



Spotlight

Naxalite Movement: A Fierce Homegrown Insurgency in India

by

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BACKGROUND

Communist movements erupted in India during the colonial era and later after the independence from British rule in 1947 the first Marxist movement started in the Southern region of India. To overthrow the government and formulate a communist regime, the Naxalite movement emerged in India in 1967 to address the inequality and the exploitation that the tribal community faced in India. The insurgency erupted in West Bengal in a small village named Naxalbari, from where the term derived and is one of the longest-running homegrown insurgencies. The term Naxalism refers to the fierce radical and revolutionary communist group that was born out as a consequence of the Sino-Soviet split in the Indian Communist Movement.¹ The movement started against the local landowners, aggravated by the exploitation of the landlords, the working class across the Naxalbari initiated a mass rebellion which spread across India and till date threatens India in the form of the Naxalite/ Maoist movement.

The Naxalite insurgency has gone through 3 different phases, the first relatively short phase of rebellion erupted in 1967 when a local peasant named Bimal Kissan was attacked and brutally beaten up by the landlord for plowing his land.² This incident lit a fire in the region, and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) under the leadership of Charu Mazumdar availed the opportunity and organized urban warfare against the capitalist class.³ In the second phase of the insurgency, a strategy of mass mobilization over the concern of political violence was emphasized and in the ongoing third phase, the Maoist insurgent groups congregated under the Communist Party of India (Maoist) in 2004 and increased mass mobilization.⁴

The Naxalite movement aimed to fight political marginalization and economic injustice and to ensure the rightful allocation of land to the working class. The Maoists incited the rural masses to protest against feudalism and the class system and to achieve their objective they resorted to violent means and took up arms against the oppressors and those who were securing the interests of the feudal lords. Within no time the retaliation gained momentum and reached regions across West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, and a feeble presence in the state of Uttar Pradesh, Assam, and Madhya Pradesh.⁵

¹ Das, Kartick. "Naxalbari to today's Maoist: Uprisings and Implications." *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 71, no. 2 (2010): 489-95. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42753711>.

² Sonali Awasthi and Ayush Mishra, "The Naxalite Movement in India," *International Journal of Law Management and Humanities* 1, no. 4 (2008) <file:///C:/Users/Administrator/Desktop/The-Naxalite-Movement-in-India.pdf>

³ Ajay Verghese, and Emmanuel Teitelbaum, "Conquest and Conflict: The Colonial Roots of Maoist Violence in India." *Politics & Society* 47, no. 1 (2019): 55-86. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0032329218823120>

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Abid Ali and Sant Lal, "Naxalite Movement in India: Causes and Solutions," *International Journal of Informative and Futuristic Research* 2, no. 8 (2015). file:///C:/Users/Administrator/Downloads/Documents/6-NAXALITE_100620.pdf

CAUSES

The different issues that added to the plight of sufferings of the local communities that led to the growth of Naxalism are:

- **British Land Tenancy System:** The peasant revolt instigated by the CPI-M leader has its roots in the colonial land tenancy system which India inherited from the British Government. The tenancy system spawn land inequality and was discriminatory towards the impoverished tribal population because, under this system, the pieces of land were allocated by the landlords to local peasants in exchange for tax revenue. The local peasants who worked hard in the field suffered the most because they were exploited by the rich landlords as the peasants had to pay a certain fixed amount to the landlords.⁶
- **Social Discrimination:** The history of social deprivation and marginalization in the Naxal-affected regions forced the local tribal men to recourse to violence and join the Naxal uprising. The deprived members of the society, especially the Dalits and the Adivasis were tortured and exploited by the local elites which provided them a reason to support the violent uprising. These communities were not given equal political representation, employment, health care facilities, and educational opportunities as compared to the local elite class.
- **Poor governance:** Systematic structural inequalities is one of the main factors that provided Maoists an opportunity to lure the deprived tribal population. The state government exploited the impoverished tribal by reserving the land they inhabited for conservation and developmental projects without compensating the poor peasants and devising a resettlement plan.⁷ The incompetence and the inefficiency of state machinery to address the miseries of the locals allowed the Naxals to gain legitimacy among the impoverished population and recruit more sympathizers and establish a parallel government in the region.⁸ Failure of government to address the grievances of the local tribal men, the slow implementation of land reforms, the issue of resettlement and compensation, and political interference in delaying court proceedings made the poor working-class follow the Naxals.⁹ Because of state neglect, the Maoist cadres filled the power vacuum and earned the support of the locals.
- **Political economic injustice:** Political and economic injustice is another major factor that led to the growth of Naxalism. The unjust political interference and policies increased the disparity between the rich and poor. Through government policies such as the Indian Forest Act, the government claimed their control over the Indian forests which led to the eviction of the indigenous/Adivasi from the forest lands that they inhabited for many generations.¹⁰

⁶ Sonali Awasthi and Ayush Mishra, "The Naxalite Movement in India," *International Journal of Law Management and Humanities* 1, no. 4 (2008) <file:///C:/Users/Administrator/Desktop/The-Naxalite-Movement-in-India.pdf>

⁷ ibid

⁸ ibid

⁹ Abid Ali and Sant Lal, "Naxalite Movement in India: Causes and Solutions," *International Journal of Informative and Futuristic Research* 2, no. 8 (2015). file:///C:/Users/Administrator/Downloads/Documents/6-NAXALITE_100620.pdf

¹⁰ Geopolitical overview of conflicts 2013, *Spanish institute of Strategic Studies*, February 2013 file:///C:/Users/Administrator/Downloads/Dialnet-PanoramaGeopoliticoDeLosConflictos2013-550333_2.pdf

The local tribal men felt enraged and excluded because the policies directly impacted their livelihood and served the interest of the capitalist class.¹¹ Because of political marginalization, the indigenous population suffered economically as they had no resources to meet their needs. Through land reforms, developmental projects, and natural resource extraction policies the politicians facilitated the rich landlords of the region and exploited the tribals. The systematic inequality, uneven economic growth, lack of employment opportunities, and political marginalization have further aggravated the conflict.

NATIONAL SECURITY THREAT

The Naxalite/Maoist movement, with high-profile assaults against the state security forces and the unarmed civilian population, is one of the major national security threats that haunt India to date. Naxalism is one of the fault lines that is adding to internal instability and is making the state vulnerable to external threats. They use the hit and run tactic and have a large armed guerrilla force comprising both men and women fighters. The armed group of CPI (Maoist) called the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (PGLA) are armed with modern weapons and explosives smuggled from Nepal, Bangladesh, and Myanmar or captured from paramilitary forces.¹² The Naxal brigade is armed with weapons such as rocket launchers, explosive devices, grenades, and Ak-47 and in the mid-2000's they had a fully functioned military and administrative infrastructure in some of the states of operation.¹³ The movement costed heavy human casualties and collateral damages. The decade-long insurgency took 14, 430 lives in the past two decades including civilians and security forces.¹⁴ The Naxalite insurgency has spread across vast geography called the Red Corridor and is functional in 13 states and 200 districts and according to reports from 2014-2019 a total of 942 attacks were carried out causing heavy human tolls.¹⁵

Naxalite movement is also hampering the economic development of the country as the guerilla warfare and high profile kidnapping is no longer limited to remote forests but has also expanded to urban cities. As the relation between economic growth and conflict is well established and it has been deduced that the ongoing conflict has caused political unrest which directly impacts the economy of the state. The Naxalite insurgency has affected the economic outcomes of the state as a large chunk of GDP is spent on national security as compared to developmental projects. Thus

¹¹ Sonali Awasthi and Ayush Mishra, "The Naxalite Movement in India," *International Journal of Law Management and Humanities* 1, no. 4 (2008) <file:///C:/Users/Administrator/Desktop/The-Naxalite-Movement-in-India.pdf>

¹² Masud Ahmad Khan, "India's biggest internal threat," *The Nation*, 21 February 2021. <https://nation.com.pk/21-Feb-2021/india-s-biggest-internal-threat>

¹³ Niranjan Sahoo, "Half a century of India's Maoist insurgency: An appraisal of state response," *ORF Occasional Paper* 198 (2019). <https://www.orfonline.org/research/half-a-century-of-indias-maoist-insurgency-an-appraisal-of-state-response-51933/>

¹⁴ South Asian Terrorism Portal (SATP), "Fatalities in Left-wing Extremism:1999-2019*(UMHA) <https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/india-maoistinsurgency/india-LWE-Fatalities-1999%E2%80%932019>

¹⁵ Masud Ahmad Khan, "India's biggest internal threat," *The Nation*, 21 February 2021. <https://nation.com.pk/21-Feb-2021/india-s-biggest-internal-threat>

the national security threats from the home-grown insurgents are impeding sustainable economic growth and internal peace and stability.

A WAY FORWARD

The root of the Naxalite/Maoist conflict is structural such as poor governance, institutional and administrative neglect, and political marginalization in tandem, they must be dealt with swiftly. To counter the insurgency a tailor-made solution must be adopted as a strategy of non-negotiation and heavy militarization cannot be applied to all the Naxal affected regions. The violent repressive means to counter the insurgency have resulted in the increase of Naxalism and irregular warfare.¹⁶ The strategy of winning hearts and minds must be adopted for which the government must formulate and implement policies that address the grievances of the rural population and should devise a strategy to counter the core narrative of the Naxalite/Maoist groups.

To curb the growth of Naxalism sympathizers the government needs to gain the support of the tribal people through reconciliation and by providing a well-functioning government, dealing with the menace of corruption and injustice and ensuring an equitable distribution of resources irrespective of class, caste, and religion. To counter the menace of Naxalism a grand strategy that incorporates political, economic, and social aspects of the conflict must be adopted. As the Naxalite/Maoists gains the support of the local tribal population because of the failure of the state government to reach out to the local marginalized population, therefore to resolve the conflict the government must adopt a bottom-up approach i.e. a population-centric approach, and address the grievances of the rural people and guarantee them their rights. To debilitate the support of the Naxalite, the government must start investing in human development and should formulate policies to elevate poverty, introduce developmental projects and most importantly enforce the rule of law.

The military response of the state to counter the insurgency and treating it as a security issue without taking into account the socio-economic and political dimension of the conflict is further aggravating the conflict. Therefore, to curb the decade's long conflict the parties to the conflict must cease violence first and initiate dialogue. The use of the military might not be considered as the only viable solution to the problem therefore the government should allow the armed rebel groups to participate in a peace dialogue. The dialogue will enable the government to distinguish the different layers of the conflict and offer new insight into the resolution of the conflict. Although the Naxals insurgency cannot be curbed all at once, better state performance and the reintegration, rehabilitation, and reconciliation of the tribal men can help in decreasing the growth of the group. Thus, to attain sustainable peace the underlying systematic structural inequalities must be addressed rather than using military might which can only to escalate the conflict.

¹⁶ Stuti Roy, "The Naxalite Insurgency in India: Addressing the limitation of Greed and Grievance in Conflict Resolution," *The Yale Review of International Studies*, March 2021
<http://yris.yira.org/essays/4899>