

MAOISTS ARE MAKING A COMEBACK IN TELANGANA

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The Kumuram Bheem Asifabad district police keep ration bags to be distributed among the Kolam tribe people of Pangri habitation in Tiryani mandal. | Photo Credit: [S. Harpal Singh](#)

On July 14, the sound of gunshots sliced through the calm night of Tokkiguda, a hamlet of just nine huts of the Gond Adivasis. The [exchange of fire](#) took place between a small squad of three Maoists and a special party of the Telangana Police who were on their trail. Jumping into the thick vegetation of the adjoining valley, the Maoists managed to escape under the cover of darkness.

It was after a long day of conducting search operations in the hamlets, which fall under the Mangi Gram Panchayat of Tiryani mandal in Kumuram Bheem Asifabad district, that the police had reached Tokkiguda at about 10.30 p.m. They had knocked on the door of the house of the village headman, Kova Ananth Rao, to inform him of their presence.

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“The police were surprised to see three armed Maoists escaping through the rear exit of the hut into the darkness,” recalled a police officer. “The Maoists fired a couple of shots at the police while fleeing and the police fired back.”

Around 9 a.m. the next day, [another exchange of fire](#) took place between armed Maoists and the police in the dense forest of Mallepallithogu in Karkagudem mandal of Bhadradri-Kothagudem district, some 70 km from Bhadrachalam town. About a dozen Maoists again escaped, taking advantage of the torrential downpour that day. However, their lying up position (the spot where they held regular meetings in the forests) was discovered by the police.

“The extremists will take a lot of time to recover from this loss,” said Bhadradri-Kothagudem Superintendent of Police Sunil Dutt on the discovery of the lying up position. “We recovered 10 kit bags and other material from the spot which is close to the border with Sukma in Chhattisgarh.”

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Both the incidents occurred about five months after the Communist Party of India (Maoist) began fresh attempts to revitalise the organisation in parts of Telangana from where it had retreated over a decade ago. According to senior police officers in the State, the Maoists are determined to prove their relevance in the region. Sources said Maoist leaders operating in the Dandakaranya forests are under tremendous pressure to prove their mettle on their home turf in Telangana where socio-economic and political conditions have changed drastically over the last few years.

It was in 2018 that the [CPI \(Maoist\) replaced Muppala Lakshman Rao alias Ganapathi](#) with [Nambala Keshava Rao alias Basavaraj](#) as General Secretary of the organisation's Central Committee. Basavaraj brought in a few organisational and operational changes: he reconstituted the Telangana State Committee and a dozen Area Committees and entrusted them with the task of reconsolidating their position in rural areas.

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The recast State Committee is headed by Central Committee member Pulluri Prasad Rao. Haribhushan alias Jagan has been nominated as Secretary and spokesperson. The other members are Bandi Prakash alias Prabhat, Bade Chokka Rao alias Damodar, Mylarapu Adellu alias Bhaskar, Sambaiah, and Kankanala Raji Reddy, according to the police.

Sources said that the Maoists have been barred by the leadership from carrying out violent activities in Telangana lest they attract the attention of the security forces. So far, they have restricted themselves to reviving links with old contacts and recruiting rural youth in areas where they are present, barring Khammam district before it was bifurcated into Bhadradri-Kothagudem and Khammam.

All activities of the underground outfit are concentrated in the forest areas in the eastern side of the State comprising the former undivided districts of Adilabad, Karimnagar, Warangal and Khammam. These areas border the left-wing extremism-affected areas in what is popularly known as Dandakaranya comprising Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district and parts of Chandrapur district, as well as parts of Chhattisgarh.

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The re-organisation efforts have been in the works for a while following the many blows to the outfit over a decade ago. By 2007, following a clampdown on Maoist activity after the re-imposition of a ban on the CPI (Maoist) and other splinter extremist organisations across united Andhra Pradesh, violent activities began to decline in the districts of Adilabad, Karimnagar and Warangal. However, Khammam, with its lush forests and proximity to Chhattisgarh, gave tactical advantage to the Maoists and had become a hotbed of Maoist activity. Out of a total of 41 murders by Maoists recorded between 2007 and 2013, 33 were in Khammam alone. Ten more killings were recorded between 2014 and 2019 besides 24 incidents of exchanges of fire. Adilabad remained largely peaceful during the entire period reporting just one murder (of Athram Ballar Sha, a Gond tribal from Khaireguda of Tiryani mandal in the present district of Kumuram Bheem Asifabad, in October 2015).

Among the north Telangana districts, the former undivided district of Adilabad occupied a special status in the history of left-wing extremism in the country. It was in Adilabad that the Maoists, then known as the CPI (Marxist-Leninist) People's War Group, had, for the first time in the history of left-wing extremism, ambushed a police party in the forest of Allampalli in present-day Kadem mandal of Nirmal district in August 1987. Ten policemen, including two Sub-Inspectors, were killed. The extremists also carried out a landmine blast in Singapur in the same mandal in February 1988 killing seven policemen, including one Sub-Inspector. As many as 65 policemen including one Inspector, one jailor, and seven Sub-Inspectors were killed during the extremist movement in undivided Adilabad. The movement too suffered great losses in the district from 1980: 138 leaders and cadres were killed in 'encounters', including top Maoists such as [Central Committee member Cherukuri Rajkumar alias Azad](#), who was killed in the Sarkepalli forests of Wankidi mandal in Kumuram Bheem Asifabad district on July 2, 2010; and 381 cadres and commanders surrendered.

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But the dense forests in this area offer safety for those on the run. This is perhaps why the Maoists are trying to make it more conducive for their cadres to operate now.

It was in February-March 2020 that Maoist dalams or squads are assumed to have crossed over

into Telangana through rivers and forests. They came into the districts of Kumuram Bheem Asifabad, Mancherial, Peddapalli, Jayashankar-Bhupalpally, Mahabubabad, Mulugu and Bhadradi-Kothagudem. Sources in the intelligence department said this movement of armed Maoists into Telangana is very large in terms of the area they are mandated by their leadership to “regain” by earning the support of the Adivasis.

On being alerted about the movement of the Maoists, the police launched operations to flush them out of the forests and prevent violence. “We haven’t succeeded so far but we are determined to push the extremists back to where they came from or get them to surrender to the authorities,” a source in the police said.

Some retired police officers, veterans from the anti-Naxal campaign before 2007, attributed the difficulty in tracking down the extremists to the lack of knowledge of the terrain among the new officers. They also pointed out that the informer network remains weak. If it is strengthened, that would make a big difference, they said.

After reviewing the situation in the wake of the two incidents of exchange of fire, Director General of Police M. Mahender Reddy said a positive result would be achieved soon. He told the media that as many as 500 policemen, including units from the specialist force to take on the Maoists, the Greyhounds, have been deployed to flush out the five extremists from Tiryani. The ratio of policemen to Maoists is 100:1, he said.

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In the former district of Adilabad, where there are reports of movements of the extremists, the dalam is led by an experienced leader, 55-year-old Adilabad District Committee Secretary [Adellu](#), who carries a reward of 20 lakh on his head. Adellu is from Pochera village in Boath mandal of Adilabad district. He is said to be conversant in local dialects and knows the jungle passages like the back of his hand.

“The dalam had consisted of some 12 armed Maoists when it crossed Pranahita in Kumuram Bheem Asifabad district in March. It is left with just five members now; the others are presumed to have gone back to Chhattisgarh after failing to withstand the heat of our operations,” said Adilabad District Superintendent of Police Vishnu S. Warriar, who also holds the charge of Superintendent of Police of Kumuram Bheem Asifabad and Nirmal districts.

“The Maoists are camping in select villages and discussing tribal issues like the Forest Rights Act, the impact of the Supreme Court order scrapping Government Order 3 issued by the undivided Andhra Pradesh government in 2000 making provision for 100% reservations in some categories of government jobs in Scheduled Areas, and the Adivasi-Lambada conflict on the issue of tenability of Scheduled Tribe status of the Lambadas. The discussions are apparently aimed at influencing the minds of young tribals and eventually recruiting some of them,” a source in the intelligence department said.

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The extremists claimed that they are observing a self-imposed restraint on the use of violence. Jagan, their spokesperson, [issued a statement](#) that the Maoists were visiting villages to educate the rural poor about the pandemic.

Warriar scoffed at this. “It was the police which used the lockdown period for strengthening ties with the rural folk by supplying them with essentials,” he said. “This is in addition to the coordination we are forging between the villagers and different departments to bring in speedy

development.”

The distribution of relief material aimed at improving relations with the people is part of the strategy of the State police to make policing more people-friendly. Also, by visiting villages located inside the forests, the department has kept an eye on the movements of suspected Maoist sympathisers.

In 2004, the Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy government in Andhra Pradesh observed an informal ceasefire agreement with the Maoists. However, that got scrapped in 2005 following the [killing of MLA Chittem Narsi Reddy and 10 others](#) in erstwhile Mahabubnagar district. According to a senior police officer, the PWG had committed a blunder by agreeing to a ceasefire. The decision haunted the organisation even after Telangana was created, he said. “They had thought that the few months of talks with the government would give them time and space to strengthen the organisation. But it was the other way around. The Maoists got exposed and offered an opportunity to the police to photograph and profile their top leaders and cadres. The authorities were placed at an advantage with regard to understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the PWG which, by then, had merged with other groups to become the CPI (Maoist),” the officer said.

The Maoists suffered heavy casualties in the period following the end of the ceasefire and retreated into Dandakaranya in 2008. They had that territory earmarked as an alternate centre in anticipation of facing the heat in Andhra Pradesh that would require them to evacuate the State in a hurry. That’s when they developed a rapport with the Adivasi communities living in the dense forests.

Also read | [Top Naxals killed in Andhra Pradesh](#)

“That such a need would arise some day had become clear to the Maoists. They had done some intense research in 2003-2004 which was titled ‘Social Investigation of North Telangana’. They selected undivided Warangal district as their case study. The study revealed that exploitation and oppression of the poor by landlords was no more a phenomenon troubling the rural poor, and that the welfare programmes of the government had percolated into rural areas,” a source in the intelligence wing of the police department said.

“The return of the Congress party to form the government in Andhra Pradesh in 2004 under Rajasekhara Reddy saw more welfare activities taking place. There was increased participation of the rural poor in development activities,” said a top Maoist who had later surrendered. “Roads and mobile communications saw a lot of improvement, and poor people, including women, got representation in administration thanks to implementation of the 50% reservation quota for women in local bodies,” he said.

“Instead of Maoists, caste organisations took the lead in dispute resolution in rural areas, while youngsters studied hoping to get government employment. This had a great impact on the recruitment process of the banned organisation which drew its cadres mostly from villagers who were disgruntled on failing to access government welfare programmes or were discriminated against, and the students,” a source in intelligence department said.

The former extremist said: “The failure to evoke any response in the villages was one of the main reasons for the outfit to withdraw from Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. The other reason was that the police had acquired the required skills to track us down. That was causing great harm to the movement.”

The bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh did not alter the positions taken by the two new governments.

The police in both the States believed that those Maoists who had left the place were bound to return.

It was because of this belief that the Greyhounds in both the States entered Chhattisgarh or Gadchiroli in Maharashtra every now and then to cooperate with the police forces in chasing or eliminating Maoists. The Mangi dalam commander Athram Shoban alias Charles was killed in an 'encounter' in Gadchiroli in June 2004. He belonged to the Tiryani mandal and was an accused in the murder of Athram Ballar Sha in October the previous year. His death removed a key link between the local poor and the Maoists.

Also read | [Shobhan's death throws up problems stalking Adivasis](#)

Has the scenario changed in Telangana? Are the Adivasis no longer exploited? "The Adivasis continue to be exploited by corrupt elements in the administration," said an Adivasi headman in Sirikonda mandal of Adilabad district as he dwelt upon the issue of revival of the Maoist organisation.

Athram Bheem Rao, a Kolam tribal headman of Pangri in Tiryani mandal, said: "The Maoists will not find support here as we want peace and development."

The Adivasis are in the right frame of mind, said Warrior. "We do not want any of them helping the Maoists, even unwillingly, and inviting trouble," he said.

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