The Legacy of Maoism in India

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The success of a counter-hegemonic challenge to Hindu authoritarian rule in India will require a critical assessment of the successes and failures of the nation's left forces, including the Maoist movement. The release of Bernard D'Mello's *India After Naxalbari* could not be better timed. D'Mello's tour de force is both a history of modern India and its "rotten liberal democracy," including the left's challenge to it, and a fine-grained look at India's Maoist movement. It combines a sharp historical account with critical analysis, along with some original theoretical insights.

The legacy of princely rule and colonialism following independence left the Indian countryside highly stratified along caste and class lines. D'Mello's account begins with the post-World War II peasant uprisings that he views as the "precursors" to Maoism in India. In their short lifespan these struggles posed a significant challenge to the power of the former landlord class, along with overturning some of the most pernicious practices of the caste system (such as vetti, the caste-based system of bonded labor in Telangana). The Communist Party of India (CPI) played a leading role in some of these struggles, most notably those of Telangana (1946–51) and Tebhaga (1946–47).

While the armed uprisings of this period had already engendered significant internal divisions within the communist movement, it was not until the following decades that these contradictions became irreconcilable. While D'Mello does not go far into the history of the 1964 split, which resulted in the creation of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), we know that the dominant current in the party was in favor of a parliamentary path to power ("national democratic revolution") through an alliance with the progressive sections of the Congress Party. By contrast, party dissidents eschewed the parliamentary path in favor of a "peoples' democratic revolution" through mass work led by the workers and peasantry.

The radical rhetoric of the CPI-M was quickly put to the test—once again by the self-activity of the masses. In March 1967, in the village of Naxalbari (in West Bengal) a revolutionary Krishak Samiti (peasant organization) within the CPI-M undertook a political program to abolish landlordism, including the burning of land records, the looting of food grains, and the seizing of promissory notes and other legal records related to the debt peasants had incurred over the years. Armed with bows, arrows, and spears they formed defense squads and peasant committees, in which women played a prominent role, in several villages. The movement awakened Indian society to the "intolerable conditions of economic oppression and social humiliation" of the poor and landless peasantry (Banerjee).

Meanwhile, the CPI-M, which had for the first time assumed control of the West Bengal state government through a United Front coalition, quickly turned against the revolutionary movement and launched a counterinsurgency. The nascent struggle was no match for the repressive apparatus of the state. Seventeen people were killed, and hundreds more were arrested. The leaders of the Naxalbari uprising and many of its supporters were summarily expelled from the party.

Undeterred, the party rebels went on to form the CPI-ML in 1969 under the leadership of Charu

Mazumdar. What was to follow were a series of “Naxalbaris” from roughly 1969 to 1975, which, as D’Mello points out, were fairly heterogenous, including in their level of adherence to the “annihilation of class enemies” line. Perhaps the most controversial of these political eruptions was that of Kolkata 1970–71, where party leaders incited urban youth to destroy all symbols of bourgeois education, including monuments and statues of nationalist writers and poets, and relocate to the countryside to join the class war.

It is in his discussion of the CPI-ML (People’s War), formed in 1980 in the state of Andhra Pradesh as an outgrowth of CPI-ML, that D’Mello provides the clearest exegesis of the theoretical and strategic considerations of the early Maoist movement. The People’s War group, following the ideas of the Chinese Revolution—as formulated by Lin Biao in his 1965 pamphlet—believed that revolution could only be won through a “protracted peoples’ war” (PPW). The PPW would begin with a “new Democratic stage led by the workers in a worker-peasant alliance and could only transition to socialism after taking power at the national level.” This would tactically be built through the formation of revolutionary bases in the countryside from which they “can go forward to final victory.”

As it played out, Maoist praxis looked very different from its theory—and in the first phase of the movement it faced staggering defeat. D’Mello provides a laundry list of reasons for defeat including the “neglect of long, hard and patient underground work that should have preceded the launch of armed struggle,” the neglect of military requirements, the failure to pursue the “mass line” or to build organization among the urban proletariat, and the lack of a democratic process in the movement. But D’Mello seems to understand these outcomes as the result of a failure to adhere closely enough to the principles of the Chinese Communist Party, rather than an inherent contradiction in the strategy itself—a major weakness in D’Mello’s analysis, to which I will return.

During the second “phase” of the Naxalite movement (roughly 1977–2003), D’Mello suggests that the “mass struggle” line—missing from the first period—gained greater purchase. As the Emergency was lifted in 1977, mass organizations affiliated with various offshoots of the Indian Maoist movement including CPI-ML (PW) in AP and CPI-ML (Liberation) and CPI-ML (Peoples Unity) in Bihar began to thrive. Notably, SIKASA, whose base consisted of workers and peasants around the coalfields of Singareni in Northern Telangana, organized not just on issues of the workplace, but also on those of the “hearth” (against-slum demolition) and “bread.” Similarly, MKSSS, part of the CPI-ML (PU), organized Dalit landless laborers against caste-based exploitation, mostly in the Jehanabad subdivision of Gaya District.

Yet the promising mass-based activity of this period quickly degenerated as state reaction and repression intensified. According to D’Mello the “mass organizations were, in effect . . . driven underground.” Importantly, during the mass activity phase, underground activities—namely the building of a guerilla base in the border areas of Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, and Orissa continued apace. The tactical retreat to these guerilla areas beginning in the 1990s intensified during the “third phase,” taking us up to the present moment. After the 2003 merger of the two largest Maoist outfits (CPI-PW and MCC) under the umbrella of CPI-Maoist, the movement was characterized by episodic guerilla attacks and raids met with heavy state violence. D’Mello displays impressive knowledge of this period of state repression—which has afflicted not only the Maoists and their supporters, but also many more civilians who are unaffiliated with the Maoists—undoubtedly in part thanks to his longstanding participation in India’s civil liberties and democratic rights movements.

Does D’Mello draw the correct conclusions from the history of the Maoist movement? In part, yes. On the question of strategy, he rightly criticizes the Maoists’ overemphasis on armed struggle to the neglect of mass work. But D’Mello does not go far enough in dealing with the difficult question of

armed struggle. Although he does not state it clearly in his final chapter “Reimagining New Democracy,” one can gather that the author is of the view that the armed struggle must continue *alongside* the development of democratic activity. Herein lies his weakness: building up strong, democratic mass movements in any modern society—where the state has an indisputable monopoly of violence—necessitates open political activity. This is particularly true of India where the state has for many years been acting with complete impunity against its “greatest internal security threat”—the Maoists—and mowing down anyone who comes in its way. The embrace of violence prior to the construction of a mass base has foreclosed in many parts of India the possibility of mass-based revolutionary activity. And, as argued by Kunal Chattopadhyay in his excellent article “The Path of Naxalbari” (2010), it paves the way for what Trotsky called “substitutionism”—where the party substitutes itself for the self-activity of the masses.

D’Mello’s other main critique of the Maoists is also accurate. The Maoists completely failed to build up the “workers” part of its peasant-worker unity—in other words, it has no meaningful base among workers in the urban core. Yet, D’Mello could have gone further and considered how this might be accomplished in the future. He recognizes that the Indian labor movement is plagued by the “peculiar differentiation” of the Indian working class along lines of status (regular/casual), caste, religion, ethnic origins, and gender, and also by the ever-expanding reserve army of labor. But how might the Maoists go about bringing together these heterogeneous sections of the Indian proletariat that often display contradictory interests? Clearly this would be a central part of climbing out of the current impasse.

Finally, while the author correctly argues that the future of the Maoist movement must pay more attention to gender, caste, nationality, and religion, he curiously avoids historicizing the Naxalites’ failure to systematically take up these “special oppressions.” Here, one would have to turn to the work of others, such as Krishna Bandyopadhyay (former member of CPI-ML) who contends that the party never took a stand on gender liberation, nor did it develop an adequate mechanism to deal with gender oppression within the party. Rather it peddled the line—common to almost every left party in India— that “women will automatically become free when society is liberated.” Likewise, Sujatha Gidla’s recent book, *Ants Among Elephants*, illustrates how the Maoists prevented local Dalit leaderships from taking up the mantle of caste annihilation, and how both casteism and sexism were deeply engrained in the internal culture and norms of the party. Grappling with these past blunders is an essential part of building a new and vibrant left.

These omissions aside, *India After Naxalbari* is required reading not only for those with an interest in Maoism, but also for anyone invested in building a counterforce against India’s neoliberal order and the growing menace of Hindu authoritarianism.

Samantha Agarwal

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