

Maoist Movement in Andhra Pradesh

In a situation marked by severe state repression of the Maoist movement in Andhra Pradesh, violent retaliation by the Maoists, and the state's brutal counter-attack (led by the greyhounds) to gain the upper hand, the Maoists are finding it difficult to retain the support of the next generation of the most oppressed. State-encouraged gangs, calling themselves tigers and cobras have unleashed private vengeance, which has played a major role in immobilising the substantial over-ground support of the movement. But above all is the tragic loss of the lives of organic leaders from among the most oppressed.

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Birpur, near the Godavari river in the northern corner of Karimnagar district, is the native village of Muppalla Lakshmana Rao, better known as Ganapathi, the general secretary of the central committee of the Communist Party of India (Maoist). Before a road-building mania took over the state in the regime of Chandrababu Naidu, it was a village difficult to access. Today it is accessible by a black-top road from the temple town of Dharmapuri on the incompletely laid out

National Highway No 16 from Nizamabad in Telangana to Jagdalpur in Chhattisgarh. As you approach Birpur from Dharmapuri, you see at the entrance of the village a fresh white memorial with two pigeons atop, evidently intended to symbolise peace. The white colour of the memorial and the pigeons on top are in contrast to the hundreds of red memorials with the hammer and sickle on top that are strewn all over Telangana. It was built recently by the police to signify what the police gleefully regard as their decisive achievement in gaining an upper hand over the Maoists

in their major stronghold, the Godavari river basin of northern Telangana. That it was built in the village of the top Maoist leader and inaugurated by the most unlikely symbol of peace, the superintendent of police, Karimnagar, is a juvenile gesture that could have easily seemed merely tasteless in a different context, but in fact symbolises a disquieting fact: the politically juvenile attitude of successive governments in Andhra Pradesh towards the Naxalites.

Peace per se would be desired by many people in the area. But very few are gleeful that the Maoists have been pushed back as never before. Maybe they are unrealistic but the ordinary people in their majority would want that the Maoists should be around, guns and all, but there should be peace in the sense of a life free of fear from this side or that. At the height of the six-month farce of talks between the Maoists and the government of Andhra Pradesh in the second half of 2004, a common apprehension heard in most of the long-term strongholds of the Naxalites was that the talks was a good thing and it was hoped that some reduction of violence would result from it, but "they won't leave us and go away, will they"?

The fact is that in much of this area the first time the common people experienced anything resembling justice was when the Naxalite movement spread there and taught people not to take injustice lying down. Unlike the rest of the state where the Naxalites spread through the armed squads, in northern Telangana there was a clear period in the late 1970s and early 1980s of the last century when it was the mass organisations, mainly the agricultural labourers associations and the student and youth fronts, that were the instrument for the spread of Maoism as an ideology and a political practice. The phase was soon to pass and the people would start depending on the armed squads for justice but the sense of attainability of justice was a fundamental change. In very plain terms the oppressors of local society, whether upper caste landlords or insensitive public officials, started dreading the wrath, initially of the awakened masses, and later of the well-armed squads composed of cadre born and brought up in poor families of the very same villages. Today the old landlords are no longer there but new local elites have come up and there is this fear that if the Naxalites go away, "the poor cannot survive". It is a matter of choice whether one sees this as revolution in the mould of Robinhood, or merely as one instance in

the saga of a Maoist long march, which is not to be frozen into a representative moment.

State Repression

From the very beginning the attitude of the governments in Andhra Pradesh was one of extreme hostility. Police camps were set up in villages and the poor were tortured most inhumanly. It was always an explicitly political assault. The policemen in charge of the areas never made secret of the fact that they were not merely “maintaining law and order” as the expression goes. They had the political task of protecting the landlords and the medieval mould of society and they were executing the task. The underground Naxalite activists were no doubt armed, but their violence in those days was by and large selective and in any case not much in extent. On the other hand, it is said by everyone who knows – including police officers at retirement – that the fight of the Naxalites in those days was against what is generally referred to as feudal

domination, and the economic oppression of the poor, and in this they were remarkably successful. Abolition of ‘begar’ and payment of some thing close to minimum wages, two, impeccably constitutional tasks, were performed by the Naxalites.

The fight for land was not so successful since the police would not allow the land left behind by runaway landlords to be cultivated by the poor. Such land by and large remains fallow to this day, but it is not a very significant matter either way because as a proportion of the total cultivable area of the districts, or the land needed by the landless, it is slight in extent. More would be added to such fallow land in the days to come when cultivation of land would be forcibly stopped by the Naxalites, not to take over the unconscionable acres of landlords, but as a measure of punishment imposed on any landed person for having harmed their cause, but even so the “land struggle” in the plains areas was not an achievement of any moment. The encouragement given to tribals in the forests to cut down the reserve forests and cultivate the land

was far and away the most successful land struggle of the Naxalites, and not any struggle against landlords. Its extent in the five districts of Adilabad, Warangal, Khammam, East Godavari and Visakhapatnam has been plaintively estimated by the government as upwards of four lakh acres, counting together the achievement of all the Naxalite parties. However, after about the first decade and a half the Naxalite parties came round to the view that beyond a point such a land struggle is harmful to the forest-dwellers themselves, and have since the mid-1990s imposed quite a successful ban on the cutting of forests.

It is tempting to speculate what would have been the result if the government had appreciated this phase of the Naxalite struggle for what it was, and responded by means other than repression. Forgetting class interests and all that, and accepting the arguments made at face value, one would perforce describe as one-sided the argument that it would have legitimised the use of violence for social/political ends, which is unacceptable in a democracy. A

blanket condonation of the use of violence by a group that lives by its own norms, which are enforceable only by itself is no doubt unacceptable in any society, even when it is declared to be for the good of the oppressed, but the contrary argument that a positive response from the government would perhaps have delegitimised the argument for revolutionary violence was never considered. That was no doubt not an innocent lapse, and the rulers had their reasons for that.

The upshot was heavy repression on the Naxalite movement, in particular the rural poor who were part of the movement or its social base. Extremes of torture and incarceration in unlawful police custody, destruction of houses and despoliation of drinking water wells and fields, framing of severe criminal cases en masse were the norm. And “encounter” killings began from where they left off the day the internal emergency was lifted. It would again be interesting to speculate what would have been the result if the Maoists had decided not to hit back but concentrate on exposing the anti-poor bias of the government and extend their mass activity to a point that would have given their aspiration for state power a solid mass base. It would no doubt have been painful, but the alternative has not been any less painful.

Maoists Hit Back

As it happened, the Maoists hit back. The first killing of a policeman took place in June 1985 at Dharmapuri in Karimnagar district. And then a sub-inspector of police was killed at Kazipet in Warangal district on September 2 that year. That was followed the next day by plainclothes policemen going in a procession behind the sub-inspector’s dead body killing Ramana-dham, a senior civil rights activist, in his clinic. “Encounters” increased and decapitation of the limbs of police informers followed. The police acquired better weapons and the Maoists followed suit. Sizeable paramilitary forces were sent to the state in the mid-1990s but the terror they created was such that they were soon sent back. Not, however, before they had a taste of the Naxalites’ newly acquired proficiency in blowing up police vehicles at will. Almost from the mid-1980s brutal special police forces meant for eliminating Naxalites came into being and were allowed to operate totally incognito, the most successful being the greyhounds, which is

a well trained anti-guerrilla force that lives and operates as the Naxalites’ armed squads do and is bound by no known law, including the Constitution of India. The armed squads soon became the focal point of the activity of the Maoists, barring the two short periods when they were allowed freedom to conduct their political activity, both significantly in the immediate aftermath of the Congress Party coming to power after prolonged Telugu Desam rule, leading to credible speculation about some pre-election agreement between the Congress and the Maoists (known till two years ago as the Communist Party of India (Maoist-Leninist) (Peoples War)).

Soon the Maoists declared the whole of northern Telangana, and the eastern ghat hills to the north of the Godavari river, guerrilla zones, followed later by a similar proclamation for the Nallamala forests in the Krishna basin to the south. With this the changed context of the movement was formalised. The immediate economic and social problems of the masses took a back seat and the battle for supremacy with the state became the central instance of the struggle. This brought its own imperatives, which were no longer immediately congruent with the needs of the masses who continued to be the base of the Maoists. So much so that while the youth in the areas of their activity look upon them as militant heroes even when they do not approve of them, it is the elderly who talk of them with affection. It is the parents’ generation that remembers the days when begar used to be demanded by the landlord and a pittance paid for wage labour. Many of the youth frankly say, they may be valiant fighters, but what have they done for us except to bring the police to our villages?

The state has its difficulties dealing with mass movements but it has tested strategies for dealing with armed struggles. It creates informers and agents for itself from the very masses the insurgency claims to represent. That is not difficult with the money and resources of power available with the state. This is a trap the militants fall into. They kill or otherwise injure those agents and informers and thereby antagonise more of their own mass base, in turn enabling the state to have more agents and informers. Without exception, all militant movements have killed more people of their own social base than their purported enemy classes. This may be taken as one of the invariant laws of the sociology of armed insurgencies. The very fact that this is true of the Naxalites, the most

politically sensitive of all insurgents, is proof enough. And this is true even without the impatience that comes with being armed, which results in more violence against dissenters among your own people.

It is not as if they no longer addressed themselves to the social and economic problems of the poor. They did and they continue to do, but notwithstanding their claim that the village committees (often semi-secret) established by them deal with these problems, though not in the open as in the past, the overwhelming reality, except in totally isolated villages – and totally isolated areas such as the Abujmarh hills of Bastar – where such committees can actually function, is that it is the armed squads that deal with the problems. And they too often deal with them in a rough and ready manner made easy by the fact that there is no possibility of any opposition to them in society, so long as the police are taken care of. The people for their part have come to look up to the squads as a substitute for their own struggle for justice. This has, on the one hand, created more enemies – victims of revolutionary arbitrariness – than they need have made, and, on the other, corrupted the masses into receivers of justice rather than fighters for it. You only have to report to the militants and get them to put up posters with appropriate demands and threats, and you will get what you want, provided that in the meanwhile the police have not made it impossible for the militants to come to your area to hear your pleas and put up posters. Then, of course, you wait till the militants turn the tables on the police.

But even where such issues are addressed, the central place in the practice of the Maoists has been taken up by the guerrilla struggle against the state, aimed at weakening its hold to a point where the area can be considered a liberated zone. This requires a range of acts of violence, which have no direct relation to the immediate realisation of any rights for the masses, though the resulting repression invariably hits at the masses. The Maoists have developed considerable expertise of a military character, which is admired even by policemen in private, even as their political development has stagnated. The state has met this with even more brutal violence, which has bred further violence from the Maoists.

For at least about a decade now, each year has seen between 300 to 400 deaths in this gruesome game. The ability of the state to obtain information on an extensive

scale, thanks partly to its resources, partly to the demise of values at all levels in society, including the lower-most, and partly to the large number of enemies created by the Maoists around themselves in the course of their battle with the state, the state's ability for the same reasons to inject covert operatives into the Maoist ranks, and the very successful forays of the greyhounds deep into the forests, has resulted in its establishing a clear upperhand in this killing game for the present.

Retaining Support of the Next Generation

But the difficulties faced by the Maoists do not end here. To discuss the rest of them requires attention to considerations that Marxism at its best would find difficult to deal with, given the lack of any attention to an understanding of the human subject of history other than the practically useless profundity that "it makes itself while making history". And Maoism is not Marxism at its best, at any rate for this purpose. The strategy of providing armed support to the aspirations of the masses succeeds at the first round without much difficulty, once willing cadre are found, in areas historically subjected to extremes of deprivation and oppression and neglected by governance. But the very success means that a new generation is created, which is freed from the severe disabilities its parents suffered from, and is able to see and seize opportunities in the existing polity and therefore may not be as hospitable to armed struggle as its parents. The state too learns, and makes some efforts to draw the area from out of neglect and into what is usually described as "the mainstream" even as it suppresses the struggle by brute force. The eagerness to join a life-and-death struggle is usually diluted to some extent as a consequence. If, at that stage, instead of toning down the armed component of struggle the radicals proceed to fight the state over the heads of the masses, the masses can withdraw further, and even become resentful. After the first immense success of the Maoists among the Gonds of Adilabad district in the late 1970s and early 1980s, from the next generation that came of age in the 1990s one often heard the honest query: are adivasis the guinea pigs of revolution? The temptation to which the Maoists have too often succumbed, namely, to condemn all such doubt as arising from the "petty-bourgeois tendencies" of a new elite only makes matters

worse. In this sense the real challenge for the Maoists is not whether they can militarily get the better of the greyhounds, who have a clear upper hand at present, but whether they can retain active support from one generation to the next while retaining their Maoist strategy, or even by recasting it to suit the changes in the needs and aspirations of the new generation in the changed social context created by their very activity and the state's response to it.

Till now there is no sign of any thinking along these lines. Often the first thing that happens to people who find political awakening from a state of dormancy is to turn to a search for their own social identity, whether caste, tribe or gender. This has led to many ex-Naxalites becoming Ambedkarites, or at least sympathisers of Ambedkarism, since any way the overwhelming majority of them are from the outcastes or backward castes of Hindu society. This does not necessarily mean that they have lost interest in revolution as the communists understand it. But the Maoists have too often reacted with a lack of sympathy to this phenomenon. So much so that while their cadre, and leaders too, except a handful at the very top, are from the dalit, adivasi or backward communities, unlike the Parliamentary left which continues to be a bastion of upper castes, and while they have in the last few years inducted women into their armed squads on a scale that will soon probably put to shame the eternally unfilled promise of one-third reservation in the legislatures, they remain not only theoretically but practically too, hostile to any expression of identity politics, seen invariably as opportunistic deviance.

Instead the Maoist response to stagnation after the first round has been to transfer attention to a new area amenable to initiation of their kind of politics – and there are many such areas, thanks to the utter neglect of vast regions by governance in the last 50 years, and the current philosophy of governance which is a philosophy of non-governance – and do the same thing again. Other Marxist-Leninist groups have often criticised the Maoists for this hop, skip and jump mode of revolution but they have never taken the criticism seriously, probably regarding their conduct as part of the strategy of guerrilla struggle. Leaving aside the political rights and wrongs of it, the practical consequence has been a rapid spread to new areas such as the area surrounding the Nallamala and

other contiguous forests in southern coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema. This spread has been mainly through the guerrilla activity of armed squads, not preceded by anything comparable with the mass activity that illuminated and remedied much of the social and economic oppression people suffered from in the Godavari basin districts of northern Telangana. But the spread has not been as smooth and successful as in northern Telangana.

Whatever Maoist theory may say, the guerrilla phase of struggle involves establishing armed dominion over society, often described by the police with exaggeration as a parallel government. Such dominion is easier to establish in areas whose social culture is characterised by a certain quiescence than in factious areas. The northern Telangana districts, of all the areas of the state, do exhibit that characteristic whereas the south, especially the region surrounding the Nallamala forests, is the most factious area. Armed activity of any kind, with even the best of intentions, can degenerate easily into factious violence. The fate of the Maoists in Anantapur in Rayalaseema is a classic instance of this. More vitally, armed dominion in factious areas calls up private vengeance which the state will not hesitate to encourage. The 'Nallamala cobras' who have committed three murders of democratic activists in the last nine months and silenced much of democratic activity in the southern districts constitute brutal proof of this.

We know that each mode of life is found attractive by persons of certain character traits and in turn encourages certain traits in those who partake of it. It is a species of conceit that refuses to see that this applies to political strategies too. To speak of negative traits alone, just as the Sarvodaya philosophy attracts a lot of hypocrisy and the parliamentary strategy of the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) a lot of opportunism, strategies of militancy attract unruly types who straddle the border line between rebellion and mere rowdiness. These types can, and have, caused considerable harm to the Maoists and have constituted easy subjects for the state's tactics of shaping covert operatives inside their ranks. Once outside the party they have fit equally well the role of "renegades" as they are called in Kashmir. The conduct of the Maoists who leave little room for appeal for persons whom they brand enemies of the people has in turn created cadre for the vengeful renegades, and the

resulting gangs that call themselves cobras and tigers of various kinds have played a major role in immobilising the very substantial underground support activity the Naxalite movement had.

Decimation of Organic Leaders

This is as far as the story of Maoist revolution has come in Andhra Pradesh. Since there is little sign of any rethinking on either side, one has no basis for expressing much hope about the future. What makes it a tragedy is that the lives of lakhs of people belonging to the lowest orders of society in terms of community as well as class are involved in it. Many dimensions of the tragedy are known or amenable to imagination but there is one which is not usually commented on. This is that many

if not all of the lives that are being lost at the hands of the police in this process are lives that the oppressed can ill afford to lose. They are the organic leaders of the class, who have adopted a political path of their choice. It is not all among the powerless classes that can dare challenge the system and be ready to pay for it. It is not everyday that the oppressed produce such elements from amongst themselves. The rights or wrongs of their choice has no bearing on the tragedy of the decimation of this organic leadership. They chose to be Maoists, but they could have chosen to be something else, and whichever the choice, they would have added to the strength of the oppressed. The daily loss of such persons is a sacrifice the oppressed cannot be called upon to put up with indefinitely. **EPW**