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Media and Maoism

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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 second paper in this series.

Abstract

This insight surveys transformations in the Indian media, print and electronic over the last few decades, and examines their significance for coverage of the Maoist movement. Print and electronic media have grown immensely in the past 20 years and there are numerous other outlets, such as the internet, for both the Maoists and the government to present their versions of events. Some media have been accused of being sympathetic to the Maoists. It remains to be seen how Indian media will balance freedom with responsibility and what impact newer sources of technology, such as the mobile phone, will have on the coverage of Maoism.

The ‘Maoist insurgency’ comes at a time when India lives in a totally new media environment. Every group in this drama struggles with these new conditions and seeks to use them to achieve its aims.

Such attempts to ‘make the media work for you’ were illustrated in Arundhati Roy’s vivid account, in the *Outlook*, of days spent with Maoist-led tribals in the forests of Chhattisgarh.²

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Maoist leaders calculated that giving someone of Roy's global reputation and firsthand experience of their activities would help their cause. Few other writers appear to have had similar access (see, Gautam Navlakha's piece in the *Economic and Political Weekly*).³ On Roy's part, she would have had to weigh up the extent to which she was being used. Was there a hope on the Maoist side of her becoming a 21st century Edgar Snow and writing a *Red Star over India?* (Snow's *Red Star over China*, published in 1937, brought Mao Tse-tung to world attention).⁴ Indeed, Roy's long sympathetic piece generated a surprising number of supportive responses from *Outlook* readers, as well as predictable calls for her prosecution as a traitor working for India's enemies.

How new is the media environment in which the Maoist insurgency unfolds? Comparisons with earlier crises of the Indian state make clear how much things have changed. At the time of the Telengana insurgency of 1948-52, India produced 2.5 million newspapers for a population of 360 million (111 people to a daily newspaper). There was no television; the two dozen radio stations were government-run and tightly controlled; and telephones and radios were rare.

In 1968-74, when 'Naxalites' challenged governments in West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and elsewhere, television was almost non-existent and, like radio, controlled by timid bureaucrats and politicians. Newspapers sold nine million a day for a population of 550 million (60 people to a daily newspaper), and India had one million telephones.

In 1984, when the Indian army battled Khalistan insurgents at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the only television was the government's Doordarshan which broadcast pictures of the temple only days later. The contrast with the live and out-of-control coverage of the Mumbai terrorist attack of 26 November 2008 could not be more striking.

Even at the time of the Kargil war of 1999 – India's 'first television war' – commercial television was just beginning to escape from various government controls and there were perhaps 30 million homes with televisions. Newspapers sold 58 million copies a day for a population of 1,000 million (17 people to a daily newspaper) and telephones had pushed beyond 20 million. These changing conditions meant that military authorities had to look for different ways dealing with media than they had deployed during earlier war experiences in 1962, 1965 and 1971.

In 2010, another new medium has spread throughout India: 580 million cell phones. Every owner of a cell phone is a potential photographer, film maker, radio listener and librarian of audio recordings. India also has close to 130 million television households, which means

² Arundhati Roy, 'Walking with the Comrades', *Outlook* (29 March 2010), pp.24-59.

³ Gautam Navlakha, 'Days and Nights in the Maoist Heartland,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 45, No.16 (17 April 2010), pp.38-47.

⁴ Edgar Snow (1937), '*Red Star Over China*', (London: Victor Gollancz).

more than half the country sleeps each night in a place with a television set. India has more than 50 television news channels, many of them plugging particular lines, which are not necessarily those of governments. India publishes 100 million newspapers a day for 1,150 million people (11 people to a daily newspaper). Up to 15 per cent of the population have access to the web.

This media environment enables ordinary people to tell their stories – and hear the stories of others – as never before. Fierce competition among scores of owners of media outlets drives these changes. The businesses and organisations include the biggest newspaper and telecom companies of Mumbai and New Delhi. At the other end of the invisible threads of communication are hundreds of millions of cell phone users, television viewers and newspaper readers.

Both Maoist ideologues and governments struggle to devise ways of telling their stories through these varied media. One of the ‘marketing’ issues in this environment is the very name of the insurgent movement itself. The term ‘Maoist’ suits both sides. The communist party mergers of 2004 agreed on Communist Party of India (Maoist) as the name for the new consolidated group. Why did they do that when a good Indian label, ‘Naxalite’, was available? ‘Maoist’ provides a vision for the oppressed people whom the ideologues seek to recruit: a brave hero Chairman Mao led struggling peasants for years before encircling the cities, capturing power and creating the modern Chinese giant (and inspiring a successful revolution in neighbouring Nepal). It is a communicator’s dream: a rousing (and selective) story told in 25 words or less.

From the standpoint of India’s ‘patriotic’ media that aim to paint the insurgents as traitors, “Maoist” also works. The word suggests something un-Indian and foreign – Chinese. Sinister and scary, it echoes with the humiliation of the 1962 war.

The opposing sides experiment with ways of influencing India’s publics. One example was the access the Maoists were prepared to give Arundhati Roy. Another is the written question-and-answer exercise that a Maoist spokesperson undertook for the *Hindu*.⁵

On the government side, state media outlets seem to be presenting more varied opinion than would once have been the case. There appears to be realisation that slow, dreary, unconvincing reporting and tried-and-true spokespersons do little to engage or convince audiences. Recent panels on Doordarshan, on the other hand, have featured a variety of analysts and opinions in ways that would once have been too controversial for government media-minders to have tolerated. Indian governments appear to be reflecting on the most effective ways of ‘manufacturing consent’.

⁵ *Hindu* (14 April 2010), ‘Edited text of 12,262-word response by Azad, Spokesperson, Central Committee, CPI (Maoist)’, <http://beta.thehindu.com/news/resources/article396694.ece>.

Governments also seek ways to control trigger-happy commercial media, particularly since the terror attack on Mumbai in November 2008. Commercial television at that time groped for standards: how does a medium dedicated to the fast break deal responsibly with a terrorist attack on a global icon like the Taj Hotel? As it was, live feeds helped the terrorists. And in 2010, such evidence of ‘media irresponsibility’ strengthens the hands of those who want to put tighter bonds on all Indian media in the name of national security.

YouTube videos promote causes and provide material for security forces and insurgents to study. Both sides’ video ambushes and devastation – to analyse and learn and to use as propaganda. A policeman shows Arundhati Roy a Powerpoint presentation of Maoist carnage – mutilated, burned police and blown-up schools. Gory photographs are mailed on compact disks to Members of Parliament. Intercepts of radio messages get recorded and used either for their intelligence or propaganda value. Roy tells of Maoists recording a police message instructing officers to shoot journalists who want to cover Maoist activity. The recording, when disseminated, makes media fodder for the Maoists – and no doubt gives journalists in remote towns even greater reason for caution. The dangers of being a small-town journalist in Bihar, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand are well known. ‘I earn around Rs 5,000 every month by not writing,’ a reporter with a Hindi daily in Chhattisgarh told Shubhranshu Choudhary to explain the perils of the profession. ‘Journalism here is the art of *not* writing.’

The bloodshed in remote India plays out in front of urban, middle-class India. This instant, mediated guerrilla war is something Mao and Ho Chi Minh did not contend with, though one can see parallels with the awakening of the United States public opinion, through television, to the horror of the Vietnam War. Governments and insurgents will calculate how much exposure to destruction and violence helps their cause. What sorts of media provide the most effective outlet for telling their versions? And how does one determine the effects of particular kinds of media on ‘the public’, on security forces, insurgent cadres and the outside world?

Analysts will watch how governments and insurgents develop media policies. Governments will struggle to control media yet keep media credible and timely, because without prompt credibility, media lose the power to persuade. Indian media, under scrutiny for irresponsible television coverage of breaking events and for ‘pay for coverage’ scandals in newspapers, need to find ways to police themselves – or face ham-handed but constricting attempts by government to control them. And where does the New Equaliser, the mobile phone, fit into this equation? Is it a crucial device for mitigating – or promoting – insurgency? Media will not decide how this insurgency ends; but they will profoundly influence the unfolding.

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