



India's Left-Wing Extremists

Maoists in the rural areas of India continue to threaten and recruit as they prepare for revolution.

by Animesh Roul



DESPITE THE end of the Cold War, left-wing extremism remains a threat to global stability. Under a Maoist banner, such extremists continue to threaten, murder, and conquer in central India. They are known as the Naxal insurgency, or Naxalites, after the place they emerged, Naxalbari in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. The left-wing extremist movement has plagued India since the mid-1960s and was once called the greatest threat to the country's internal security. It has declined in recent years, but it has not abated. The Indian Ministry of Home Affairs estimates that in the decade between 2005 and 2015, there have been 4,748 civilians and 1,896 security personnel killed in Naxal-led violence. The majority of the civilians killed were from pro-state tribal populations who face the wrath of Maoists for being "police informers" or "government agents". Government figures from 2016 suggest that from January to November, 196 civilians and 64 security personnel have been killed by the Maoists and their supporters.

At the peak of their insurgency, Indian Maoists

indiscriminately targeted legislators, security force officials, civilians, and infrastructures in their so-called Revolution Zone or Red Corridor, which comprises swathes of territory including parts of central and eastern India. The Maoist extremists once controlled nearly 40,000 sq. km spread across 20 states. Over the last ten years, nearly 70 districts in nine states have been affected by Naxal violence to varying degrees, according to a modest assessment by India's Internal Affairs Ministry. Several more states still unofficially consider themselves a target.

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The goal of the Maoists remains to take over the Indian state by armed violence or struggle. Though born in India, their movement was inspired by the revolutionary ideals of Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution that emerged in China during the mid-1960s. Their immediate objectives are to achieve military strength and geographical consolidation to trigger

a revolutionary war against India's security apparatus. They may have recently lost rural support, but they are gaining ground among intellectuals and the Muslim minority population.

The Indian Maoist Revolution

The Naxal insurgency emerged in 1967 under the leadership of Charu Mazumdar and slowly spread to neighboring states, coming a long way from a small-scale local rebellion of peasants and tribal people. It initially centered around the impoverished parts of West Bengal, Bihar, and Andhra Pradesh, but soon after it organized nationally as the Communist Party of India. Most of the political party uses the Marxist-Leninist label (CPI-ML), distinguishing it from the CPI-Maoist groups that have since adopted violent tactics, including fomenting peasant unrest against landlords and guerrilla warfare against the government.

The Maoist groups faltered in the face of relentless military and territorial counter-insurgency offensives by the government, as well as simultaneous development and outreach initiatives in the tribal areas. Combined, these debilitated the Naxal militant forces

and corroded much of its domination over vast swathes of territory. The influence of the CPI-Maoists has decreased to the so-called Red Zones. Even the propaganda machinery of the Maoists has admitted to such losses over the previous few years.

A resolution from the CPI-Maoist's central committee in 2015 noted that this eroding support

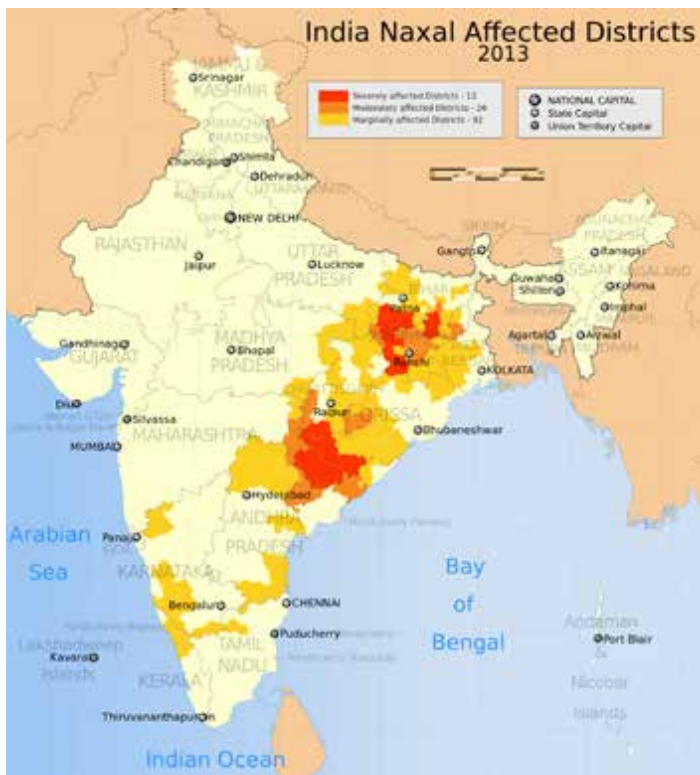
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base, amid rising rates of surrender and desertion by its cadres, jeopardizes its ability to scout for new talent. The General Secretary of the party, Muppalla Lakshmana Rao—also known by the *nom de guerre* Ganapathy—conceded the loss of a “considerable number of party leaders” and vowed to intensify the campaign to strengthen cadres amid a weakened movement in “rural plains and urban areas”. He aired this in an internally circulated interview for the Maoist Information Bulletin:

“We have lost considerable number of party leaders at all levels starting from the central committee to the village level party committees. Therefore, we have identified the preservation of existing subjective forces from enemy attacks as one of the foremost tasks before the party.”

He even urged Maoists members to carry out “wide propaganda against the present Indian government under Narendra Modi and his Right-wing party’s ‘pro-imperialist and pro-feudal’ policies”. In an April 2015 interview, Ganapathy reiterated Maoist support for ‘Dalits’ (a lower caste of Indians), Muslims, and working classes, with an aim to recreate a support base among them. Since 2007, the CPI-Maoists have purposefully reached out to Muslims and other disaffected minorities to increase the insurgency’s support against the Indian state.

Delhi is taking Ganapathy’s threats seriously. India’s counter-terrorism agency, the National Investigating Agency (NIA), has announced a reward of approximately \$22,000 (US) for any information leading



Maoist-active regions of India

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Naxalite march

to Ganapathy's arrest.

Maoists claim to fight the Indian state for the cause of the economically underprivileged sections of society, mostly tribal people from Central and East Indian states. According to Delhi, however, the tribal populations have become victim of the “protracted people's war”. The Indian government's Minister of State for Home Affairs says the Maoist movement is one of the causes of tribal region underdevelopment, as they have hindered work in the areas in order to keep the population away from government-sponsored development projects and welfare schemes. In December 2016, he emphasized that most of the central welfare schemes and skill development programs have failed to reach the tribal villages because of the Maoist presence. The conflict affects the construction of schools, hospitals, roadways, and industry, perpetuating the very inequalities that the Maoists use as justification for their acts.

Violent Acts

The CPI-Maoist initiated a campaign of violence against civilians and state machinery in July 2006, with a mass killings at the Errabore Relief Camp in Chhattisgarh, killing over 30 people. While sporadic low-scale strikes continued, Maoists unleashed another major at-

tack at a police camp in Dantewada, Chhattisgarh, in March 2007, killing 55 people including security personnel. A February 2010 attack against the personnel of the Eastern Frontier Rifles at Silda in West Bengal took 25 lives. In April the same year, armed Maoists killed over 75 security force personnel at Danewada. The most dramatic attack came on May 25, 2013, when they ambushed a convoy of political party members at Bastar, Chhattisgarh, killing 27 people including top legislators of the then-ruling Congress party.

Observers fear that the Maoists are moving away from the traditional guerrilla formula of ambushes towards a novel hit-and-run formula and urban strategy. This strategy of encircling urban areas is reminiscent of violent clashes between security forces and armed tribal groups backed by Naxalites over land acquisition by the state government a decade ago. The same regions have been a hub of Maoist activity since the 1980s. Maoists in these areas have raised armed rebellion against the local government officials, forest officials, contractors and political forces—but left-wing extremism is not just a rural movement.

A significant shift occurred in 2004, with the calculated merger of the two biggest Maoists formations, the Peoples War Group (PWG) and the MCCI (Maoist Communist Centre of India), to form a unified

CPI-Maoist. Fusing not only their ideology but the firepower and manpower of these two armed groups, the merger strengthened the insurgency enough to challenge the Indian state and its sovereignty.

Many active members and sympathizers have been arrested in Indian metropolises, including New Delhi, Mumbai, Nagpur, and Hyderabad. As Maoist violence declined, they garnered increased urban support from intellectuals, students, slum dwellers, minority populations, and laborers in the cities and towns. The Maoists have attempted to infiltrate existing trade unions and create new ones in big companies both for political and funding purposes. Universities across the country have witnessed a wave of sympathy for the cause of tribal and Maoist struggle. Previously, the CPI-Maoists had never achieved success in infiltrating India's urban centers.

Linkages with Other Maoist Movements

Maoists in India and elsewhere in South Asia, like neighboring Nepal, have adopted the strategy of a "protracted people's war" to achieve their political objectives. This concept has three phases: occupy the land, step up the guerrilla struggle, and bring power to the people. For a while, India's Maoists maintained ideological-level links with their Nepalese counterpart, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist-Centre). Maoists in both countries, as well as in Bangladesh, were believed to be linked through a pan-South Asian conglomerate known as the Coordination Committee of Maoist Parties and Organisations of South Asia (CCOMPOSA). The March 2004 Conference of CCOMPOSA adopted a political resolution that was signed by Maoist groups from all three countries. The 4th CCOMPOSA Conference, in August 2006, adopted a resolution stating that members of the conglomerate vowed to remove "reactionary rulers, the Indian Expansionists, the U.S., and all imperialists out of South Asia".

Accusations of strategic or operational links to on-the-ground militia, however, are always refuted by Nepalese as well as Indian Maoists. National Maoist organizations, as in China and the Philippines, have often distanced themselves from reports of guerrilla warfare.

The Nepalese Maoists joined the mainstream political path for social change and abandoned a decade-long bloody insurgency after signing a peace deal in 2006. It is unlikely the underground and covert Indian Maoist movement has strong international connections, but there are suspicions that an underground

faction of Nepalese Maoists continues its fraternal linkages with its Indian counterpart.

Islamist Links

CPI-Maoist General Secretary Ganapathy's call for Muslims and other minority communities to support the insurgency aroused suspicions within the security establishment of India. Ganapathy has previously expressed solidarity with Islamic jihadist movements, describing them as a reaction to U.S. imperialist policies, exploitation, and suppression of the oil-rich Arab nations. According to him, CPI-Maoist opposes every attack on Arab and Muslim countries and the Muslim community at large committed in the name of the global war on terror.

Borrowing a strategy from ISIS, Maoists circulated a video in August of last year featuring a mid-2009 ambush on a security force convoy in Madanwada, Chhattisgarh. Nearly 20 security personnel were killed including a senior police official. The video showed torture, killings, and the Islamic jihadist-style execution of one wounded officer. This was the first time that

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the brutal and inhumane side of the Naxal insurgency, though not previously unheard of, was circulated by the organization itself. The purpose of releasing this video was not clear, but its timing suggests it was released to either compete with or show solidarity for jihadist recruitment in India and abroad.

During the NIA's investigations into ISIS-affiliated outreach efforts inside India in July of last year, the agency reportedly found hints of a possible link between an ISIS module in India and the Maoists. The ISIS affiliates were mostly Indian Mujahideen (IM) militants looking for ammunition and hideouts, but they included jihadi personality Mudabbir Mushtaq Shaikh, the leader of ISIS's branch in India. The attempts to establish links with Maoists were initiated by these former IM militants, though there are no clues whether Maoists have so far accepted the offer of logistical ties, including training and weapons trading. According to unverified NIA reports, the former IM militants met with senior Maoist leaders in April/May of last year. There is fear that the so-called "Red Corridor" of the Maoists could become a training ground for Islamic militants. This has been at the core of investi-

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gations by India's security forces and has featured in parliamentary debate since the Intelligence Agency of Pakistan attempted to infiltrate Maoist ranks over the last decade.

Indian Maoists have supported Islamists in Kashmir and Manipur and at one time openly supported their respective movements in these two states through leaflets and propaganda.

Despite this, it seems unlikely that the Maoists will be joining hands with ISIS or like-minded jihadi groups (e.g. Al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent) any time soon, as it would lead to a loss of credibility for the movement. However, there is an increasing chance of tactical linkages, as the immediate aim and objectives of both these anti-democracy groups coincide. Always short of funds to sustain the Red Movement, the Maoist leadership could take this as an opportunity to engage with these elements for financial benefits.

Maoists Today

Despite their recent setbacks, the Maoist stronghold in Chhattisgarh's Abhujmarh area, the epicenter of their "liberated zone", remains intact and undis-

turbed. Here the CPI-Maoist and its military wing, the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army, have been running a parallel government for over a decade, in a region with a shortage of civil administration.

Amid all the signs of setbacks and the waning of the revolution, the CPI-Maoist's central committee issued a list of celebrations in 2017 and 2018: the 50th anniversary of the Naxalbari armed insurgency, the centenary of the Russian Bolshevik revolution, and the bicentenary of the birth of Karl Marx. This multi-decade old insurgency movement has faced many reversals due to concerted government military campaigns and economic maneuvers to stifle its growth, but it has clearly not given up. The upcoming anniversaries provide a convenient pretext to try to bolster its strength. Despite its marked decline in firepower and a significant degeneration of cadre strengths, any miscalculation or underestimation of Maoist resolve would be detrimental to India's internal security architecture. ■

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