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Surge in the Red Tide: Rise of Maoist Militancy in India

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For eight long months prior to June 2009, members of the Communist Party of India- Maoist (CPI-M) ran a parallel government in Lalgarh, West Bengal with 1,100 villages under their control. Following their expulsion by paramilitary forces in an insurgency war, a formal ban has been imposed on the Maoists. Is India prepared to fight a long war?

FROM JANUARY to June 2009, India has witnessed a total of 1128 incidents of violence related to the Maoist insurgency affecting thirteen states in Central and Eastern India. The Maoist insurgency has, in these six months, claimed 455 lives of security officers and civilians.

Maoism or Naxalism (as commonly termed in India) started as a peasant movement in the 1970s, its namesake being a small village called Naxalbari on the border between West Bengal and Nepal. Today it is a movement aimed towards liberating the tribal population (who comprise approximately 9% of India's population) from many years of oppression and current exclusion from modern India's growth story. The Maoists, who unified under a single banner as the Communist Party of India-Maoist on 21 September 2004, have emerged as a formidable militant force and aim to form a Red Corridor through the heart of India --extending from Nepal in the north to Kerala in the south, covering 155 districts. Their most recent attack in Lalgarh, West Bengal has reignited efforts to counter the Maoist threat in India.

What fuels the movement?

Modern India represents two very different faces of development. India, the world's second fastest growing economy, ranks 66th among the 88 countries surveyed by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in the Global Hunger Index (2008). This is below Sudan, Nigeria and Cameroon, and slightly above Bangladesh. One of the worst hit in this ladder of deprivation is the tribal population belonging to the Maoist belt that faces stagnantly poor or barely improving standards of living. Unlike the better developed states, states like Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and others have not initiated effective land reforms, wide-scale industrialisation policies and poverty alleviation programmes.

These states are highly feudalistic, with landless peasant villagers comprising the bulk of the labour force, their numbers being greater than those in other states. Although these states are resource-rich and thus teeming with economic activity, socio-economic exploitation by the state governments and various business enterprises deprive the villagers of any economic benefits from these resources. There have been cases in which several employees of local state-run agencies are in cahoots with the Timber mafia (who control much of the timber industry in these regions).

The Timber mafia, alongside renowned business houses, is known to expel peasants from their land, extort money from them, and enslave them as bonded labourers. This exploitation is not limited to the timber industry; it is also present in the mineral mining industry and in agriculture. Many times, the local police collaborate with these parties, inflicting human rights abuses on the villagers instead of protecting them from these injustices.

Consequently, these states have become the most backward, underdeveloped, and impoverished States in India, with more than a third of their populations living under the poverty line.

What is the current conflict?

The Maoist insurgency captured headlines with the Lalgarh incident in West Bengal recently. In November 2008, the foundation for a Jindal Steel plant was laid at Shalboni in West Bengal. The convoy of West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya and Central Minister Ram Vilas Paswan was attacked on their return from the foundation ceremony. The CPI-M took responsibility of this attack, saying that it did not support the construction of a steel plant on tribal land. Since then, the Maoists have stood alongside tribal villagers and have formed a “liberated, anti-capitalist” zone in Lalgarh, West Bengal. In June 2009, the central government of India launched Operation Lalgarh to reclaim the areas infested by Maoists and to flush out the Maoist militants from Lalgarh and its surrounding areas.

Response

One of the earliest responses to counter the movement was introduced by the Chhattisgarh government. Termed as *Salwa Judum* (literally, ‘purification hunt’; euphemistically referred to as ‘peace campaign’), the movement was introduced by the Chhattisgarh government in June 2005 to arm local tribals against the Maoists. However, since the Maoists were also arming the tribals to gain tribal support, the result is a pseudo civil war in Chhattisgarh, leading to large-scale denouncement of the movement.

After the Lalgarh operation, the central government announced its plans of a coordinated and organised operation in all the states affected by Maoists, so that Maoist militants do not find escape routes in neighbouring states.

The Union Home Minister then imposed a formal ban on the Maoists under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act in West Bengal. By this act, the CPI-M joins the 30 banned outfits among which are Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Student’s Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) and United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). Thus the current government has classified this highly complex issue as a law and order problem. By doing so and by clubbing the Maoists as “terrorists”, the government has infested these Maoist areas with state forces, paramilitary forces, and police, further isolating the people and their problems.

With increasing militarisation of the problem, one gets a sense of déjà vu as the Indian government seems to be prioritising hard measures rather than a healthy combination of hard and soft measures to tackle the roots of the crisis. Soft measures are especially important as the Maoists enjoy considerable public sympathy and support.

Not just that, the main opposition party in West Bengal -- the Trinamul Congress (TMC) -- is also supportive of the rebels' cause. Simply banning the outfit would imply giving a free hand to the ruling political party to curb dissidents in the state in the name of rooting out terrorism.

Termed as the 'biggest internal security threat' by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as far back as 2006, the government has witnessed increased sophistication in the Maoist attacks in terms of tactics, targets and area of operation -- from the rural to the urban areas. While the Indian government focuses on combating Islamist terrorism, this 'people's movement' is getting increasingly bloodier by the day. The time has come for the Indian authorities to wake up to the reality of red militancy in India and devise a comprehensive solution that includes both hard and soft measures to combat the roots of the violence, not the violence alone.

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