

*The dialogue between the Maoists and the Government of A.P:  
Is its revival possible?*

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With the failure of the attempted dialogue between the naxalites and the Government, Andhra Pradesh has probably missed a significant opportunity. Not an opportunity to 'solve the naxalite problem', as it is often put, but an opportunity to teach some kind of social accountability to both sides. It is so easy to slip into either of the two extreme positions: the process of dialogue is a ploy by the establishment to drag the revolutionaries into a situation where they start functioning by *its* rules; or that dialogue opens the gates of legitimacy to a force that is out to destroy the carefully structured Constitutional scheme which has not been given a decent trial at all.

The world is no longer very innocent to the ways of revolutions, and the ways of the dialogues that the States confronted by them seek to engage them in. So one does understand both the apprehensions, and one does appreciate that each apprehension can be a serious matter if you are situated at the appropriate political point. The only excuse for nevertheless ignoring both the apprehensions is that the large mass of people, not in general or as a universal rule, but in Andhra Pradesh today, is not standing at either of the points that would lend poignancy to either of these apprehensions. Over the years the large mass of people have come to accept the revolution as part of the political life of society, and not as an enemy of democracy that is out to destroy that political life. But they see it as one political process and not as *the* politics of the people, as the highest political expression of people's aspirations, etc. As such, the repeated and quite widespread response of the people has been to welcome the dialogue without at any point succumbing to the urban middle class view of the process, namely that it is the beginning of the end of naxalism, a final solution to the 'naxalite problem', etc. Indeed, there are so many people who have found that naxalism is a solution to the problems they face with the establishment and the classes that have it in their pocket, that they would be amused by the suggestion that naxalism is a problem that is to be solved.

The argument that we have a young Constitution that was carefully crafted by concerned persons and that it needs to be given a decent trial before setting out to subvert it from within or destroy it from outside, certainly has a persuasive quality to it. But the

revolutionary's likely answer that the more decent parts of the Constitution will never get that decent trial has much historical experience to commend it. My point is not that we cannot go beyond this even-handed expression of appreciation. We can, if need be, but the point relevant to the urge for dialogue is that this is not a matter on which a quick consensus is so likely that society can be expected to adopt it and deal with the naxalites (or the State, as the case may be) accordingly. We can only expect that the debate will go on for quite some time to come, the logic of it refracted through various contingent circumstances like the overall moral degeneration of social life that has affected the establishment as much as the radicals, and is bound to colour the appreciation of their respective arguments.

That being so, a certain breathing space for the people caught in the conflict was an immediate need, which need not have caused prejudice to the basic political stand of either side. The most difficult part of the process of initiating a dialogue lay in convincing both sides to distance themselves from the unshakeable belief in the sole truth of their creed to the extent necessary for sitting across the table. Or so one had thought. It was only later that it was realised that the bigger problem was and would be to inculcate political seriousness and sincerity in the establishment, without which the issue could not even be approached. Finally it was on the lack of political sense and sincerity on the part of the Government of Y.S. Rajasekhar Reddy that the dialogue foundered.

The situation in the State after the break-down of the dialogue illustrates like nothing else could the need of a dialogue. The police started the killing spree on 6<sup>th</sup> January 2005, ending the cease-fire that had stood for fully six months. The initial response of the naxalites was one of shock. By the time they realised that the times had changed, they had not only lost quite a few underground cadre but also activists of over-ground organisations owing allegiance to them, who are normally careful enough to ensure that they do not meet the party leaders in places and situations where a police raid is likely. An activist of the Chaitanya Mahila Samakhya, a women's group, and one of the Telangana Jana Sabha, who had gone to meet the underground, died in 'encounters' in Prakasam and Warangal districts respectively. More vitally for the underground, the police started going deep into the forest with accurate information and mowing down the armed squads. About 70 have been killed till May 2005.

The accuracy of the information the police are able to obtain must be worrying the naxalites. In most of the incidents, the police arrived at the place where the naxalite armed squads were present within hours, *some times within minutes*, of the arrival of the squads. It was not a case of one or two policemen on the prowl stumbling into them by accident.

Invariably, a large posse of armed policemen has surrounded the armed naxalites from two or three sides, indicating availability of detailed information. Information leaking to the police in cases where the armed squads have spent a lot of time at one spot is not uncommon, and easy enough to comprehend. But what one has in recent times seen is the police getting information about the place the naxalites are *about to go to*, the kind of information that few outsiders are likely to have, and could only go from some one very close to the underground, probably some one inside the underground. This is confirmed by the fact that in each such case the naxalites have alleged leakage of information by 'covert operatives', a term commonly used by them to refer to insiders who act as agents of the State.

All this may appear to be irrelevant for what we began with, namely the societal impact of the killings. It appears so only because the naxalites are seen as professional revolutionaries from outside local society. Indeed, the way the media often reports the naxalite movement, the cadre would appear to have descended from nowhere upon local society. The truth is any thing but that. All the naxalite cadre are from local society, from small farmer, landless labourer families belonging to Scheduled Castes, Schedule Tribes and Backward Castes. The better of them are the natural leaders of their classes/communities, recognised and respected as such by the villagers. The decimation of the naxalites by State action is the elimination of the political cream of the poor and the oppressed classes: this is one serious reason for being concerned not merely with the legality of State action but with its social meaning and consequence when it hunts down naxalites as if they are some species of a particularly harmful wild animal.

In response to this killing the naxalites themselves have gone on a bigger killing spree. The murders committed by them up to May 2005 have crossed one hundred. The victims of these murders are not landlords or other members of socially exploitative classes. Indeed, killing such people has become quite rare these days. The most common victim is one described as an 'informer'. Now by the very nature of things, informers can only be of the very same social class as the supporters of the movement, for one who is an outsider to the movement can hardly have much information that the State would not even otherwise get. Thus, the persons killed in the name of informers are mostly of weaker sections of society. The other victims are local body representatives from the Congress party or its allies. In killing them, the naxalites have not even been giving any reason touching upon the victim's character or conduct. They have bluntly said that they are being killed only because they belong to the ruling alliance. Here again, the better off among the ruling party's local body representatives would have some business or civil contracts in the towns and would not be

accessible to the revolutionaries to kill at will. It is the newly empowered first generation leader from some backward community that is most likely to get killed in these vengeful murders. Such murders are moreover followed by large scale resignation of the remaining local body representatives, thereby emptying the local of bodies of their representative content to a large extent.

The villages are again tense. In the past one would qualify this and say 'the villages of north Telangana', but in the last half decade or so, with heavy repression forcing the naxalite squads into the forests in Telangana, they – or rather the CPI (Maoist), as the erstwhile Peoples War, the biggest and most militant party, is now called – has spread itself in the area surrounding the Nallamalai forests to the South, namely the districts of Guntur, Nalgonda, Mahbubnagar, Kurnool and Prakasam. That party has also always had sizable presence in the eastern ghat hills of East Godavari, Visakhapatnam and Vizianagaram districts and the adjoining plains of Srikakulam, and in the southern-most district of Anantapur. It has had some activity in Cuddapah, Nellore and Chittoor districts, thus covering the whole State.

The villages are therefore tense in much of the State. The early morning knock, the dreaded symbol of police raj that serves to keep people awake through much of the night and tense during the day, is as dreaded as ever, except that in these villages the knock could be of the police or of the naxalites. Since it is people from the same classes/communities that are on either side, for the reasons explained above, the two knocks are not distinguished (excepting marginally) by the social composition of the victims. During the day too, the villages are quiet. People have a lot of problems which they would like to agitate about, but they are inhibited by the fear that the police will see the agitation - any agitation – as naxalite-inspired. Once that label is put upon the agitation, anything can happen to the participants. And so they would rather suffer. People have their own interests, needs, likes and dislikes in economic and political matters, but are afraid of acting freely lest they offend the naxalites. Parents are especially afraid for their impressionable sons and daughters – daughters as much as sons these days, for naxalite recruitment of women cadre is fast on the increase – afraid that their anger at the conditions of their life will drive them to the naxalites and thence to death. In the other direction, they are perhaps also afraid for such of their progeny as are inclined to tell the naxalites where they get off, out of a misguided sense of righteousness, which too could well be fatal.

A curtain of fear therefore hangs over the affected villages, more dense in some places

than in others. It would be wrong to convey an impression that the situation is as bad as, say, in Kashmir. The State does not see the naxalites as a threat in the same sense as it sees ethnic militancy in the border areas. It is certainly more tolerant of their political expression. On the other side, the naxalites too, whatever their faults, are an ideologically oriented group, which acts as a check of sorts on how arbitrarily they can conduct themselves. Nevertheless the overall situation is hardly comfortable. It started becoming uncomfortable from about the beginning of the nineties, and has become progressively more so as the years have passed, since the 'naxalite problem' has gradually become a hit and run war between the naxalites and the police, everything else in practice subordinated to the requirements of this battle. Administration in the affected areas has been subordinated to the needs of counter-revolution, and on the other side, revolutionary politics has also been subordinating itself to the tactical needs of the battle. That is, of course, the cleaner aspect of it. The less clean aspect is the cultural degeneration of the movement and the further brutalisation of the police, which has added a further element of uncertainty and arbitrariness to the violence.

When human rights activists go to villages these days, the wistful request they hear is: please get us back those six months, that is to say the period of ceasefire, June 2004 to Jan 2005. No more telling proof of the popular desire for negotiations need be sought. This request comes from all classes, the poor as well as the rich, the sympathisers of the revolution as well as its opponents. Not all of them expect total disarming of the naxalites as the final outcome of the talks. Not all of them desire it either. What do they want, then?

May be they are not very clear what they want, because it is human to shy away from entertaining clear expectations when confronted by forces beyond one's control. But it is possible to arrive at a view of what they might reasonably want if they dared to want any thing. Freedom from fear of the midnight knock, or a life where your ears are routinely trained to unfamiliar sounds from dusk to dawn, would be the most important. Freedom to participate in political activity of their choice, whether that is radical politics or what the radicals would call bourgeois politics would probably come next. Freedom to obtain and retain the benefits of revolutionary activity would be quite high on the list. The naxalites, whatever critics may say of their methods, have been instrumental in getting many social and economic benefits for the poor: wage increases, a better price for forest produce such as tendu leaf, a parcel of land to live on, and so on. In times of drought the naxalite squads have often raided public godowns and distributed the food grain to the poor and hungry. In all such cases, the police have taken it upon themselves

to obstruct the benefits, acting on the theory that if the poor are allowed to retain the benefits obtained by revolutionary means, then they would feel encouraged to support the revolution, which would make the task of policing that much more difficult. The answer should have been that policing is not the highest moment of governance, and as such the difficulties the police may face shall not be decisive in such matters. Governments, unfortunately, have not thought so.

On the other hand, the public at large would want that routine Governmental activity shall be allowed to go on unhindered by the revolutionaries, for they do get some benefit now and then from it. Complete cessation of all governance is certainly not desired by the people, though for the revolutionaries, it is often a matter of prestige that the Government shall not function at ease in their strongholds, certainly at times when their own political activity is forcibly obstructed at each step by the police. Of a piece with this is the unhappiness of the public with the frequent mass resignations of local body representatives forced by the revolutionaries. Villages which are emptied of political representatives at this level do lose out in the Panchayat Raj system.

Violence, of course, is a major concern. Police raids on villages resulting in arrest and torture of sympathisers of the naxalites, destruction of their houses and despoliation of their fields, intimidation of the kith and kin of naxalite cadre to force the cadre to surrender, use of villagers, especially the poor and the oppressed, as human shields against possible naxalite attacks, are routine events in the areas of naxalite presence. To this the response of the naxalites has been to attack suspected agents of the police and informers, which makes for further intimidation and fear.

A lightening of the terrible burden this state of affairs imposes on the people is what, in a nutshell, the people at large have reason to hope for. Any dialogue, any talks, would have meaning for them to the extent that this is achieved or at least attempted to be achieved. It is as with people living at the borders of hostile neighbouring countries. Those living safely and securely away from the border can afford to think of permanent peace or permanent victory for the good (which means themselves) over evil. Those living at the border would be happy with workable rules of war.

When the Congress party came to power in Andhra Pradesh last summer, it announced lifting of the ban on the CPI(M-L) (Peoples War), and started speaking of a dialogue with them. The Committee of Concerned Citizens, an informal grouping of public spirited persons that has for long been agitating for a dialogue, quickly took the initiative and

started the process that eventually led to the actual sitting across the table in October 2004. A ceasefire was declared and honoured by both sides – barring a few incidents of a purely local character – for about six months, from June 2004 till January 2005. A more detailed code of conduct was also agreed upon without too much difficulty. Essentially it meant only one thing: that both the naxalites and the police should stop indulging in the various acts of violence and destruction that had become a habit with them in the course of revolution and counter-revolution.

But one point of contention remained: this was whether, during the period of the dialogue, when the naxalites would be free to openly campaign in support of revolutionary politics, they would go around with weapons slung across the shoulders or would leave them some where to be picked up if and when the talks failed and ceasefire became a thing of the past. The Government wanted them to leave their arms somewhere and move around unarmed, a suggestion that was initially not greatly resisted by the radicals, but by and by too much was read into the suggestion by ex-revolutionaries and revolutionary sympathisers, making it impossible for the Peoples War to accept it and still assert its character as the most uncompromisingly militant revolutionary organisation in India. This served only to prejudice the public against revolutionaries, for to the lay eye their insistence on carrying weapons openly when the Government was willing to offer a cease fire and start a dialogue appeared churlish.

With this as the only sour note the talks started. But there was no agenda at all. Indeed, the dialogue resembled some kind of a theatre performance, led by the TV cameras. The naxalites enjoyed it and made the most of it. Criticism of the establishment of the kind that is normally confined to the ghettoised gatherings of the radical left was aired by the TV channels and reported by the Press on page one. Delegations of different sections of the people were permitted to visit the revolutionary representatives and place their problems before them, presumably for being included in the agenda of the talks the revolutionaries were to have with the Government. Unwilling sections of the establishment, such as the major section of the police, fumed and fretted about the indulgence being shown to the outlaws, but there was no stopping the tamasha so long as the mood of dialogue lasted.

It could not last long. It is in the realm of fairy tales that Governments backed by comfortable majorities and a reasonably effective police force wantonly give up killing the revolutionaries and talk to them to be told how anti-people they are, how unconcerned about mass welfare their policies are, etc. Governments on the verge of collapse under the

assault of the revolutionaries do so, to save a little bit of their authority or to prevent the blood bath the finale would entail. Governments that are beseeched by hard-pressed revolutionaries ready to give up arms on face saving terms may also indulge the outlaws in a last dialogue that will help preserve the dignity of the latter and rid the former of a major head-ache. Short of these two extremes there is no situation in which the kind of drama that Hyderabad witnessed during the pooja vacation of 2004 could be real. And Andhra Pradesh is no where near either of the two extreme situations. The naxalites are quite strong but certainly not at the gates of power. The police are able to contain them at a point well away from that, though only with the most uncivilised methods of force. The revolutionaries, to their credit, have managed not to be vanquished, and indeed have given the police, and the establishment in general, blow for blow, but that ability has only helped them survive and spread horizontally, at considerable cost to society as well as their own character and quality as a revolutionary force, but has not served to bring them near the portals of power.

On the other hand, the very fact that the revolutionaries are able to replicate their struggles in newer and newer areas even as they are suppressed in their original strongholds has meant that they feel no compulsion to call it quits. Indeed, the party which was until recently known as the CPI(ML) (Peoples War), and now as the CPI(Maoist), has in this very course become the only model of revolution in the country. Major radical formations of Bihar have merged with it, and today it can boast of a swathe of land under its strong influence all the way from the Krishna river basin to India's borders along the northern extreme of the Gangetic plains. The rather virulent differences that used to characterise the internal dialogue within communist revolutionary ranks have given way to near universal acceptance, among practical revolutionaries, of their way as the only way. Some among the radical left may find themselves disturbed by the nagging question whether termination of a theoretic debate by considerations of practical efficacy is necessarily the best thing, but for the present at least events have overtaken doubts. And so the scenario of the naxalites being ready to give up arms on face saving conditions is as unreal as a surrender of sovereignty to them by the Indian State. That being so, the only possible dialogue was some kind of a code-of-conduct talks that would reduce the bloodshed some what and give breathing space to the people living in the areas of conflict. What October 2004 needed was some one in the middle of the dialogue – and there were many, some legitimately there and some who had pushed themselves on to the stage, as will happen in such times – who would realise this and tell the two sides to stop the charade and get down to a realistic dialogue on the basis of a workable agenda. But the name of analysis in those weeks was the most airy cloudiness.



A lamb-gets-chummy-with-the-tiger paradigm of political thinking overtook the State and held the field until the field caved in come the new year.

It only required some impatient one on the establishment's side to pull the curtains down on the play. The Chief Minister himself turned out to be that one. He had studiously kept away from the events and let his Home Minister do all the talking. And the Home Minister, as seasoned a politician as any, did an able job of it, his philosophical air and earthy idiom carrying more conviction than the fire-breathing words of his counter-parts in the dialogue, the three writers and artists who represented the Maoists in the run up to the talks. But it was known to those who knew the political career of the Chief Minister Y.S.Rajasekhar Reddy, that he would have no inclination for such democratic processes as a dialogue with outlaws, and much less would he tolerate the aimless atmosphere of the talks that had resulted in lionisation of the radicals by the public and the media. He was only indulging the Telangana leadership of his party that had realised the fruitlessness of police action as the only response to naxalism. Rajasekhar Reddy himself would not regard the response as fruitless for his is not the queasy stomach that cannot tolerate the bleeding of Society in a higher cause. After all, he himself has caused considerable bloodshed in one higher cause: his own rise to power.

As the second round of talks was expected to begin, Rajasekhar Reddy's cabinet struck the first blow by deciding not to extend the cease-fire after Dec 2004. He and his Director General of Police started saying that since the naxalites were going around carrying weapons even while the dialogue was on and the ceasefire was in force, the police could not keep quiet. From 6th January 2005, the police started hunting down naxalites again. Soon, making it clear that he was not reacting only to the unsettled term of the ceasefire, namely whether during the period of the talks the revolutionaries would go around carrying weapons in public, Rajasekhar Reddy declared that there could be no talks with the naxalites unless they were ready to lay down arms, that is to say talks would be only for surrender of arms by the naxalites. That was certainly curtains for the effort.

There is little prospect of the talks being revived in the near future. The view of the police, and the view of the police has always been decisive in the matter of the State Government's naxalite policy, is that any dialogue, any agreement, short of final surrender of the naxalites, will only strengthen them. They are probably right, but why should that be a cause of worry, and to whom? Naxalism is one politics. There can be different views about it, and certainly anybody with a sense of humanity cannot but view their easy attitude towards violence with any thing but disquiet, but there is little doubt

about the help it has given to the poor and the oppressed. If a process of dialogue can help discipline its tendency to indulge in arbitrary violence, then what is wrong if in the process it gets politically strengthened? The poor certainly would not think there is any thing wrong with that. And so who is worried?

The likes of Rajasekhar Reddy and Chandra Babu Naidu – whose Government refused even to initiate talks without a categorical assurance of laying down of arms by the naxalites – are worried. It is for the more enlightened sections of society to carry a different message to the public, but this time round they should abjure the kind of cloudy thinking that rendered the process a tamasha and made Rajasekhar Reddy's destructive intervention the only act of realism. Everybody has heard the piece of wisdom that politics is the art of the possible. That can some times be a terribly cynical thing to say, but it is certainly truer than the belief that politics is a theatre where people play out fairy tales.