

Towards Peace, Democracy and Justice

Committee of Concerned Citizens

In Telangana, hardly a day passes without reports of horrific killings either at the hands of the police or Naxalite political parties. Unnoticed by much of the country, a citizens' enterprise has persisted for more than five years to try to restore justice and peace to the troubled districts. Although it has not succeeded in stemming the violence, it is the only initiative that has evoked responses both from the state and Naxalite leaders.

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Over almost four decades, the Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh has been racked by incessant brutal bloodletting, both by state authorities and radical political formations. Hardly a day passes without reports in local newspapers describing horrific killings either at the hands of the police or Naxalite political parties; there have been encounters, reprisals, explosions, killings of alleged informers and factional violence. Ordinary people are entrapped and terrorised in this incessant crossfire, which they are utterly powerless to control. Violence perennially infests the air, and stalks every path. People find themselves in an unending spiral of bloodshed and fear from which many see no paths of redemption.

In the years 2000 and 2001, for instance, as many as 350 lives were lost in encounters by the police, and more than 310 people were reported to have died as a result of Naxalite violence. The large majority of those killed belong to impoverished dalit and tribal communities, and include many youth and some women. In the dark despair of these times, unnoticed by much of the country, is a citizens' enterprise of great ethical significance, which has doggedly persisted for more than five years to try to restore peace and justice to the troubled districts of Telangana, to end the cycles of violence and suffering, and to restore the right of peaceful and normal living of the common people.

A group of citizens of undisputed high moral standing came together in early 1997 to form the Committee of Concerned Citizens. The committee is convened by S R Sankaran, a retired IAS officer who

is universally respected for his contributions towards social justice for marginalised people, his personal integrity, humanity and the austerity of his lifestyle. The committee includes K G Kannabiran, National President of the People's Union of Civil Liberties, G S Hargopal, D Narasimha Reddy and Venkateswara Rao, senior editor and K Jayashankar, former vice-chancellor. In its early years, the committee was assisted by journalist Anatakrisna. The ethical strength of the committee derives not merely from the considerable reputation of its members, but from its consistent determination to apply the same democratic and moral principles in evaluating acts of violence by the state and by revolutionary parties. Its steady voice has therefore been a lonely one in the confused cacophony and tumult of these times. Yet it is significant that although it has not succeeded in stemming the violence, it is the only initiative that has evoked responses both from the state and from Naxalite leaders.

The committee expresses its opposition both to state impunity and to what it describes as the impunity of a revolutionary political movement, which claims that its struggle is to provide an alternative and just system. It is unequivocal, firstly, in its condemnation of the killing of alleged Naxalites by the police in encounters, which it describes as 'targeted extralegal executions'. It has listed many examples of these in its letters to the state government and National Human Rights Commission (NHRC). For instance, in its first report in 1997, the committee stated unambiguously that the police have developed the 'habit' of picking up people from their homes and public places and shooting them

dead in the vicinity of their own villages. The committee came across several such instances in the villages visited. It is difficult to imagine how a man working in the fields, speaking to his friends, or having his meal at home could suddenly turn out in an olive green uniform with a weapon tucked under his arm and get shot in an armed encounter with the police. Two striking instances of such actions were the killing of Bhujanga Rao, a 16-year old gond youth in March while he was working in his fields in his village Damanguada in Adilabad; and the killing of Lingamaiah, a 20-year old youth in Pisara in Warangal district in June last year. In the Pisara incident, the boy was picked up from a public space and the police fired in the air to frighten away village women who tried to rescue him.

Three years later, in May 2002, in a letter to the chairperson, NHRC, the committee described some major encounters. On the April 26 in Tallavellemla in Chityal Mandal in Nalgonda district, six persons including one woman reportedly from the People's War Group (PWG) were killed by police personnel. An encounter in Koukonda village in Parkal Mandal in Warangal district on April 27, 2002 resulted in the death of as many as 12 persons, including five women reportedly from PWG. In the second case, some of the bodies were also found burnt.

The committee maintains that 'the state leadership' has shifted its political burden to the police, encouraging them to indulge in what are euphemistically described as encounters. These are no other than custodial and targeted killings, extinguishing human life and the right to life itself. It regards such encounter killings not as isolated aberrations or unintended transgressions of law by individual police personnel, but a deliberate systemic response of the state. A state that is adopting a policy of annihilation of individuals, and that is unable to comprehend a complex problem which is the result of inequity and denial of justice. The government, particularly the police, have internalised the practice of killing in encounters as valid and believe, irrespective of the law of the land, that in case of encounters, there need not be any independent investigation. These indiscriminate killings, termed as encounters, "introduce terror as a component of governance and erode its very democratic essence".

One impact of condoning and indeed fostering such unchecked state violence,

has been to brand all democratic protests as Naxalite activities, and to deploy repressive police action to thwart and crush legitimate democratic dissent. The committee has therefore demanded that democratic protests should not be branded as Naxalite activities and police force should not be used to suppress them. The police should stop the practice of picking up alleged Naxalites or others from their homes and public places and shooting them. It has also demanded that all cases of alleged encounters should be treated as homicidal killings, investigated and tried, as ruled recently by the high court and NHRC. Even according to existing law, all armed encounters must be registered and enquiries must be immediately instituted. However, the government has not done anything to register and investigate the offences.

The committee is equally scathing in its condemnation of Naxalite violence, which focuses more on what the committee describes as “military actions rather than on the mobilisation of people for social transformation”. It is convinced that the CPI(ML)-PWG has been engaging in unleashing indiscriminate violence and terror upon people rather than resorting to democratic methods. Its strategies include physical liquidation of people, attacks on police stations and targeted killing of police personnel, killing of so-called informers and ‘coverts’, exploding of landmines resulting in large scale deaths, destruction of public property and other forms of arbitrary actions including death threats, or even a ‘ban’ on political parties. The committee feels that the policy of individual annihilation followed by the CPI(ML)-PWG is as flawed as the policy pursued by the government, which has come to believe that liquidation of activists and leaders will lead to liquidation of the movement.

These arbitrary and violent actions of Naxalite parties are seen to contribute to “further brutalise the society and lead to the shrinkage of democratic space for mobilisation and direct participation of the people, impairing the very process of transformation that the movements claim to stand for”. Often, in public perception, the Naxalite movement has come to essentially connote a confrontation between the police and the Naxalites, each having its agenda of violence. ‘There is a general public feeling that people are sandwiched between Naxalites and police apparatus and this feeling cannot be wished away.’

In the long run, the committee is convinced that social peace can be restored and sustained only if justice and dignity is ensured for every person. It points out that the Naxalite movement is not a new phenomenon in Andhra Pradesh. Land based struggles of poor peasants and tribals have taken place several times in its history. These struggles are political in nature and have a socio-economic base. Attempts to crush them with force may drive them underground and render their course more brutal.

The committee draws attention to the structural violence built into the societal system such as inequality, exploitation and lack of freedom or democratic space. These root causes include land, human dignity, wages, employment, repression and harassment, particularly encounters as well as the absence of a redressal mechanism for grievances. On the core issue of land, the committee has called upon the government to distribute to poor dalit and tribal landless families thousands of acres of cultivable land lying fallow in the districts. While estimates about the extent of such lands vary between a few thousands to more than a lakh, there is common agreement on the reason for the land lying fallow. The CPI-ML parties identified these lands as surplus and forcibly occupied them at different points of time. However, as the lands have not been officially transferred to the beneficiaries identified by the parties, the revenue and the police departments step in to prevent the allottees from cultivating it. The landlords on the other hand cannot cultivate the land for fear of Naxalites. In many instances, the landlords moved out of the villages to nearby towns.

In a meeting with the Committee of Concerned Citizens on June 3, 2000, the chief minister of Andhra Pradesh Chandrababu Naidu assured them that there will be no fake encounters; according to him there were none. He maintained that it was certainly not possible to have good governance without law and order. He reiterated that the Naxalites have no faith in democracy. He spoke of the killing of Madhava Reddy, former home minister by the PWG, by exploding landmines in March 2000. He said that many other good people were killed by them, and if such incidents occur and people roam around with weapons, the government cannot just keep quiet and watch. He also referred to threatening letters and letters written in blood received by him from PWG, threatening to kill him and his family.

It is significant that the Naxalite groups have responded in writing to appeals issued from time to time by the committee, with far more seriousness than either the state government or indeed the NHRC. The CPI(ML) People’s War states, for instance, in a letter in Telegu to the committee, “that democracy means bourgeoisie democracy”. They maintain that “extremism (democratic struggles of the people) is inevitable in a situation of inadequately addressed social and economic problems”. They claim that the committee came to the wrong assessments only by isolating the cruelty and violence from people’s struggle. Thus, the Committee of Concerned Citizens wrongly equates police violence with Naxalite violence. “It is also unfortunate that a revolutionary party and its activities, which are essential for the liberation of an oppressed people, should be projected as something opposed to the very people. The revolutionary party is responsible for the oppressed people in all its political practice. It corrects immediately any unintentional mistakes. It takes all steps to ensure that innocent people are not subject to any suffering due its practice. It apologises to the people in case of any grievous mistakes”.

The committee kept up the dialogue by stating, “We agree that you are fighting on behalf of the oppressed masses. However, we also believe that there is a difference between the direct actions of the people and those actions taken by the party on behalf of the people”. Naxalite leaders in turn stated, ‘it is the birth right of people to resist by legal or illegal means, peacefully or by arms, violence and atrocities on people, cruel exploitation of workers, peasants, students, intellectuals, women, minorities, dalit and adivasis by oppressive landlords, big capitalists, high officials, imperialists”.

In its meeting with the chief minister, the committee appealed to stop encounters and adhere to the rule of law. A month earlier, in May 2000, the Peoples War had set out eight demands to implement a ceasefire. The committee has continued its dialogue with government and political parties in subsequent years. In 2002, the committee suggested to the state that it should stop encounters, combing operations and harassment; strictly adhere to the law; review cases; and allow all non-violent, peaceful and democratic activities, irrespective of political ideology. The suggestions to Peoples War were to stop the following killings, including that of

police personnel; attacks on police stations; destruction of government and public property; the use of land mines; extortions; and interference with the democratic activities of political parties or groups and activities that would give an impression that development, administrative and other welfare activities are being obstructed. There was an immediate reply addressed to the committee from the CPI(ML) – Peoples War on January 19, 2002 stating they were ready for talks if the government stopped encounters and combing operations.

The chief minister responded with a series of all-party meetings, and announced that the government would hold direct talks with the CPI(ML)-Peoples War, who in turn consented to participate. However, hopes were dashed when in the second half of 2002, encounter killings by the government as well as the killing of police personnel, political leaders and land mine blasts by Peoples War resulted in a large number of deaths and led to the revival of a spiral of killings as in the past.

As the violence continues virtually unabated, the committee continues its efforts for peace, democracy and justice. It maintains that “the government particularly the police have converted themselves into the prosecutor, the judge and the executioner and are continuing the criminal practice of extra judicial killings with impunity”. It highlights the issue of encounters precisely because “it relates to extinguishing of human life and right to life by the government itself – a government which is expected to protect life and liberty under the Constitution – and for which no recompense is possible”. At the same time, it remains resolutely opposed to the violence of Naxalite parties, and instead calls upon them to, “establish a tradition of human rights and values as a part of their political perception and practice”. It is a comment on our times that neither side is prepared to heed their courageous and gentle counsel. There is no doubt that the country is a darker, more brutal place as a result. **EPW**