

## **The riot of red flags**

*By: Ajai Sahni*

**The strategies and tactics of the Naxalites are there for all to see, but the Indian establishment is yet to understand this agenda of ‘protracted warfare’.**

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India’s Naxalite movement – to which contemporary Indian Maoists directly trace their lineage – emerged as a wildfire insurrection in 1967 in the Naxalbari area of North Bengal. After a few years of dramatic violence, however, that movement was comprehensively suppressed by 1973, with the entire top leadership of what was then the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), either jailed or dead. What little remained of its splintered survivor organisations was destroyed during Indira Gandhi’s Emergency of 1975. It was with the formation in 1980 of the People’s War Group (PWG) – under the leadership of Kondapalli Seetharamaiah, an erstwhile Central Organising Committee member of the CPI (ML), in the Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh – and the reorganisation of the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) in Bihar in the mid-1980s, that the movement resurfaced in some strength.

Initial successes were, again, rapid, and by the mid-1980s, 31 districts in seven states were experiencing Naxalite violence. By the early 1990s, however, the problem had been eliminated from at least 16 of these districts, bringing the total number of affected districts to just 15 in four states. Thereafter, the reconstruction of the Naxalites was initially more systematic, with wider areas being targeted and consolidated. In recent years, however, the growth of the movement has been exponential. Thus, at the meeting of what is known as the Central Coordination Committee of states affected by the Naxalite movement, on 21 November 2003, then-Union Home Secretary N Gopalaswami disclosed that a total of 55 districts in nine states were affected by varying degrees of Naxalite violence. Just ten months later, on 21 September 2004, an official note circulated at the meeting of chief ministers of states experiencing Naxalite violence, indicating that this number had gone up to as many as 156 districts in 13 states. By August 2007, the official number had risen to 194 districts in 18 states.

Not all of these districts and states were, of course, seething with Maoist violence. Just 62 of these were categorised as ‘highly affected’, reflecting significant levels of violence. Another 53 districts were categorised as ‘moderately affected’, indicating high levels of political mobilisation and some violence. Meanwhile, 79 districts fell into the ‘marginally affected’ category, in which preliminary political mobilisation was detected. Sources indicate that intelligence estimates now put at least 220 districts in 22 states into the sphere of varying degrees of Maoist influence and activity.

It is important to recognise that the phase when there is violence, which is ordinarily the point at which the state takes cognisance of the problem, actually comes at the tail end of the process of mass mobilisation. This is the stage when neutralising the threat will require considerable, if not massive, use of force. From the all-important preventive perspective, then, it is useful to chart not merely the current expanse of visible Maoist mobilisation and militancy, but also to understand the extent of their current intentions, ambitions and agenda.

### **‘Protecting’ Adivasis**

The Maoist rampage has been enormously accelerated by the unification, in September 2004, of the two principal parties, the PWG and the MCC, which had long dominated – and contested control over – the purported ‘Red Corridor’, running from Andhra Pradesh to the borders of Nepal. With the PWG and the Communist Party of India (Party Unity) having merged in August 1998, this consolidation of the most significant Maoist formations in the country resulted in augmented capacities to intensify the ‘people’s war’ in the country.

Significantly, the CPI (Maoist) has established regional bureaus that are responsible for nearly two-thirds of the country, further sub-divided into multiple lower-level jurisdictions in which the process of mobilisation has been assigned to local leaders. There are at least five regional bureaus, 13 state committees, two special area committees and three special zonal committees in the country. There is also evidence of preliminary activity for the extension of operations to new areas, including Gujarat, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir and Meghalaya. Moreover, in 2004 the Maoists articulated a new strategy to target urban centres in their “Urban

Perspective” document, which offered guidelines for “working in towns and cities”, and for the revival of a mobilisation targeting students and the urban unemployed. Two principal ‘industrial belts’ were also identified as targets for urban mobilisation: Bhilai-Ranchi-Dhanbad-Calcutta and Bombay-Pune-Surat-Ahmedabad.

The Maoist enterprise has secured ground in the administrative and political vacuum that extends over vast areas of India, where the state has systematically and chronically failed to provide the public goods and services as it is required to – including security of life and property, criminal justice, and opportunities for social and economic growth. In such circumstances, it is inevitable that another entity would step in to fill the vacuum. It is also inevitable that, in most such cases, such an entity would not be constrained by the limits of law or established procedure in its activism among local populations; as a consequence, such activism will tend to be violent.

The unfortunate reality is that the mechanism of rural administration in areas experiencing Naxalite activity has been made ineffective, wherever it may have evolved beyond the primitive structures of colonial governance. Elsewhere, the Naxalites became active where, due to state incompetence, corruption and criminalisation of the political leadership, the rural administration has deteriorated to the point of paralysis. The problem is compounded manifold in Adivasi and forest areas by an ill-conceived policy of isolation that, under the influence of well-intentioned European social-anthropologists, was adopted throughout the country shortly after Independence, with the intention of ‘protecting’ the culture and interests of the Adivasi population.

Such an isolationist policy has been a total failure. It has kept the Adivasis poor and outside the ambit of development, has been unable to protect them from exploitation and abuse, and has deepened economic deprivation through an increasing alienation of indigenous rights over forest produce and wealth. As such, this approach is now long overdue for a re-examination. The vulnerabilities of the Indian state have been compounded further by decades of misgovernance in ever-widening areas of the country, along with the steady erosion of the integrity and efficacy of established institutions of administration and justice. Over the past decade and a half, processes of liberalisation and globalisation have also unleashed a new and fractious dynamic,

provoking or intensifying conflict between the beneficiaries of the new economics and those who have been further marginalised by them.

These structural vulnerabilities of the Indian system have helped the Maoists secure tremendous and cumulative successes – despite the occasional reverses, as presently in Andhra Pradesh. These successes are underpinned by the extraordinary strategic and tactical coherence of their movement, which remains little understood within the echelons of political and administrative power in India, and within a large proportion of the security establishment itself. No effective response to the Maoist challenge in India is possible unless this strategic and tactical ‘understructure’ is fully documented and understood.

### **Weapons and people**

In critical need of recognition is the point that extreme violence is an integral element of the Maoist ideology, and not a mere tactical expedient. “Political power”, as Mao Tse-tung put it, “grows out of the barrel of a gun.” And extreme violence is at the heart of this formulation. “To put it bluntly,” Mao noted,

*it is necessary to create terror for a while in every rural area, or otherwise it would be impossible to suppress the activities of the counter-revolutionaries in the countryside or overthrow the authority of the gentry. Proper limits have to be exceeded in order to right a wrong, or else the wrong cannot be righted.*

India’s Maoists are explicit in their insistence that violence is the only instrument through which their revolution can be realised. CPI (Maoist) General-Secretary Muppala Laxmana Rao (aka ‘Ganapathy’) argues,

*the question of armed struggle ... is independent of one’s will. It is a law borne out by all historical experience. It is a fact of history that nowhere in the world, nowhere in historical development of the class society, had the reactionary ruling classes given up power without resorting to violent suppression of the mass protests ... until they are thrown out by force.*

Another commentator in People's March, the CPI (Maoist) party journal, contends, "The question is not of violence vs non-violence, but whether it is just to take up arms against a most violent and brutal state ... The Maoists say it is just to take up arms as part of the overall process to change a brutal and violent system."

Many in the mainstream Indian political leadership have articulated the hope that the decision of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) to join the democratic process could serve as a future model for their Indian ideological brethren, tempting them away from their current commitment to violent insurrection. Such hopes are entirely misplaced. For one thing, the Indian Maoists have explicitly rejected the Nepali Maoists' 'present tactics' – those of joining with the mainstream political system. They warn that these could set in motion "an irreversible process of losing all the revolutionary gains achieved till now". The Indian Maoists also contemptuously reject any suggestion that they could choose, at any point in the future, to participate in what their spokesman, 'Azad', described as "the parliamentary pig-sty in India".

India's Maoists are, of course, yet to decide whether the Nepali Maoists' engagement with democracy is a 'betrayal' or a tactical innovation leading to an eventual and total seizure of power. If it is the former, the CPN (Maoist) will be seen simply to have joined the ranks of the many 'revisionists' and 'right opportunists' that are thought to have corrupted the movement through its history. If it is the latter, this new stratagem will be studied with care, in order to determine its utility and the conditions in which it would apply. Such an approach, however, holds little promise of any early abandonment of violence by the CPI (Maoist). If its Nepali counterpart is, in fact, able to secure an absolute seizure of power through its 'present tactics', it will only be because the Maoists of Nepal had already created a situation of extraordinary disruptive dominance across wide – indeed overwhelming – geographical areas in the country. The Nepali Maoist's 'present tactics' can only be relevant to India in some future situation in which the Indian Maoists have already secured comparable disruptive dominance, and the existing political and administrative order has been pushed to comparable conditions of decay and disintegration – a still-distant possibility in India.

Securing these conditions of decay and disintegration is, in fact, the objective of the Naxalite 'people's war', and its principal instrumentality is the strategy of protracted warfare. As the "Programme and Constitution" of the PWG's People's Guerrilla Army (PGA) declared, "The line of protracted people's war is our military strategy," and further, "The PGA firmly opposes the pure military outlook which is divorced from the masses, and adventurism. It will function adhering to the mass line." The 'mass line' rejects the 'left adventurism' often attributed to the earlier Naxalite movement of the 1967-73 phase, and insists that the military aspects of the revolution are contingent on mass mobilisation. Mao, in "On Protracted War", notes, "We see not only weapons but also people. Weapons are an important factor in war, but not the decisive factor; it is people, not things, that are decisive." The idea of protracted war clearly recognises the strengths and superiority of the state's present forces and alignments, but recognises, equally, its vulnerabilities. Mao declares,

*The enemy is strong and we are weak, and the danger of subjugation is there. But in other respects the enemy has shortcomings and we have advantages. The enemy's advantage can be reduced and his shortcomings aggravated by our efforts. On the other hand, our advantages can be enhanced and our shortcoming remedied by our efforts.*

Thus, the CPI (Maoist) document on "Strategy & Tactics" likewise notes,

However strong the enemy's military power may be and however weak the people's military power, by basing ourselves in the vast backward countryside – the weakest position of the enemy – and relying on the vast masses of the peasantry, eager for agrarian revolution, and creatively following the flexible strategy and tactics of guerrilla struggle and the protracted people's war ... and following the policy and tactics of sudden attack and annihilation, it is absolutely possible to defeat the enemy forces and achieve victory for the people in single battles.

### **Front organisations**

The Maoists believe that there is, at present, an "excellent revolutionary situation in

India”, and have clearly declared that “the seizure of state power should be the goal of all our activity”. After their 9th ‘Unity’ Congress in January-February 2007, they outlined an inventory of “immediate tasks”, to include, among others, the following:

- Coordinate the people’s war with the ongoing armed struggles of the various oppressed nationalities in Kashmir, Assam, Nagaland, Manipur and other parts of the Northeast.
- Build a broad UF [United Front] of all secular forces and persecuted religious minorities such as Muslims, Christians and Sikhs ...
- Build a secret party apparatus which is impregnable to the enemy’s attacks ...
- Build open and secret mass organisations amongst the workers, peasants, youth, students, women and other sections of the people ...
- Build the people’s militia in all the villages in the guerrilla zones as the base force of the PGA [People’s Guerrilla Army]. Also build armed self-defence units in other areas of class struggle, as well as in the urban areas.

The Maoist strategy is clearly to fish in every troubled Indian water, and to exploit every potential issue and grievance, in order to generate a campaign of protest and agitation. The principal vehicles for these ‘partial struggles’ are ‘front’ or ‘cover’ organisations of the Maoists themselves, on the one hand; and, on the other, a range of individuals and organisations best described, in a phrase often (incorrectly) attributed to Lenin, as ‘useful idiots’ – well-intentioned persons who are unaware of the broader strategy and agenda they are unwittingly promoting through their support to unquestionably admirable causes. As the “Political and Organisational Review” of the erstwhile PWG noted,

*Cover organisations are indispensable in areas where our mass organisations are not allowed to function openly ... There are two types of cover organisations: one, those which are formed on a broad basis by ourselves; and two, those organisations led by other forces which we utilise by working from within without getting exposed.*

This strategy has already contributed to abrupt and unexpected violence in a number of cases in the recent past, with the role of Maoist provocateurs often discovered much after the event. The impeccable causes embraced in this cynical strategy include

caste conflict, and the escalating tensions over the displacement and attempted imposition of special economic zones in West Bengal and Orissa. During September 2006 in Khairlanji, in Bhandara District of Maharashtra, a Dalit family of four was murdered following the rape of two women. Protest demonstrations abruptly escalated into violence with the intervention of Maoist fronts and activists. A subsequent Maoist “Resolution against Dalit Killings in Khairlanji” declared, “The Dalit masses knew that Maoists have always stood with the oppressed. The masses took inspiration from this and intensified their agitation.”

While protests against the special economic zones were initiated by various other parties and non-governmental groups, the Maoist involvement was progressively visible. This was eventually acknowledged by Ganapathy, who observed, “One should only be surprised if we are not involved in such life-and-death issues of the masses ... Struggles against the SEZs acquiring fertile farmland of the peasants and also huge projects are turning more and more militant ... As for our role in such movements, we shall definitely make all efforts to be in the forefront and lead the movement in the correct direction.”

Indeed, current Maoist debates and documents condemn the “second wave of economic reforms” as a “violent assault on the right to life and livelihood of the masses”, and call for “an uncompromising opposition to the present model and all the policies that are coming up”. Internal debates on the issue have further underlined the “need to build a huge movement against displacement and the very model of development itself”, and to unite all “genuine democratic and anti-imperialist forces ... to create a tornado of dissent that forces the rulers to stop this juggernaut.” The issues at stake envisaged for potential mobilisation focus on “development driven through big dams, super highways and other infrastructural projects ... gigantic mining projects, Special Economic Zones (SEZs), urban renewal and beautification”.

Within the same pattern, the “Political and Organisational Review” of the PWG noted, in March 2001, that united fronts and joint action committees have prioritised “burning issues of the peasantry such as for water, power, remunerative prices for agricultural produce, against exploitation by traders, against suicides by the peasantry, against the WTO [World Trade Organisation], and on worker, student, women,



Adivasi and Dalit issues.” Thus, further, “issue-based temporary joint activity with other forces has been the general form of UF [United Front] undertaken by our Party at various levels.” Suitable issues are not picked up randomly or opportunistically, but are based on extensive ‘investigations’ into ‘social conditions and tactics’, and are meticulously reconciled with the broader Maoist strategy and agenda.

As noted previously, these various causes are laudable, and no one can be faulted for extending support to demands for greater equity, justice and access in these spheres. For the Maoists, however, these campaigns are an integral component of their strategy of political consolidation, necessarily leading to military mobilisation. In Maoist doctrine, these ‘partial struggles’ are no more than a tactical element in the protracted war, and they have no intrinsic value of their own. These ‘struggles’ create the networks and recruitment base for the Maoist militia and armed cadres. Where partial struggles thrive, an army is being raised. These ‘peaceful’ or sporadically violent movements are eventually and inevitably intended to yield to armed warfare. The objective is to “isolate the enemy by organising the people into various cover organisations and build joint fronts in order to mobilise the masses into struggles to defeat the enemy offensive”. Army formation, the Maoists insist, “is the precondition for the new political power”, and “all this activity should serve to intensify and extend our armed struggle. Any joint activity or tactical alliances which does not serve the cause of the peoples’ war will be a futile exercise.”

The “Urban Perspective” document envisages the formation of ‘Open Self Defence Teams’ and armed ‘Secret Self Defence Squads’ in urban areas. For the latter, the document notes, “One significant form of activity is to participate along with the masses and give them the confidence to undertake militant mass action. Other tasks are to secretly hit particular targets who are obstacles in the advance of the mass movement.”

The Maoists are – and have long been – working in accordance with a plan. This gives their movement great strength; but to the extent that this design is well known, it also makes the Maoists enormously vulnerable. Regrettably, while there is a handful of officers in the security and intelligence establishment who are aware of the details of this design, the general grasp in the security and political leadership at the state

level and at the Centre remains weak. There is, moreover, the added constraint that the Maoist strategy exploits the vulnerabilities of constitutional governance and its freedoms, and the security apparatus has only limited instrumentalities of containment available in the initial stages of subversion and mass mobilisation. The response of the Indian state remains trapped in an 'emergency response paradigm' that has little relevance in dealing with the protracted war strategies of the Maoists.

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