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Socio-Economic Roots of Maoism post-1980

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‘More than Maoism: Rural Dislocation in South Asia’ is an ISAS research theme focusing on socio-economic, political and security dimensions of “Maoist movements” in South Asia. The institute conducted a closed-door workshop on the research theme, and the presentations are being put together as a series of ISAS Insights and ISAS Working Papers. This is the first paper in this series.

Abstract

Economic and political factors have alienated populations in tribal areas and given a fillip to the Maoist insurgency. They include inefficient and corrupt governance, skewed economic growth and heavy handedness of the state. The genesis of the movement can be traced to two developments in the 1980s. The first was the setting up of public sector units in tribal areas; the second, the Forest Act of 1980. The two developments alienated large sections of the tribal population.

With heightened concerns about security and terrorism, there has been an active debate about the measures required to combat it. Faced with insurgency in the north-east, militant Maoists in several states and the blasts in public places, India’s state governments have been rethinking the security paradigm and redefining the roles of different agencies and institutions. Several states have passed anti-terrorist laws that provide for preventive custody. Recently, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India, Justice K.G. Balakrishnan, has warned the country about the dangers of lawmakers in several states introducing such

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legislation and using it in a high-handed manner. There have been instances where these laws have been used against those who have opposed industrialisation programmes of the state by highlighting the interests of the poor. There have also been instances, much debated in the media, about arrests on flimsy grounds of waging war against the state. The approach of picking up people for questioning, holding them without charges and bringing the cases to trial constitutes a major violation of human rights. Media and intellectuals have repeatedly been highlighting these issues before the public, yet the jails are full of inmates that have been held on flimsy evidence and have spent years without being charged. With increasing security concerns, the public is merely told that a suspect has been picked up and little is heard of the trial or conviction. That these laws are used to settle political scores and that they invariably work against the interests of the poor; has been established again and again in specific instances covered by media. There is adequate evidence that the population of these tribal areas feels that economic development has marginalised their livelihood patterns.

Two important developments took place in the eighties that could have some relevance to the increased alienation of the tribal populations from the mainstream of development. When Prime Minister Indira Gandhi came back to power in 1980, the country was facing severe shortages in power generation and infrastructure. Existing power stations were not getting adequate coal and the shortages were quite severe in northern India and Punjab. The new Government decided to invest heavily in opening up new coal mines and establishing power stations based on coal. The activity was taken up entirely in the public sector, with Coal India, the National Thermal Power Corporations, and other governmental agencies nominated as executing agencies. The large-scale mining operations taken up during 1980-84 involved the resettlement and rehabilitation of millions of people in Chattisgarh, Jharkhand (then Bihar), Madhya Pradesh and southern Uttar Pradesh. The Singarauli and PENCH coal fields were opened up during that time along with the Talcher and IB Valley fields in Orissa. Close to a hundred million tonnes of coal per annum was targetted from these fields and there was a frenetic pace of project execution. These were also the places in which there was a density of tribal population – economically marginalised people who, depending on traditional activities, were dislodged from their centuries-old traditions and moved from mine sites. This was perhaps the largest movement of the impoverished that development programmes of the Government had mandated and the signs of resentment can well be traced back to this period.

A second development that took place was the enactment of the Forest Act in 1980. This legislation was an attempt to protect flora from being exploited in the name of projects and commerce. The Forest Act followed the Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972, which attempted to protect biodiversity in the country. This was also the time when the proposed Silent Valley project in Kerala was being criticised for damaging eco-diversity, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) was still influential, and suddenly the importance of nature had dawned on everyone. The 1980 Forest Act was, in some senses, a strong piece of legislation; it gave enormous powers to the forest officials to prevent encroachments, and indeed, habitations within declared forest areas. As areas were delineated as reserve forests, traditional

occupations of even gathering twigs ('lops and tops' in the forester's language) was forbidden. People who earned their livelihood through access to forest resources in a sustainable manner suddenly found themselves outside the law. Further, this Act did not distinguish between habitations that existed within the forests for generations; the habitants suddenly found themselves to be encroachers on their own traditional land. For the Forest Department, it was inconceivable to allow tenancy rights within the reserve forests after the 1980 Act. This has perhaps been a major contributor to the disenchantment of the tribal populations living in forests with the entire development process. At the same time, encroachments on the fringes continued, with the rich and powerful eating into forest areas on expanding plantations. It was only in 2008, nearly three decades after the damage of the 1980 Act, that a revised legislation – one that recognised traditional dwellers' rights within forest areas – was enacted. This legislation, though somewhat flawed, sought to provide some protection for traditional dwellers and their rights.

It is argued by those working with indigenous people in Jharkhand, Orissa and Chattisgarh that want of resources – due to a lack of access to traditional means of livelihood and total neglect by the state – has been at the bottom of the total disenchantment of the people of this region. This is perhaps the reason for the growing lawlessness in these regions.

In short, the public appears to be alienated from the state in the maintenance of law and order; and views state agencies as enemies and not as allies. There is considerable evidence that this has led to the rise of local strong men that administer peace in their domain. The larger manifestation is the Maoists; where the Maoists operate, they are the law and not the state. At the same time, it is important that the state exercises administrative control and steps are being taken now to bring the rule of law into these disturbed areas is a step in the right direction. However, development must follow immediately. It is necessary that state governments quickly plan programmes that will be directed towards the economic improvement of these areas to prevent the people from slipping back into anarchy. The good news is that we have encountered such situations in the past and have some experience in dealing with them.

State agencies, on the other hand, plead institutional helplessness. The law breakers are often better armed and trained; they have political access and support, and the legal system poses innumerable hurdles to speedy conclusion of trials. Most importantly, the law enforcement agencies no longer command the respect and affection of the people. Therefore, the state is no longer privy to information or intelligence, and hence unable to come to grips with crime or terrorism. The only way they can enforce obedience is through 'state terror' – picking up suspects, holding them under draconian laws, lumping the innocent and the guilty together, and ensuring that things do not get out of hand. Little do they realise that this further alienates the public.

The recent encounters at Lalgarh in West Bengal, seen so vividly on television, are a stark reminder of the problems that are being faced in several states. From the media, it appears as though the writ of the state does not run in a large number of districts and that there is a willing and ready supply of fighters for the rebel cause. This is indeed worrying.

Several questions arise. How do the Maoist extremists sustain themselves – who gives them money and arms? Secondly, where do they get their rhetoric and ideology from, for they all appear to be rural peasants of fairly limited educational attainments? And thirdly, what do they really want – what are their demands and aspirations?

Answers to these questions are not easy to find, nor are they satisfying. Recent aerial photography of areas where the Maoists have their pockets of influence has shown a substantial increase in the cultivation of poppy. No factories that process opium have yet been found, but this is a small garage venture, and it is possible that opium in its raw form constitutes a stable source of revenue. Of course, this also means that they have access to trade channels that are entrenched in drug trafficking, though this may not be their only source of funds. It is also clear that they have access to those who supply arms, and that the intelligence of the state has not been able to bring any of these suppliers to book. The famous air dropping of arms case in Purulia comes to mind, but we know very little about the threads that it led to. There is also evidence of extortion and forced collection of revenue from the peasants which would be yet another source of funds. In terms of ideology, the answers are somewhat easier – there are a number of intellectuals, including academics and teachers, who have espoused their cause. Dr Binayak Sen², who was held by the police for a long time, suspect to espousing this radical cause, is an example; and there are many others, notably from Andhra Pradesh. It is interesting that this state, which has brought forth so many entrepreneurs in the last decade, is one where the differences between the rich and the poor; the urban and the rural; and the feudal nature of the society, make it a natural breeding ground for dissent against the prevalent structure of the society.

The third question, even more difficult to answer, is what exactly do that they want. Earlier peasant movements including the Naxalbari movement of the sixties sought to overthrow landlords and restore the tiller's rights to lands and the produce. Today, ownership of land is no longer the sure way to wealth and prosperity, not even of sustained livelihood. It is also clear that the form of governance practised in Maoist-held areas is largely focused on redistribution of agricultural land and solving of village level disputes through an ad hoc judgment mechanism. What is next and what they really want are questions difficult to answer. In Nepal, after the Maoists had won their armed struggle against the monarchy, they were content to mainstream their activities through the democratic system. If this is the aspiration in India, the solutions are not difficult. But, if like the Liberation Tigers of Tamil

² Dr Binayak Sen, the national vice-president of the Peoples' Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) in India, was arrested in May 2007. He was granted bail by the Supreme Court in May 2009.

Eelam (LTTE), the attempt is to destabilise the state and to bleed it endlessly, then there is no solution to the problem other than to engage them.

If we add to the above the concerns of deteriorating law and order in the major cities and the increase in crime and accidents, there is a fear that matters are slipping out of control. These threats manifest internally, with some overtones of external influences, are likely to hinder development, growth and stability.

There is still the threat of external terrorism that seeks to inculcate its ideology into the misguided youth in India. This can be handled only through better intelligence and preparedness. State police and intelligence agencies need to be better armed and protected, intelligence gathering should be digital not person-dependant, and greater surveillance over borders and coasts is necessary. This needs to be done quickly so that an effective deterrent internal security force is available. The introduction of the National Identity Card will help, and this programme should be implemented quickly, ensuring that infiltrators are properly screened before the cards are given out.

Finally, there is the issue of governance, especially in the urban areas. The average citizen has little faith in the police or the law and order machinery, and media continue to highlight the failings of the state. Unless citizens have confidence in the authorities, they will not trust them. The first step towards building trust is to establish an effective grievance redressal mechanism. If those who govern are seen as oppressors that have to be appeased or fought, there is little hope for security or peace.

Why have we come to this? Thirty years ago, a Collector in a crime-prone district used to get information about every crime committed the same day, and the name of the perpetrator within 48 hours. It was not an intelligence system that was operating – just a fair administrative system that ensured that grievances were given due attention. In return, the villages cooperated and felt that they were part of the state. The important lesson was that the state was their friend and ally.

The state and its institutions are in decay, notwithstanding the rising Sensex and the mighty conclaves of the government and the rich. They are in decay because the institutions that deal with the public have become exploitative and whimsical – seeking to deal with all dissent with a heavy hand and meting out unfair laws to a mute populace.

There is also the worry that politicians are using Maoists as a vote bank with whom electoral or commercial adjustments can be made. They are even prepared to take a soft line with the Maoists. 'For a significant proportion of our politicians, democracy is just a career path, a

road to power and affluence.’³ If the Maoists are able to command a proportion of votes that would get them elected, then they become a legitimate constituency.

For long-term growth and stability, institutional and governance issues are very important to address concerns of internal security.

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³ See K. Subrahmanyam, *Business Standard* (9 May 2010), ‘The dangers of playing footsie with Maoists’, <http://www.business-standard.com/india/news/k-subrahmanyamdangersplaying-footsiemaoists/394207/>.