries. Abstracts of 250-300 words should reach, latest by 21 April 2003, to Sushil Kumar Sen, Office Manager, **INSEE**, Institute of Economic Growth, University of Delhi Enclave, Delhi-110007, India, Fax number: 011-27667410, email: [insee@ieg.ernet.in](mailto:insee@ieg.ernet.in). Authors of abstracts selected by the Programme Committee will be informed by 31st May 2003 and they will have to submit full papers by 29 August 2003, for final selection. Limited travel grants exist for authors of papers selected for presentation.

Dr. Sudarshan Iyengar  
Secretary, **INSEE**

psychologically apt time to disrupt the process of talks. Perhaps what deterred a formal acceptance was the oft-repeated unwillingness of the government to put itself on the same footing as the outlawed group. This is a self-righteous difficulty all governments experience in the matter of talks with outlawed armed groups, a difficulty that they are forced to get over sooner or later, but only after much blood has been needlessly split.

The CCC met the home minister immediately after the May 7 offer and tried to persuade him to extend an invitation accompanied by offer of ceasefire to the People's War. An invitation not accompanied by offer of ceasefire was made by the government on May 9. On May 29 the People's War, consciously ignoring the government's unwillingness to reciprocate the offer of ceasefire, reacted positively by nominating two persons to talk to the government about the modalities of the actual talks that were to take place between that party and the government. The two emissaries are Varavara Rao, the well known writer and poet; and Gaddar the popular composer/singer of revolutionary songs. The state government again held an all-party meeting on June 3 and announced the names of two cabinet ministers as emissaries to talk to the People's War emissaries. One of them was formerly a senior police officer with a history of having handled the naxalite movement as ruthlessly as any one else; and the other an inconsequential minister from Srikakulam, who knows next to nothing about the naxalite movement. He was probably chosen for the symbolic reason that he belongs to Srikakulam, where the whole thing started three and a half decades ago.

The emissaries met and talked three or four times, but each sitting was preceded by an 'encounter' killing in one district or the other. From June 4 to 13 a total of 11 persons were killed, some of them described as naxalites and some as ordinary criminals. Two women members of a People's War armed squad were killed on June 24. It is difficult to imagine anything better calculated to upset the atmosphere of parleys, for it is one thing to accept with equanimity the objection, however specious, that a lawfully-constituted government cannot offer ceasefire in so many words to an outlawed group, and quite another thing to countenance the unwillingness to even informally restrain the police for the duration of the process of talks. The police officers who were instrumental in the killings obviously knew this, and so did the government which did nothing to restrain them. It was as if they

were throwing a challenge to the revolutionaries to see how far they would demean themselves and press ahead with the readiness to talk in the midst of almost daily killing of their cadre. It is to the credit of the People's War that it did not react the way they were evidently hoping it would. If the People's War's emissaries had pushed ahead quickly to fix at least a tentative agenda and a place and a time for the main talks, the irritant could perhaps have been neutralised. But the emissaries, who are persons with a known penchant for adversarial stances, converted the preliminary talks into a polemical duel. They seemed to have no idea what the talks could be about, or else they understood it as a debating competition between Chandra Babu Naidu and the People's War about who represents the people better: one of their suggestions was that the talks should take place in front of the masses at the Lal Bahadur Stadium, with loudspeakers and all. Political immaturity has always been the hallmark of writers and poets close to the revolutionaries in Andhra Pradesh.

Since the government's emissaries had no more idea what the talks could be about, the preliminary talks dragged on interminably into July. To the objections of the People's War's emissaries as well as other concerned organisations that 'encounters' were taking place even as efforts at structuring a dialogue was on, the chief minister replied that if the naxalites wanted that 'encounters' should not take place, they should not move around with arms. This was to be followed soon by its logical corollary, expressed for the first time since the efforts a dialogue started six months before, that no talks would be possible unless the naxalites put down their weapons. In other words, the government was not interested in a dialogue but only in a unilateral surrender. If this had been stated six months before, a lot of people would have been saved a lot of sweat. But then it merely signifies the utterly irresponsible and cavalier attitude of Chandra Babu Naidu towards an issue as serious as that. It is clear now that he never had any serious intention to pursue the path of dialogue, but was merely testing the waters all the while. Perhaps he was undecided in the midst of conflicting pressures from within his administration, particularly the political component and the police component, and finally plumped for the police side. Or perhaps he was play-acting throughout. Given the inherent unreliability of his character as a politician, there would be nothing surprising if indeed that were so.

In the meanwhile, the police upped the ante in July. They killed eight People's

War cadre in Warangal, Karimnagar and Guntur districts between July 2 and 10. In the first incident, which took place at Nerella in Karimnagar district on July 2, the police killed Padmakka, a senior and respected leader from that district. Her killing signified the end of any possibility of dialogue, for the People's War could not be reasonably expected to demean itself further by persevering with its almost one-sided efforts thereafter. It was a matter of time before the emissaries Varavara Rao and Gaddar declared that they were withdrawing from their role as emissaries in protest, followed by the People's War itself withdrawing the offer of ceasefire. It was then that the chief minister started saying for the first time that there could be no talks with the naxalites unless they lay down their arms.

On the face of it, it appears that the issue has come full circle. Indeed, soon after the formal breakdown of the effort at talks, the two sides have been on a killing spree. The People's War took the government by surprise by suddenly stepping up violence in the slight area of influence it has in Guntur district of the developed Andhra region. The police too are now officially back in the game of killing. Their perception of matters has won the day, though it is not clear whether that was because they were successful in creating a fait accompli, or because the chief minister in any case shared their viewpoint from the beginning.

But not all share it even within the ruling Telugu Desam Party, and that dissonance is likely to show up one day or the other, especially as the elections approach. For the local political leadership of Telangana, whether of the Congress or Telugu Desam Party, the talks between the naxalites and the state government signified something very practical. It is this local leadership that is the most immediately available 'enemy' for the revolutionaries, and their lives, property and political freedom have been in perpetual danger from the violent acts of the naxalites. For them, giving the People's War greater freedom meant getting greater freedom for themselves, and that could make all the difference between being in or out of the political business. So they waited quite eagerly for the talks to take place, and now they are among the more disappointed. It cannot be that Chandra Babu Naidu is not aware of this, but for the present he has chosen to ignore them. Even his brand of politics cannot for ever continue to ignore the felt political realities as perceived by his own men, and as that pressure is likely to increase as the elections due in 2004 approach, better sense may yet prevail for reasons of political expediency if nothing higher. **EW**