

A Savage War for ‘Development’

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The Maoists have come under relentless attack and have suffered a setback in their main stronghold, the Bastar division in southern Chhattisgarh, but, contrary to official claims, they are far from being wiped out over there. Fifty years after the Naxalbari uprising, the resilience displayed by the Maoists provides continued political relevance to the “spark” that lit Naxalbari in May 1967. But there is a long road uphill and ahead.

Spread over 40,000 square kilometres, according to Census 2011, the Bastar division of Chhattisgarh has a population of 23,48,808 persons. With the deployment of 58,772 central paramilitary force personnel and another 50,000 of state armed-police personnel, the Bastar division has a security-personnel-to-civilian-population ratio of 1:22. Its jails are overcrowded to the extent of three times the prison capacity, filled with Adivasis charged with what is called “Naxal offence,” and waiting for the criminal justice system to set them free. The report of a High Level Committee headed by Virginius Xaxa, submitted to the government in May 2014, brings this fact to the public notice.¹

In contrast, crimes committed by government forces—rape, murder, fake encounter, custodial torture, and loot—are seldom recorded or investigated. The National Human Rights Commission found 16 cases of rape by the custodians of the law, in six months, from October 2015 to March 2016. Although Maoists have suffered losses and retreated into their guerrilla base area, nevertheless, government forces have so far failed to engage the People’s Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA) frontally. The state government claims that the Maoists are on the verge of defeat. In February 2016, the Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh Raman Singh said that 95% of Bastar is “safe”; that Maoist activity is confined to “maybe ... a small ward” and, he assured the reporters, they would “very soon” be part of history.²

Matter of Perception

If this is true, the question arises as to why the government, instead of wooing those who do not subscribe to the overthrow of the state but merely want the police and the security forces to abide by the law, hounds, abuses and threatens them. The vilification campaign against such people, alleging that they are linked to Maoists, is intrinsic to the war.

The primary objective of the counter-insurgency (COIN) though is to force the ordinary people to stop supporting the rebels. This is done through the use of brute force, and by humiliation, which is intended to erode their will to resist. Rape, molestation, harassment, loot and plunder are engaged in to achieve this. Indeed in the aftermath of an encounter/ambush, it is the villagers who are the first target of the government forces who vent out their anger and frustration on unarmed civilians. A study by a serving officer of the Indian Army³ says that

(a)ny target is fair game in unconventional warfare, from uniformed troops to civilians, as the idea is essentially to weaken the enemy from the inside out, and forcing them to capitulate and negotiate surrender.

The distinction between combatants and non-combatants is absent on the ground. Reports of civil liberties and women’s organisations documenting rape, molestation, torture, fake encounter, fake surrenders, fake cases and unlawful detention provide ample evidence of their prevalence and preponderance.

The recent Gadchiroli trial court judgment that awarded the five accused, including G N Saibaba, life sentences, shows how mere possession of “Naxal literature” has become an offence, without actual commission of or incitement to crime. Truth is not palatable to the powers-that-be as it would reveal their intent and expose the misdeeds of the military forces, with demand for prosecution of the perpetrators of heinous crimes. Fear of demoralisation grips the rulers as soldiers would not countenance their prosecution for war crimes. COIN may then begin to unravel. Unlike insurgents who want journalists to write on the happenings in the war zone and also want to reach their narrative to the large public, the state abhors independent coverage of the war, unless the journalists/writers are embedded or escorted.

A recently replaced inspector general of Police (IGP) (Bastar range) had famously declared that only “nationalists” will be allowed to work in Bastar.⁴ They chased out spirited women lawyers who could expose police persecution of the Adivasis; media was hounded to ensure

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that Adivasi accounts of the security forces operations do not reach the public at large; social activists were threatened to dissuade them from coming to the aid of the aggrieved Adivasis and stage public protests. The quality of the leadership provided by the government for its forces in Bastar is pathetic. Senior police officers from IG to superintendent of police (SP) have been accused of heinous crimes such as rape, torture, custodial killing, patronising vigilantes, and inciting violence, but they remain unprosecuted and unrepentant.⁵

On 1 April 2017, at 4 am soldiers in search of “sangam” members of the Maoist movement attacked Chintalgufa village in Sukma district. They dragged a 14-year-old girl away and gang-raped her, and even beat her family members. According to the law, a woman’s complaint, even if she is a minor, is sufficient to register a first information report and begin investigation. But not in Bastar, where the SP refused to register her complaint, alleging that the villagers were lying.⁶ That neither the rule of law nor the rules of war exists in the war zone ought to be a cause of concern. Constitutional freedoms can be squelched lawfully through a draconian law and malleable procedure by invoking “national security” and “the national interest” is shocking. The authorities can step outside the law because legal immunity from prosecution makes them susceptible to lawlessness.

Trouble in Paramilitary Ranks

On 29 March 2017, the Minister of State for Home Affairs Kiren Rijju disclosed to the Rajya Sabha that there had been a 450% jump in voluntary retirements from the central paramilitary forces (CPMFs) from 2,105 personnel in 2015–16 to 9,065 personnel in 2016–17. Furthermore, according to data collected by the Ministry of Home Affairs, whereas 1,067 CPMF personnel lost their lives in COIN from 2014 to February 2017, three times as many, 3,611 personnel died due to poor health and illnesses. Heart attacks and suicides were the major cause.⁷ There are palpable signs of discontentment, corroborated by leaks in social media from CPMF personnel.

Patting his government’s back, the union home minister nevertheless boasted to the Lok Sabha on 14 March 2017 that in 2016 they had killed 135 “Maoists,” arrested 779 and forced 1,198 of them to surrender. Similarly, in 2015, they had killed 226 “Maoists” in 1,088 incidents. The death count is unmindful of whether government forces killed civilians and dressed them off as Maoists. The number of Maoists arrested likewise gets inflated by treating suspected Maoists as confirmed “left-wing extremists.” It was reported⁸ that a screening committee of Chhattisgarh Police found that 97% of those who were shown as “surrendered Maoists” did not adhere to the definition of Maoist cadre as per central or state government’s rehabilitation policy. Out of the 1,216 surrenders listed in 2016, only nine were considered for rehabilitation and the rest were rejected.

Maoist Setback or Close to Being Wiped Out?

So let us examine the claim that Maoists are close to being wiped out. On 18 May 2016, a delegation comprising Sanjay Parate, Chhattisgarh state committee of Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)], Vineet Tiwari of the Communist Party of India run Joshi–Adhikari Institute of Social Studies, Archana Prasad, a faculty member of the Jawaharlal Nehru University and central committee member of the CPI(M)’s All India Democratic Women’s Association, and Nandini Sundar, a faculty member of Delhi University, released a report which, among other things, speaks of arrests and fake surrenders observed in and around Kanger National Park in Tongpal and Darbha blocks. The report mentions Kumakoleng village where 50 persons were forced to surrender in March 2016. The Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) then came and held a “Jan Jagran Abhiyan” on 15 April. Two days later, the Maoists came and allegedly beat the villagers for asking for a CRPF camp near their village. In Soutnar Panchayat, the report says, villagers have resolved to keep Maoists out and have been patrolling the area for the past three months. The report found further corroboration in an English daily which wrote that in the villages of Nama

and Santenar, the villagers barred Maoists who, the villagers said, had done very little for their welfare in the last 10 years and were hindering government-sponsored programmes from reaching them.⁹

There is evidence that the movement is facing opposition from villagers who have succumbed to pressure or become disenchanted with Maoists. However, to believe that the Maoists have lost the support of the Adivasis is a myth. The Naxalite movement has been demonised and written off many times before in last 50 years. The fact is that if the state is close to wiping the movement out, and the Maoists are unpopular, there would neither be any need to silence pro-state liberal critics nor would there be any need for around 1,10,000 soldiers in Bastar.

The problem with COIN doctrine is with one of its centrepieces, perception management, which has to constantly juggle between whipping up fears about the threat posed by the Maoists, while simultaneously projecting the view that the government forces are winning and the Maoists are on the run. Both ends of the argument need padding. So there is reason to be wary of official claims. Self-styled strategic experts are generally more cautious. The former head of Centre for Land Warfare Studies, Major General D C Katoch, reportedly said on the second day of a conference on “Smart Policing and Safety Exhibition” in New Delhi that the “sudden lull in the red corridor must not be seen as defeat of the Maoists. It may just be calm before the storm.” He said that,

when we try to analyse LWE (left-wing extremism), statistics show there is a downward trend in the attacks carried out. But I believe this is the case of Maoists stretching too far from their territory. They faced a lot of setbacks due to some excellent police work and intelligence gathering. They have retreated to the jungle and maybe regrouping.¹⁰

So while the Maoists have come under relentless attack and suffered setbacks, they are far from vanquished.

A More Nuanced Picture

Four recent incidents suggest a more nuanced picture.

(i) Mudkam Deva was on a “recce” mission on 12 May 2016 when he was caught

and then kept in the fortified Basaguda Police Station, “one of the most sensitive” outposts in Bijapur district of Chhattisgarh. He seemed “amenable” to surrender and willing to provide information, and claimed that he had been sent by Hidma, one of the most sought-after Maoist Adivasi leaders of the PLGA. Six days later, on 18 May at 7.15 pm the sentry on watch tower number one saw Mudkam Deva cut the wire and walk away with an AK 47, 90 rounds of ammunition, and an under-barrel grenade launcher, prized military equipment, with 8 cells.¹¹

(ii) On 20 May 2016 at 10 pm, Maoists attacked the Chhattisgarh Armed Forces Tenth Camp from four sides in the Mirtoor division of Bijapur district. Ambushes took place on the routes leading to the camp, preventing help from arriving. Firing continued for 90 minutes, injuring three combatants.¹²

(iii) On 7 June at 1.00 am, using “improvised rockets for the first time,” heavily armed Maoist guerrillas attacked the 41st Battalion of the Indo Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) in Ranapal village of Kondagaon district in the Bastar division. The camp falls under Mardapal police station. The Maoists attacked from three sides and firing went on for half an hour.¹³

(iv) In the Barkapal ambush on 24 April 2017 in broad daylight, in an area full of government troops—a CRPF camp every five kilometres, police stations as well as camps of the Chhattisgarh armed police force nearby—hundreds of guerrillas, most of them women, could overpower the government forces, seize weapons, and disappear in less than an hour, with no news of their plan of action leaked out in advance. This is a mark of people’s support. In the vicinity of Barkapal, on 11 March, guerrillas had ambushed a CRPF unit near Chintalgufa and, apart from killing 11 soldiers, took away another cache of arsenal. This is evidence of the morale of the two protagonists. Ambush by the guerrillas killed 25 soldiers, injured six others and netted them a huge arsenal capable of equipping two companies. Government armouries and troops are the major source of the Maoist arsenal.

Stealth and audacity in guerrilla warfare comes from local support, as it

is difficult for the guerrillas to prepare and carry out such attacks or escape from custody if people turn against them. In a Bastar flushed with soldiers and their camps, and enough money to buy allegiance, the government forces are at an advantage. A disenchanted populace would be tailor-made for the decimation of the guerrillas. If they were to strike fear, they would neither inspire nor win sustainable support. After demonetisation in November 2016, the government claimed that the Maoists have been dealt a serious blow, that all their “extorted” money was now a waste and that they are running short of cash to buy weapons and ammunition. The fact is that the intelligence agencies know that 90% of the arms, ammunition and explosives with the Maoists are from raiding armouries and looting from soldiers. So they are not as dependent on buying arms as the propagandists allege. And, of course, one must not forget that almost all demonetised currency has been remonetised.

Politics of ‘Protracted People’s War’

The role of the state in this war is not understood; if understood, it is condoned. Many regard the Maoists as “criminals” or “enemy” and have no appreciation of what protracted people’s war (PPW) means. Guerrilla attacks are one part of PPW. The other is non-violent activities to uplift the local people’s economy and encourage the people to become agents of their own change. The guerrillas’ attacks are infrequent; they spend more time in other work, aside from training, mainly in spreading political consciousness. A recent dissertation based on fieldwork in three districts of Telangana (Adilabad, Warangal and Khammam) “contests conclusions made by most current research on insurgencies focused on the militaristic aspects of armed groups” and shows “that organizational structures, local village-level factors, and non-violent rebel activities played a far more important role in explaining insurgent strength and sustenance.”¹⁴

This facet of PPW finds support in two opinion pieces from Bastar. The first one¹⁵ by Shubhranshu Choudhary, avowedly

anti-Maoist, shares some details of a closed door meeting organised by the Indian Army, where G K Pillai, “finest (among) home secretaries in recent times,” spoke on “how to tackle the Maoist problem.” The author says, while details of schools burnt, roads and bridges blown up were being listed, he interrupted to ask if the government had the statistics on teachers and health workers killed by the Maoists. He was told that this was not known. He writes:

Maoists have not harassed any school teacher or health worker for their work in their entire history of failed revolution of many decades now. Of course it is a different matter if a school teacher starts passing on information and a good doctor starts couriering money. I have seen many blown up school buildings by Maoists. And have also seen a mud hut next to that building which was built with support from Maoists so that the school can function. I have seen Maoists with guns pleading with government school teachers to come to school regularly and asking what they can do to make their life better in the village. Can we help make a new house for you, what more can we do for you, please tell us, I heard them say. I have also witnessed a Maoist rally demanding teachers to attend school regularly in Narayanpur area in Chhattisgarh some time back.

He goes on to add that neither Ramakrishna Mission nor Doctors without Borders were stopped from carrying on with their work by Maoists. On the contrary, it is the government teachers and panchayat workers who do not go to school or the villages but never forget to collect their salary on time. It is also significant that it was the Dandkaranya Special Zonal Committee of the CPI (Maoist) which on 19 June 2015, through a press statement, alerted the Bastar public to the wholesale closure of 3,000 schools and ashrams (hostels-cum-schools).¹⁶

The second one is by Ashutosh Bhargava¹⁷ who, while condemning the crack-down on media by the police in Bastar, reminds us of the long sordid role of media groups in Chhattisgarh which have business stakes in coal, iron ore, and thermal power, and openly support clearing the forests of the Maoists. He goes on to say that Adivasis who disagree with the Maoists still prefer them to the state because they stand between the government which is trying to destroy

their “way of life.” In the interior villages, he writes, people are not enamoured of industrialisation. He wonders that if the Maoists were on the retreat then how they were able to recruit 550 cadres in Bastar alone in 2015, which is more than the official number of 393 Maoists killed in India from 2011 to 2015. And he laments the fact that despite the Naxalite insurgency going on for 50 years, “there is little attempt to engage with the rebels or grasp their methods and madness.” He pointedly asks why “(i)n an era when suicide bombing has become a highly effective mode of violence across the globe, Maoists are still adamant on a “PPW,” and says that the “Indian state is unwilling to confront the fact that the insurgency rests on an idea that the (Indian) state is essentially discriminatory and favours the powerful.” And then he goes on to share that “several young officers in Bastar have told him, in candid moments, that if it were not for the rebels, the state would have gifted away the zone to the industry a long time ago, leaving tribals in a wretched state.”

Writing from a strategic perspective, Shashank Ranjan states:¹⁸

It is worthy to add that the developments in Bastar, over the last several months, have been worrisome, as far as positive perception management by the state is concerned. The aspect of psy [psychological] messaging to counter the insurgent narrative is an imperative and the Union Ministry of Home Affairs has adopted public perception management as one of the four pillars to base its counter LWE [left-wing extremist] strategy; the other ones being security, development and ensuring rights and entitlements of local communities.

However, developments like allegations of fake surrenders, pressure on activists and media, rise in extremism of vigilante groups like Samajik Ekta Manch (SEM) do not portend too well for the counter-insurgency campaign It is not to indicate that the allegations of Bastar turning into a police state are correct, but the requirement on part of the state is to come out clean by projecting a counter narrative, refuting the allegations. If required, transparent enquiries should be resorted to probe the matters. In absence of the same, it is likely that the Maoists' agenda will gain traction, further sapping the state efforts to counter them.

Congress leader Jairam Ramesh had warned his own United Progressive

Alliance government in 2013 that the Maoist argument of forests being cleared of them to enable mining corporations to move in, protected by government forces, was exactly what was happening in Saranda in Paschimi Singhbhum. His party and government did not listen to him and turned a deaf ear to his plea for a 10-year moratorium on mining in Scheduled Areas. At present the Jharkhand Adivasis are protesting the amendments brought about by the BJP state government to the Chhota Nagpur Tenancy Act and the Santhal Parganas Act, divesting them of the protection offered by these acts and paving the way for transfer of land to predatory capitalists. A parliamentary opposition, damned by its own dismal performance in the past, has stymied the Adivasi resistance from moving forward.

So PPW is not just guerrilla attacks/ambushes, but also struggle for enforcing constitutional provisions, implementation of government promises, opposition to specific policies, educating the people about the hypocrisy of the Indian state and encouraging them to struggle for their rights. Most Adivasis witnessing legally sanctioned land/forest grabs, dilution of laws protecting their rights, which they won after long-drawn struggles, feel helpless. The forest bureaucracy and the police have regained their power over them and are encroaching on rights assured by the Forest Rights Act. The likelihood of recruitment to Maoist ranks, under these circumstances, is enhanced because of a virtual single-party rule, a biased administration serving the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the BJP, and the dismal state of the parliamentary opposition. Nature abhors a vacuum.

Easy to Forget, Not Easy to Ignore

India's ruling classes were reluctant to accept the Forest Rights Bill in 2006 until the fear of a resurgent Maoist movement convinced them otherwise. After 2010, a combination of brutal war and serious errors of the Maoist leadership led to a setback for the armed resistance. This enabled Indian government to set up military camps in and around mining areas and encouraged the

corporate sector to move in, especially in the Saranda forests of Jharkhand and Raoghat in Chhattisgarh. The Adivasis are battling a dilution of key provisions of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (FRA) 2006. The process of conferring rights has slowed down.

The Chhattisgarh bureaucracy has de facto revoked the community right conferred under the FRA, although there is no power of revocation under it. The Sarguja district authorities have revoked the community forest right (CFR) of Ghatbarra village. An official letter dated 8 January 2016, signed by the district collector, the divisional forest officer and a district-level representative of the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs, has claimed that CFR was coming in the way of a coal mine that had been granted approval in 2012, prior to the conferment of CFR in 2013. The Adani Group company had got a lease for the Parsa East Ketan Besan coal mine. On 14 March 2016, a joint secretary in the Ministry of Environment and Forests noted that “both on facts and matter of law the said cancellation of Community Forest Right is arbitrary and in violation of the letter and spirit of the law, that is, FRA.”¹⁹

Not surprisingly, the mine remains in control of the company; the tree cover has been shaved off and mining has begun. In Nagarnar, 838 peasants whose lands were acquired in 2012 for the National Mineral Development Corporation's steel project were assured of employment in the company. But this promise remains an empty boast; nothing will be done until December 2018 when the plant begins its operation. Not surprisingly, in November 2016, NITI Aayog included the Nagarnar plant for divestment to the private sector.²⁰ In Maharashtra, the forest bureaucracy has wrested back control over minor forest products. In Odisha, the government has been trying to reverse the outcome of the referendum held in 12 gram sabhas in Niyamgiri under a Supreme Court order, which brought a halt to Vedanta's bauxite mining plans in the hills.

So the Maoist movement remains relevant for people's resistance to halt corporate–military inroads into the forest

domains of the Adivasis. The richest 1% of Indians who owned 36.8% of wealth in 2000, now own 58.4% of India's wealth, whereas 70% of Indians who owned 13.9% of country's wealth in 2010, saw their share shrunk by half to 7% in 2016, in just six years.²¹ This staggering enrichment of the rich at the cost of ordinary people is the real story of "development" in India. So if the Maoists manage to withstand the current onslaught and remain militarily unvanquished for another two years, their political graph will certainly rise. The first rule of guerrilla warfare is that if the rebels are not defeated, the state has not won. Second, the guerrillas must expand or they can get boxed in. Regardless of propaganda, there has been a Maoist revival in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, including in the Araku Valley after a break of two decades, as well as expansion, for instance, in the tri-junction of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala.²²

Maoist resilience in the present difficult phase of the "politics of bloodshed" put into effect by the Indian state to wipe out the Maoist movement is the basis of hope. Courageously resisting oppression and exploitation over a long period might ultimately create the basis of a "politics without bloodshed." Resilience, however, has to be imbued with an alternative vision for it to pave the way for a project of socialist transformation.²³ Without mass struggles, PPW will remain stymied. Fifty years after the Naxalbari uprising, the resilience displayed by the Maoists provides continued political relevance to the "spark" that lit Naxalbari in May 1967. But there is a long road uphill and ahead.

NOTES

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