

An engineer by training, behind most audacious Naxal attacks: Story & significance of Basavaraju, dreaded Maoist leader allegedly killed in encounter

Basavaraju took over from the former CPI (Maoist) general secretary Mupalla Laxman Rao alias Ganpathy sometime in 2017. Some in the security establishment believe that his killing could mark the beginning of the end of the movement in India.

In perhaps the most successful security operation in decades against the Maoists, security forces on Wednesday (May 21) claimed to have killed CPI (Maoist) general secretary Nambala Keshava Rao alias Basavaraju along with 27 other Naxal cadres in an encounter in Chhattisgarh.

Sources in the security establishment said this could be critical moment in the fight against Naxals, and that the forces may actually be able to meet the deadline set by union Home Minister Amit Shah for ending the Maoist insurgency by March next year.

A former military commander of the movement, Basavaraju took over from the former general secretary Mupalla Laxman Rao alias Ganpathy sometime in 2017 owing to the latter's ill health. However, the CPI (Maoist) announced this change only in 2018.

In a press statement dated November 10, 2018, the Maoists announced that Mupalla Laxman Rao alias Ganapathy had "withdrawn from his responsibilities", and the new general secretary was Nambala Keshava Rao alias Basavaraju.

This was the first change in the leadership of the movement in 14 years. Ganpathy had been its supreme leader for 25 years — 12 years as chief of the CPI (ML) People's War and 13 years as chief of the CPI (Maoist) following the merger of the People's War and the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC).

Until he took over the party as chief, Basavaraju was practically the No. 2. He was the Commander in Chief of the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the Maoists, and was responsible for all attacks and ambushes on security forces over the past decade and a half.

He looked after both intelligence and operations, and was the head of the forest division of the Dandakaranya in the past. He also was a member of the CPI (Maoist) Politburo (the top ideological think tank of the party), a member of the Standing Committee, part of the Central Committee, and a member of the editorial board of the party publication Awam-e-Jung.

Security agencies have had very sketchy details of Basavaraju, the "ferocious and brutal revolutionary", beyond his student days.

Born in an ordinary family at Jiyanapeta, Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh, on July 10, 1955, Basavaraju went on to do a B Tech from the Regional Engineering College in Warangal. This trained engineer was also very good in sports – and represented Andhra Pradesh at the national level in volleyball.

These were also days when Basavaraju got involved in leftist student politics, and was arrested in 1980 following a scuffle with ABVP members. That was the only time he had ever been arrested.

Soon afterward, Basavaraju joined the People's War. This association with left-wing extremism (LWE) would continue for the next 35 years.

According to intelligence agencies, Basavaraju is about 6 feet tall, and has a wheatish complexion. An intelligence document accessed by The Indian Express describes him as a "clean shaven man who now dyes his hair regularly". He "lives in Maad (Abujhmad) and AOB Zonal Committee area", and carries an AK 47. "He walks briskly and swings either side while walking," the document says.

The document also says that Ganpathy had been grooming him for the top leadership post for years, and had even accompanied him to Parasnath Hills in Giridih in November-December 2013 for a meeting.

Basavaraju carried a reward of Rs 2.02 crore on his head. Ganpathy himself carries a reward of more than Rs 3 crore on his head.

GANAPATHY: Ganapathy was a teacher before he joined the Maoist movement. He has been the ideological fountainhead and the political brain of the CPI (Maoist), and has steered the broad policies of the party since its inception. Ganapathy is regarded as a pragmatic leader with a degree of acceptability across LWE parties.

Ganapathy used to work under Kondapally Seetharamaiah, the founder of the People's War. In 1992, Ganapathy toppled him, and was elected General Secretary. He oversaw the merger of the People's War with the MCC, and was again elected General Secretary.

His core concerns and roles have been spreading the influence of the party in new areas, maintaining contact with and guiding overground front organisations, keeping in touch with like-minded political parties, establishing infrastructure for logistical support and legal help for cadres.

BASAVARAJU: As CMC chief first and later General Secretary of the CPI (Maoist), Basavaraju was responsible for planning operations, targeting security forces, and recruiting dalam cadres. He had the blessings of Ganapathy when he was chosen to lead the People's Liberation Guerilla Army.

Basavaraju was known as an aggressive military commander who had presided over some of the most audacious and brutal attacks in the history of the Maoist movement. He was regarded as an expert in IEDs, and was a master military strategist.

It is said it was his brain that lay behind the 2013 Latehar ambush in Jharkhand, when a photosensitive IED was planted in the belly of a dead CRPF man with the expectation that rescue teams and doctors would suffer casualties.

Basavaraju was also regarded as someone who could "tolerate some collateral damage" in terms of civilian lives if it meant a big success against security forces.

When he took over the leadership of the CPI (Maoist), Basavaraju, with his considerable combat experience, was expected to make the outfit more lethal and combative. He did, indeed, embark on that path after taking over – guiding several lethal attacks on security forces.

But his leadership also saw the decline of the movement and serious setbacks for the Maoists. Security forces have not only killed hundreds of LWE cadres and leaders in the past few years, but have also advanced deep into Maoist core areas.

Some of the major attacks that took place under Basavaraju's leadership include:

2018 Sukma IED attack: Maoists detonated an IED targeting a mine-protected vehicle carrying CRPF troops. Nine CRPF personnel were killed and six injured.

2019 Gadchiroli landmine blast: A landmine explosion targeted a police vehicle hours after Maoists torched vehicles at a road construction site in Maharashtra's Vidarbha region. As many as 15 police personnel and a driver were killed.

2021 Sukma-Bijapur ambush: Security forces were ambushed during an anti-Maoist operation, leading to a prolonged firefight. As many as 22 security personnel were killed and 32 injured.

2023 Dantewada IED blast: An IED explosion targeted a vehicle returning from an anti-Maoist operation. 10 DRG personnel and 1 civilian driver were killed.

2025 Bijapur IED attack: A powerful IED explosion targeted a vehicle returning from an anti-Maoist operation. Eight DRG personnel and a civilian driver were killed.

The major reverses suffered by the Maoists under him include:

2024 Kanker encounter: Security forces engaged Maoist cadres in a significant encounter, resulting in substantial rebel casualties. As many as 29 Maoists were killed, three security personnel were injured.

2024 Abujhmad clash: This was one of the deadliest encounters for the Maoists, which significantly weakened their presence in the region. Thirty-eight Maoists were killed; one security personnel was injured.