



Naxal Conflict in 2008

An Assessment

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Recently the Government of India has approved a special development package for the 33 Naxal-affected districts, along with 22 districts around the Naxal infested areas. With a budget of Rs. 20,000 crore for the next three years, it aims to provide a health center and school within one kilometer of every habitat, roads connecting all villages, skill development programmes for youth and help in increasing agricultural output. This initiative by the Central government is being looked upon as a remarkable step forward for the resolution of the decades old problem of Naxalism.

On the other hand, as India celebrated its 60th Republic Day on 26th January 2009, CPI (Maoist), the outlawed Naxal outfit, showcased its might by clamping a ban on the celebrations in many parts of the red territory. With the Central government going unconventional in formulating anti-Naxal policies, it's time to ask whether such a paradigm shift would be useful? What about the unprecedented growth of the violent Naxal network?

I NAXAL VIOLENCE IN 2008

Changed tactics of Maoist warfare along with a marked shift in government strategy were two notable developments of 2008. Armed cadres of CPI (Maoist) proved their abilities in newer techniques of Mobile warfare, Marine warfare, and Communal warfare. Politically speaking, CPI (Maoist) during 2008 experienced new dynamics of organizational politics. While formulating policies on the Naxal front, the Government of India seemed to get caught in the dilemma of making a choice between 'warfare' or 'welfare'.

According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, there was no let up in violence during 2008. The level of violence was particularly high in the states of Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Bihar. Over all, the situation in Andhra Pradesh was comparatively better with about a 40 per cent drop in Naxal incidents.

Naxal Violence in Orissa

Orissa with a total death toll of 132 in Naxal related incidents remained a hotbed of Maoist activity. Some of the spectacular attacks include the following: the coordinated raid in February of a Police Training School (PTS), the district armory and district police station in Nayagarh; and the 'marine' attack in June, of a motor launch inside the Balimela reservoir, in the Malkangiri district.

Malkangiri is separated from Andhra by the Sileru river and from Chhattisgarh by the Saberi river. Besides the Sileru and Saberi, there is another inter-state river, the Mahendrataneya, between Orissa and Andhra. Operationally this is the area where Naxals have recently raised a Boat Wing to facilitate faster movement of their cadres and weapons.

In August, Swami Laxmananda Saraswati, a Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) leader, and four others were killed by Naxal cadres in the Kandhamal district of Orissa. Sabyasachi Panda claimed that Naxals were behind the assassination. There were many who suspected Panda's claim on the grounds that Naxals have no history of interfering in religious matters. However when it comes to studying movements, generalizations are deceptive; Naxals may not have interfered in religious issues in the past but that does not prevent them from entering

into the arena of communal politics. The Kandhamal operation was well in the line with deliberations of the last party congress of CPI (Maoist) wherein fundamentalism was considered the second biggest threat, after globalization.

The Kandhamal incident led to two distinct Maoist formulations in Orissa. First, a split of CPI (Maoist) on religious grounds which led to the formation of a new outfit called Idealize of Democrat Guerrilla Army – Maoist (IDGA-Maoist). Second, in a related development the Central Committee of the CPI-Maoist expelled Sabyasachi Panda, secretary of the CPI-Maoist's Orissa unit, from the party.

These two developments are bound to bring significant change in the Maoist strategies in the state. Undeniably Panda was the pillar of Naxal movement in Orissa, and it's to be seen how the state and Naxal actors react to the changed ground situation. Orissa suffered from multiple systemic failures which ultimately added strength to Naxalism. It was evident through out the year that Naxals were quick to fill in the gap between the government and its people, caused due to the nagging problem of faulty models of industrialization and mining causing massive displacement in the tribal pockets. While the government persisted with the industrial model of

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development it failed miserably in proper implementation of relief and rehabilitation. The growth of CPI- Maoist (Janashakti) and IDGA in two separate regions which were relatively untouched by the Naxal problem also added to woes of the state.

Naxal Violence in Chattisgarh

Chhattisgarh, since its inception, has always

remained the epicenter of the Naxal Movement. Being the election year for the state Legislative Assembly, 2008 witnessed hectic Naxal activities in Chhattisgarh. While politics overshadowed everything else in the election year, the threat of Naxalism continued to loom large in the background. With Naxalites making their presence felt in more than half of the 18 districts in Chhattisgarh, year 2008 also saw large scale Naxal related violence and killings.

During the year, a total of 261 people including 131 civilians, 63 security personnel, 14 special police officers and one secret police person and 52 Naxal cadres were killed. The 2008 statistics are slightly better, as compared to the death toll of the previous two years but that does not mean that in 2008 the Naxal Movement showed any signs of weakness. Continuing with their stand of a complete rejection of the Parliamentary methods, the Naxals called for a complete boycott of the election in their strong hold in South Chhattisgarh and killed 20 security personnel in four separate incidents during the assembly elections. Salwa Judum continued to be the rallying point for all the players who are, some way or other, related to the politics of Naxalism. The government insists the Salwa Judum is a spontaneous homegrown movement. But in the last three years the conflict has only gotten worse. At least 70,000 tribal villagers were displaced, and had to live as refugees by the roadside.

Naxal Violence in Jharkhand

With a death toll of 286 during 2008, in 405 separate incidents, Naxals in Jharkhand showcased their ability in implementing the tricks of 'mobile warfare' where the extremists actually control 'liberated areas'; a certainly improvement over the 'guerrilla warfare phase'. A total of 39 security personnel, including a deputy superintendent of police, were killed against a toll of 11 in 2007, according to police data. The police said they succeeded in killing 99 Maoists over the year as against 60 in 2007. Though police officials claimed that more rebels were killed in 2008, they were rarely able to recover the bodies of the fallen rebels. At the same time, the number of civilians killed went down in 2008 to 148 civilians, against 175 in 2007. However, 39 of these were killed because they were termed police informers by the Maoists, up from 27 killed in 2007 for the same reason. CPI-Maoist, with an estimated 2,700

armed and political cadres, appears to be in the total control over 1,200 of the 4,564 panchayats in the state.

There are six main groups of Naxals in the state; Tiritiya Prastuti Committee, Jharkhand Prastuti Committee, the People's Liberation Front of India, Jharkhand Janshanghars Mukti Morcha, Sanyukta Pragatisil Morcha and the CPI (Maoist), who at the moment are in a position to dictate terms in most of the mining and industrial belt of the state. Naxalism in Jharkhand has forced all development activities in remote areas to shut down. In the name of revolution, Naxals have linked it to structural injustice and violence. In fact, after the merger of the MCC and PWG, a new pattern of Naxal violence has emerged. Previously, the ultras rarely killed innocent civilians, but since the merger, a larger number of innocents have lost their lives. By resorting to violent means the Naxals also seek to establish a link between underdevelopment and violence, which is illogical.

Naxal Violence in other States

The level of Naxal violence in other affected states was also considerably high. Andhra Pradesh registered 66 deaths; however there was a 40 percent decline in the Maoist activities as compared to 2007. In 2008, 36 Maoists, including seven state committee members of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) and seven Dalam (armed squad) commanders were killed in 27 separate gun battles with the police and 392 extremists, including one state committee member and five Dalam commanders, were arrested and 193 extremists and one central committee member had surrendered. The Maoist movement has further weakened with the killing of several top leaders in gun battles with the police during last few years.

In addition to a drastic fall in the number of violent incidents perpetrated by the Maoists, Andhra Pradesh stands first in utilizing the Central funds provided to Naxal affected states. It was given Rs. 424.26 crore under the modernization of police force (MPF) scheme between 2004 and 2008. This is the maximum allocation made to a State in comparison to other affected States.

The concentrated onslaught by the State, mainly the Greyhounds for over six years, forced the ultras

to vacate their strongholds and reduced their armed struggle to a mere fight for survival. However, Andhra Pradesh continues to remain in the priority list of the Maoists. "Like the Phoenix, we would rise again from the ashes" roared Varavara Rao, the key Naxal ideologue in one of his recent interviews.

The greatest obstacle in implementing government strategy has been the lack of co-operation between states in fighting Naxalism. Also there is a lack of trust between the Central government and several state governments in the matters of implementing anti-naxal programmes.

In Bihar, casualties on account of naxal violence were once again high with 71 deaths. The largest number of incidents were reported from Gaya District (30), which also accounted for the largest number of fatalities in terms of Security Forces (8); followed by Jamui (total fatalities, 12), which also accounted for the highest civilian fatalities (9); Aurangabad (9) and Rohtas (8). Deo, Madanpur, Rafiganj and Nabinagar under Aurangabad District and Barachatti, Mohanpur, Tekari, Fatehpur and Tankuppa Police Stations under Gaya District are considered the worst affected Police Stations of Bihar. There have been also some reports of the movement of Nepalese Maoists in the Northern Districts of East and West Champaran as well. Naxal situation in other states which include West Bengal (24 deaths), Maharashtra (14 deaths), Karnataka (7 deaths), Uttar Pradesh (2 deaths) and Tamil Nadu (1 death) mostly showed an upward trend. Not merely in terms of death toll but more in terms of the spread of the Movement.

II GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

Speaking at the Chief Ministers Conference on 20th January 2007, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh while referring to Naxalism categorically said that "development and internal security are two sides of the same coin. Each is critically dependent on the other." In 2007 and 2008, the government tried to implement it through the formation of different commissions and declaration of different programmes. There have

been numerous reports on this issue.

In April 2008, an Expert Committee appointed by the Planning Commission submitted its report on the causes of Discontent, Unrest and Extremism. The group compared 20 severely Naxalite-affected districts in five states - Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Orissa - with 20 non-affected districts in the same states to establish a correlation between certain human development indicators and their links to social unrest. This report recommend rigorous training for the Police force not only on humane tactics of controlling rural violence but also on the constitutional obligation of the state for the protection of fundamental rights. Coming down heavily on civil war instrument of Salwa Judum, the committee asked for its immediate suspension.

The National Commission for Human Rights (NHRC) on the basis of a Supreme Court directive appointed a three-member team, which investigated the alleged rights violations by Salwa Judum. The Commission, concluded that there was nothing to suggest the direct involvement of the members of the Salwa Judum. The second Administrative Commission submitted its 8th report titled "Combating Terrorism" in June 2008 and interestingly this report puts the Naxals at par with jihadis. It recommended a multi-pronged strategy based on political consensus, good governance and socio-economic development, respect for rule of law, countering the subversive activities of terrorists, providing appropriate legal framework and building capacity.

Government initiatives in 2008 moved around the above mentioned reports and recommendations. Government of India maintained that while it is necessary to conduct proactive and sustained operations against extremists, and put in place all measures required for this, it is also necessary to simultaneously give focused attention to development and governance issues, particularly at the cutting edge level.

III CHALLENGES AHEAD

The future is always uncertain; what happens at the Naxal front in 2009 is certainly a difficult prediction. But as things stand today, the government needs to capitalize on certain positive developments of 2008. The government

needs to follow a multi pronged strategy which could effectively combine both development and military orientations. The decision making apparatus in India now agree on two basic principles; first Naxalism is a result of the evils of poverty and an imbalanced model of development; and that the government needs to wake up to its responsibility of taking good governance down to the people, where it matters the most.

The greatest obstacle in implementing government strategy has been the lack of co-operation between states in fighting Naxalism. Also there is a lack of trust between the Central government and several state governments in the matters of implementing anti-naxal programmes.

Tailor made programmes of poverty alleviation need proper monitoring and implementation. Second, in the wake of targeted attacks on the police and continuous allegations of human rights violation against the police, it's time for fulfilling the neglected agenda of Police Modernization. However, the government needs to realize that the crucial element of police modernization lies in training and recruitment, not in the fortification of police stations and procurement of arms and ammunition. Similarly in addition to intelligence gathering and sharing, there is an urgent need for real-time intelligence. The Naxal Movement is again entering to phase of internal splits, and during 2009 in all likelihood the Naxal groups are going to be engaged in fierce battles among themselves for all ideological and practical causes. The government must be prepared to turn this situation to its advantage.

Three distinct elements must be included in all official counter Naxal programmes; they are pre-empting and preventing; containing and managing; and investigating and prosecuting; and the government must converge these three at the operational level for optimim results.



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