

**THE NAXALITE MOVEMENT OF ANDHRA PRADESH:
WILL IT FIND A WAY OUT OF THE CRISIS?**

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The naxalite movement is by now more than three decades old. It started when the Indian State still professed egalitarian goals and accepted welfare responsibilities. Indeed, its emergence in the late sixties was paralleled by the avowal of a radical agenda for the Indian State by Indira Gandhi, for reasons which were, if only in part, connected with the social-economic crisis that led to the revolutionary trend within the Indian communist movement.

The movement then went through a period when the avowed radical agenda of the State took the shape of destruction of liberal institutions, the better to fight the self-serving propertied classes and their political agents. The naxalite cadre suffered the consequence of this ‘populist’ authoritarianism along with – but more severely than – the other enemies-of-the-masses-according-to-Indira Gandhi’s Congress. They were arrested, tortured and killed in the name of ‘encounters’.

Later came the days of gradual withdrawal of the Indian State from its welfare responsibilities. This was done quietly in the early eighties, but has been the declared policy during the nineties. The naxalite movement is now living through this phase of the Indian polity. This change is bound to make the call of the naxalites all the more attractive to the vast mass of youth whose life is rendered irrelevant for the polity, though the prospects of the movement are not as rosy as that would imply, for three reasons: one, parallel with the withdrawal of the State from welfare there has been a brutal consolidation of its repressive powers; two, the ideological crisis of Marxism post-1989 has had an impact that is greater than most Marxists would like to admit; three, the organisational state of the naxalite parties is not exactly conducive to a disciplined consolidation of the distress, though in their eagerness to expand they would not let that fact inhibit the attempt.

This article focuses only on Andhra Pradesh, and is concerned in the main with the social-moral dimension of the naxalite movement rather than the organisational aspect. I am

conscious of the diversity of organisational forms and tactics of the naxalite parties, and the variety of problems they face. I will nevertheless use the word 'naxalite' in an inclusive sense, without differentiating the trends within it. Much of what I say is likely to be valid mainly for the more militant among them, of which the People's War is the prime example. But I think that some of the trends and problems stem from the very idea of building socialism through the capture of State power by means of armed struggle, and that idea is common to all the naxalite parties.

Today's picture is seemingly contradictory. On the one hand, the open espousal of the World Bank's philosophy by Chandra Babu Naidu's government has created conditions immensely favourable to the growth of every kind of radical movement. On the other hand, the naxalite movement, which answers to every description of the word 'radical' is in disarray as well as on the defensive. The most active organisation, the CPI-ML (People's War) is on the defensive to an extent unknown in the past. Some of the others, heirs of the trend that is identified with Chandra Pulla Reddy, one of the early leaders of the naxalite movement, are badly splintered and in disarray. The only organisations that are stable are two which do not normally indulge in much violence, and in fact do not conform to the public image of 'naxalite', though they are in theory still committed to smashing/capture of State power through armed struggle.

The course of events that led to this situation has been both fruitful and painful for the poor, the constituency of the naxalite movement. There is very little doubt, after thirty years, that the poor in the areas of naxalite activity are able to walk with dignity and self-confidence of a degree that would be inconceivable without the naxalite movement. Nor that the State's only known counter-insurgency strategy has been to kill, maim and otherwise injure the social base of the naxalite movement, the poor again. If that were all, the matter would be a morally plain one of Good vs Evil, except that some may still be worried that the Good has chosen unlawful/violent means to overcome Evil. What has complicated matters is that in giving confidence and strength to the poor, the naxalite movement is not merely addressing their immediate social, economic and political needs, but also working out a conscious strategy of building an alternative State power. That power, like all power, tends to be intolerant of opposition to itself or assistance to the enemy from any quarter including its own 'masses',

and quite ruthlessly unmindful of the pain it causes in the course of moving towards the goal of realising itself.

The naxalite movement in Andhra Pradesh started in the late sixties in the 'Agency area' (predominantly adivasi-inhabited forests) of the then Srikakulam district. Much of that area now falls in the district of Vizianagaram which was created later. In the seventies and eighties it spread to the north Telangana districts of Warangal, Karimnagar, Adilabad, Nizamabad and Khammam. It ceased to be primarily based among adivasis, but of course it remained a poor people's movement. In Srikakulam, it addressed the issue of exploitation of adivasis by non-tribals, and in Telangana the first and most successful attack it made was on medieval forms of begar prevalent in the villages till the eighties of the twentieth century. Subsequently it has spread to practically the whole of the State, though given the nature of its politics, its spread is understandably more intense in the backward areas than in the developed ones. Apart from the tribal people and landless labourers, peasants in general, students, mine workers and other industrial workers have been sizably influenced by the naxalite movement. Its influence among the intelligensia is considerable in extent though rather doubtful in quality. Ideologically the movement has made some accommodation to the Ambedkarite and feminist critiques of the Communist movement, but the accommodation has not gone beyond programmatic concessions.

Two extreme views are possible, and frequently expressed, regarding the character of the espousal of people's causes by the naxalite parties. One is to claim that the espousal signifies the identity of the people's aspirations with naxalite politics, whereby the political agenda of the naxalites is declared to be as much the popular aspiration as their views on social and economic matters. The other is to treat the espousal as a merely

opportunistic tactic aimed at gathering the people behind the naxalites as support for their violent political aims. In the former view, the people are identical with the naxalites and vice versa; in the latter the people are gullible objects of manipulation.

The truth, to take recourse to a cliché, lies some where between the extremes. The first point to be noted in this and related contexts is that the naxalite cadre are not persons external to local society. They are mostly youth (these days a significant number of them are also

women) from local dalit, adivasi and backward caste families. They have a natural empathy with the problems and aspirations of these masses. However, their perception of the problems and aspirations is refracted through their political ideology and strategic requirements. There is thus little doubt that the naxalites' espousal of popular social and economic causes is honest in its intentions, and yet they do not see it as an end in itself (or as a step in a self contained process) but as a moment in the political advancement of their strategy of smashing the present State and establishing the People's State (or whatever name they choose to give it) by force. The latter aim does not make a mere instrument of the former, for the one is seen as a continuation of the other. The assumption, of course, is purely theoretical, and if the actual masses do not see the political aim of their emancipators as the natural continuation of the economic/social agenda of the movements led by them, that is seen not as disproof of the political assumptions but as the ideological backwardness of the masses. This would be merely amusing, were it not the case that it frequently leads to the imposition of political choices on the masses by force in the name of the higher political consciousness possessed by the revolutionary vanguard. As a matter of fact, it is doubtful that more than a fraction of the people who constitute the social base of the naxalite movement approve of the political agenda of the naxalites in their heart of hearts. Yet they must perforce put up with the consequences of their presumed class interest which their proclaimed vanguard knows better. At the risk of sounding absurd to those who deduce facts from theory, one must say that notwithstanding the far greater political and theoretical maturity of the communist revolutionaries, the militants fighting for self-determination in Nagaland or Kashmir represent the actual political aspirations of the local masses to a perceptibly greater extent than do the naxalites. Yet, if one is talking of the immediate social and economic aspirations, the naxalites are quite close to the hearts of the masses.

This would in any case have been a problem, but has acquired serious dimensions because of the gradual conversion of the socio-economic class struggle that benefited the people a lot into a ding-dong armed battle with the State, initially for political supremacy but latterly for mere survival. While the State is primarily to be held responsible for this state of affairs, the naxalite movement too has chosen to join the game in the terms set by the State instead of

adopting strategies that would not allow the social-economic struggle to degenerate into a mere armed battle.

One of the unstated facts about our beloved country is that we have followed the same counter-insurgency strategy in handling every insurgency as has been done by countries with no democratic claims. That is, hit at the masses who support the insurgency and terrorise them so that they are impelled to distance themselves from the insurgency, and thereby isolate the insurgents. The isolation has two purposes: it helps to pick and kill the insurgents, and to deride them as terrorists with no mass support.

This shameful strategy began from the very first days of the naxalite rebellion, and has gone on ever since. The naxalites in turn have walked into the trap by devising more and more violent means of meeting the violent suppression; and more and more violent ways of establishing and maintaining their hold on the masses and their lives. In turn the State has armed its men with more sophisticated weapons and other instruments of man-hunt;and so on and on until the state of conflict between the police and the naxalites resembles more a war than a civil conflict. In the course of this battle, the police of Andhra Pradesh invented and patented a mode of cold-blooded killing described as an 'encounter'. International law describes it as 'extra-judicial execution', and the Supreme Court of India has called it 'administrative liquidation'. But the police like to call it 'encounter', an exchange of fire between the police and the outlaws, which is always initiated by the outlaws and miraculously always ends with the death of the one who has initiated it. The expression is so well known all over the country today that I do not need to explain it. It only needs to be placed on record that the notion was invented by the A.P.Police. The naxalites, who initially began by killing oppressive landlords and other enemies of the poor, soon took to killing 'informers', who make encounters possible. Since the naxalites operate among the poor, only the poor can be effective informers. Hence the killing of informers means killing of persons belonging to the very social base of the naxalites. The sad fact is that over the years, the majority of the persons killed by the naxalites are from the poor and the lower middle classes. (This is no accident: it follows the logic of insurgency and counter-insurgency. The State can only find agents for itself within the social base of the insurgents, and therefore the insurgents' strategy of eliminating the agents devours their very social base. Most of those

killed by Kashmiri militants are Kashmiri muslims, and most of those killed by the Khalistanis were Sikhs.)

Until about four years ago, the casualties in this battle were roughly equal. From 1970 till about 1996, if one adds up the killings on the two sides in any year, the numbers will add up to more or less the same figure. It was left to Chandra Babu Naidu's government to upset the macabre balance. Each year from 1996 to 2001, the police have killed more than 200 naxalites in the name of 'encounters'. The naxalites, inspite of the very ruthless efficiency of the People's War, have been no match. It is this 'victory' of the police that has been behind the State Government's refusal to take interest in talks with the Peoples War. More about this later, however.

A few examples of the way socio-economic struggles have got converted into killing matches would illustrate some of the points made above. Forcing landlords to give up their land in favour of the poor is one of the struggles undertaken by the naxalites. In the beginning there were instances of the poor under the leadership of the naxalites physically occupying and dividing up landlords' land among themselves (or deciding to cultivate it collectively). Later the naxalites, especially the People's War, started using threats of violence to force landlords to let go of land. Literally thousands of acres have been forcibly 'taken over' in this fashion. But the poor do not dare cultivate the land thus evacuated for their benefit, since the police step in and threaten them on pain of torture and worse not to go any where near the land. Even TADA cases were booked against them! And to defeat the purpose of the naxalites, the police encourage the landlord to get the land cultivated by labourers or share croppers. The naxalites attack the labourers/sharecroppers, unmindful of their class status. They are maimed, killed and at best driven away from the village. The land remains fallow. There are thousands of acres of such fallow land in the Telangana districts.

The meetings of the naxalites and other propaganda activity have long since been prohibited by the police even without any sanction of the law. With a ban placed in the year 1992 on the People's War under the Andhra Pradesh Public Security Act, the law itself now enforces the prohibition. In revenge, the naxalites vow that they will not respect the political freedom of the ruling parties. People are threatened not to attend any rally organised by the Telugu

Desam Party or the Congress, whichever party happens to be ruling the State at that time. While the ordinary people who do attend may not be harmed, the village cadre of the parties who mobilise the masses to attend a Minister's meeting are likely to be attacked and harmed. Such active cadre are invariably from the lower middle classes/backward castes. There are innumerable instances of such cadre being maimed or killed for failing to respect the dictates of the revolutionaries not to attend or mobilise people to attend ruling party meetings. Worse still are instances where a local sarpanch or some such inconsequential office bearer belonging to the ruling party is killed in protest against the repressive policies of the State.

In periods when the naxalites have been able to function relatively freely, they have attempted to build an alternative power apparatus in the villages and towns of their influence. These are not more representative bodies of the people, but more revolutionary bodies, consisting of militants who issue dictates to the officially established local bodies and the local organs of the government. They have also taken up alternative modes of dispute resolution. While they call them 'People's Courts', they are mostly the Courts of the revolutionaries. The idea of resolving issues and disputes locally without going through cumbersome Court processes is not unattractive, but an honest engagement with the problem would require careful building of democratic dispute-resolution processes, if not institutions. What the naxalite parties have sought to structure instead is an impromptu Court of gun-wielding militants who may possess the 'right' line but little experience or maturity in dealing with the host of problems that come up in villages. These 'People's Courts' have often imposed unacceptably harsh corporal punishments for offences which the official Courts would have imposed, if at all, no more than a short sentence of incarceration.

At election time, the People's War issues a call to boycott the polls. Whether such a call is sensible or not, that party has every right to issue such a call. But the police come down brutally on this campaign. Every election time, a number of youth involved in this campaign have been picked up and killed by the police. In retaliation the People's War prohibits the election campaign of the ruling party. Village cadre of the Congress and the Telugu Desam Party are threatened not to campaign, and those who defy the prohibition are liable to be physically set upon. Some times they attack polling booths and take away and dump the ballot box in some well or tank. The police force local sympathisers of that Party to sit in the

polling station and guard the box. If it is taken away by the militants, the sympathisers will answer for it. Elections therefore are a time of intense fear and trepidation for the masses in the areas of naxalite influence.

As the State has rested on police action as the main means of tackling the naxalite movement, the naxalites have taken to killing of police personnel. Each such killing is followed by retaliatory killing in more than even ratio by the police. Since the police cannot immediately lay their hands on underground naxalites, they kill the ordinary sympathisers. Such killings are later followed by the naxalites killing some one in the village who is suspected of having informed the police about the identity of local sympathisers. Since nobody can inform the police better than a former militant, such former militants live under the constant threat of being attacked any day.

Worse still, sympathisers or ordinary villagers are forced to sleep at police stations in the night to forestall a possible attack. Police patrol vans that face the possibility of being blown up by the landmines which are expertly operated by the People's War, force common villagers to travel in the vehicle along with them. Some times they are nevertheless attacked, and the innocent suffer injury and worse. The game of ruse and counter-ruse between the police and the naxalites can be fatal for the innocent. A very horrible instance is what happened on the 18th of November 2002 near Tupakulagudem in the tribal belt of Warangal district. The police killed some Peoples War cadre in an 'encounter' in the Tupakulagudem forests. While the killing was done by a special police party, the subsequent task of having the inquest done and taking away the dead bodies etc had to be one by the police of the local police station assisted by the district armed reserve. They chose to go to the place of the killing in a bus requisitioned from the Road Transport Corporation instead of a police vehicle. Knowing fully well that their movements in the forests would be watched by the naxalites, and that the roads are heavily land-mined by them, the police returned by a different route in a different vehicle and let the vehicle they came in take ordinary passengers back. The People's War cadre who had noted the number of the vehicle while it was going, blew it up on its way back, killing 14 innocent villagers.

This history of attack and counter-attack accompanied by increasing levels of sophistication of weapon power has not been without its impact on the organisation of the revolutionary parties. Lakhs of rupees are being spent by them on acquisition of weapons and provision of safe places for the leaders and cadre. Such money, obviously, cannot be raised from their own social base. It can only be commandeered from the exploiting classes by means of threats of force. This has been going on now for well over a decade and has left the lingering doubt whether the donors are not seeking some quid pro quo. More visible is the effect it has had on the cadre through whom the funds are collected. Corruption is no longer foreign to these parties of the poorest of the poor. There have even been cases of cadre salting away some of the funds, and finally either surrendering to the police or simply running away from the movement. It is arguable that the disarray – the demise, for all practical purposes - of the CPI-ML groups that were formed from the splintering of what used to be called the Chandra Pulla Reddy group has been caused by the easy availability of massive funds at the flick of a revolver. But the impact is perceptible upon the People's War, too.

Equally harmful is the premium that militancy has acquired as the most important attribute in the selection of cadre. The communist movement in general does not possess the theoretical tools required for comprehending the fact that the method of struggle or political activity adopted by a party is reflected in the kind of personality attributes predominantly found in the cadre whom it attracts. The CPI and the CPI-M with their politics of repeated compromises are burdened with cadre of appropriate character. And the naxalites, in particular the heavily armed ones such as the People's War which have allowed themselves to be pushed into the ding-dong battle of armed supremacy with the State, are today attracting cadre who are unable to distinguish mere militancy from revolutionary practice. That this can be harmful to the people needs no explanation. What the naxalite organisations are now realising painfully is that it can have a devastating effect on their movement as well.

Militancy, as a trait, can well go with genuinely rebellious consciousness. But it can equally well go with a sadist personality, a power-hungry and insecure nature, or a narrow and intolerant mind. That a number of persons with the less welcome traits have been attracted to the more militant among the naxalite groups, which have been too intent on their power struggle with the State to be conscious of the possibility, is now clear. This has inevitably

told on the way the cadre have functioned with the people. It has also led to internal problems of indiscipline, opportunism, careerism and plain bad faith. It has also offered the police an undreamt of opportunity to consume the movement from within. There have been a number of cases in recent years where cadre of the People's

War have taken money from the police, killed their own comrades and gone over to the side of the police. Later, such 'renegades' have formed gangs which are now haunting not only that Party and its followers outside, but any one in the State who speaks out against the State and its minions, such as human rights activists. Rumour has it that the People's War is now devising checks upon its own cadre so that it may be forewarned in case of treachery. A classic case of being afraid of one's own shadow!

It is in this context that some well meaning persons with considerable experience and commitment in the cause of democracy initiated efforts to persuade the State and the naxalites, in particular the People's War, to sit down to talks. The Committee of Concerned Citizens, as they called themselves, met both the underground leadership of the People's War and responsible officials as well as the Chief Minister of the State more than once to secure this end. After persistent efforts on their part, spread over more than four years, the talks almost took place this summer, but the Government wantonly sabotaged the effort by making a turn around in the last moment and declaring that it would talk with the naxalites only if they put down their arms before coming to the discussion table. The condition is patently absurd, since there would be no reason for the talks if the naxalites were willing to voluntarily abandon violent means. Worse still, this turn about was preceded by a series of 'encounter' killings, including the killing of Padma, an important People's War leader of Karimnagar. The killings were deliberately engineered to affront the self-respect of that Party, and force it to call off the talks. It is to the credit of that Party that they persisted with their resolve up to a point, but when the Government representatives started taunting them to put down arms and come for talks, the People's War had no real option but to declare that it was withdrawing from the talks.

The break off of the talks has been followed by an escalation of violence on a large scale. Though the naxalite movement has been restricted drastically in its traditional areas of

operation, its capacity to mobilise militants and cause violence is in no way diminished, and it has been doing so in new areas. Such acts of attacks on individual ruling party leaders and Government property do not signify any thing more than that the cadre required for creating such pin pricks is available today on a sizable scale. Indeed, as popular disaffection with the World Bank directed polity of Chandra Babu Naidu's governance increases, such militancy will be all the more readily available. But while it will cause enough nuisance for the rulers of the State, it will not help put the naxalite movement back on the rails.

About the author: The author is a human rights activist of two decades standing. He was General Secretary of A.P.Civil Liberties Committee for 15 years from 1983 to 1998. A major part of the activity of that organisation was to build up a protest against repression unleashed by the State agencies on the naxalite movement. Now the author is with the Human Rights Forum, of which he is a founder-member. He taught mathematics at the Kakatiya University, Warangal from 1981 to 1985, and after thirteen years as a whole time civil rights activist, he is now a practicing advocate at the High Court of Andhra Pradesh. He is a regular contributor to many Telugu journals/magazines, and also writes occasionally for the Economic & Political Weekly.