Research Paper Economics

The Growing Influence of Naxalism in India: Intellectual Myths and Operational Realities

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ABSTRACT

There is an intellectual haze surrounding the problem of Naxalism, also known as Left Wing Extremism (LWE), in its political "avatar". What started as a small peasant movement against injustice in the 1960s, has turned into the biggest internal threat to a nation's very existence as a democracy.

India has been paying a heavy price in terms of loss of manpower (civilian, police and military) , besides heavy economic loss in being unable to harness the potential of a mineral and forest rich region of the country, extending beyond 220 districts, covering a geographical area of approximately 92,000 sqkm. While the factors leading to emergence of LWE are quite clear, what is surprising is the way the movement has been allowed to flourish and prosper for the past 5 decades.

In order to effectively combat this burgeoning crisis, it is crucial to examine the reasons for its survival and growth, so many years after independence. Steps have been taken to suppress the Naxalite movement; and in this process, costly mistakes have been made, leading to a situation where the remedy applied has aggravated the disease. It has become difficult to resolve the academic debate - whether this is a political, economic or social problem, or should it be tackled like a law and order problem and effectively crushed using State power. There is also a school of thought which adheres to the view that as of now there can be only one solution - the Military forces. All attempts have however failed, proving that the roots of the problem lie deep and unidentified.

This paper seeks to examine the factors responsible for the growing influence of Naxalism, separating myths from the ground realities, in an attempt to diagnose the disease correctly, so that we may apply the appropriate solution, to rid the country of this growing menace. The paper is divided into three sections. In Section 1, a brief history of important aspects of growth of the Naxalite movement up till the present times, will be discussed. This is followed by Section II which deals with factors responsible for growth of the extremist movement in the past 5 decades. Section III focuses on a discussion of potentially feasible measures to deal with this formidable threat to the democratic fabric of the nation.

KEYWORDS

Introduction:

An often stated intention of LWEs is that they seek to dismantle the prevailing unequal socio-economic and political institutions that basically serve the interests of upper sections of society. In its place will be set up a truly democratic people's government. However, their objective appears to be different from their stated intentions. Increasing geographical spread and growing militarisation of some of the left extremist groups has the potential to seriously challenge India's integrity as a nation.

There is lot of confusion regarding the nature and magnitude of threat posed by LWE, also referred to as Naxalites or Maoists. In order to remove the layers of myths which idealize the movement, and gain a comprehensive understanding of this problem, it is necessary to trace the background against which the movement evolved and circumstances under which it spread.

SECTION 1: Origin and Evolution of LWE in India

Roots of LWE in India can be traced to the communist political movements, labour and agrarian unrests and tribal revolts that erupted, but failed to achieve their objectives during colonial rule in India; however, they did manage to instill a revolutionary fervor among the deprived classes of society. The Independence of India in 1947 had raised expectations of socio-economic justice among the deprived classes; however, they were soon disillusioned when their socio-economic status remained the same even after an Indian government was established. Neither was there any hope of improvement in the future. "Electoral politics was dominated by land owners and the land reforms that were promised were not being taken up in the expected spirit. The old exploitative structure had continued in a different garb. This led to a lot of disillusionment and frustration among the masses" (AK Singh, 2008)[1]. The prediction of their leaders that the political independence of India from British rule would simply mean a change of exploiters, without improving the lop sided socio-economic structure in the country, appeared to be coming true. It was increasingly felt that an armed revolution was the only way to end the exploitation.

In this scenario, the CPI (M) started large scale mobilization of tribals, the landless and share-croppers in Bengal, and the Naxalbari incident sparked off the conversion of a political and socio-economic agrarian movement into an armed struggle. Comparing the Indian situation to China before 1949, it was decided to launch an armed conflict, "People's Democratic Revolution" against the "exploitative" Indian State by a new party: CPI (Marxist-Leninist) or CPI (ML). Leadership tussles within the new party did not however permit any synchronization between the different leftist groups.

The State response was mixed. From 1967-72, there were fierce battles between CPI (ML) and government authorities, resulting in large-scale violence. However, a positive development was that the government also seriously undertook land reforms. With the coming into power of the Congress supported government in Bengal in the year 1971, a major operation named "Steeple Chase" was launched in which the military, paramilitary and state forces participated jointly in the Naxal affected areas. Within two months, the movement was controlled and it finally died out after the arrest and death of the Naxal leader Charu Majumdar in July 1972. Even though the rebellion was a failure and almost nothing happened for a decade after 1972, the brutal state response had further widened the chasm between people and government, leading to the creation of a violent LWE movement in India.

Developments from 1970s to 2004:

Till the 1980s, the movement could not win the support of the poor peasants, agricultural landless labourers, urban mid-

dle class and the industrial workers as they did not view it as a struggle for their own cause. The CPI(ML) disintegrated into sub-groups which accused each other of wrong action, but at the same time there were efforts to re-build the maoist movement. The centre of gravity of LWE shifted from Bengal to Bihar and Andhra Pradesh in late 70s. The futility of armed rebellion against govt of India was realized and the new naxalite leaders started entering parliament as elected leaders[2]. Efforts towards unification among the various Left Extremist Groups (LEGs) were also intensified. The People's Guerrilla Army (PGA) was founded as the military wing of the People's War Group (PWG) in December 2000 by re-organising its guerrilla force. It emerged as the strongest LEG with a wide mass base and the strongest military.

Developments between 2004 to the Present:

The CPI (M) has emerged as the most powerful Naxalite group in the country. The two guerrilla armies – the People's Guerrilla Army (PGA) and the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA), respectively, have also also merged. The new armed force reportedly operates under the name of PLGA since December 2004. The PLGA has attained military level sophistication in terms of both tactics and equipment.

As of today, there are around 38 to 40 LEGs with their area of influence and operation extending to around 194 out of the total 602 districts of India. The extremists aim at establishing a Compact Revolutionary Zone (CRZ) from Nepal to Tamil Nadu. The objective is to liberate their proposed CRZ. The actual objective is very far from ideology. It is based on the consideration that this "liberation of CRZ" would give them domination over the vital mineral and industrial areas of India as this area contains most of India's coal, iron and aluminium mines. By controlling this area, they would be able to control the industrial base of the country. It was also decided to protest against the special economic zones (SEZs) and the setting up of industries by acquiring forest and tribal land, using the argument that it was against the interests of backward communities. Thus, the movement which was initiated against apathy of the state towards deprived classes soon used these very classes to wage a militant mass movement against the neo-liberal policies of globalisation, liberalisation and privatization; in short against all economic development in the "Red Corridor".

During the last few years, increasing attempts are being made to mobilise international public opinion against the 'atrocities' of the Indian state, to put pressure on the Indian government. Realising that garnering international support is crucial, they have been developing contacts since 1995 with the Maoist groups from Philippines, Turkey, Germany, France, Holland and Italy, besides neighbouring China and Nepal.

Available reports indicate that the movement is currently strengthening the formation of all three forces of the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA)– the basic, secondary and main forces. Recently, an increased presence of Naxalites in urban areas and industrial belts of the country has also been observed.

SECTION II: An Analysis of Factors responsible for Sustained Growth of the Extremist Movement in the past 5 decades.

Factors may be classified as governance related, Socio-Economic and Cultural and political, besides reasons that have sustained the LWE movement.

Factors related to Governance

The emergence of LWE to this extent can be attributed to the failure of successive governments to offer an efficient, clean and non-exploitative administration to the common masses in the most deprived regions of the country. In such a situation, it was natural for people to look for an alternative. The mass mobilisation and support to LWEs have been possible mainly due to disappointment with the poor or non-existent government machinery in remote areas of the country.

Table I clearly indicates the various dimensions (literacy, urbanisation, health, etc) of deprivation within the regions that are most affected by Naxal influence. Unlike government officials, the Naxals reached out to the people, took up their issues and fought for their rights, earning goodwill among the backward classes.

Table-1: Economic Indicators (% share) in 5 States affected by LWE

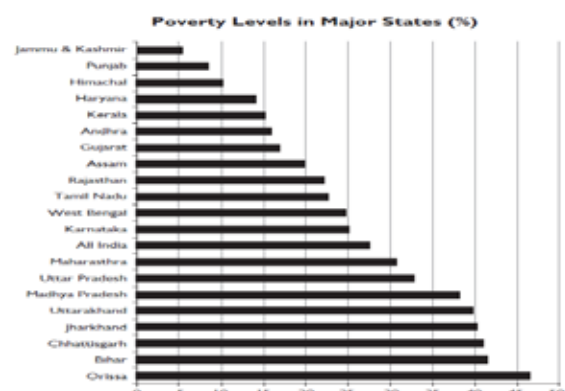
	Orissa		Jharkhand		Chhattisgarh		Bihar		Andhra Pradesh	
	Affected Districts	Affected Districts	Affected Districts	Affected Districts	Affected Districts	Affected Districts	Affected Districts	Affected Districts	Affected Districts	Affected Districts
Share of SC/ ST (%)*	65	23	45	30	69	36	19	18	36	22
Literacy rate (%)*	64	76	40	51	50	68	46	48	56	68
Infantry Mortality rate (%) (1999)	123	73	n/a	n/a	76	57	n/a	n/a	34	28
Urbanisation (%)	17	23	10	27	7	29	12	8.6	24	27
Forest Coverage (%)*	39	15	38	16	53	28	8	1	17	14
Agriculture Labourers (%)*	35	25	29	20	26	34	52	46	40	31
Percapita Foodgrain production	151	96	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	121	293
Road length per 100 sq.kms. (1996/97)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	44	70
Rural HH with no Kerb o/ (%)*	81	80	77	74	83	82	83	80	69	72
Rural HH without specified assets (%)	63	37	46	36	47	31	53	50	56	41

Source: "Development Challenges in Extremist Affected Areas", Report of an Expert Committee to the Planning Commission, April 2008.

Socio-Economic Factors

There appears to be a strong and direct correlation between economic deprivation (basically poverty and unemployment) and growth in the influence of LWE. Land reforms remain a neglected area and feudalistic exploitation continues. Instead of sharing the benefits of economic growth, the poor classes have borne the brunt of economic development for the already better off classes. Lack of employment opportunities for the youth due to lack of development schemes enabled Naxal groups to recruit more and more people. **Table 2** depicts the level of poverty in different states.

Table-2: Variations in Poverty levels in India – State wise (as % of population)



Source: Poverty Estimates for 2004-2005, Planning Commission, March 2007, http://planningcommission.nic.in/news/prmar07.pdf

It is clearly seen that the poverty levels in the Naxal affected states of Orissa, Bihar, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand are much higher (with more than 40 percent of the population living below the poverty line), than in rest of India.

Another crucial factor has been the ***political marginalisation of the backward classes.*** The pace of political reforms to ensure participatory democracy in India has been very

slow. On the other hand, the system proposed and followed by the extremists appears to be the most participatory. It attracts the common man towards their ideology where everyone has a say and a role to play. The extremist groups are able to convince people that peaceful methods of resistance would not give the desired result because vested interests will never give up their power and control ; thus there is no option to the armed struggle against state authority.

The above mentioned factors have remained in place for decades, but there are other factors responsible for the sustenance and expansion of LWE in India. The Naxals have capitalised on every defect present in the prevalent system and lose no opportunity to malign it. They have remained relevant in the situation of continued socio-economic and political wrongdoings of an inefficient and corrupt governance. It is easy to understand ***the ideological appeal*** of the Maoists, propogating the fall of imperialism and rise of peasantry, with the ultimate collapse of economic capitalism.

One should also not under estimate the ***Organisational Strength of the Extremist Groups:*** A cadre based organizational set-up, a disciplined military which plans in detail all operations and their understanding of the micro socio-economic situation in the various regions of India makes the extremists a formidable rival which can implement its strategies effectively. The movement has been able to sustain many ups and downs, and is growing in both area and population coverage only because of the commitment and dedication of the members to their cause and unity among the LWE groups despite differences.

An important reason for sustained power of LWE is their various funding sources ranging from contributions (taxes and levies), looting of govt treasuries and banks, extortion from businessmen, political leaders, rich landlords, government officials and professionals. It has been estimated that they are able to collect approx. Rs.1,000 crore a year[3]. The Naxals monopolize control over forest produce and government contracts in their areas of dominance. They receive a substantial share of all development funding flowing into these areas[4]. All government contracted construction works, auctions, coal and mineral mining companies, illegal mining activities, road contractors, and other industries in these areas come under their extortion network. The business of Tendu leaves and its labour supply is completely under the control of Naxalites. In addition, the Naxalites also control illegal economic activity, especially harvesting and smuggling of forest produce.

The funds are utilised in various ways. Huge amounts of money are spent on arming the organisation with intelligence and sophisticated arms and ammunition [5]. A small proportion, roughly an estimated 5 per cent of the annual earnings of the extremist groups, goes into financing development activities in their pockets of influence. These could be in the form of laying roads, minor irrigation projects and running mobile hospitals in remote parts of the country. Efforts are also made to diversify and improve agricultural production. A serious fallout is the inclusion of Mafia gangs in some districts of Bihar and other states which have joined the Naxal groups just for the sake of the money that is involved.

An important reason for the continued growth of this movement is that this movement has been providing economic and social security to erstwhile unemployed youth. Apart from economic security, it gives them a sense of empowerment and dignity. Joining a Naxalite group saves the recruit and his family from harassment from both the government officials and the Naxalites. Thus there is a continuous flow of new recruits, (educated urban and rural youth), to the Naxal fold, especially in the absence of government sponsored employment schemes.

It is also to be noted that there is no clear strategy of the state or Central government to deal with this growing problem, much less counter it. This has resulted in divergent approaches being adopted by different states and the central government, and their efforts remain largely uncoordinated. The impression conveyed is that the state is confused about devising ways and means to react to the multi-dimensional challenge posed by LWE. State action is also constrained by geographical and political limitations. Further complicating this is the lack of coordination between the police forces and intelligence; this obviously works in favour of the Naxalites.

The state police forces in the affected states are ill-equipped and ill-trained to successfully combat the serious threat posed by the Naxalites. To add to it, the Naxal affected states have the most adverse population-police personnel ratio which varies from Bihar 57, Jharkhand 98, Chhattisgarh 131, Orissa 99 and Andhra Pradesh 98 per 1,00,000 population, which is much lower than even peace-time requirements (the UN recommendation is 222 per 1 lakh population).

Since the causes for evolution and sustenance of LWE are being continually strengthened due to state lapses, the situation is turning critical. Even so, political myopia and bureaucratic inertia continue as always, increasing the intensity of this problem and helping it to grow.

SECTION III: Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no dearth of policies, strategies or fund allocations to deal with LWE effectively. However, a skillful implementation of the same remains a distant dream. The primary responsibility of the state is to provide security of life and property and provide a secure environment for economic development in the areas which have been deeply affected by the Naxalite violence. We have already crossed the stages of dialogue and negotiation. The only alternative left is the use of force as in these areas, extremism has reached a stage where it has acquired a self sustaining dynamism of its own, which can only be forcibly disrupted. A multi pronged strategy will have to be worked out to deal with different levels and intensities of the LWE problem in different districts of the country. Development initiatives by a team of dedicated task force of bureaucrats will be required to deal with this problem effectively. Monetary incentives and promotions should be given to such officers who are willing to take the risk, and go beyond the call of duty in a positive manner to deal with this problem. On the security and strategy front, coordination and cooperation among the states and the Centre and among the police and security forces is the need of the hour.

The affected states also need to enhance their capabilities to counter the problem. Counter-insurgency and jungle warfare training centres need to be set up to strengthen the confidence, skills, morale and operational efficiency of the state police forces. Besides, the technological up gradation of the forces that are involved in anti-Naxalite operations is a must. The forces must be equipped with the latest weapons, equipment and devices.

Within the Armed Forces, there is clear thinking that Army should not get involved in anti-Naxal operations. However, a non-combat role for the army could be envisaged in imparting training, providing logistic support, medical services and technical equipment and expertise to the paramilitary forces that are deployed in Naxal affected areas.

The central and state governments should consistently monitor development schemes aimed at removing poverty and unemployment in these areas. The government needs to seriously undertake land reforms and ensure that the socially and economically backward sections of the society are brought into the mainstream of development. Nothing can replace a committed and pro-active governance.

The Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, PESA Panchayats (Extension To Scheduled Areas) Act 1996, the Pradhan Mantri Gram

Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and the National Rehabilitation and Resettlement Policy 2007 are some steps that have been recently taken by the government on the developmental front. All these need consistent monitoring and implementation.

There is obviously no immediate solution to the Naxal problem. It will take many years before we witness normalization in the affected areas. In the meantime, the first priority should be to contain Maoist expansion and re-enforce law in the affected states. Assured peace & security in the affected regions is a pre-requisite for economic development to take place. The maintenance of law and order is the responsibility of the state and towards this end, the government machinery has to be thoroughly professional, accountable and above all, proactive.

By 2015, LWEs are showing increasing military expertise in the way they conduct their operations. They have stated their objective to overthrow the Indian democratic system by 2050. The fifty years of struggle has made some factions turn towards politics, but mostly it has resulted in a vicious cycle of distrust and attacks. Breaking this cycle is of utmost importance if a mutually acceptable solution has to be reached.

The present Home Minister is not in favour of revealing the strategy to be adopted in dealing with the problem. However, he stated that Infrastructure development is the key to this deadlock in the Red Corridor.[6] "They live in our country but worlds separate them from us". All they want is living in the same world in which we live. Everything else above that is a result of politics and personal ambitions.

END NOTES

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