

Dialogue in Democracy: Challenges for Government-Maoist Talks

By Manoranjan Mohanty *This article appeared in [Mainstream](#), December 8 2009.*

Public opinion in India seems to be building up strongly in favour of a dialogue among the government and the Maoists. This is despite the clear indications that the Central Government is going ahead with its preparations for launching the armed offensive in the Naxalite movement areas. Yet there are signs from both the government and the Maoists that they were amenable to the idea of talks.

Central-level Dialogue

One thing is clear: the Central Government has taken the initiative in the current round of anti-Naxalite operations. Union Home Minister Chidambaram, who has cultivated the image of a 'tough' Home Minister, has listed the 'Naxalite problem' as one of his main challenges, together with the task of countering terrorism. Even though he has often differentiated the two challenges calling the Naxalites as 'our own people who have been misled', he has linked the two together saying that the terrorist outfits were a source of supply of weapons for the Naxalites and also that both target civilians. In fact, both the phenomena have social roots in the alienation of groups and that is a relevant comparison.

Anyhow the point to emphasise here is that the talks have to be held at the Central level. Even though State governments have to face specific situations, we have seen in the past that the work of coordination was carried out by the Centre. A coordination mechanism has been functioning at the Central level for over a decade now. Even the Salwa Judum initiative against Naxalites—the arming of the civilian population and setting up of camps for them outside the movement areas in Chhattisgarh—was a Centrally-supported BJP-Congress strategy at the State level.

Notwithstanding indictments by the Supreme Court and the National Human Rights Commission that infamous initiative continues to exist. Similarly the operations in Lalgarh in West Bengal have been jointly organised by the Centre and the State government. That sometimes the State governments complain about the inadequate supply of Central forces for their inability to curb violence or that the Centre blames the concerned State Government for ineffective action cannot wish away the fact that in this matter the Centre today has taken the command.

Thus just as security operations are coordinated under the Centre's leadership, the dialogue process has also to be initiated by the Centre under the auspices of the Home Minister. Since the Maoists also operate as an all-India movement, the talks should take place at the all-India level.

Focus on Tribal People's Problems

One of the positive aspects of the current discussion in the media all over the country is that rather than focusing on violence and counter-violence or breakdown of law and order in some areas, the attention of the people in the country has shifted to the actual problems

faced by the tribal people and the failure to meet their rightful demands which has pushed them to the path of armed resistance. Even the PESA and Forest Rights Act which were small yet welcome steps to respect the tribal people's rights are not implemented fully. Home Minister Chidambaram, who had started this new phase of anti-Naxalite operations, declaring the main task as 'securing the areas before development activities can be launched', seems to have now nuanced his approach. One does not know how serious he is about this 'composite' approach. In his letter to former Lok Sabha Speaker Rabi Ray and other members of the Citizens Initiative for Peace (CIP) on October 20, 2009 Chidambaram said: "Like you and your colleagues, the Government of India is also concerned about the real issues that affect the people, namely, food security, land and forest rights, education, health and justice." He was quoting from the CIP appeal dated October 15 which was signed by a wide spectrum of intellectuals, judges, social workers, journalists and human rights activists from all over the country.

But the real issues should not be discussed in the abstract. The tribal people have risen in protest against the steady process of alienation of tribal land. Then there are the burning issues of the current movement relating to land acquisition, mostly in the tribal areas, for mega projects and Special Economic Zones which is being resisted by the local people. In some cases the people have succeeded as in Nandigram and Singur in West Bengal because of strong and united campaigns and in Raigarh in Maharashtra due to the people's campaign having won the referendum as well as having been able to obtain a favourable judgement of the Supreme Court. Unlike in these cases in areas such as Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Orissa, where the mineral wealth of the Indian people is concentrated, the state and the ruling parties have come out fiercely in defence of the corporate interests, national and global. These areas have seen long years of neglect of the basic problems of the tribal people—it was good to notice that the Prime Minister talking about this in the Chief Ministers' Conference on Anti-Naxalite Operations though he reiterated his view that the 'Naxalites posed the greatest threat to India's internal security'.

So the emerging scenario which has crystallised in the public imagination of the oppressed people of India today is that the government offensive against the Naxalites in Central India or Dandakaranya is to clear the area for mining and industrial projects such as steel plants and bauxite mines and aluminum industries of the giant companies like Tata Steel, Arcelor Mittal, Vedanta Sterlite and POSCO. These projects are needed as a part of the strategy to draw foreign capital to India and achieve a high growth rate in the process of globalisation and liberalisation of the Indian economy. This trend is being resisted in many parts of India where adivasis, Dalits, backward classes, religious minorities have forged united movements with women in the forefront. The resistance has acquired greater momentum with the deepening crisis in the countryside where the farmers' suicides have spread to new areas and rising prices have further impoverished the poor.

Three kinds of oppression have converged into what amounts to be a war by the Indian state against its own people: one, persistence of poverty, malnutrition and distress migration; two, exploitation of the natural resources of these areas without the consent of the local people causing massive displacement and loss of livelihood and cultural estrangement; and three, the threat of a much escalated armed attack by the COBRA and similar dreadful paramilitary forces supported by the Army and Air Force that is bound to

result in innumerable killings and injuries. All this in addition to the familiar terrorising practices by the security forces resorting to rape of women and harassment of common people in the name of tackling Maoist sympathisers which have been documented by the NHRC.

This operation of the government is thus aimed at all the movements which are resisting the displacement-generating mega projects and are fighting for land rights of the tribal people. The government has reduced all streams of resistance to a single stream of the Naxalite movement even though there are many movements on the ground which have nothing to do with the Naxalites. In Orissa, for example, the resistance movement against POSCO in the Paradip area is a movement of local people with the participation of many different parties led by CPI activists supported by socialist and Sarvodaya workers. The Kashipur movement against Utkal Alumina project in Koraput and the anti-Vedanta struggle in Lanjigarh, Kalahandi to save Niyamgiri, the Kalinganagar movement against Tata Steel are spearheaded by local tribal people supported essentially by socialists and Sarvodaya workers. Some Naxalite groups may be present in the areas.

But to brand the entire movement as Naxalite or Maoist and then, using the bogey of fighting Naxalites, subject them to arrest and other harassment is absolutely unjustified. Similarly, the government is unable to differentiate among the many parties and groups among the Naxalites who differ on issues of strategy and forms of struggle and has often used the blanket term of Maoist. Even though all Naxalites share the broad ideology of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, the CPI (Maoist), which was formed in 2004 after the merger of the first People's War Group with the Party Unity and then the resultant CPI (People's War) with the MCC (active in Bihar and Jharkhand) is leading the armed struggle in the tribal areas of Dandakaranya. Even where Naxalites and Maoists are leading local people's movements the state should respect the rule of law and go into the reasons as to why the people have accepted the leadership of Naxalites in solving their problems.

The important thing to note is that when mega projects are imposed on the people and their peaceful agitations fail to persuade the governments to reconsider the projects, then they very often resort to violent methods. That is how tribals of Dandakaranya have found protection from the Maoists who have given them a sense of dignity and voice to assert their rights over their local resources. Far from being opposed to development, the local people seek an alternative pattern of development that fulfils their basic needs and enables them to decide their future course of development.

Steps towards Dialogue

The CIP has given a call for unconditional dialogue. This can happen only when there is a ceasefire. The Home Minister has set a condition that the Maoists must 'abjure violence'. He has elaborated this by saying that he did not ask them to lay down arms but 'halt the acts of violence'. On the other hand, the Maoists demand that the state stop its offensive.

One of the lessons from the Andhra Pradesh peace talks in 2004 has to be kept in mind. Both sides accused each other of taking advantage of the ceasefire to strengthen their operations. In fact almost all the prominent CPI (Maoist) participants in the peace talks

were killed in police actions in the succeeding months. The government accused the Maoists of spreading to new areas in Telangana. The fact is that the peace talks were followed by massive police operations that severely weakened the Maoist base in Telangana.

That experience is cited by many democratic forces to question the very idea of a dialogue. They believe that it would help the state to lay a trap to encircle the Maoists and liquidate them through the planned paramilitary operations with high tech deployment of forces using helicopters and even unmanned aircraft. The offer of peace talks may be meant only to legitimise the military action of the government. This cannot be ruled out at all. But the planned offensive of the government can only be stopped if we draw attention to the real problems of the people and for that acts of violence from all sides have to cease. The aim is to expand the democratic space in India to pursue the promises made to the people of India in the Preamble, Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of the Indian Constitution. That space is being steadily reduced by the ruthless imposition of mega projects on the one hand and militaristic offensives by the state on the other. The government has to be reminded that similar strategies to suppress Naxalites have not only failed in the past, these have pushed more and more people into their movement during the past four decades.

Therefore, the first step in this process is for the state to order the armed forces to stop the combing operations in the movement areas, vacate the public institutions such as schools, dispensaries and Panchayat Bhavans and stay in their barracks. It is the combing operations which have led to much harassment of the tribal people. Incidents of killing and rape by forces such as COBRA continue to come from the villages of Chhattisgarh. In Orissa recently, a peaceful demonstration of unarmed tribal people in front of the police station of Koraput's Narayanpatna protesting against the combing operations in their area was fired upon by the police in which two tribals were killed on November 20, 2009. This was a movement led by Chashi Mulia Adivasi Sangh, which had conducted a peaceful march in July to restore tribal rights over illegally alienated tribal land. This is another classic case of a peaceful struggle for constitutional rights being subjected to the brutal force of the state which might push many of the tribals to the path of armed struggle.

As soon as the government ceases its operations, the Maoists should announce a suspension of their attacks. The recent incidents of blowing up police vehicles and killing security personnel as well as alleged police informers, holding up passenger trains and attacks on public institutions and properties do not augur well for peace efforts.

More than showing interest in the idea of talks, the government must announce some concrete steps to facilitate it.

Second, once the suspension of armed operations has taken place designated representatives can meet and formulate the issues for talks. The representatives of the Maoists must be guaranteed safe passage and immunity from arrest. Both sides must be prepared to have several rounds of talks.

Third, to facilitate the peace process a climate of dialogue must be created and tempering postures must be avoided by all concerned. Statements have to be made with care. The Prime Minister's high-pitch statement on the Naxalites being the greatest threat to

internal security pictured the question wrongly as a zero-sum game. The Home Minister took the discourse to a new height by describing the task as the most important challenge of his career. His formulation that the space abandoned by the state to the Naxalites must be secured first for resuming civil administration had already departed from the earlier perspective proposed by the Planning Commission's Expert Group that the Naxalite movement was basically a development challenge.

As if the Home Minister's incitement was not enough, West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee vowed to 'teach them a lesson'. The media has revelled in heightening the temper of the anti-Naxalite discourse. Their studio discussions and reports have hardly contributed to building an environment of democratic discussion. Everyone should realise that democracy is about careful reasoning on issues of justice, equality and freedom and that requires conditions of peace. Peace is not absence of conflict, but structural conditions for enabling humans to work to the best of the ability of one and all.

Democratic forces in general and human rights groups in particular once again have a duty to come together, as they were trying to do in the case of Jammu and Kashmir and North-East India, namely, to affirm that dialogue is central to democracy and the challenge in the Naxalite areas is to acknowledge the arrival of resurgent tribals and enable the struggling people to achieve their fundamental rights and dignity.

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