

NAXALISM AND THE INDIAN STATE

Niranjan Ashok Jahagirdar

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Hari Nair

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1. How Naxalism started in India

1.1 History of Communism in India¹

To understand the origins of Naxalism and the political mechanisms behind it, we must understand the history of Communism and Communist parties in India. The Communist Party of India (CPI) was founded on December 26, 1925². The founders of the CPI were inspired by the Great October Socialist Revolution. In 1963, the CPI had split into two factions with the newer one being called the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM. This split was due to the increasing differences in the CPI leadership especially during and after the Sino-Indian War. There were leftist and rightist blocs in the CPI. The rightist bloc looked up to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and as a result, had forsworn armed revolution, because the Soviets wanted good relations with the Indian government. The leftist wing followed the Communist Party of China. They saw the Indian state as run by an alliance between the landlords and the bourgeoisie and regarded India's parliamentary democracy as mostly a sham: to be used when it suited, and to be discarded when it didn't. The CPM joined the

¹ Ramchandra Guha, *India after Gandhi: the History of the World's Largest Democracy* (London: Picador, 2008), 421-426.

Arundhati Roy, *Walking With The Comrades* (Gurugram: Penguin Books India, 2011), 34-35.

Adrija Roychowdhury, 51 years of Naxalbari: How a peasant movement triggered a pan-India political movement, *The Indian Express*, last updated May 25, 2018,

<https://indianexpress.com/article/research/51-years-of-naxalbari-how-a-peasant-uprising-triggered-a-pan-india-political-movement-5191046/>

History of Naxalism, *Hindustan Times*, last updated December 15, 2007,

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/history-of-naxalism/story-4f1rZukARGYn3qHOqDMEbM.html>

² History of the Communist Party of India, The Communist Party of India, accessed on November 1, 2018, <https://www.communistparty.in/about>

West Bengal government in 1967 which led to some members like Charu Majumdar accusing them of 'betraying the revolution'.

In 1967, events in the small village of Naxalbari in West Bengal lit the fire of the armed revolution that is referred to as Naxalism today. The peasants in Naxalbari had been exploited by the landlords for centuries. On March 25, 1967 a tenant farmer was beaten up and looted by a landlord for tilling the land he was illegally evicted from. CPM's Kanu Sanyal, an associate of Charu Mazumdar mobilized the peasants and other tribals against the landlords who had evicted tenants or hoarded grain. The protests became militant, leading to the death of a sub-inspector and nine tribals. The protestors took to arms and landlords were beheaded. To the surprise of the protestors, the CPM took the side of the law enforcement. 1500 policemen were deployed in Naxalbari. Kanu Sanyal and other leaders were jailed while the other rebels fled to the jungles. News about these events spread all over the country and the word Naxalite, derived from Naxalbari, came to refer to anyone who would use arms to fight the Indian state on behalf of the oppressed and disinherited, especially the tribals.

In Andhra, another group of Naxalites had been preparing for action. In 1948, 2,500 villages in the south were organised into 'communes' as part of a peasant movement which came to be known as 'Telangana Struggle'. Youngsters were being trained in the use of arms. In Srikakulam, houses of landlords and money lenders were raided and their records burnt.

It is interesting to note that at this point of time, the leaders of Communist China approved of the Naxalites. In June 1967, Radio

Peking announced that the Naxalite movement “is the front paw of the revolutionary armed struggle launched by the Indian people under the guidance of Mao Tse-tung’s teachings.... people of India, China and the rest of the World hail the emergence of this revolutionary armed struggle.”

Thus Naxalism can be defined as the armed struggle against the Indian state led by the ideologies of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism.

Since the CPM was part of the West Bengal Government (in alliance with the Bangla Congress) which had taken police action against the Naxalites, those in the CPM who supported the Naxalites felt betrayed by the leadership. They formed the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI(ML)), the first formal organization for the Naxalites, in 1969. Charu Mazumdar, the General Secretary of the CPI(ML) urged the elimination of landlords, who were deemed as ‘class enemies’, as well as of CPM cadres, who were ‘right deviationists’. West Bengal, especially Kolkata (then, Calcutta) faced a series of violence attacks in 1970s. The Naxalites hoped to cause unrest by random attacks on policemen and government officials.

After Mazumdar’s death in custody in 1972, there were several splits in the CPI(ML). By 1982 there were three major organizations which had split from the CPI(ML) – the People’s War Group (PWG), Party Unity (PU) and the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC). The PWG yielded influence in the tribal areas of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. The PU functioned mainly in Bihar while the MCC operated in Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal. By 2004, these three

parties merged together to become what they are now, the Communist Party of India (Maoist).

1.2 Factors responsible for the rise and spread of Naxalism³

The Naxalites today have a significant presence in the states of Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Bihar, and West Bengal, and a marginal presence in Assam, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. To understand the rise of Naxalism, we must understand why locals and tribals in these areas support the Naxalite movement.

The main point of contention between the tribals and the Indian state has always been the ownership of land. Most of the areas controlled by the Naxalites are rich in natural resources like bauxite, iron ore or even flowing water. As a result, these areas are in demand by corporations who wish to build mining centres, dams, etc. They, therefore, approach the Indian or state government to buy this land, often for large sums of money. In these situations, the government has tried to displace the locals and take the land, with or without providing compensation. To solve these problems, the government started land reforms.

Implementation of land reforms has been very slow in Naxalite areas. Landlords have frequently moved the court to delay implementation.

³ Arundhati Roy, *Walking With The Comrades* (Gurugram: Penguin Books India, 2011), 3-15, 36-45.

Dr. Abid Ali and Dr. Sant Lal. "The Naxalite Movement in India: Causes and Solutions," *International Journal of Informative and Futuristic Research* 2, no. 8 (2015): 2971-2979.

Imran Garda, "Inside India's 'red corridor'," Al Jazeera, last updated October 20, 2011, accessed on November 1, 2018.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/aljazeeracorrespondent/2011/10/2011101974422887318.html>

They have connived with politicians and bureaucrats, making the process slow and cumbersome.

Even when their land was not taken, the tribal people were still economically exploited. In Gadchiroli in 1981, the locals were paid 3 paise for a bundle of fifty leaves. Compared to this, the contractors to whom these leaves sold would earn profits of 1 to 6 million rupees per season. Lack of government attention to these issues led to the Naxalites organizing these locals, leading a strike and increasing the prices to 1 rupee per bundle. Such acts of land grabbing and economic exploitation led to resentment against the government and support for the Naxalites.

The tribal people were also frequently harassed by the Forest Department. Forest officials would often prevent people from ploughing their fields, grazing their cattle, collecting firewood, plucking leaves, picking fruit etc. People would be beaten, arrested, humiliated and have their crops destroyed. All this was done on the premise that the tribals were illegal people engaged in unconstitutional activity. Tribal women were also sexually exploited by these officials. These acts built up anger against the government.

Salwa Judum (Purification Hunt), a militia led by the now deceased Congress MLA Mahendra Karma, was responsible for rapes, killings, burning down villages and driving hundreds of thousands of people from their home. The fact that governments had directly or indirectly sponsored this group drove tribals directly into the arms of the Naxalites who portrayed themselves as the protectors of the tribals against such

groups. The existence of such groups allowed the Naxalites to use violence unabashedly themselves, without facing any criticism from the tribals. Their violent methods were perceived as self-defence by the tribals.

The effects of India's rapid economic growth have not percolated to the poor and tribal areas. The wealth disparity, along with government negligence in implementation, and exploitation by big businesses, has led to several unemployed youths. Since governments have left the administration of these areas unattended, the Naxalites have stepped in to fill the power vacuum. They have collected money from people in these areas, which has been used to recruit several youngsters into their militia who are provided a monthly salary, uniforms and arms. In such neglected areas the Naxalites have assumed the role of the state by establishing an elaborate structure of Janata Sarkars. These Janata Sarkars have different departments (akin to ministries) dealing with agriculture, trade, defence, education etc. Furthermore the terrain, topography and lack of infrastructure in these areas are very suitable for the Naxalites and their guerrilla tactics.

Several attempts have also been made to 'Hinduize' the tribal people. As part of the Hindutva campaign to 'bring tribals back to the Hindu fold', their culture was denigrated, self-hatred was induced, and the caste system was introduced. The villages and people were given Hindu names. Those who did not come forward to join the Hindu fold were declared 'Katwas' (untouchables), who later became the natural constituency for the Naxalites.

Given these socio-economic conditions, it is easy to see why Naxalites are popular among the rural poor and indigenous tribes, and why the adivasis view the guerrillas as their 'saviours'. The tribals feel that they do not have any political power to voice their grievances legitimately, and therefore the alternative of violent groups seems attractive.

2. Ideologies of the Naxalite Movement⁴

The Naxalites follow a political philosophy called Marxism-Leninism-Maoism which calls for a mass revolution using guerrilla tactics. Charu Mazumdar's 'Historic Eight Documents', written from 1965 to 1967, formed the basis of the Naxalite ideology. These writings listed the principle of the Naxalite militant movement in India and criticized revisionism. Revisionism refers to ideas that were 'revised' versions of original Marxist principles. Mazumdar and other hard-line leftists considered revisionism to be a 'watering down' or abandonment of Marxism.

The first document said that the Indian State was forcing capitalism and hence, a version of imperialism, on the Indian people. It said that the growing discontent of the people must be channelled by the Communist Party to lead a revolutionary struggle. It then laid down a set of policies to be adopted, which stated that there should be no contact with the police and an underground place should be set up for meetings and storing secret documents

The second document urged the Communist Party to not restrict itself to 'krishak sabhas' and unions. As true Marxists, their goal should be the

‘Seizure of Political Power’. This goal can be achieved by seizing power in one area after the other. However this can only be done if the revolutionaries arm themselves. Illegal methods may be used by Activist Groups to spread propaganda and arm themselves.

The third document talked about international events post World War 2. In this document Mazumdar spoke highly of the Chinese Revolution and the rise of leftist movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America. He celebrated China’s military victory over India in the 1962 war as a communist power beating an imperialist one. He decried revisionism and reiterated that only through armed struggle could the working class overthrow the Indian State by area-wise seizure of power and lay the foundation of a New People’s Democratic India.

The fourth document accused the Soviets of revisionism and co-operating with the United States. It also decried the use of nationalism by the Indian state with respect to China and Pakistan and urged Marxists to support the fighters in Kashmir. According to this document, the peasant revolution should be led by the poor and landless peasants. There should be active military resistance and every attack should be avenged. For this it is necessary to increase the number of Activist Groups.

The fifth document said that any sort of peaceful resistance would be absolutely futile. Armed rebellion was the only way the poor could get what they need. This document again emphasized on the tactic of seizure of power as demonstrated by Mao. It urged the revolutionaries to take violent action against the police, military and other government

officers. In this document, Mazumdar said that 'it is clear like daylight that India alone is the aggressor' and that the war was an attempt by the Indian state to distract the public from its imperialist policies. To resolve this 'imperialist war' waged by the Indian state against the people, Mazumdar urged the revolutionaries to start a civil war in the country. He wrote that only through a civil war could they seize power and overthrow the bourgeoisie.

The sixth document started by naming Mao (instead of any Russian leader) as the true successor to Lenin, thus allying the Naxalites with Communist China and against the Soviet Union. Mazumdar then trained his guns on the CPM's leadership, saying that they had forsaken the path of Marxism-Leninism by opposing China in the Sino-Indian war. CPM's opposition to armed rebellion enraged Mazumdar. The document quoted Mao, "Attacks are not for the sake of attacking merely, attacks are for annihilating only" and urged attacks against the police, bureaucrats and class enemies. Mazumdar said that while these attacks could take place all over India, they must first be started in the rural areas. Once all the rural areas are in their control, they shall proceed to encircle the cities with villages before attacking them. A People's Revolutionary Army was needed to protect the masses.

The seventh document urged all members to spread the party's ideology in light of the upcoming general elections. The aim of this document was to build armed struggle against revisionism. It quoted Mao, "Freedom only comes out only from the barrel of the gun." Mazumdar said that the trade unions and peasant organizations which were being

used only to build up unity must be used as part of an active armed resistance movement against the Indian government which was killing people through starvation and bullets.

The eighth document directly attacked the CPM leadership for joining the government and converting to revisionism. On joining the government, the Party told its cadres to not indulge in violent, anti-state activities. Party leaders who had promised to distribute land among the peasants turned their backs on such promises. Mazumdar said that this was a betrayal of the people by the Party.

He asked the cadres to be ready to make sacrifices. If a peasant gets a piece of vested land, he no longer is active in the movement because his class has now increased. As Mao said, "Where there is struggle, there must be sacrifice." Lenin had said that if reforms were passed but were implemented by the bureaucracy, then the peasants would get nothing. Thus, Mazumdar called for the destruction of state power. The arms required for this would be snatched from the class enemies. Strategies, 'right from burning people's houses' to others, would be taught to the cadres. Leadership of this movement must be in the hands of the poor peasants.

While the second document asked the party to not restrict itself to unions, the eighth document emphasized that unions and other 'partial demands' will intensify the struggles. They should not be condemned. These partial demands should not be simply made an economic issue but should be used to bring about class consciousness. Mazumdar also

said that the dogmatists in the party, who wanted a sort of October Revolution in India, did not analyse the objective conditions of India.

Mazumdar wrote that the teachings of Marxism-Leninism must be applied in class struggle, arriving at general principles based on that experience and taking back to the people the principles summed up from experience. This is what he called 'from the people to the people'.

Thus, the Naxalites follow an ideology that seeks a violent and complete overthrow of the state, irrespective of the sacrifices that are required.

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