

## **Naxalism: the vacuity of official rethinking**

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The sudden interest the Central Government is taking in the Maoist movement is more than a little strange. Time was when it was left to the State Governments to handle it, with the Center committing itself only to dispatching paramilitary forces when requested. It was regarded as a 'problem', yes, but as a local problem which could well be tackled locally. The naxalites themselves made it clear that their aspiration was global, but New Delhi was not impressed.

All of a sudden we find the Government of India calling for meetings of the concerned State Governments to discuss ways of tackling the naxalites. By itself that may not signify much of a change. Such meetings took place some times in the past too, at any rate at the level of the police, but today we find the Prime Minister himself deigning to talk at length of naxalism. He calls it the biggest threat to India's internal security, an astonishing idea about which we will have some thing to say below. And we find the Government of India putting forward proposals of how to tackle the Maoists in a coordinated way, the Center and the States acting in concert.

The Planning Commission's official mouth piece Yojana has also come out with a special issue (Volume 51, Feb 2007) on the topic which has pieces by the Prime Minister himself as well as two high profile policemen of nation-wide repute – K.P.S.Gill and Prakash Singh, of the former of whom it would have been said until recently that he is an expert on high-intensity insurgency and his talents and time are wasted if asked to take on the low-intensity violence of naxalism. Today however he is Security advisor to Chattisgarh, the most in-the-news theater of naxalite activity. His pompous article expresses what can only be expected from his type: utter contempt for every thing humane in governance, expressed as the practical wisdom of the faceless formless 'forces' that everybody throws to the wolf, as against muddled, populist, hysterical, head-buried-in-the-sand responses and the rhetoric of 'root causes' mouthed by the politicians and the intelligentsia (all these are Gill's expressions).

The sudden interest is probably due to two reasons. Until recently it used to be said, some times smugly, that the naxalite movement is a badly splintered left-over from the hopeful nineteen sixties. It still is (splintered, I mean), but at the center has emerged a major formation, the CPI (Maoist), product of two mergers, first of the CPI(M-L) (Peoples War) with the CPI(M-L) (Party Unity) and then of the resulting organization with the Maoist

Communist Center (MCC). The sense of smallness and inconsequentiality that the expression 'splintered' conveys is no longer apt for the naxalites. Two, the Government of India has realized that this formation is (from its point of view) sitting on the mineral wealth of Central Indian forests. Since this wealth, spread over Jharkhand, Orissa, and Chattisgarh, is eyed covetously by the forces which want to take India into the heaven of a two-digit growth rate, the dominant presence of the naxalites here is viewed with anxiety. For the naxalites and the awareness they communicate to the local adivasi masses is likely to come in the way of cavalier handling of the issues of mining leases to private Corporations and land acquisition. It is true that the naxalites have not succeeded anywhere in effectively obstructing the Government's policies, even as they have quite effectively put an end to oppression and exploitation by traders and petty government servants. Yet the anxiety is there.

But the heightened interest is not matched by any heightening of understanding. Take the opinion that the Maoists are the biggest threat to internal security. That the Maoists are a threat to the personal security of certain sections of society is a fact. And we need not follow the Maoists in identifying all these as exploiters and oppressors. There are many who are not, who are nevertheless targets of naxalite wrath for various not so inspiring reasons. Yet there are whole classes of society, especially the Scheduled tribes of Central India coming down to the northern parts of Andhra Pradesh, who had the first taste of a sense of security only after the naxalites entered their midst. Every passer-by, from the smallest minion of the Indian State to every clever non-tribal, robbed them and beat them until the naxalites came along. They could neither live nor grow a crop nor collect firewood in peace in their own habitat till then. So if somebody asks whose security the Prime Minister is talking of when he says the naxalites are a threat to the internal security of the country, what would he say? Is he not confirming the Maoists' own analysis of political terminology, that its meaning is class-ridden? Considering the fact that whatever one may say against Manmohan Singh, one cannot call him unintelligent, this ridiculous opinion must be put down to abysmal ignorance.

Even if it is sought to be explained that when the Prime Minister talks of threat to internal security he is referring to the security of State and not of individuals and social classes, it is still doubtful that he is right in identifying the Maoists as the main threat. Security of State is threatened more by people losing faith in the system than by rifle fire. Corruption and callousness of administration contribute more to weakening the people's faith in the dispensation than the naxalites' political rhetoric or attacks on police stations. If police stations were seen as abodes of lawful penal administration, the blasting of one police station building would in no way weaken the State. The police could continue to

function from a hut. If what the Prime Minister really aims is to make the Indian State more secure he had better pay attention to his own home than the policing of the naxalites.

I do not wish to convey the impression that the Government need not be concerned about naxalite violence because the violence has come to the aid of the poor. There are many reasons why it is not possible to take this stand, including the fact that naxalite violence has not always injured the wicked or the rich alone, and in any case it cannot be left to their discretion alone to decide who is wicked and who is not. From the point of view of Constitutional governance, however, it would not be possible for any Government to abdicate its responsibility to govern and govern well, and instead hand over governance to even the most well intentioned private group using violence as a means. Adopted as a principle, that would mean replacement of governance by chaos. But when the violence comes to the aid of the most disadvantaged sections of society and thrives on their support, it is necessary to have a rounded view of it, and to not let one's objection to the violence, whether born of Gandhian notions or of adherence to the principle of Rule of Law, upset one's sense of balance. Rule of Law no doubt requires that the law enforcing agencies alone have the right to violence, and that too strictly within the parameters of law. But there is no cause for making a fetish of this principle in the face of the inability of the law to prevent oppression and exploitation, the unwillingness of the law-enforcing agencies to confine their use of violence to within the four corners of the law, and the general tendency in society to flout this principle whenever it suits one's interests, a tendency that mainstream political parties and their leaders are no more immune to than those such as the Maoists who reject the principle on ideological grounds.

Rulers of our country have learnt to pay lip service to the idea that naxalism is a socio-economic phenomenon, and then forget it and proceed with the job of policing as usual. The Profile of naxalism that is set out in the preface to the Planning Commission's special on naxalism illustrates this point. The Profile proceeds as follows:

Naxalites operate in a vacuum created by inadequacy of administrative and political institutions, espouse local demands and take advantage of the prevalent disaffection and injustice among the exploited segments of the population and seek to offer an alternative system of governance which promises emancipation of these segments from the clutches of 'exploiter' classes through the barrel of a gun. This may be taken as a good enough working description of naxalism, even if the Maoists are likely be unhappy

that it misses out the political dimension. But immediately the Profile goes on to add:

Naxalite menace remains an area of serious concern.

If it answers the 'prevalent disaffection' and sense of injustice among the people, how can it be a 'menace'? Does it not mean that the use of violence by the naxalites is put at the center of one's understanding, to the exclusion of the social and economic role they have played?. That this is wrong is precisely what is supposedly recognized when it is said that the naxalite movement must not be seen merely as a problem of law and order but as a socio-economic phenomenon. That caution was never intended to convey an impression that naxalite violence need not be prevented or that it should be condoned. It means that the use of violence by the naxalites should not be central to the understanding of the phenomenon, though it cannot be ignored. Naxalism is not violence with a socio-economic façade of retrospective justification, but a political programme with substantial socio-economic content that uses violence as a means. Some may in all honesty disagree that violence, or at least violence of the specific form and type they employ, is necessary to realize their programme. That is a different matter. But if after stating the socio-economic dimensions of the phenomenon, one goes on to call Maoism a menace, one has learnt nothing.

Whether the ignorance is honest or deliberate make belief, it extends to appreciative nonsense about Salwa Judum of Bastar, namely that it is a spontaneous expression of pent-up anti-naxalite sentiments among the local people, a voluntary and peaceful movement of local people. That there are anti-naxalite feelings in local society would be conceded. The non-tribals who have suffered loss of position and privilege because of the naxalites do hate them. And so do the corrupt and the privileged among the adivasis who too have lost importance and power in their community. But the list of the disaffected does not stop there. The Maoists have an agenda of remaking society under their exclusive leadership that allows little political freedom to disagree with them, and which therefore treads on more toes than just those of the tribal elite and the non-tribal exploiters. A political mobilization against the naxalites is therefore not unthinkable. But what distinguishes Salwa Judum is a conscious effort to gather together victims or opponents of the Maoists, arm them with the connivance of the State, give them the freedom to go on a rampage in the areas of Maoist influence in tow with the police and paramilitary forces, to burn, loot, kill and rape the adivasis and their habitations. This is how the Salwa Judum has been described in report after report published by the

mainstream press, and not just leftist publications and the reports of civil rights organizations. Don't people at the Planning Commission read any thing?

This view of the Salwa Judum is compounded by the observation of the Prime Minister himself in his piece, that special training for forces involved in anti-naxalite operations is important and his appreciative comments on 'the excellent training establishment for anti-naxalite operations' available in Andhra Pradesh. The reference is to the greyhounds of the Andhra Pradesh police, about whom there is a separate article by a police PRO from Hyderabad. The greyhounds is a force trained to hunt and kill – it is honest in its name. It is no doubt to their credit as a hunter group that they have hunted and killed a number of underground Maoists, especially in recent months. But any one concerned with legality must worry whether in the law that governs our county it is permissible to develop a police force to hunt and kill any one; and any one concerned about the social character of Maoism must worry whether it is bearable that these sons and daughters of the oppressed who have taken up weapons to fight for a new society – believe that they are misguided if you will – should be killed like dangerous animals. And the uniform appreciation the greyhounds receive from the rulers of the country makes one wonder what is meant when they say they realize that the naxalite movement is a socio-economic phenomenon. In general, the police establishment of Andhra Pradesh, in the background of its victorious fight against the naxalites, has developed into a very ugly force that does no credit to any civilized society. Severe forms of torture are routinely part of their professional apparatus, whether the crime being investigated is of the naxalites or not; extra-judicial execution, crisply called an encounter, is an option they always deem to be available to them in relation to any detenu, again whether naxalite or not; the police stations in more and more areas of the State are built like forts which no poor householder who has lost a goat or a bicycle will ever enter to give a complaint; searchlights beam all night across more and more villages from the local police station or outpost scaring villagers who may have to go to the fields in the night to switch on the bore-well motor or answer a call of nature; etc.

Finally, it is odd that the 'development' is what the Government is supposed to undertake in tandem with policing to counter the Maoists. From the Prime Minister down to sundry experts, every one says that the Government must undertake development activity in those areas to win back the people. The Maoists have certainly not done any development to attract the poor in their areas of activity. One has heard that they have built some irrigation tanks here and there but that has been exceptional. Nor is there any great hunger for development among the people, though they may not be averse to some of it if it comes their way and does not involve handing over their habitat to others. What the

Maoists have enabled is life with the minimum of security and dignity, and an opportunity to lead lives unmolested by the babus of the Government and enterprising intruders into the forests. That this minimum is what has been denied to the adivasis and other oppressed in all corners of the country is the message the growth and spread of naxalism should be giving the Government. And not that people have an unsatisfied urge for some dubious object called development, which now the Government should rush in to provide. Apart from being a solution no one desired, it opens the door for further alienation of local resources to business interests, only to later blame the adivasis again for not wanting the solution the government in its generosity offered them.