

On a different trajectory: on Naxalbari movement

Half a century after the [Naxalbari movement arrived like a Spring Thunder over India](#), questions are beginning to arise as to whether the spark that gave rise to it is in danger of being extinguished. Independent India had previously experienced armed peasant movements, including the Telangana armed struggle and the Tebhaga movement (in Bengal), but the Naxalbari movement seemed to follow a different trajectory.

It was ignited by a small group of Bengal revolutionaries (all members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) formed in 1964) who felt disillusioned with the so-called embourgeoisement of the party which had only recently split from the CPI on the ground it had turned revisionist. Breaking away from the CPI(M), this faction received almost instant endorsement from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Mao. This was followed by a few cadres visiting China to receive the benediction of the CCP. In course of time some of the cadres went to China for training.

It was in April 1969 that the movement took formal shape, with the coming into existence of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) under the leadership of Charu Mazumdar. It initially had a mesmeric effect, enthusing sections of the rural population as well as some semi-urban and urban elements mainly in the States of West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. The Chinese Communists were keen that the new Naxalbari movement should follow the Chinese model of revolution relying on the peasantry, establishing base areas in the countryside and using the countryside to encircle and finally capture the cities. As the movement progressed, it became obvious that the Indian Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries preferred the Ho Chi Minh model to that of Mao. The CPI(ML), hence, consisted of both rural and semi-urban elements. In the early years, and till the 1990s, a number of recruits to the movement came from the urban intelligentsia.

Naxalbari at 50

From the beginning, the movement, which included many well-known ideologues, suffered from a series of splits. Several leaders from Bengal and Andhra Pradesh thereafter set up their separate parties. A high degree of ideological motivation, however, helped the movement to survive despite the several splits. The ideological motivation could be sustained through the several hundred revolutionary journals in different languages published during the period.

The splintering of the movement subsided to some extent after Muppala Lakshmana Rao, aka Ganapathy, took charge in the early 1990s. Following this, the movement witnessed a degree of consolidation with the Communist Party of India (Maoist) formally coming into existence in the first decade of this century with the merger of several existing factions. Nevertheless, several smaller Marxist-Leninist parties and groups survive to this day.

The main strength of the CPI (Maoist) has been its organisational structure. It has a Central Committee headed by Ganapathy. It possesses a powerful military wing headed by Nambala Keshav Rao aka Basavaraj — the Central Military Commission (CMC). Members of key committees, and especially the Central Committee, are geographically distributed, thus ensuring a degree of cohesion across the party. The hierarchical organisational structure consists of regional bureaux, zonal committees and area committees. Some of the area and zonal committees such as the Dandakaranya Special Zonal Committee, the Andhra-Odisha Border Special Zonal Committee and the North Telangana Special Zonal Committee have been more active than others.

Over a dozen States have been, or are, affected by Naxalite activity to varying degrees. The most affected States are Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha. Naxalite or Maoist violence is mainly concentrated at present in pockets such as Abujmahad and Narayanpur districts, Bastar,

Dantewada and Sukma, all in Chhattisgarh. Areas of Odisha are also increasingly affected today by Naxalite violence. Considerable potential for Naxalite violence exists in Bihar, pockets in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, Maharashtra and the tri-junction of Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The movement's leaders are in constant search of new areas to expand their activities and to secure fresh recruits.

The village where it began

Maoist actions and scale of violence have steadily come down in recent years, and more so since 2010. The presence of over 100 battalions of Central paramilitary forces aided by State police forces has had a sobering effect on the movement. It has not, however, prevented Naxalites from carrying out a few spectacular attacks during this same period. One of the deadliest attacks took place in April 2010, involving the massacre of 76 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel in Dantewada.

There have been other serious attacks as well, notwithstanding the overall decline in the tenor of the movement. This year, there have been at least two major attacks. One took place in March this year, leading to the killing of 12 CRPF personnel, members of a road opening party. In April this year, the Maoists carried out an even more daring attack on a CRPF patrol in Sukma district killing 25 personnel. On more than one occasion between 2010 and 2017, the Maoists were to demonstrate their penchant for large-scale attacks — in one instance ambushing a group of Congress leaders during electioneering (May 2013 in Chhattisgarh). At least 27 people, including former Union Minister V.C. Shukla, died.

In official circles, Maoist success is often attributed to the failure of police personnel to observe 'Standard Operating Procedures' and also to the failure of intelligence. This, however, ignores the intrinsic capacity of the Maoists to carry out ambushes, their skill in employing improvised explosive devices, and their capacity to resort to ingenious weaponry such as arrow bombs. It also underestimates the ability of the highly trained battalions of the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army, who constitute the vanguard of the movement. They are well-armed and adept in the use of both orthodox and unorthodox weapons. Their skill is often evident in the so-called 'liberated zones' in the Naxalite heartland.

The forgotten war

The decline in the rate of Maoist successes — in the past year the numbers of those killed by the Maoists was hardly 20% of that in 2010 — and the relative success of the security forces, seems to have induced some rethinking in Maoist circles. There is growing demand today for a change in approach, and for a new direction.

The spirit of Naxalbari was predicated on a mixture of intellectual fervour and armed struggle methodology. Over the years, the concept of capturing the cities by mobilising the countryside has lost much of its steam. Far fewer recruits to the Maoist cause also came from the urban areas, especially the intellectual class. By the turn of the century, the movement had become increasingly militarised, more adept at so-called military actions and hardly retaining any of its intellectual élan.

Leaders like Ganapathy, who has remained General Secretary of the CPI (Maoist) since its inception, were more influenced by the past. They seemed out of step with the current genre of violent revolutionaries, who make up the bulk of the cadres today. Younger elements favour not only newer tactics but also a change of guard, viz. seeking a new leader more experienced in employing militaristic techniques. The demand for a churn has been growing louder in recent months.

All indications, hence, are that as perceptions of a Maoist decline intensify, the CPI (Maoist) would move away from the previous traditional line and embark on a more violent path. This would be under a new leadership more attuned to such policies and techniques. A strong possibility exists that Ganapathy may be replaced by the present chief of the CMC. The CMC is in direct charge of guerrilla type violent activities of the party. With the change of guard, the ideological content of the movement is bound to decline still further. The link with Naxalbari and the Naxalbari spirit threatens to snap as a result. The CPI (Maoist), bereft of ideology, could then drift towards becoming like any other militant or terror group active in different parts of the country. This could have graver consequences for the country since the CPI (Maoist) has a much wider base than any other militant outfit.

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