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Left Wing Extremism in Chhattisgarh: A Thorn in India's Side

The Indian state of Chhattisgarh witnessed one of its largest attacks on Indian soldiers by the Maoists in recent years. This has once again raised the question of a viable long-term solution to the issue of left wing extremism in India.

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Introduction

On 24 April 2017, 25 soldiers of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) were killed and six were injured in a Maoist ambush at Burkapal in Sukma district in the Indian state of Chhattisgarh.² This is the fourth largest attack on the soldiers in last six years. The largest was in April 2010 when 76 CRPF personnel were killed at Tadmetla in Chhattisgarh.³ According to the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs, between 2010 and 2015 (up to 31

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² <http://www.firstpost.com/india/sukma-naxal-attack-multiple-intelligence-sop-failures-led-to-massacre-that-killed-25-crpf-jawans-3402502.html>

³ Ibid.

December 2015) around 2,162 civilians and 802 security force personnel have been killed in different parts of India.⁴

History of Left Wing Extremism in India

The Maoists, also known as Naxalites or Left Wing Extremists in India, have been active in the country since 1960s. Ideologically, the Left Wing extremism in India is the result of peasant uprising in the Naxalbari village in West Bengal in 1967. The main demand of the protestors was an equitable distribution of land between farmers and their landlords. The uprising was headed by Charu Mazumdar and Kanu Sanyal. It attracted a large number of university students and middle-class intellectuals. In 1969, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) was formed to lead the movement. By 1975, due to internal factions and police actions against them, the revolutionary movement was almost decimated. The Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), a party formed to carry out the spirit of Naxalbari movement, adopted democratic path and popular means to raise their voices.⁵ However, deep-rooted social inequality in India saved the insurgency from its certain death. By 1980s, the Left Wing Extremism resurrected and spread itself across the other states of India. People's War Group and Maoist Communist Centre emerged as two leading left extremist groups engaged in armed struggle against the Indian state. In 2004, the People's War Group and Maoist Communist Centre merged to form Communist Party of India (Maoist). Earlier, in an attempt to spread Maoism in South Asia, nine different outfits active in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and India, came together to set up the Coordination Committee of Maoist Parties and Organizations.⁶

At present, 156 districts of 13 states across India are affected by the Maoist insurgency. One of the state where they are most active is Chhattisgarh in central India. This state has large natural resources and inhabited by a large number of tribal groups. To meet the Naxalite's challenge, *Salwa Judum* (Peace March in Gond⁷ Language) was set up in 2006 and Special

⁴ Left Wing Extremism retrieved from http://mha.nic.in/naxal_new. Accessed on 26 April 2017.

⁵ Since its entry into democratic politics the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) has been condemning the attacks carried out by the Maoist insurgents. On Sukma attack see its official statement at <https://cpiml.org/press-statements/cpiml-statement-on-maoist-attack-in-sukma>

⁶ Biswas, Bidisha (2014) *Managing Conflicts in India: Policies of Coercion and Accommodation*. Lanham, USA: Lexington Books.

⁷ This is spoken by a large number of tribal groups mainly in Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand states of India.

Police Officers units were created by the state government. The members of these groups were drawn from the tribal groups and were supplied with arms by the state to fight an arms battle against the Maoist group. This has led to killing of many innocent people, rapes and utter violation of human rights.⁸ The legitimacy of such groups and their acts were legally challenged in the Supreme Court of India. In July 2011, the Supreme Court ruled that the Indian state's use of *Salwa Judum* and Special Police Officers to fight the Naxalites was illegal. Later, in 2009, 'Operation Green Hunt' was launched by the Indian government to fight against the Maoists insurgency in India. The Communist Party of India (Maoist) and other Left Wing Extremist organisations were included in the schedule of terrorist organizations under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act 1967.⁹

Development versus Human Rights Debate

It is being maintained by the union and state governments that the Maoists are against the development of the region of their operations. They are accused of keeping the region underdeveloped and people poor so that they can use them for their ideological purposes. This is being evident by the attacks carried out by Maoists outfits on the delivery systems and development works to create hurdles in the governance of the region.¹⁰ Some security analysts allege that the group works on behest of a foreign country to de-stabilise India. The suspicion is based on the fact that, for years since its formation, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) had been guided by political developments in China. For example, in 1972, a split took place in the party between pro- and anti-Lin Biao¹¹ factions, although there were policy-related political issues which created factions among the leadership. The pro-group was under Mahadev Mukherjee while the anti-group was led by Jauhar, Vinod Mishra, and Swadesh Bhattacharya.

The Maoist insurgents are mainly active in the regions dominated by poor, tribal groups and the weaker sections of society. In resource rich tribal land, people are aggrieved that their

⁸ Biswas, Bidisha (2014) *Managing Conflicts in India: Policies of Coercion and Accommodation*. Lanham, USA: Lexington Books.

⁹ Left Wing Extremism Retrieved from http://mha.nic.in/naxal_new. Accessed on 26 April 2017.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Lin Biao was a Chinese political leader. Once regarded a close confidant of Mao Tse-tung, he later developed deep differences with Mao.

resources are being used by corporate houses and the state for the benefit of ‘outsiders’. The security forces operating in those regions have been accused of carrying out extra-judicial killings, illegal arrests of people and rapes.¹² There have been instances when public intellectuals raising such issues have been slapped with police cases against them. For example, in 2016, Professor Nandini Sundar, author of *Burning Forests: India’s War in Bastar*, and 10 others were booked for the murder of an anti-Maoist vigilant group member, Shanta Baghel. The First Information Report, as claimed by the police, against Sundar and the others, was filed on the complaint of Shanta Baghel’s wife, Vimla Baghel. However, later in an interview to an Indian television channel, Vimla Baghel said that the Maoists killed her husband and she did not provide Sundar’s or any other name to the police in her complaint.¹³ A few others like social activist Bela Bhatia are being threatened with dire consequences if they do not leave the state.¹⁴

Theoretically, the Maoist insurgency can be explained from the viewpoint of the grievances of the people and greed of multiple actors. Such grievances exist due to socio-economic inequality, relative deprivation and a feeling of being exploited for the benefit of others. The greed of multiple actors is due to political and economic benefits that they reap from the ongoing insurgency.

Conclusion

In 2009, mentioning Maoist insurgency in India, then-Indian Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, labelled it the “gravest internal security threat”.¹⁵ It is also a complicated threat because the insurgents are citizens of India. Therefore, the Indian state cannot afford to use its coercive means indiscriminately and for a long period of time against these insurgents. Permanent peace is only possible through dialogue and democratic engagement between the actors.

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¹² See <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/maoists-say-sukma-attacks-in-retaliation-to-sexual-violence-on-tribal-women/article18259734.ece?homepage=true>

¹³ <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/never-named-anyone-says-wife-of-murdered-tribal-on-professor-nandini-sundar-1624206>

¹⁴ <https://thewire.in/102194/bela-bhatia-attack-bastar-chhattisgarh/>

¹⁵ <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/10/08/india.police.shootout/>