

Complicating the 'Naxalite' debate

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An edited version of this piece appeared as the cover story in *Himal Southasian* in December 2007. The report is based on travels across Andhra to Bihar in October of the same year. At a time when most of the media is pushing the same binaries we must avoid, this may help in conveying the enormous complexity of the issue. Some facts may be outdated, and Kafil readers will be more familiar with certain issues like Salwa Judum than this reporter, but the broad argument may still have some relevance. I will follow this up with posts on the Nepali process and Indian Naxalites.

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A people's movement. The greatest internal security challenge. Struggle for the rights of the poor, tribals, Dalits, landless. Compact Revolutionary Zone with influence in almost 200 districts. A socio economic problem rooted in exploitation and idealism. A law and order threat . True people's democracy. A criminal, authoritarian and opportunistic outfit. The revolution will smash the Indian state. The Maoists are ants and can be crushed anytime .

Neat black and white portrayals have come to characterise one of the most complex stories of our times. The Naxal as the saviour and the state as the oppressor. The state as protector and Naxal as the villain. Numbers and scale of action act as the judge of Maoist spread and activity. 1608 incidents of Naxalite violence and 677 people killed in 2005; 1509 incidents and 678 killed in 2006; 249 persons killed till June 2007.

But this narrative hides more than it tells. Like the fact that there is possibly no one Naxalite movement in India, neither is there a unified and organised state response. The Communist Party of India (Maoist), born in 2004 after the unity of the People's War Group and the Maoist Communist Centre, leads the Maoist movement. It spreads across several states in varying degrees, and has a common political and military outlook. The movement is clearly national in character; the party is organised with a command structure and the aim of taking over state power. Connecting the dots to address the issue at the national level in Delhi is important for any sustainable way out.

Yet, the Naxalite movement looks different in Hyderabad, Raipur, Ranchi, and Patna. Go further deep in each state and Warangal, Dantewada, Hazaribagh, and Jehanabad – datelines that punctuate India's Naxal war – have more than their share of differences. Like any other political formation, it may be natural that the Maoists adapt themselves to specific set of dynamics. But the stark variations assume added significance. They pose difficult questions for those who portray it as a single movement that will destroy the Indian state and those who advocate any homogenised approach to deal with the issue.

Across Andhra Pradesh, there is a large degree of sympathy for the Maoists, yet today they face their most severe setback in this traditional southern bastion. There has been a massive escalation of violence and conflict in Chhatisgarh due to a flawed and brutal government strategy. In Jharkhand, a powerful but degenerated Maoist movement coupled with a corrupt and inert state has made life miserable and dangerous for citizens. The most powerful critique of armed Maoists comes from other ultra-left Naxalite groups in Bihar. The local politician-police-business-media lobby is exploitative, but there is a more intriguing Naxalite-mainstream politician and Naxalite-big business nexus that characterises the political landscape in places. In this almost incomprehensible maze, all that a visual footage driven media reveals are shots of sporadic armed attacks. All that a one-dimensional narrative provides is a simplified image of a Maoist party at war with a coherent Indian state.

What is certain however is that activities and strength of the CPI (Maoist) have increased in the past few years, particularly in the resource-rich states of central and eastern India. Inequitable government policies, absence of justice, land issues, a weak and corrupt administration, dearth of political actors who channelise people's concerns on the ground, forced displacement and insensitivity to non violent movements have all contributed to creating space for an armed outfit that questions the legitimacy of the political system. There is little doubt that the Maoists gain initial popularity by raising concerns of the poorest and most exploited. But it takes them little time to evolve into a dictatorial power structure with enormous vested interests, and elements of corruption, brutality, and mindless violence thrown in.

The Indian state is a divided house and there is no one standard threat perception of Naxalites. For the Prime Minister, left-wing extremism is the gravest internal security challenge; for a home ministry official in Delhi, the Naxal problem can easily be managed if states get their act together. A Raipur bureaucrat thinks if the central government decides to use force, the Naxals can be crushed in one minute. The local administration, according to a Jharkhand district police official, is only a temporary barrier for the Maoists who will continue to grow if politicians don't stand up. In the calculations of a Hyderabad top cop, all it requires is a specialised force and good intelligence to defeat the rebels who are like a disease. Naxalites are working according to a plan, and there will be an explosion of violence in a few years across India, warns a Delhi security analyst. For a Dantewada politician, Naxalism is a threat to his life but also his moment to emerge in the limelight as a defender of the Indian state.

In this flurry of voices, often at odds, the government neither has a uniform view of how strong is the Naxalite 'threat', nor an effective plan to deal with it. Sometimes, it suits politicians and officials to exaggerate the Naxal 'menace', for it becomes a pretext to ask for more funds and justify repression. At other times, it is more convenient to downplay the issue to convey a sense of success in dealing with it. On paper, the state vacillates between treating it as a socio-economic issue as well as a law and order problem. In practice, it relies almost exclusively on a police solution, and even that is badly planned and executed. Strikingly, there is no mention in government documents or even left-liberal discourse of the one critical element that is necessary to deal with Naxalism – local-level political management.

Fundamentally, engagement between the state and Naxals can yield little. The Maoists have no faith in the present constitution or state structure; the state has no time and space for those who seek to destroy it with arms. But what is needed is introspection. The government must realise this is a political movement stemming from genuine grievances that cannot be crushed and its own policies provide ammunition for rebellion; the Naxalites need to know that despite some increase in strength, taking over even a district headquarter, let alone a state capital is not easy, and those who are suffering the most are the poor who they claim to represent. Obvious facts, but the lack of rethinking on both sides gives rise to suspicions that neither is interested in a solution. Yet, it remains the only way to enable a basic level of dialogue on issues raised by Naxals which do fall within the constitutional framework, and an agreement to minimise loss of lives.

The Machiavellian southern state

Andhra Pradesh will remain etched in any account of the Maoist movement. From the first ultra-left rebellion against the Indian state in Telangana six decades back to being the hub of Naxalite activity right from 1967 to the present, the state has been the ideological fount of the Maoist movement.

With the formation of a new government headed by the Congress party in 2004, there was a ceasefire between the state and the People's War Group. Talks were initiated at the behest of an active citizen's group. The two sides agreed to be on the table because of a behind the scenes understanding during the polls when the Naxals helped the Congress win in several constituencies and in return the Congress promised to go lenient after victory – a reflection that the line between the mainstream and rebel is often blurred. A section of Maoist activists emerged overground, organised mass rallies, and participated in a round of negotiations. But it took little time for the process to collapse. Both sides had continued to distrust each other and saw the interlude as merely tactical to organise themselves more effectively. The government accused the Maoists of continuing to carry arms and consolidating strength by uniting with Bihar's MCC; the Naxalites alleged that the government was using the period to stage fake encounters against their activists.

In hindsight, the Maoists had a point. The government had shifted goalposts by insisting on disarming them without even a basic agreement – it was unreasonable to expect that the rebels would hand over their arms and give up the revolution. The Machiavellian state clearly acted in bad faith. They had used the break to track Maoist operations, weaken the armed squads or dalams, and plant a strong network of informers.

In the last three years, the Maoists have suffered a major setback in Andhra, particularly in the Telangana region – a fact accepted by Naxalites themselves. This is reflected in the reduced frequency and scale of armed actions, recruitment, and activities of mass organisations. The reversal stems from multiple factors, and deserves careful scrutiny because it is a marker of challenges that Naxalites might face in other parts of the country in the future.

One factor for the decline, much to the discomfort of all those who believe a law and order approach is completely futile, is strong and effective police action. The Andhra Pradesh police have built up a specialised fighting force called the Greyhounds. These are mobile squads, who know how to live in forests like the Naxalite dalams – the fulcrum of the movement – and have the ability to conduct surgical strikes based on sharp intelligence inputs.

Compared to police operations in the past, the Greyhounds are more careful not to violate human rights. While there have been allegations of rape against Greyhound members in Vakapalli in Vizag recently, human rights activists like K Balagopal see this as an aberration. "This is a disciplined force that roams around in villages and forests and does not harass people on a significant scale.

Instead, they purchase information about location, use modern technology to track movement, surround the area and shoot," he says. A top police official admits there has been a deliberate change in strategy. 'Earlier we used to go to a village, round up all the able-bodied men and beat them to scare them. But that only pushes people away. Now, there is strict control over these activities. In fact, I keep telling my counterparts in the Islamic fundamentalist department to do the same.' For their part, the Naxals have not been able to conduct any major attacks on Greyhounds.

Technology has helped the counter-insurgency effort. The identity of informers can be concealed more easily given that all it requires is a mobile phone set and different SIM cards to alert the police. N Venugopal, a pro-Maoist journalist, adds, "What added to the Maoist woes is the fact that they over-estimated their strength and went on a mass recruitment drive during the ceasefire. The police used the moment to infiltrate within."

The swinging masses

However, this should not make the police smug. For one, the setback is not irreversible. Indeed, there have been several ups and downs in the Maoist movement in Andhra since the 1970s but the rebels have consistently bounced back. And they continue to command sympathies of a large section of the society. From a Sikh auto-driver in Hyderabad to a Muslim cook; from pro-establishment journalists to even a government official in Bhadrachalam in Telangana, there is a consensus that Naxalites have served as a force for good in the past. They don't harass common people and attack only the corrupt; they beat up the landlord in my village; they will stand by the poor; they are the only ones who give justice in the forests; give them a chance to rule - we have seen this system and it doesn't work.

The Maoists also retain the ability to strike at will, as was witnessed in an attack on the convoy of former chief minister Janardhan Reddy in September. Indeed, the reversal inflicted by the police is coupled with the deliberate decision of the Maoists to retreat temporarily from the forests of Telangana and concentrate forces across the border in Chhatisgarh where an active war is raging with the government.

The Maoists are understood to have drawn two lessons from the recent Andhra experience. "They have decided to strengthen their military wing and adopt more aggressive strategies in the future. The party also feels that the answer lies in becoming more secretive and clamming up to prevent the possibility of information leaking. In fact, the district units do not even come out with statements now," says a CPI (Maoist) member.

But they may have got their analysis wrong here. For the setback is not only due to police action but also other systemic factors which require them to engage more widely in mass politics, rather than shy away from it.

For one, a major challenge faced by the rebels nationally, and particularly in Andhra, is the inability to attract young people in urban areas and small towns.

Warangal is at the heart of Telangana. At the sprawling campus of Kaketiya University, the hub of Naxalite student activity in the 1970's and 80s, there is a sense of calm. A few students are crowded around the National Service Scheme office to plan their next voluntary activity. There is a hand-written notice announcing the onset of placement interviews - 'Golden job opportunities in Infosys'. A group of students in the canteen chat loudly about Telegu star Chiranjeevi's daughter eloping with a man to ward off her father's opposition.

At the School of Social Sciences, a group of professors are having a cup of tea and pondering over the changing aspirations of students. "The upper and intermediate caste students join science and want to be a part of the IT boom. Those in humanities are usually first generation students from SC and ST background who are here only because of reservations and minimal scholarships. They are financially insecure and look around for employment, even if it is as a coolie or auto driver," says S Rao, a political scientist.

Students have little time or incentive to join the Maoist movement, in the face of competition and pressure from peers and parents to 'settle down' in life. Those at the Indian School of Business, a management school that has international tie-ups, in the outskirts of Hyderabad can barely locate the Telangana districts on the map and have their sights set on Silicon Valley. A little down, in the Nizam College of Osmania University, the aspirations are to get to the Hi-Tech city - an enclave of software companies and malls within the state capital. Students at the Regional Engineering College in Warangal aim for the green card as well, but would be satisfied with a well-paid job locally. And the Humanities students, already scorned for not making it to the science stream, are under pressure to get a job, try for government 'service', and send money home.

Simplistic as it may sound - after all, there were career-oriented people in the 70s as well - this has become among the most potent factors in weaning the youth away from armed movement. The success of the Maoists over the past few decades - in attacking feudalism, creating a new sense of consciousness among the marginalised, and forcing the state to give concessions to the tribals - is now proving to be an obstacle, for the young now want to exploit the available opportunities. These people in traditional Naxal strongholds have seen the movement closely. They know the pain and suffering that comes from being a Maoist activist - death at any moment in an encounter, constant harassment of the family, a tough life in an authoritarian set-up - with little immediate dividends. Little surprise that the second generation in the area decide to make the best of whatever they can get rather than fight for a red India.

As much as the Naxalites may like to disagree, another reason for their decline is the fact that politics - mainstream and democratic politics - has percolated down to people. In Andhra, there are alternative political channels to express aspirations. And many would like to join one of these streams and be a part of the state rather than fight it and face repression. The Telugu Desam Party provides an outlet for regional aspirations; the mainstream Communist Parties have picked up issues of land displacement and distribution of surplus land; the Telangana Rashtriya Samiti is at the forefront of the movement for a separate statehood - a claim supported by the Maoists. Mainstream politicians do not hesitate to make promises which far surpass the incentives provided by the Maoists.

Varavara Rao, the public face of the Indian Naxals and one of the emissaries in the aborted talks, does not seem to realise the irony when he beams with pride and says, "The Maoists have forced all other parties to become more progressive and take up their agenda." This not only reflects Maoist success in deepening democracy but also reveals the limits of their expansion, by showing the space within the system to raise issues.

Yet, it is undeniable that the PWG, and now the CPI (Maoist), have created space for dissent and influenced the way of seeing the world among large sections of Telugu society, across the political spectrum. A restaurant manager in the Secunderabad station area, when asked if he knew the way to Naxal balladeer Gadar's house, jumped up excitedly. "Of course, it is near the Lotakunta bridge. Who doesn't know Gadar? He sings for the poor and stands up against wrong." The manager himself, it turned out, was a member of the ruling Congress party.

A war zone

Take a bus from Warangal and cross Bhadrachalam in Khammam district, travel through dense forests on both sides, and reach Chintoor. Sit in a shared auto to take you through the last mile of Andhra territory. Ask around about Maoist influence in the area and people clam up and look away. Suddenly six hefty gun-wielding men appear in plainclothes and stop the auto. They go through every item in your baggage, and only later care to identify themselves as members of the Andhra police. One constable wants an identification card and lights up at the mention of press – “See we are efficient and do our job well. Not like the ones across the border.”

Across the border is literally the centre of India. Across the border lies the heart of the civil war that continues to rage between a ruthless state and a militant force; between tribals and tribals; between the Naga regiment, Mizo battalion, Central Reserve Police Force, state police on one hand and the Naxals on the other; between 50,000 tribals locked in state camps on the main road and marked as defenders of the Indian flag, and thousands inside forests branded as terrorists – both caught in politics not of their making.

Walk across to enter Dantewada or South Bastar in the state of Chhatisgarh. But before that, face another six people with rifles slinging on their shoulders – only this time, they are wearing khaki uniforms. Only this time, they are short and skinny. Only this time, their average age is 14. After inspecting the luggage, and fiddling with the mobile phone, one child soldier commands, ‘Das rupaiya, ten rupees.’ Why? ‘To let you enter our land.’ Just then, a slightly older soldier winks and says, “Let him go, we will take it from someone else.”

Konta can pass off as a small border outpost. Report to the police station and let them know you will be visiting the ‘base camps’ located on the way to Dantewada five hours away, advise local journalists. The thana is a small concrete structure hidden behind barbed wires. It is 11.45 in the morning, and the place is littered with bottles of Bagpiper whiskey. A plump man, not in uniform, is rocking his chair and asks for identification, wallet, and mobile phone. The ‘press card’ is not enough to impress him. “Kathmandu haan? I am Manisha Koirala’s boyfriend. Give me your address details – name of your sarpanch, name of the area MLA. Has the government sent you? Your Nepali Maoists are here also. We can fuck all of you,” he glares. 50 minutes of telling him that there is neither a sarpanch nor an MLA in Kathmandu is not sufficient. Finally, it is a fake address, fake names of Kathmandu representatives, and lunch time that makes the man relent.

Salwa Judum territory is the land of the bizarre. The fear is palpable and people do not want to talk. We do not know. Let it be sir, we will get into trouble. Businessmen are reluctant to rent out cars. Locals warn you not to provoke anyone and be short and crisp.

The Naxals entered the area from Andhra in the late 70s and gained popularity soon after for standing up against exploitation of tribals by forest contractors, providing instant justice, organising people into sanghams and dalams, engaging in cultural activities, campaigning against the corrupt state which had done little for the adivasis, and living with the people. But local resentment against the Naxals was brewing gradually – against their interference in local customs, ban on tendu-leaf collection, dictatorial ways. This was exploited by local politicians and the administration to start Salwa Judum in 2005. Tribals were mobilised against Maoists and as the Naxals began retaliatory attacks, the state forced them to flee into camps.

The dissatisfaction against the Maoists was genuine and spontaneous, but a concerted movement to actively go after them was clearly state-supported and sponsored. The government went in with forces to evacuate villages under Naxalite influence and allegedly plundered houses, raped women, and killed with impunity to send a message to the tribals to come to camps. Those at the camps were

seen as state supporters by the Naxals. Those who stayed behind in villages were immediately branded as terrorists by the administration. Many young men in the camps were appointed as Special Police Officers, to assist the state police in its responsibilities – several of them former Naxalites with inside knowledge of the forests.

The logic behind Salwa Judum remains difficult to fathom, for it abounds with irony. On the surface, the state appears to be giving up the land in the interiors to the Maoists by displacing the people to camps instead of fighting the rebels directly or winning support of people in those areas. The strategy divides people and leaves an entire constituency inside the forests as fodder for Naxalites. And to top it all, the Judum campaign is headed by Mahendra Karma, a Congress MLA who is the Leader of Opposition in the state assembly – but in a rare instance of co-operation, has the complete backing of the BJP government.

Sitting in a Dantewada rest house, Karma claims this is a “Gandhian movement against political terrorism”, and the camps are necessary to protect those who have stood up against Naxalites from their wrath. Others suspect that Karma is keen on Salwa Judum because it has given him prominence, allowed him to concentrate more than 50,000 people in specific areas, maintain a vigil on them, and keep them away from Naxal influence. As Raipur journalist Praful Jha explains, “Fish will survive where there is water. Dry out the river and the fish will die. The Salwa Judum is based on the calculation that keeping people away from the interiors will finish off the support base of the Maoists.”

Raipur bureaucrats see the Judum as helpful for it allows them to make neat and mechanical plans to ‘push the Maoists’, and ‘clean the forests’, based on the assumption that all those inside are militants. Drawing up a rough sketch, a top police official says, “See, we can now move into the forests with heavy deployment of forces, defeat the Maoists in one area, and push them backwards. That area can thus be cleared and development can begin. Then we go further in and push Maoists even more backwards.” And push them where? “How does that matter? Our job is to make life difficult for them here. How do we care if they go to Andhra forests?” says a close aide of state chief minister Raman Singh.

Activists see a more sinister plan behind displacing such a substantial segment of population from resource rich areas which are being eyed by extractive industries. The camps are slums meant to enable industries. “Bastar has diamonds, iron ore, steel, and uranium. Industries want to begin operations there on a war footing. And the Judum has meant they will face no protests against displacement, for people have already been thrown out,” remarks Ilina Sen, an academic and activist. This is possible in the long-term. But at present these are areas where the state barely has any presence and there are no public plans of industrial capital coming in. The two projects that have been approved by the government and are in the offing – the Tata plant in Jagdalpur and Essar operations in Dhurli-Bhansi – are not in the same areas from where Judum related displacement has taken place.

But the primary character of the Salwa Judum is that it pits tribals against tribals, divides families on both sides, and creates a notion of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ in a community that has lived together for ages. It has also engineered a shift in the line of firing. If the rebels earlier used to attack the politicians and policemen, now they go after the tribals in the camps perceived as enemies. The SPOs are used as shields in battles against the Naxals.

The result – the poorest segment of the Indian population, tribals, are killed on both sides.

At the Errabara camp, the camp-in-charge advances another argument in favour of the Judum. Ram Lal Markan, a teacher, says, “See these tribals are illiterate and unaware. The camp gives us an

opportunity to lock them in, teach the new generation about nationalism, law, Indian constitution. This will ensure they do not fall for the Maoist propaganda and the young know that mother India is great." Strikingly these defenders of 'mother India' in camps, who are the heads of the camp panchayats or act as the local leaders, are all non tribals - many of them sidekicks of Karma who have been targeted by Maoists in the past. The patronising argument that the dumb tribal needs education is countered by Pratap Agarwal, a Jagdalpur advocate who has filed a PIL against Salwa Judum. "If you look at voting patterns, South Bastar has always been in tune with the larger national electoral mood. These tribals have local consultative mechanisms; they take joint decisions. It is wrong for us to think we know best."

The implications of the Salwa Judum have been devastating. The violence has increased drastically, but the state has a ready defense on this count. "If we put up a fight, obviously violence will increase. This is a war. Make no mistake," says a local police official in Dantewada. Communist Party of India leader Manish Kunjam claims that more than 700 people have been killed by the police and SPOs, and 5000 houses burnt. There has been little agriculture for the past few years. The SPOs are a law unto themselves and have indulged in innumerable human rights violations.

Most importantly, the state-sponsored campaign has removed the tribals from their natural habitat, forced them into artificial camps, and divided families and communities. Kura Erra, a 21 year old at the Dornapal camp, looks longingly towards his village, Gorkunda, 7 km away while sipping tea at a crowded shop. "I can only go to my village with heavy police force, and that too only rarely. Otherwise the Naxals will kill me." The might of the Indian state cannot protect Erra's right to life, liberty, and free movement a few miles down the main road in South Bastar. Ask if the strength of the Naxals has increased in the past few years and all heads nod in agreement. There is a forced smile and the tea-shop owner remarks, 'Who knows who is a Naxal? He might be sitting right here.'

While there are 50,000 people in the camps, many others are reported to have fled across the border to Andhra to escape the wrath of the state and Naxals. It is difficult to put a figure to the number of refugees. Many are of Koya tribe who travel in packs of three-five families, and have kinship links on the other side and stay with relatives on the other side. But it is said that the forests surrounding Chintoor are home to almost 35 clusters of refugees, with the number of displaced running into thousands.

The problem with Salwa Judum is that there is no easy exit route. There has never been easy escape when the state decides to outsource its responsibilities and use people as fodder. Some politicians like CPI's Manish Kunjam argue that the Naxals will not target all the 50,000 people who live in camps if they return - their 'enemies' are only the SPOs and Salwa Judum leaders. "Announce the phased withdrawal of camps and send people back." Senior police officials agree that the natural tendency of tribals to live in open spaces cannot be curbed for long. But their solution is different. "Remember we plan to push the Naxals back. After we do that, tribals can go back."

Maybe, an exit route appears difficult because too many people are happy with the Salwa Judum. Mahendra Karma is thrilled at becoming the symbol of the fight against Naxalism. He and his cronies, along with local bureaucrats, are getting to siphon off enormous funds that the government has allocated for the Salwa Judum. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh has found a chance to begin a process of Hinduising the adivasis in camps. The BJP is establishing political presence in an area where they have been traditionally weak, thanks to the help of the leader of opposition. And even the Naxalites are happy for the resentment against tribals is turning into political capital for them.

The reign of terror

Jharkhand is the untold, and potentially the most dangerous, Naxalite story. A corrupt state that has given a free reign to Maoists who have lost their ideological moorings gives the place an air of anarchy. The rebellion can flare even further because the only sphere in which the government is active - signing mining contracts - will lead to displacement and force thousands into destitution. They will be the losers in this process of sustaining a shining and happy India. Losers who will be ready to pick the gun, and serve as foot soldiers.

Talk to a Ranchi editor, a corporate sales manager, a political party activist, a rickshaw-puller, or even a district correspondent - the refrain is common. Yahan tu sarkar hi nahin hai. There is no government here.

Madhu Koda, an independent MLA, is the head of a coalition government and has completed one year in office - a feat seen as miraculous in times of a fragmented polity where it takes little to buy legislators off, trample on the constitution, and defect without a prick in the conscience. Little wonder then that Koda, his ministers, top bureaucrats, and local officers in lucrative posts - all want to make a quick buck in their moment under the sun.

And for them the presence of the Naxalite is not a threat but an opportunity. Play the victim card and ask the central government for more funds to tackle the 'menace' and make money off it; exchange money with the insurgents and promise them protection in return of support during polls in constituencies where the Naxals have influence; give the Maoists information about construction contractors and share the loot; turn a blind eye when the Maoists are extorting people and later ask for a commission. A young district administrator remarks exasperatedly, "The police force is not too competent and in several places is a part of such a set-up. But even when it comes close to nabbing a Naxalite or attacking them, there is a call from the local politicians or seniors who ask them to lay off."

The nexus between mainstream politicians and the rebels receives a temporary jolt when there is a dramatic attack by Naxals like the one in Giridih at the end of October. The rebels had planned to target the brother of former chief minister and an anti-Naxal crusader Babulal Marandi. Instead Marandi's young son and 17 other innocent tribals who were enjoying a cultural programme after a football match were killed. At times like this, the rhetoric escalates; all sides become careful; and media attention increases. The government promises to take the Maoists on. The rebels chose to justify the killings in the name of the revolution. In rare instances however, the Maoists deign to admit that targeting innocents was a mistake- a small price to pay in the war to take over the Indian state. But a lot of this, observers say, is a farce - a game before things go back to being normal. And normalcy is synonymous with fear and insecurity on the ground, as leaders who are hands-in-glove watch the fun from the top.

The Maoists are active in more than 18 out of the 24 districts in Jharkhand, with a steady increase in their recruitment. And this expansion is not only to do with a weak and corrupt state but other systemic factors.

The absence of justice plays a far greater role in helping Maoists win cadre than is often understood or acknowledged. This is not only at the level of millions of cases which are stuck in the judicial system but at the level of the local thana. "People go with complaints to file a report at the police station. If it is a poor person, or someone of a lower caste, the police will not listen to him in the first place. And even if they do, and the case happens to be against a richer person with connections, the local sub inspector will take the side of the latter," explains a local crime reporter in Hazaribagh. The aggrieved are left with only one choice - the Maoists who provide instant justice, often

rightfully against the oppressor.

Land issues continue to remain a factor in alienating people from the mainstream. Feudalism may not be as powerful anymore and the image of brutal landlord is, more often than not, misplaced in several narratives. But the land reform programme has other components – updating land records being one of them. More than half the criminal cases – not civil but criminal – are related to land disputes where ownership is contested. There was either never any proper documentation, or documents got burnt or rotted. “Do a survey and prepare a fresh record of land ownership. Computerise the findings. And 25 percent of the Naxal problem will be resolved,” argues a SP in a Maoist-affected district.

The incentives are also aligned in favour of joining the Maoist movement in several areas because it is the most attractive employment option. After a short training course, the recruit gets a gun and monthly expenses. From a hanger-on at the local tea-shop who is derisively dismissed by elders for not having a job, this person suddenly acquires a new social status and unbridled power. Petty criminals who want to protect themselves from police harassment also find Naxalism a convenient refuge. And they all become legitimate actors. For in parts of several districts of Jharkhand, and Chhatisgarh, the line between the legal state and illegal Naxals is blurred. In fact, the state is often not present at all. And even when it is, the sheer power and presence of the Maoists gives them de facto legitimacy and acceptance as a political actor.

The political vacuum is most intense in Jharkhand. “Panchayat elections have not taken place, and local level leaders who could address grievances and channelise aspirations are absent,” points out Harivansh, editor of the well-respected Prabhat Khabar. Political parties act merely as electoral machines. In instances where local parties are present, leaders prefer to keep silent rather than risk Maoist wrath. Parties don’t send their cadre to these places.

But in all this, a notable absence is that of ideologically trained activist. What is common is a utilitarian streak and incentive based calculation behind the decision to join the Maoists. And this has created a vacuum of the politically committed at the middle level, leaders who can keep a check on ‘mistakes’ of the cadre. A CPI (Maoist) member admits, “The politicisation of the cadre is weak. The top leadership has a set of principles and we have no desire to kill innocents. But the command structure is not in place which gives the local units a lot of autonomy. And in the absence of politicisation, corruption seeps in.”

The descent into corruption, criminalisation and internal caste feuds is most pronounced among the Jharkhand Naxals. Maoists Communist Centre (MCC), as it existed prior to the merger, is often referred to as the Money Collection Centre. Levies are imposed not only on local contractors and small shop-keepers. A big corporate wants to initiate an industrial project – it needs to remember to set aside a share for the Maoists. This trend is visible in parts of Chhatisgarh as well where companies are reported to have paid large sums to Maoists to allow them to construct pipelines and start factories. The government wants to initiate a development project – pay the Naxalites a levy. A striking fact, for it poses difficult questions for those who believe ‘development’ is the panacea to resolve the Maoist issue. In cases like this, development money only strengthens the rebels.

The Maoists have not been immune to that fundamental, and all-pervasive characteristic of Indian society – caste. Tussles over sharing money, as well as inter-caste clashes between Yadavs and Ganjus, a Dalit community, have led to the formation of splinter groups like Tritiya Sammellan Prastuti Committee (TPC) and the Jharkhand Prastuti Committee (JPC). This has come as delightful news to the local administration which often supports one group against the other, and seeks to extract information by providing protection. But the proliferation of actors has made life even more difficult for citizens. Rakesh Jha, the owner of watch-repair centre in Chatra – hotbed of Naxalite and

TPC activity – says, “Earlier we had to pay one group. Now it is four. But look at their standards. They begin asking for Rs 50,000 and finally relent if we agree to pay for a Rs 500 mobile recharge card. It shows they are only out to make a quick buck.”

The future in Jharkhand looks like one where there will be an escalation in the levels of violence. The government has signed MOUs worth billions with Mittal, Tata, RPG group, Jindal, and many others for extractive industries. The process of land acquisition will entail massive displacement. Only a few agreements have been implemented yet. But the government and big industries seem to have prepared a multi-pronged strategy for the process – offer attractive rehabilitation packages in principle, co-opt some locally influential people and encourage them to persuade the community, rig Gram Sabha hearings in tribal areas, use hired goons to create pressure, and use state forces overtly and covertly.

Any question of displacement is bound to provoke widespread controversy. In certain areas, some sections of people may be willing to give up their land. But by most accounts, the resistance is strong. This stems both from a deep attachment to land and the dismal record of past rehabilitation projects. “There is a deeper logic to the opposition. For 150 years, adivasis have given their land, labour, minerals, forest produce to this country’s elite. And in return, they have been dispossessed and proletarianised,” says Xavier Dias, a Ranchi based activist. Responding to reports that the opposition is a move to gain better relief packages, Dias says, “This is not a tactical decision. It is the only way to save what is remaining of the tribal population. Should they give their land so that their children can become coolies? The state will have to crush people’s movement if they want to move with industrial expansionism. And then we will see blood aluminum and red coal.” In such a context, where anger is rife among tribals and the government appears insensitive to non-violent movements, it is likely that people will be attracted to Maoist violence.

The critique within

Ram Jatan Sharma is a Naxalite. He believes India is a semi-feudal, semi-colonial country which needs a revolutionary overthrow of the state. But Sharma does not carry arms and is not a member of the CPI (Maoist). Instead, he belongs to the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation, an ultra-left outfit that traces its roots to the Naxalbari movement. Male, as the party is popularly called in Bihar, interestingly participates in electoral politics and has six legislators (CHECK) in the Bihar assembly.

An introspective Sharma looks back at the days when his outfit was underground and believed in the precedence of armed action. He says that the fundamental flaw of far-left groups has been the inability to judge the revolutionary fervour of the masses. “A revolutionary situation existed for a brief period between 1968 and 1970. We continued with the tactic of boycotting elections till 1978 but then realised that mass mobilisation comes first.” Wondering loudly why the Maoists refuse to see that the other parties, derisively dismissed as comprador, have the support of masses, Sharma says, “The task of a true revolutionary is to utilise the institutions of the bourgeoisie system to break the illusions of the people and reveal the true character of the ruling class.”

A day earlier, a ruling party MLA, Anant Singh, had beat up an NDTV journalist when faced with tough questions about an alleged murder he had committed. Singh happened to be a close aide of chief minister Nitish Kumar, who has carefully sought to cultivate the image of a clean politician against criminalisation. “The system provides some space to intervene. See we can show the people how there is little difference between Laloo Yadav and Nitish Kumar and both harbour criminals,” argues Sharma. Liberation leaders say that using this space does not mean getting co-opted into the

system, and point out that attacks on them by the ruling parties have increased since they began participating in the parliamentary system. "They are more insecure and scared now than they were when we were in the forests." The Maoists contribute little by engaging in anarcho-militarism and mindless violence, when it is clear that an attack on a small landlord does not in any way translate into warfare against the Indian state. Instead, this violence gives the state a pretext to repress.

The critique of the Maoists from within the left stems from several other perspectives as well. Many Marxists claim that the Maoists have not recognised that the true nature of the ruling class and the Indian state - it is not the feudals but the capitalists who dictate policies. The mainstream Communist Party of India (Marxist) has, at the theoretical level, countered the categorisation of the Indian bourgeoisie as comprador, claiming that it has a dual character and strives for the autonomy of capital. Pro-CPM intellectuals also argue that at the present national and international juncture, armed revolution is not possible and the task of a Marxist is to radicalise democracy.

But Bihar remains significant because it is here that Naxalism has taken a different turn, besides the one heralded by the armed Maoist outfit. For their part, the Maoists appear to be concentrating more across the border in Jharkhand. There has been a lull in drastic Maoist actions since a daring jailbreak in Jehanabad sometime ago when the Naxalites killed members of a rival group and released their own cadre. What has changed in the expansion of the rebels to North Bihar - Muzaffarpur, Sitamarhi, Madhubani, and Champaran. Some observers link this to support and linkages from across the border in Nepal.

"Maoism remains a force and finds recruits because the state has collapsed in a substantial part of the Hindi heartland," says Saibal Gupta, a Patna academic. "Couple this with the fact that new economic policies have resulted in the withdrawal of the state from even the basic welfare services it was providing." The political parties who are present on the ground inevitably take the side of the powerful- the underclass remains potential fodder for the rebels. The unemployed are looking for avenues and see the movement as a quick tool of upward mobility.

However, Bihar's polity appears to have attained certain equilibrium, notwithstanding the churning within identity politics in the electoral realm. Caste wars are not as vicious as they were in the past. The politician-Naxal nexus has formed a pattern and reciprocal assistance has become a part of the norm. Prakash Louis, author a book on Naxalites in central Bihar, says, "Laloo and Nitish are benevolent oppressors. The movement is at its zenith when the opposition is at its zenith. If the state has an appearance of giving concessions, it becomes difficult for the Maoists to mobilise as actively. Laloo had made it clear that land grab should not result in police firing. The exploitation is present, but not as palpable and brutal."

The Maoists do have the ability to conduct a major strike. But it is unlikely that this will alter the balance of power, political equations, and the state's own presence. As Vinay Kanth of the People's Union for Civil Liberties puts it, "There is no reason to think Naxal strength will increase dramatically. Equally, there is no reason to believe that the government can contain it with the same set of policies."

The thinking cap

A quick scan of the Maoist movement in some key states is enough to reveal that all sides in this conflict need to sit back, look at their calculations, and reassess strategies.

The Maoist movement is increasingly becoming an exclusively armed movement, with little focus on political mobilisation. The leadership realised this and at the party congress earlier this year, made a

conscious decision to form a united front with other like-minded people, and pick up mass-based issues. However, this has not translated into practice anywhere, apart from a few instances of engagement with displacement issues. This involvement is fairly minimal and the basic character of the organisation remains one which gives priority to violence.

This trend of not engaging enough in mass politics stems both from choice and compulsion. A repressive state leaves the rebels with little space to organise themselves and have meetings, let alone hold rallies. But it is also a deliberate decision. The MCC was traditionally a more militant force focusing on violence while the PWG had a greater component of mass activity. Since the merger of the two, the MCC line of thinking is said to have become pre-dominant. Maoists have also concluded that the rapid success of the Nepali Maoists was due to an aggressive military strategy, and this needs to be replicated in India.

What the Naxalites need to understand is that armed action can yield only limited political or military dividends, particularly if you are up against the might of the Indian state. 180 Naxalite-affected districts is a misnomer in more than one way. The Maoists do not have control over any district headquarter; they hold exclusive sway only in select areas in Jharkhand and Chhatisgarh, particularly dense forests, where the state is not present at all. To fall prey to the conception that the Maoists are all over Andhra, Orissa, Jharkhand, Bihar, and Chhatisgarh just because they have presence in rural areas and the state is about to give way would be a mistake.

It is mass activity that attracts committed cadre; awakens a sense of consciousness; and keeps a check on the criminal and degenerative tendencies within the party. Beginning with violence, rather than winning the genuine support of the people, has never been a sustainable strategy for any outfit.

This focus on violence has inevitably led to several 'mistakes'. Inadvertent or not, innocents are often killed. More often than not, these are people the Maoists claim to be fighting for and represent. This creates a sense of outrage and gives the state a pretext to repress. Not only do committed Maoists get crushed in the process, so do many others in politics and civil society who are seeking to dissent on fundamental questions within the system by being branded as Naxalites.

But civil society needs to bear its part of the blame as well. Across the board, human rights organisations are seen as more sympathetic to the Naxals and unconcerned when people are killed due to Maoist actions. While some of this may be state propaganda to discredit activists, there have been instances when PUCL members, particularly in Jharkhand, have refused to condemn the Maoists. After the Giridih attack, a PUCL activist told The Telegraph that their agenda is to solely expose the state's crimes. Another activist Shashi Bhushan Pathak went a step ahead by criticising the government and Babulal Marandi for provoking the Maoists to attack. "Their credibility has taken a beating," says Sunil Kumar, editor of the Chhatisgarh daily in Raipur.

Journalists have not covered themselves in glory either. Most newspapers are heavily dependent on government revenues and usually toe the government line, especially on sensitive issues. This is true of Chhatisgarh where only a few papers have exposed the Salwa Judum story for what it is. The prejudice seeps down to the local correspondents, who have vested interests tied with the local establishment. Few journalists in Dantewada were willing to stick their neck out and be critical of the campaign. Instead, one hears conversations among them of the last date for filing tender and contractor kickbacks.

Since the Naxal issue emerged in 1967, an easy way out for left-liberal academics has been to mouth the cliché that this is a socio-economic problem and development is the answer. It is true that development, defined as effective government services and creating opportunities, can lock people into the national mainstream and reduce their incentives to join the Naxalites. Yet, the issue here is

as much of rights as of development. A person does not become a Maoist because there is no school or health centre in his village; he becomes a Maoist due to a different set of circumstances, spanning from lack of justice, brutality of state officials, perceiving participation as a tool of mobility, coercion from other Maoists, and other factors. In fact, the development money often goes straight into the pockets of politicians and Naxalites and strengthens them. So while development is a part of the solution, to treat it as a one-size-fits-all alternative without carving specific strategies for different places may not be productive.

The Naxal movement is fundamentally a political movement. And the answer lies in politics and political parties. As long as parties continue to be inert in areas and do not fulfill their core responsibilities – accommodating aspirations, putting pressure on the local administration, providing institutional protection to those who believe in the present system, standing up for the marginalised, speaking out if there are atrocities against Dalits and tribals – there will be space for alternative outfits. This becomes difficult in areas where the Maoists do not allow activities of other political parties. But there is no easy way out but to fill the political vacuum in a just manner.

The government pretends to recognise that this is more than just a law and order problem. But it has done little to build up or act on a non-police solution. In fact, its own policies over the past decade – SEZs, doing little to tackle agrarian distress, withdrawing basic support to enable health and education, lack of prompt redressal of grievances especially for the marginalised – have only contributed to the unrest. The state may have the right to suppress any movement that questions its authority and seeks to destroy its monopoly over violence. But the present strategy of only pumping in more money for the police force, or attempting a Salwa Judum like campaign, can yield little. Talks may not be possible, given that both sides have diametrically opposite positions, but a basic engagement to minimise violence could be in the interests of the people.

The Indian Maoists have undoubtedly pushed the envelope by putting several issues of the marginalised on the agenda, and forcing the government to pay heed to it, if out of nothing than self-protection. Their support among many of the poorest people in India is testament to the fact. Even as the government needs to address these aspirations, the Naxalites would do well to realise there are clear limits to their possible expansion. The Indian masses have, over the past six decades, shown they may have complaints, but retain faith in the present democratic system. As an old man on a bus from Hazaribagh to Patna put it, " Sahib Naxal tu theek hain, par kaam tu sarkar hi karega na. Sir, the Naxals are fine but finally, it is the government which will do the work, isn't it?"

Prashant

P.S.

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