

# The 'Red Surge': Media framing of Maoist struggles in India

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## Abstract

Maoist struggles in Eastern and Central India against the Indian State have been under-reported in International Media. These struggles by mainly indigenous communities against the corporate-state mining nexus have become a national crisis and literally hundreds of Indian paramilitary forces, Maoists and indigenous people have died as a result of these conflicts. Local media have typically reported Maoism in terms of a law and order and security issue. This article highlights some of the 'frames' used by the media within a critical political economy inspired reading of the conflict that the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has described as India's number one security issue. It deals with uneven globalisation, the under-reporting of lives lived by India's most deprived communities and the other side of India's tryst of globalisation that has led to many indigenous communities living lives on the edge.

## Keywords

Framing, globalisation, India, Maoism, media ownership, media representation, poverty, under development

This article is an interpretative account of the Indian media's, in particular English newspaper and news agency coverage of issues related to Maoism and the Maoist struggles in parts of Central and Eastern India. There is a woeful lack of analysis of media coverage of the many insurgencies against the Indian state at any given moment ranging from the conflicts in Kashmir, North East India, particularly Manipur, Meghalaya and Nagaland to the numerous 'Maoist' struggles that have cut a swathe across East and Central India. The fact that close to a 100,000 Indian paramilitary forces, along with an equal number of special and

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state police squadrons and private armed militia have been deployed in and around core Maoist hot spots in Central and Eastern India belie the scale of state action against a movement that has been described by the prime minister of India Manmohan Singh in 2010 as the nation's number one security threat (see *Indian Express*, 2010). In the state of Jharkhand alone, more than 200 military 'companies', 'special forces', 'battalions' and 'units' are involved in actions against five Maoist outfits including the dominant Communist Party of India (CPI) (Maoist) group that has around 3,000 fully armed cadres along with 5,000 'people' cadres (Vishnu, 2012). The ambush of a ruling Congress Party motorcade on 27 May 2013 by Maoists, in the state of Chhattisgarh that resulted in the killing of more than 27 prominent politicians and senior police personnel reflects the intensity of this conflict (see Bagchi, 2013).

While the specific variant of Maoist struggle as described in this article is specifically of Indian origin, extreme-left movements such as the Shining Path in Peru have also been described as Maoist. One of their characteristics is their link with peasant movements although Maoism is equally applied today to describe urban movements involved in both violent struggles against the state and involvement in electoral politics. Maoist movements have been characterised by variety, shifting alliances, episodcity, fratricidal conflict and diversity within the global Communist movement. In the 1970s Maoism/New Communism constituted a part of the Socialist Left in the USA (Elbaum, 1998). The US-based *Maoist International Movement*, the *Gran Marcha Hacia el Comunismo* in Spain and the *Parti Communiste Revolutionarie* (Marxist–Leninist) from France are examples of Maoism in the West. What makes some of the South Asian Maoist movements especially significant today is their open espousal of armed conflict and contestation of the neo-liberal order and in particular, the political–corporate nexus that has been identified as the key adversary to the futures and fortunes of marginalised communities. For that precise reason the current struggle in India needs to be viewed as more than just an internal security affair given its potential to be replicated not only in South Asia but also in other parts of the world. The fact that this struggle does have the potential to derail India's role as a key protagonist of the growth paradigm and neo-liberal economic globalisation is of global concern. The fact that Maoists played a key role in ending a monarchy in Nepal, opted to join electoral politics and establish a government in Nepal in 2008 was, and continues to be, of geo-political concern for the US government in particular (see Gross, 2011).

The fact is that away from India's globalising cities and outside of the dominant 'news values' and glare of both national and international media, there is an unfolding, largely untold story of the extraordinary decline of the survival capacities of the rural poor, especially India's indigenous, *Adivasi* (tribal) populations, who have been dispossessed of their land in the context of state and private-sector mining for bauxite, iron ore and other minerals. Malnutrition, the lack of basic health facilities and local forms of corruption that involve settlers, the police and local government have placed *Adivasis* on the edge of survival.

Furthermore, the failure of the established Left political parties, and in particular the CPI (Marxist) in West Bengal and its perceived existence as a bastion of power, corruption and oppression has contributed to the growth of this radical movement. The killings of a number of *Adivasis* in Lalgarh, West Bengal, by the state police, in January 2011 exacerbated tensions with the then ruling Left Front government. There have been similar killings in Chhattisgarh by the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) (see Pandey and Jain, 2012a, 2012b). Mining has become an especially contentious issue and both private companies such as Vedanta, Pohang Iron and Steel Company, South Korea and public sector initiatives such as the Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL) have now become targets for Maoist resistance. Their resistance has been interpreted in the Indian media as primarily a story of development versus anti-development, of a law and order breakdown and as a reflection of the attempts by misguided anti-national elements to disrupt the course of development in India.

This article is based on an analysis of media, in particular newspaper framing of the Maoist struggle in India. It is divided into the following sections: (1) an introduction to theory and methods in particular a critical political economy of communication and 'framing', (2) background to the struggle, (3) analysis of a sample of 200 mainly print-based reports in the English press in India published between 27 July and 5 November 2012 with a special focus on the thematic and rhetorical strategies used by the media to frame the reporting of this conflict.

## Theory: Critical political economy of communication

The theory that I have used to understand the practice of journalistic framing is a critical political economy of communication. A critical political economy of communications recognises the fact that the media are by no means objective and independent purveyors of news and information but that they are deeply involved in supporting dominant political and economic interests. As such a critical political economy of communications decentre its focus on the media per se, and focuses on the many external factors that shape the media and make it what it is. As Vincent Mosco (1996: 71–72) describes it in his classic text *The Political Economy of Communication*,

Decentring the media means viewing systems of communication as integral to fundamental economic, political, social and cultural processes in society. ...the point is that the political economy approach to communication places the subject within a wider social totality. ...Both political economy and communication are mutually constituted out of social and cultural practices. Both refer to processes of exchange which differ but which are also multiply determined by shared social and cultural practices.

Decentring however does not mean marginalising the analysis of the media. Rather, the media and political economy need to be seen as 'mutually constitutive',

distinct but also coterminous, synergistically related and as two sides of the same coin.

Recent studies on the media in India have shown the extent to which corporate–political agendas have begun to dictate the trajectory of media development (see Ghatak and Thakurta, 2012; Thomas, 2010). This includes extensive evidence of corporate and political party ownership of the media throughout the country inclusive of the press, satellite and cable television and radio. In the light of weak regulatory structures and the absence of strong cross-media ownership legislations, media ownership in a number of states in India is in the hands of a small group of influential media houses that are backed by corporate and political interests. Examples of such ownership patterns include the Sun TV empire in Tamil Nadu, backed by one of the major political parties – the DMK, the Dainik Bhasker group in North India that is backed by corporate interests and the Times Group that is the largest media house in the country with substantial interests in the press, broadcasting, films and cable TV, event management and entertainment.

Journalists as an ‘interpretative community’ have by and large stood by corporate interests and embraced the logic of the state’s response in terms of the restoration of law and order. The larger critique of media reporting in globalising India levelled by senior journalists in India such as Sukumar Muralidharan (2012) and P. Sainath can be applied equally to media reporting of Maoist struggles. Sainath (1996, 2000, 2008), for example, has on a number of occasions exposed the media’s penchant for soft rather than hard news and their near total marginalisation of critical news from rural India including the agrarian crisis, farm suicides and rural poverty. The phenomenon of ‘paid news’ – news space for politicians in exchange for hard cash has become of national concern and both the English and vernacular press have been accused of this practice (see Auletta, 2012). Media accountability is at its lowest ebb in the post-independent period, ironically at a time of great media diversity including 80,000 registered publications and close to 850 cable and satellite channels. Arundhati Roy (2012: 15–38), the Indian writer and social activist in an article on 21st century Indian capitalism refers to links between corporate media houses and their other business interests in Maoist regions that include mining.

...one of the major vernacular newspapers in the region – *Dainik Bhasker*...– has 17.5 million readers in four languages, including English and Hindi across 13 states. It also owns 69 companies with interests in mining, power generation, real estate and textiles.

In a similar vein, Ashish Khetan (2012: 38) in an article on politics and patronage in the state of Chhattisgarh that is at the epicentre of the Maoist rebellion observes that

The promoters of *Dainik Bhasker*, the state’s largest circulated daily, have a mining lease for 91.6 million tonnes of coal reserves in Raigarh District. The company has

been brazenly using the newspaper to promote its mining business. The group even launched a Raigarh edition around the same time it set up a power plant in the region. On most days, it carries stories of how the power plant and coal extraction would herald prosperity and economic growth for its hitherto backward people

Incidentally, the *Dainik Bhasker*, with its 36 daily editions and 159 sub-editions in 13 states in India, and daily circulation of 17.5 million, is one of the largest circulating daily newspapers in the world.

In addition, the Chhattisgarh government has been accused of encouraging 'paid news' by granting TV channels government advertisements in exchange for favourable coverage. Bagchi (2012: 15) in an article in *the Hindu* newspaper has named '...Z24, a franchisee of Zee News, Sahara Samy, ETV Chhattisgarh, Sadhna News' among TV channels that have benefited from this arrangement. In such a context, it is wholly unsurprising that the Maoist rebellion is represented in the way that it is by dominant media in this state. With the exception of the investigative magazine *Tehelka* and the *Caravan* and accounts in journals such as *the Economic and Political Weekly* and *Seminar*, reporting of the Maoist conflict is routinely bland and is in the main, an enumeration of the death toll on both sides. *Tehelka's* coverage of this conflict, including its critique of Maoist excesses remains an extremely important source of independent information on this conflict (see, for example, Chaudhary, 2011; Mittal, 2012) in a reporting environment that has been compromised by media reporting exclusively 'official' stories of this conflict.

Ashis Nandy (2003: 136), the well-known Indian social psychologist has observed that the Indian middle classes largely agree with the state's response to counterterrorism, even with the use of concepts, styles and techniques that have been imported, a project and rationale that the media have widely diffused.

The media have sold these concepts, styles and technologies as universal, gradually standardising the diverse Indian responses to an interpretations of terrorism. Partly as a result, there is now a wide-spread, articulate, political demand in India that policy-makers battle terrorism uncompromisingly and visibly, according to the received wisdom about counter-terrorism and statecraft. Such battles may or may not be within the bounds of civility – but a very sizeable section of urban, middle class, newspaper-reading Indians no longer cares.

## Methodology: Framing

A Factiva search on Maoism in the English-speaking Indian press between September 2011 and September 2012 yielded 3,015 entries/documents with the majority of these news reports carried in India's leading English language newspaper the Times of India (655), the government news agency the Press Trust of India (276), the Hindu (240), the Telegraph (201), the United News of India (173),

New Indian Express (87), Hindustan Times (74), Indian Express (70), The Pioneer (56) and the DNA (55). These news items highlighted core Maoist hot spots, cities or states involved in these struggles – Chhattisgarh (481), Delhi (317), Andhra Pradesh (204), Jharkhand (199), Orissa (164), Bihar (153), Karnataka (129), Mumbai (123). The most-mentioned subjects in these 3015 entries included Political/General News (430), Crime/Courts (390), Domestic Politics (151), Murder/Manslaughter (119), Acts of Terror (93), Page-one Story (53), Kidnap (51), Corporate/Industrial News (48), Regional Politics (43) and Corruption (38). Evidence of such a large volume of entries suggests that the topic is indeed of primary concern in the media. Given the large sample size, I have opted to narrow the sample size and read closely 200 entries mainly representing print-news reports in the period 27 July–5 September 2012. These entries were chosen for their primary focus on Maoist activities. The sample does not include close to 100 articles from the same period that only tangentially dealt with these struggles. The samples chosen were text based and did not include visuals such as photographs. While the analysis of a sample size of 200 entries can be seen as a limitation, one can argue that neither a comparative study of two or more time periods nor a study of a larger sample size will significantly add to an understanding of news frames given the shared, bounded nature of dominant media framing of these struggles. While alternative framings of Maoism do exist, such framings arguably do not affect or shape public opinion and are not in a position to compete with dominant media framings of Maoism.

Following Entman (1993: 52), I argue that frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements and suggest remedies and that to frame 'is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation'. Frames as Goffman (1981: 63) has argued are a cultural phenomenon and the repertoire of frames that are available to journalists as they construct reality and to audiences as they interpret this reality are, even if they are not always congruent, part of a 'frame package' (Van Gorp, 2007) that are culturally resonant. Pan and Kosicki (1993: 59) have suggested that 'Framing devices in news discourses may be classified into four categories, representing four structural dimensions of news discourses: syntactical structure, script structure, thematic structure and rhetorical structure'. This study will focus on an analysis of the thematic and lexical structures in the news framing of Maoist struggles in India.

The media are involved in providing 'frames' that enable readers to make sense of the world. Framing refers to the ways in which the media construct/emphasise an ideological scaffolding over a news item thereby encouraging its audiences to make sense of that news item within the given frame. So a media frame includes the amount of exposure given to a story, where the story is placed, how the headlines are written, what photographs are included, the tone adopted. Frames give order to any given media story. They are constructions of reality that in the long run can become the normal way of understanding news on all sorts of issues – poverty,

aboriginality, people with disabilities, etc. Framing allows audiences to mediate the world. Framing is conditioned by journalism as a practice in the real world conditioned as it were by dominant politics, economics and understandings. Journalist's roles as gatekeepers and as aligners of 'frames' with any given understanding are determined by their institutional settings as much as by the salience of dominant understandings such as that of national security. Framing Maoism is based on frame building – a process that inevitably involves a number of discourses from that of state security to the national interest to actors such as politicians, the military and civil society, professional routines and institutional interests.

I have applied textual analysis to an analysis of these texts that is based on a close reading of the text and the context. These 200 entries include a variety of news sources including a cross-section of English-language newspapers from within India, websites, magazines, journals, foreign newspapers, and TV news sources. In terms of entries per newspaper, the major sources were *the Hindu* (20), *the Times of India* (23), the *New Indian Express* (11) *The Telegraph* (10), *The Pioneer* (9), *PTI* (8), and *DNA* (7). The study identifies the categories and frames used by journalists as an interpretative community to make sense of this struggle along with the dominant accents and gaps in understanding and interpretation. The objective is to highlight the fault lines in interpretation that are an aspect of the larger fault lines that are dividing the country at the very moment of its emergence as a global economic power house. There is a sense in which this struggle has become a national and global narrative that has been forced on to the public imaginary by those at the very bottom rung of society who are only covered by the media when they are victims of a natural disaster or a health epidemic.

## **Background: Understanding the Naxalite and Maoist movements in India**

It is common place to use the terms 'Naxalite' and 'Maoist' inter-changeably. Both struggles use arms against the state and both have attracted middle-class support. However unlike the Naxalite struggle that was urban and 'agrarian', the present struggle is concentrated among mainly indigenous populations who inhabit the hills and forests of Eastern and Central India. While the term 'Naxalite' relates to a specific geographic origin, i.e., Naxalbari, in West Bengal, the term Maoism is a descriptor for an adapted version of a mass movement in China under the leadership of Chairman Mao. Maoism in India, unlike the original movement in China, is by no stretch of the imagination a mass movement. Innumerable Maoist groups have claimed this moniker or have been ascribed it by the media. The fractured nature of the movement has certainly been one of its central features although the merger of two of the most organised groups on 21 September 2004 – the People's War Group (PWG) and Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) to form the CPI (Maoist) – has strengthened the organisation of this movement and reinforced its movement identity. Given the nature of the struggle a lot has been written



about it in both books and journals and also the press and magazines and there are increasing numbers of representations of this movement on YouTube and on the Internet. These writings include Bahree (2010), Banerjee (2006, 2009), Bidyut and Kumar (2009), Desai (2009), Donner (2011), Giri (2009), Guha (2007), Gupta (2006), Harriss (2010), Mahadevan (2012), Miklian (2009), Miklian and Carney (2010), Mohanty (2006), Shah and Pettigrew (2012), Steur (2011), Suykens (2010a, 2010b), among many other writings. The writings include reviews of literature, Maoist ethnographies, biographies of Maoists, Maoism from the perspective of national security, Maoism and the Left in India, Maoism and state politics, Maoist ideology, Maoism and democracy, Maoism and *Adivasis* (tribals), counter insurgency, first person account of travels in Maoist-controlled regions (see Chakravarti, 2008; Navlakha, 2012), along with numerous pieces on specific events such as the violence in Lalgarh. Mention must be made of the special issue of the journal *Seminar* (607/2010) Red Resurgence, and numerous pieces by the controversial writer and social activist Arundhati Roy.

Agrarian and peasant movements in India in the 19th and 20th century and in the post-Independent period were allied to the CPI and the CPI (M). The peasant struggle in the Telangana region (now in Andhra Pradesh) against feudal landlords and the then Nizam (ruler) of Hyderabad, through armed means between 1946 and 1951 was the first sign of the emergence of radical revolutionary politics in post-Independent India. To cut what is a complex story short, the failure of the established Communist parties to effect radical change and their perceived capitulation to the ideas and rules of democratic politics led to the formation of a radical revolutionary Marxist–Leninist political project whose aim was to overthrow the state, redistribute land to the landless and whose base was in the main, the agrarian underclass. This project came to fruition in the mid-1960s mainly under the leadership of Left, middle-class and city-based intellectuals. The insurrection began in Naxalbari, West Bengal and was led by Charu Mazumdar and others who were involved in the annihilation of class enemies including rich, feudal, land owners and law and order and government functionaries who were perceived to be foot soldiers for the system. This struggle by ‘Naxalites’ spread throughout India although the epicentre of the struggles was in the states of West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. Although this movement was crushed by the Indian state in the early 1970s, and Mazumdar was killed in police custody in 1972, it can be argued that the conditions for revolutionary struggle have been constant in India. The story of Maoism in India is complex. It is a narrative of fratricide, betrayal, struggles for self-respect and identity, extortion, romanticism, extreme violence, co-option by the state, poetry, murder, setbacks, within a context characterised by deep poverty, ill health, exploitation and brutality and the growing militarisation and corporatisation of these regions (see Laul and Mishra (2012) on Maoism and malaria in Chhattisgarh). It is important to not romanticise Maoist movements in India. While this movement is a genuine response to the immiseration of *Adivasi* populations in India, there are many groups under the Maoist banner, and some have been implicated in human rights abuses, extortion, kidnapping and other criminal



activities. This environment has also led to extortion rackets carried out by criminals who claim that they are Maoists. In fact quite a few reports in the media carried news items on such activities. The CRPF and the many paramilitary forces have also been accused of human rights violations including the killings of many innocent *Adivasi* men, women and children.

## **The context of Maoism: Tribals (*Adivasis*) and (under)development in India**

*Adivasis* in India have been relentlessly marginalised during the post-independent era and their lands expropriated by the state by reason of 'eminent domain'. Close to 80% of *Adivasis* live in Eastern and Central India on land that is rich in minerals. A number of official and independent investigations have revealed the ruin of local economies and ways of living as a consequence of the expropriation of tribal lands by the state and private sector. A report by the Centre for Environment and Food Security (2005) presents these consequences in the starkest of terms:

Out of a total 1000 sample *Adivasi* households from 40 sample villages in Rajasthan and Jharkhand surveyed for this study, a staggering 99 per cent were facing chronic hunger. The data gathered during this survey suggests that 25.2 percent of surveyed *Adivasi* households had faced semi-starvation during the previous week of the survey. This survey found that 24.1 percent of the surveyed *Adivasi* households had lived in semi-starvation condition throughout the previous month of the survey. Over 99 per cent of the *Adivasi* households had lived with one or another level of endemic hunger and food insecurity during the whole previous year. Moreover, out of 500 sample *Adivasi* households surveyed in Rajasthan, not a single one had secured two square meals for the whole previous year.

Their lack of access to health facilities is highlighted by Baru et al. (2010) and Guha in a study on *Adivasis*, Naxalites and Indian Democracy (2007) has highlighted the systematic ways in which tribal lands have been alienated, their low literacy rates, indebtedness, lack of access to health and drinking water. Yogesh Jain (2012: 33), writing from the heart of conflict in Chhattisgarh writes that

... the largest 'health problem' that we see is of rampant under nutrition, a polite term for chronic hunger. More than 70 per cent of children below the age of three, and more than half of all adults in this part of rural Chhattisgarh are undernourished. Shockingly, these numbers don't elicit much outrage.

The most telling indictment of the system is however contained in an official report – the *Committee on State Agrarian Relations and Unfinished Task of Land Reforms*, Vol. 1, Draft Report, compiled by the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, New Delhi, 2008. Chapter 4 on the Alienation of Tribal and Dalit Lands. The report includes information on variety of ways in which tribal

lands have been alienated but reserves its strongest critique for the involvement of the private sector. In the concluding section entitled 'The Biggest Land Grab of Tribal Lands after Columbus' it states the following:

A civil war like situation has gripped the southern districts of Bastar, Dantewada and Bijapur in Chhattisgarh. The contestants are the armed squads of tribal men and women of the erstwhile Peoples War Group known as the Communist Party of India (Maoist) on the one side and the armed tribal fighters of the Salwa Judum created and encouraged by the government and supported with the firepower and organisation of the central reserve police forces. The open declared war will go down as the biggest land grab ever, if it plays out as per the script. The drama being scripted by Tata Steel and Essar Steel who wanted 7 villages or thereabouts, each to mine the richest lode of iron ore available in India. Villages sitting on tons of iron ore are effectively de-peopled and available for the highest bidder. . . (160–161, see also Laul, 2011).

## Findings and analysis

The analysis of 200 articles in the English language press, in particular, provides pointers to the nature of news media framing and construction of Maoism in India. Not surprisingly, the majority of these reports describe the killing of CRPF personnel by Maoists, the arrest of Maoists or their killing in 'encounters', the recovery of arms and the foiling of Maoist ambushes by paramilitary forces. There is no reason to suspect that the reporting of this conflict in the vernacular press is any different. While there is evidence of the vernacular media contributing towards the democratisation of access to information (see Neyazi, 2011; Ninan, 2007), the management of many of these media groups including the largest circulation daily newspaper in India – the *Dainik Bhasker* (2.2 million) is closely linked to real estate and mining interests.

The following example of media headlines between 28 July and 2 August (Table 1), highlight in the main, 'official' frames used by the media to interpret Maoist struggles in India. These include the state's involvement in anti-Naxalite operations, the recovery of arms and ammunition, the environment of fear manufactured by the Naxalites, the arrests of Naxalite leaders bomb blasts in the city of Pune that are attributed to Naxalites. To attribute blame and responsibility for terrorist operations to a group without the benefit of substantive evidence reflects the exercise of media power. Audiences are primed and encouraged to understand a given reality via frames that offer interpretive schemas. For example, a report in the *Early Times* on 1 August states categorically the following, that 'It is now established that there is a nexus between the Maoist terrorists and Islamic terror outfits and that they are working in unison in several areas of the country, including the sensitive north-eastern States' (Neha, 2012). This example of frame-based priming establishes continuities between key struggles in India, thus eliding any

**Table 1.** Framing Maoism: Media banner/headlines of maoist struggles in India.

Date	News sources	Banner/headlines
28 July	<i>The Telegraph</i>	Close shave for Beur jailor
	<i>UNI</i>	Five Maoists arrested in Gaya
	<i>New Indian Express</i>	Anti-Naxal Ops: Flailing around in the name of strategy
29 July	<i>Time City</i>	Cop giving intel on Naxalites, gets threat, puts in papers
30 July	<i>Zee News</i>	Security forces recover arms from Naxalites
	<i>Merinews</i>	
	<i>PTI</i>	
1 August		Naxalites observe martyr's week through cultural programs and recruitment
		Cops, civil officials avoiding duty fearing Naxalite attacks
		Naxals take up arms against country liquor
	<i>Times of India</i>	
	<i>Times of India</i>	Top Naxal leader arrested
	<i>The Hindu</i>	Cops seize 80 cookers, 215 tiffin boxes and explosives
	<i>Hindustan Times.Com</i>	
2 August	<i>Early Times</i>	Laskar may derail Indo–Pak progress
		Analysis: Shinde at home
		Shinde's first statement as HM not inspiring
	<i>Moneylife</i>	Mini blasts in Pune send out maximum message

understanding of the specificity of these struggles and replacing it with a general conspiracy frame that collapses ‘difference’ into one unitary struggle by anti-Indian conspirators.

**Thematic strategies**

*Maoism as a national security issue*

One of the key frames that journalists use to describe this conflict is that of Maoism as a national security issue. This framing is entirely consistent with the media framing of other conflicts in India, in particular, the numerous insurgencies in North East India that are routinely described as unlawful combat by groups against a sovereign state. News of the spread of Maoism is described in terms of the language of ‘security panics’ – of this threat being reflected in Maoist organising of labour movements and involvement in labour disputes in the capital of power, New Delhi and other urban centres. This threat is amplified by reporting that suggests links between insurgents in the North East, even Islamic terrorist and Maoists (*Early Times*, 1 August) and the grave threats emanating from this

to the nation state. Little evidence of such links is available and that would suggest that this is a case of raising the ante and keeping the national security threat angle alive. The reports suggest that Maoist activities have stalled legitimate development activities that farmers have fled, forest guard posts remain unfilled, police recruitment levels have suffered and senior police posts have remained unfilled (*PTI*, July 30). While it is certainly the case that *Adivasi* (tribal) populations have suffered as a result of these struggles, hardly any of the reports mention the role played by private paramilitary militia armed by the state and corporate interests who have also been implicated in numerous human rights abuses. These groups include the *Ranvir Sena* in Bihar, the *Salwa Judum*, *Harmad Bahini*/*Bhairav Bahini*, *Santi Sena* in Chhattisgarh along with other groups.

## Demonising Maoists

Maoists are routinely described as those committed to terrorising and/or duping innocent people – in this case ‘tribals’ and of using a variety of violent means to control local populations. They are not fighting for the rights of tribals but are instead involved in dispossessing them of their land (Red terror hounds out poor tribals, *Mail Today*, 8 August); are cowardly in their attacks; are involved in extortion, kidnapping, the narcotics trade (Naxalites sourcing funds through poppy cultivation, *Indian Government News*, 8 August); beheadings and using women and children as human shields (Afternoon Voice, Naxals using women, children as human shields: Government, 23 August, *Asian Age*, Naxals may use human shields, 29 August). The reports suggest that Maoists are not only political terrorists but economic terrorists who are holding up the economic progress of the nation through their banning of mining (SAIL net profits fall on FOREX losses, *The Pioneer*, 7 August). A major fallout of this struggle is its repercussions in the mining industry. Both public and private mining activities have stalled and this is seen as a major threat to the state’s globalisation agenda. (Naxals creating hurdles in developmental projects, *Zee TV News*, 15 August.)

## The fickle Maoist: Money, position and clemency

Maoists are portrayed as people who can be induced to change sides. Money is the common currency for such exchanges although access to health facilities, to government jobs and amnesty are also portrayed as inducements. How to win back the support of *Adivasis* and reform Maoists is a key issue for all state governments facing a threat from Maoist activities. While the Chhattisgarh government has invested in counter-cultural strategies including theatre groups that portray the government’s welfare activities and the benefits of state-sponsored development and feature films such as *Aalaap*, a major part of this strategy is directed towards offering Maoists amnesty and monetary rewards for surrendering. In the state of Jharkhand, Maoists have been promised parliamentary seats (*Hindustan Times.com*, 4 August). A report in the *PTI* (9 August) highlights the

graded monetary rewards given to Maoists with a zonal command member getting 'Rs 10 lakhs (US\$20,000) and others down the pecking order getting lesser amounts. The report goes on to add that in the state of Andhra Pradesh 'since 2005, 365 Naxals surrendered and got assistance worth Rs 1.79 crores' (US\$ 380,000).

## Framing Indian paramilitary successes

Counter propaganda is evident in the news reports of key Maoists who have either been killed or who have surrendered. The killing of the CPI (Maoist) leader Kishenji in West Bengal on 24 November 2011, the surrender of Pothoru Rajaroa due to ill health (*NetIndia123.com*, 27 August, *Times of India*, 29 August) and that of Chander Ganjhu and his wife Anita (*WebIndia123.com*, 10 August, *The Pioneer*, 20 August) and a policeman turned Maoist (*The Hindu*, 9 August). The lack of access to medical facilities in the jungles is a major reason for the surrender of many Maoist fighters. State governments have also invested in anti-Maoist training at prestigious training outfits such as the Indian Institute of Management, Ranchi (*Times of India*, 19 August). The Maoist is portrayed as on the run, desperate, whose action are increasingly irrational as this report on a statement made by chief minister of Chattisgarh, Raman Singh in *The Pioneer* 9 August.

Frequent naxal attacks are a clear sign of their panic. Moreover, the way they have been violently responding to the initiatives taken by the government to establish peace, has also shown their anarchichal and anti social mentality, according to the CM.

## The sacrifice frame

The sacrifice made by Indian paramilitary forces is contrasted with the random killings made by the Naxalites with no concern for life ('as many as 10–15 armed rebels fired indiscriminately at the police quarters in Dantewada...' Orissa TV, 8 August). Counter propaganda includes the major investments made by the government in remembering fallen CRPF soldiers and commanders (*Times of India*, 1 September), the promotion of 'anti-Naxal' army personnel (*Bureaucracy Today*, 29 August), passing out parades of security personnel (*Deccan Chronicle*, 2 September), guard of honour for dead soldiers (*The Pioneer*, 9 August), gallantry awards (*India Gazette*, 14 August, *The Telegraph*, 15 August), including an award for killing the Maoist leader Kishenji, and compensation for the next of kin of soldiers killed by Maoists (*Times of India*, 23 August). These reports arguably help create a 'shared memory' that is circulated through and reproduced by the media. However, the Maoists counter this memory making with their own initiatives aimed at keeping alive the memory of fallen leaders.

## De-legitimising Maoism: Lexical strategies

Maoists are routinely ascribed stock descriptors. Most often the term 'Naxals' (used to describe those involved in an earlier phase of predominantly urban struggles against the state) and Maoists are used interchangeably (in 86 of the 200 articles). They have also been described as 'red terror' (*Mail Today*, 8 August), anarchists and anti-social (*The Pioneer*, 9 August, *New Indian Express*, 16 August), hard-core ultras (*The Pioneer*, 10 August 2013, *UNI*, 10 August, *PTI*, 21 August), rebels (*The Telegraph*, 11 August), evil (*The Pioneer*, 13 August) and as leftist vagrants (*The Hindu*, 13 August), as members of a jungle government (*Times of India*, 14 August), kidnappers and extortionists (*The Hindu*, 15 August). They have also been described as vicious fighters who will not hesitate to use women and children as human shields (*Afternoon Voice*, 23 August, *India Gazette*, 23 August, *Asian Age*, 29 August) and as a threat to tribals (*DNA*, 8 August and *Mail Today*, 8 August), farmers (*New Indian Express*, 6 August) and activists (*India Ink*, 3 August). Maoists are implicated in cultivating poppy and marijuana (*Indian Government News*, 8 August). Their involvement in real estate and involvement with Non Government Organisations (NGOs) and intellectuals are also seen as a threat (*The Pioneer*, 31 August). In other words, in general the media have used lexical strategies to increase the threat of Maoism to the nation.

## Setting the media agenda on Maoism

An important insight in the literature on framing processes is that of the 'indexing hypothesis', – 'the core idea that journalists index, that is, calibrate news stories to the power balance they perceive amongst those in government' (Lawrence, 2010: 269) – in other words that journalists in general do not contest key government officials involved in the making of policy. While journalists in India are involved in critiquing government policy, there are major security threats to the nation including the conflict in Kashmir, North East India and Maoism that are interpreted primarily through the lens of the national interest. A majority of the news pieces analysed in this study relied on 'official' sources for their news on Maoist activities in Eastern and Central India. Why this is the case needs to be explored further. On the one hand it can be argued that there are real security threats to journalists from both official and unofficial paramilitary forces and Maoists groups and that, as a result, very few actually report from the battle front lines. While this threat is real and should not be discounted, it would also suggest that a consequence of this is a form of lazy journalism that is involved merely in relaying the 'official' version of events. Official spokespersons who are featured include chief ministers, the home minister, the inspector general of police, deputy inspector generals of police, assistant sub-inspectors, the minister of state for home affairs, state governors, CRPFs Chiefs and the Naresh Chandra Committee that was set up to look into national security. There are a handful of pieces that include reports from human rights organisations, activists



such as the mediator Swami Agnivesh and Maoist sympathisers, poets and writers (*The Hindu*, 17 August, *India Ink*, 3 August, *The Hindu*, 20 August, *The Hindu*, 24 August). Out of these 200 articles, there were a minimal number that provided an in-depth background to these struggles, provided context or explored the plight of *Adivasis* caught as they are between the state and Maoists. There was one article in the journal *Economic and Political Weekly* (28 July) on the rise of the paramilitary group the *Ranvir Sena* in Bihar, another in the *New Indian Express* (28 July) that was a strong critique of the 'anti-Naxal' operations in the state of Chhattisgarh, a piece in the citizen journalism portal *Merinews* (30 July) on the celebration of Martyr's week by Maoist outfits, a critical piece on the political economy of mining and its consequences for tribals in *Hard Talk* (5 August) along with a very interesting piece on Maoism in the *Frontier Post* (1 September, Pakistan). In other words, five articles out of 200 that attempted to provide background. However, this marked reticence to report from the field by mainstream English newspapers can be contrasted with any number of in-depth articles in the magazine *Tehelka* on a variety of issues related to Maoism by journalists who travelled to the frontlines. This would seem to suggest that there are pathways to reporting from these areas that have not been followed by stringers and reporters in regions and districts throughout Eastern and Central India.

It is clear that the government and army in particular largely set the agenda for media reporting of these struggles. Given the close relationship between mining and the vernacular press in particular, corporate interests too are involved in setting this agenda.

## Information, communication and cultural warfare

What these news reports also reveal is the writ of Maoism throughout districts in Eastern and Central India. Some of these reports do allude to the fact that districts under Maoist rule do have systems of governance and administration in place, that their cadres have infiltrated urban contexts and that they have their own systems of communication – mobile phones, computers and radio communications. Their cultural front involves poets and literary writers including Varavara Rao, Lal Singh Dil, Kalyan Rao, Satyamurthy and others. Maoists have established an elaborate culture of celebrating fallen comrades through events such as 'martyr's days'. These events include cultural programs, recruitment processes and the setting up of memorial pillars to fallen comrades. Prashant Jha (2007) writing in *Himal* magazine mentions the existence of Maoist cultural fronts in Andhra Pradesh

Several front organisations – Virasam, the Revolutionary Writers Association, and the Jana Natya Mandali, a people's theatre group led by iconic balladeer Gadar – have been active here for decades, and have created a constituency of Maoist sympathisers in a section of Hyderabad civil society.

There is also news on Maoist governance and their advocacy against bootleggers and police who provide protection for such activities (*Times of India*, 1 August). From an information and communications perspective, news reports routinely highlight the fact that mobile phones and laptops are recovered in raids. In fact one report in the *Times of India* (12 August) mentions the fact that Naxals may own up to 20 Subscriber Identity Module (SIM) cards and reports that the 'The DIG (Deputy Inspector General) took strong exception to the pre-activated SIM cards being given to buyers immediately without ascertaining the identity of its users'. A *Press Trust of India* (9 August) report highlights the jail terms for two women Maoists for supplying 'walkie talkies'. In fact the mobile phone features in routine news about Maoists killed in 'encounter's such as the following in the *Hindu* (21 August), 'A.303 rifle, live ammunition, and 12 bore firearm, empty ammunition pouches, a mobile phone, Maoist literature and banners were recovered by the police'. That information warfare is an aspect of this struggle is captured by a comment by an outgoing chief of the CRPF that the loss of 76 CRPF soldiers in a Maoist ambush was caused by the fact that they continued to use the same frequency of a radio that they had lost to Maoists for communicating on the ground (*The Indian Express*, 16 August). It has also been reported that the whereabouts of the Maoist ideologue Kishenji was based on knowledge derived from a computer that was captured by the armed forces. Maoists have targeted mobile phone towers and the Ministry of Home Affairs plans to increase mobile network coverage and set up 2,200 installations across the Maoist belt thus increasing their ability to intercept emails, text messages and call records (Umar, 2013). Maoist's use of social media has been highlighted in a recent report by Khanra and Gupta (2013) in the *Times of India*.

Based on intelligence inputs of the ministry of home affairs, the Chhattisgarh government had ... requested Facebook authorities to block a Facebook page – Naxal Chhattisgarh. ... in the page 'Naxalism community' there is a detailed description of the Bastar carnage where 27 Congress workers were killed by the Maoists. What is even more surprising is the fact that 404 people 'liked' the page. Besides, 'Naxalite community', 'Naxal', 'Naxalbari Hamiz' are some of the online forums that the Maoists are using to propagate their ideology and activities.

One of the consequences of this struggle is the seeping of the Maoist imaginary in popular culture and media treatment of this struggle. A number of media reports mention the release of the Bollywood film *Chakravuyh* that provides a sympathetic portrayal of Maoists. In fact one of the roles played by the actor Om Puri in this film was based on story of the Maoist Kobad Ghandy who was arrested in New Delhi in 2009 while seeking medical treatment. Reports also cover popular rock bands that deal with issues facing *Adivasis* and reviews of travelogues by writers who have travelled into Maoist territory. In other words, what seems to be emerging is the creation of a 'memory' and a 'remembering' in popular media that is markedly different to the official, mainstream journalism's version

of events. The collective memory of this struggle is multifaceted in spite of mainstream media's selective portrayal of events (see Guite, 2011; Volcic and Erjavec, 2012).

### **Reading between the lines: What these reports do not report**

Journalists as an interpretive community are involved in making sense of issues that affect humanity. When that practice is circumscribed by reliance on official communiqués, as is the case with reporting Maoism in India, what one is left with is a partial account that more or less ignores the multi-faceted nature of this reality. In other words the 'memory' of this struggle created by journalists is limited to the reporting of violence and not of violence as one facet of a larger struggle. The solution is described in the language of 'law and order'. There is an amnesia in this type of reporting given that with a handful of exceptions there have not been attempts to understand the causes of Maoism, deal with the deprivations faced by *Adivasi* communities in Central and Eastern India and the exploitation of natural resources by the state and private mining companies. It is clear that India's tryst with globalisation and the market has created a 'development at all cost' mindset that has clearly affected the lives of millions of India's underclass including *Adivasis*. Visiting Raipur, the capital of Chhattisgarh in late November 2012, I was struck by the money that is flowing into this region from mining interests – there are more than five malls in Raipur, a new airport and the presence of numerous mining companies including the Jindal group of companies. Chhattisgarh has been the epicentre of 'coalgate' – a scam related to the allocation of coal deposits to companies – an issue that has completely been bypassed in these reports. While there have been some attempts to provide means for *Adivasis* to communicate their version of events as for example via *CGNet Swara*, a voice-based portal that is based on the use of mobile telephony, the information challenges facing these communities are enormous.

While this article has explored dominant media reporting on Maoist struggles in India, there is, as I have pointed out, a growing industry in the reporting of Maoist struggles by other media including magazines, Left-oriented publications, Bollywood and via the genre of travel writing. However, the impact of such media when compared to the dominant media's power to influence public opinion is limited.

### **Conclusions**

The rise of Maoism precisely during an era in which the media have sung the praises of globalising India reveals the fault lines that exist in media reporting of such conflicts in India. Media framing of globalising India, in particular its reliance on 'progress' and 'growth' frames, at the expense of frames that enable audiences to understand the contested nature of progress and growth, has contributed to one-dimensional understandings of globalising India. While it is going to be extremely

difficult for the Maoists to make any sustainable headway, nevertheless this struggle and the inability of the media to provide balanced accounts of it merely reinforce the viewpoint expressed by senior journalists in India that globalising India and its media does not want to acknowledge the desperate underclass who occupy the other side of globalising India. The writer and historian Ramachandra Guha (2007: 3311), who is less hopeful of *Adivasi* gains from this struggle, believes that it is a tragic struggle

there is a double tragedy at work in tribal India. The first tragedy is that the state has treated its *adivasi* citizens with contempt and condescension. The second tragedy is that their presumed protectors, the Naxalites, offer no long-term solution either.

Both tragedies arguably could have been mitigated by balanced, in-depth coverage of this crisis by the media in India.

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