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# Combatting Left Wing Extremism: Need for a Realistic Approach

Dhruv C Katoch

The use of the term Naxalism has become synonymous with Maoist activities in India. All such activities are branded as Left Wing Extremism (LWE). The Maoist movement calls for a complete transformation of the political, social and economic systems as existing in India. In its essence, it challenges the validity of the Indian Constitution and rejects the Parliamentary system, seeking to replace it with a new social order. It draws its strength from existing weaknesses in society where certain vulnerable sections have been marginalised and exploited and, thus, can be penetrated and swayed by Maoist ideologues, who promise the people a fulfillment of their aspirations and a life of dignity and self-respect. The Naxal movement has a relationship to Communism. Karl Marx propounded that in order to fight feudalism and capitalism, “You must have a scientific philosophy and a sound theory, for a workers movement to be built up on a scientific basis”. In dealing with the problem of social change, Marx examined two concepts, the first dealing with the “forces of production” and the second with the “relations of production”. He was more interested in examining the military concepts of the social revolutionaries, which earlier lay in the domain of great political leaders,

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legislators and pioneering reformers. According to Marx, the social process would lead to revolution at a certain stage of development and the material productive forces of society would come into conflict with the existing relations of production. He emphasised that change could be brought out only by revolution and not by peaceful means.<sup>1</sup> The Naxal ideology flows from this line of thought.

Lenin raised the Marxist revolutionary doctrine to a higher level while applying it to Russian conditions. He stressed the need for clarity as to the historical conditions that gave rise to war, the classes waging it and the ends to be achieved.<sup>2</sup> In his work, *Socialism and War*, Lenin went on to justify civil wars waged by an oppressed class against the oppressor class, by serfs against landowners, and wage owners against the bourgeoisie as legitimate, progressive and necessary. Mao Zedong modified the theories of Marx and Lenin and adapted them to the conditions as existing in China. He found the Marxist theory of revolution being led by the industrial proletariat to be unsuited to Chinese conditions and used peasants as the major force to achieve the political objective. He also propounded the “United Front Theory”, observing that there was inevitable weakness in the efforts to make a revolution, relying on the workers alone. It was necessary to also rally all possible revolutionary classes and strata in forming a revolutionary united front. To Mao, ‘unite’ meant forming a united front with the bourgeoisie, while ‘struggle’ meant peaceful struggle without bloodshed with the bourgeoisie, on matters of ideology, politics and organisation. This would turn to armed struggle when the time came to split with the bourgeoisie.<sup>3</sup> Such armed struggle was to be waged through guerrilla warfare. Such warfare required political military leadership and would pass through three phases, namely, the passive or preparatory stage, the strategic defensive or retreat, and the counter-offensive. The Indian Naxal movement draws its sustenance from Maoist thought. This understanding is essential if LWE is to be eradicated in India.

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### **The Naxals**

The Naxal movement was essentially an agrarian movement, which, post independence, had influence in parts of Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and certain other parts of the country. It lost its agrarian character after a clash between peasants agitating for land rights clashed with the police in a village called Bengai Jote in the Naxalbari block of Siliguri district in West Bengal on May 25, 1967. Nine adults and

two children were killed in the police firing, subsequent to which the movement lost its agrarian character and became a militant movement. As per one of the local leaders of that time, “*There is no peaceful way to establishing rights for the poor. The gun is where the answer lies*”.

Today, we have a number of Maoist groups, spread over the eastern half of the Indian landmass, operating in parts of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Telangana and a couple of districts each in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. The most prominent of these is the Communist Party of India. Maoist (CPI -Maoist), formed in 2004 with the merger of two groups, the MCCI (Maoist Communist Centre of India) and PW (People’s War). The new organisation’s ideological-political orientation is fully dominated by the MCC brand of Maoism. The social base of the movement varies in different states. At some places, it comprises peasants with small or nil landholdings and, to lesser extent, middle peasants. At others, it consists of tribals. At still others, it is an amalgamation of the above, along with other marginalised sections of society. In caste terms, the base of the movement consists of lower and intermediate castes. This applies to the Hindu as well as Muslim communities. The leadership of the movement is largely from the upper castes and classes and, to a large extent, is Andhra Pradesh-centric.

To most of the common people who form part of the movement, the term Naxalite has come to represent a movement or struggle for basic rights. The testimonies convey an anti-system sentiment and suggest that the Naxalites have a fair idea of the important components of their struggle for basic rights as well as knowledge of their opponents: the government machinery, landlords, upper classes, big business houses, and the like. In their self-identity, therefore, the Naxalites clearly see themselves as individuals who have chosen a path which clashes with the existing order. In their view, their struggle for basic rights has met with fierce opposition and condemnation which has turned their 'right' into a 'wrong' in the eyes of a large part of the world. They generally disassociate themselves from the wrongs that are commonly attributed to the movement to the extent that they may distance themselves from the term itself. They define who they are by who they are not, and in so doing, affirm the positive values of the Naxalite movement.<sup>4</sup>

At the lower levels, the ideological factor of Maoism is clearly missing. The migration of Telugu speaking people in the areas near the Godavari has also continued unabated and they have done in Bastar division what they have done in Adilabad, Warangal, Khammam and East Godavari. They have swamped the tribal population, exploited them mercilessly and have reduced them to penury and second class citizenship in their ancient lands. And quite ironically it is from these that the nucleus of the Naxalite leadership has emerged. Though the Naxal movement is now almost entirely centred in the Adivasi homelands, one cannot but notice a disconnect between what the tribals seek and what the Naxalites provide.<sup>5</sup> Few Adivasis have heard of Mao Zedong or care for what he stood for and did. The Naxalites, on the other hand, deify him. To them, China's Chairman is "their Chairman". Today, the entire greater homeland of the Koitur Gonds in Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh is under the thrall of the Telugu speaking Naxalite leadership, which now has an increasingly symbiotic

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relationship with rapacious forest and Public Works Department (PWD) contractors, and corrupt officialdom.<sup>6</sup>

An understanding of the ideological content of the Maoist movement as well as the social base of its core constituents must, therefore, be an essential first step if LWE is to be eradicated from India. A lack of such understanding is perhaps a primary cause for its continuance, despite brave proclamations made periodically, by political leaders and

defence and social analysts that LWE is declining. Neutralising the foot soldiers in ground offensives is but a palliative. Like a bad penny, the movement will spring up again, and will continue to do so till the ideological and social characteristics of the movement are understood and addressed. A three-pronged approach is essential to achieve success, involving winning the ideological battle, breaking Maoist linkages and fronts, and neutralising their military base. All these actions would have to proceed concurrently.

### **The Battle for Ideology**

This is perhaps the least understood aspect by those responsible to halt and eliminate LWE from the country. In its essence, the battle is ideological. The tools used by the Maoists may manifest in public mobilisation and violence but the central aim remains imposing a particular social order for governance. The Maoist movement is, thus, an antithesis to the nation's democracy and its Constitution. The Maoists do not aim to split India but to change its nature of government through force, in accordance with Maoist philosophy that "power flows through the barrel of the gun". That fundamental will not change. Those who continually call for, and propagate, the idea that the Maoist leadership

can be brought into the ambit of the democratic process are not cognisant of Maoist ideology and thought, and that is precisely why talks with the Maoist leadership will not yield results. The Maoists may abjure violence for a short period of time in places of their choosing but that process is temporary and will be used, more often than not, to achieve short-term tactical advantage in terms of regrouping their forces after a debacle or as part of a larger strategic design. For any worthwhile gains to be made, the ideological content of

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the movement has to be defeated. As an idea, the movement can only be defeated if it is supplanted by another idea and that idea perforce has to be the idea of Indian democracy. But for that to happen, Indian democracy must be seen as a superior alternative, which means that democratic structures must work in delivering social good to society. This would encompass the entire gamut of deliverables such as creating forums where the voice of the people is heard, having effective justice delivery mechanisms, providing socio-economic opportunities to the affected masses and providing basic facilities in terms of drinking water, roads, power supply, education, sanitation and health. All of these fall under the banner of 'good governance' and are common to all parts of the country, but assume greater relevance in areas affected by LWE.

Political penetration is perhaps the best antidote to LWE. Wherever political parties hold sway, the voice of the people is heard and people have a forum to state their needs and vent their grievances. This space gets filled by Maoist activity when the state abjures its responsibility in the less populated and remote areas of the country. A decline in LWE

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in West Bengal can be attributed to political penetration of the affected areas. People generally prefer choosing among a set of alternatives in the democratic system, as against the totalitarianism of the Maoists. Hence, the democratic path offers a construct which is preferable to what Maoist ideologues offer. Of course, political parties would have to deliver, else they will be thrown out of power. Society is

becoming increasingly aspirational, which places increasing responsibility on the state administration to deliver. In conditions where political parties cease to perform or have limited reach, the area becomes fertile hunting ground for the Maoists. This highlights the importance of good governance. Justice delivery mechanisms and a sensitised administration and police force are perhaps the most potent weapons in the fight against LWE. Both the judiciary and the political leadership have to look closely into these aspects as part of a concerted effort at conflict resolution. However, it is not development alone that will deliver tangibles but attitudes and perceptions. An elderly villager, when asked by a visiting Deputy Commissioner in the Bastar division of Chhattisgarh, about what differentiated the Naxals from the government servants, gave a caustic reply. “We do not see much difference”, he said, “When your forest guards and police constables come here, they take our poultry and eye our women. The Naxals do likewise”.<sup>7</sup> This is where the primary change is needed.

On the development front, there appears to be a lack of clarity on the long-term strategy being adopted to tackle LWE. Interaction at the ground level brings home the truth that a long-term vision for development is lacking and the concerned officials are barely looking even one month ahead in terms of goal realisation. There is a need for a vision statement, at the levels of both the Centre and the state, spelling out the goals to be achieved.

This must then be translated into a time-bound long-term perspective plan. The requirements must initially flow from the districts encompassing a period of 5 to 10 years. The plan should then be coordinated at the state level and issued as a directive to the districts. This directive must be unique to each district and must state the benefit that will accrue to the local population. The directive should encompass what is proposed to be achieved, the cost to be incurred, the resources that would be made available and the time lines for completion. Unless such focus is brought in, the development effort will remain a mirage and the ideological battle will be far from being won.<sup>8</sup>

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### **The Linkages**

Mao appreciated the necessity of forming united fronts to achieve the goal of revolution, believing rightly that the peasants by themselves would not be able to do so. The CPI-Maoist document, titled “Strategy and Tactics of the Indian Revolution”, bases its core ideology on Mao’s teachings. It seeks to “creatively apply the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism to the concrete conditions prevailing in India”. The political strategy aims to... “develop progressive forces, win over fence-sitters and isolate staunch opponents”, in order to defeat the state.<sup>9</sup> This understanding is vital as it brings into focus, the role of various organisations in India which the Maoists use for their own purposes. By aligning themselves with such forces, through direct or indirect support, they propagate and strengthen their cause and give it further legitimacy.

The fronts alluded to comprise four classes: the proletariat, peasantry, urban petty bourgeoisie, and national bourgeoisie. These can be broken

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down into Tactical United Front (TUF) and Strategic United Front (SUF). The former is formed with organisations that are opposed to the state for one reason or the other. A good example of this category is the People's Democratic Front of India (PDFI), which was formed in July 2006 through the efforts of a Maoist front organisation known as the "Revolutionary Democratic Front" (RDF). The PDFI has amongst its members eminent personalities such as Medha Patkar, Nandita Haksar and

SAR Geelani. Some of the organisations which form part of the PDFI are the Samyukta Sangram Committee (West Bengal), Indian Federation of Trade Unions, All India Federation of Trade Unions, Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha, Daman Virodhi Manch (Orissa), Jharkhand Progressive Students Union — an affiliate of the All India Radical Students Federation (AIRSF), etc. The emphasis in alignment is with educational establishments, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and other establishments which could be used by the Maoists to further their cause. Here, the Party seeks to take advantage of the conflicts and contradictions within the ruling class, to achieve control over the vast resources and markets. They make use of each and every activist, many of whom may not even be aware that they are part of the broader plan of the Maoists to sabotage the state. The aim is to create a mass struggle through propaganda, agitation and action. The Maoists' desire to be associated with civil movements remains an important component of their strategy, as seen by their links with the People's Democratic Front of India (PDFI). Similarly, in the populist movement launched by Anna Hazare against corruption, the movement saw traction in places as far away as the Bastar heartland.<sup>10</sup> The counter to such activities lies in an effective intelligence network and in formulating

a counter perception management strategy, to give the target audience an alternate narrative.<sup>11</sup> The SUF consists exclusively of Maoist mass organisations that are underground and operate in the base area/struggle area. The combined strength of these organisations is synergised to serve the cause of the revolution. They would need to be penetrated by own intelligence agencies.

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In addition to the above, the Maoists have developed linkages with a number of foreign and Indian terrorist and insurgent groups. These include the Maoists of Nepal, militant groups operating in northeast India, anti-Indian actors – state and non-state – based in Pakistan, and umbrella organisations at the regional and global levels like the Coordinating Committee of Maoist Parties and Organisations of South Asia (CCOMPOSA)<sup>12</sup>, Friends of Indian Revolution (FOIR), International Conference of Marxist-Leninist Parties and Organisations (ICMLPO) and International Communist Movement (ICM). These linkages are not only increasing in depth and quality, but also turning deadly.<sup>13</sup> The counter-strategy here is once again to neutralise the threats through an effective intelligence apparatus.

### **Security Forces (SFs) Operations**

This is the third triad in operations against LWE. While ideological, governance, intelligence and perception management issues play a pivotal role in addressing Maoist violence, no realistic solution can come about till such time as the military power of the Maoist groups is neutralised. The most powerful of the militant groups, the CPI-Maoist has in its People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA), about 9,000 to 12,000 hard core cadres, grouped into military companies, platoons, and special squads. Military companies, platoons, and even special guerrilla squads

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are equipped with AK 47/56 rifles, INSAS rifles, LMGs, and mortars.<sup>14</sup> The Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) is the lead security agency, tasked to defang the PLGA and other military groups of the Maoists. A broad survey of security forces' operation over the last decade throws up disturbing trends which are yet to be addressed. The most disturbing aspect

of the SFs' operations is the abnormally high rate of casualties suffered by the CRPF and local police forces in encounters with the Maoists. Statistical data from the South Asian Terrorism Portal reveals that for the five-year period 2010-14, the police forces lost one man for each terrorist killed.<sup>15</sup> This bespeaks of a very heavy rate of attrition on the security forces which impacts negatively on their morale and will to confront the Maoists. But an analysis of encounters indicates an even more worrisome fact. In one on one encounters with the Maoists, the police forces have been bested most of the times. In many cases, when the police forces were ambushed, they did not return the fire, which enabled the Maoists to remove the weapons and equipment of the fallen policemen. This denotes tremendous weakness in the leadership and training of the forces deployed in combatting the Maoists in India's heartland.

Reports suggesting that the police forces suffered because they were outgunned by the Naxals lack credibility and are not substantiated by facts. After every major encounter, in which the police forces have suffered grievous loss, there is a renewed clamour for better weapons and equipment, improved protection gear and use of advanced technology for identifying and neutralising the Maoist cadre. This is for the most part uncalled for. Let us consider some of the demands made after each successful strike by the Maoists. The issue of mine protected vehicles continues to crop up whenever a vehicle is blasted by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED). The

use of such vehicles is, however, self-defeating. Put simply, each vehicle can withstand a certain quantum of explosives. It is but a simple matter for the Maoists to increase the quantum of explosives in the IEDs they bury in the ground, to defeat at nominal cost any such equipment that is bought. In Sri Lanka, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) exploded an IED under an Infantry Combat Vehicle (ICV), the explosion sending 30 tons of metal over 50 ft into the air. Vehicles with armour protection are useful against small arms but offer little protection against IEDs.

Their use in combatting the Maoists serves little purpose. When used, they become obvious targets and could be likened to metal coffins.

Another factor which repeatedly crops up is the demand for drones for seeking out and destroying the terrorists. After a Naxal attack in March 2014 in Chhattisgarh in which 15 policemen were killed, a leading national daily raised a rhetorical question on why the 200 million dollars worth of Israeli drones were not being used to track the movement of Naxals.<sup>16</sup> This underlies a basic misunderstanding of the employment of drones. The Heron Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) in use in the Services is useful to gain information in conventional operations. To combat LWE, it would be practically impossible to keep the entire length and breadth of the areas affected by LWE under constant surveillance. The number of UAVs required for total area coverage as well as the support infrastructure required would be colossal. Even so, their utility would remain doubtful. In the type of terrain that exists, there are obvious challenges to detection of small bands of lightly armed men and women using drones. Even if they were detected, the time required to process the information and pass it down to the local police for taking action is so large that the Maoists

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would have long left the scene by then. Medium Altitude Long-Endurance (MALE) UAVs of the Heron class are, thus, inherently unsuitable as a tool for tactical level operations against the Naxals. Micro UAVs in the hands of operating troops would be more useful in such environments and that is where emphasis must be laid. The police forces need to be empowered at the tactical level.

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It needs reiteration that while technology is an enabler, the battle against the PLGA can only be won by police forces which are well led and well trained. This remains the Achilles heel of our operations. The leadership, drawn from police officers, remains well below par for operations in the jungles. The training standards too remain a cause of concern. Unless these concerns are rectified, the PLGA will continue to get the better of our forces. India cannot achieve its rightful place in the sun if a major portion of its landmass remains affected by extremist violence. The political leadership as well as the state administration tasked with addressing security concerns arising out of extremist violence need to develop a holistic understanding of the Maoist philosophy, and then take steps to insulate the masses from the Maoists. Governance challenges need to be addressed through a time-bound long-term action plan, which should be monitored at the highest level in each state. Maoist linkages and fronts need to be broken through a concerted intelligence action plan. Finally, the police forces need to get their act together and provide the requisite training and leadership to our forces deployed in combatting LWE. Only through such an integrated model can we hope to overcome the challenges that face us.

## Notes

1. Karl Marx, *Critique of Political Economy* (1859), p. 509.
2. M A Suslov, "Leninism and the Revolutionary Remaking of the World", in *Leninism and the World Revolutionary Working Class Movement* (Moscow, 1976), p. 17.
3. Mao Tse Tung, *Selected Works*, Vol. 1, pp. 575 - 616.
4. Bela Bhatia, "The Naxalite Movement in Central Bihar," *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 09, 2005.
5. Mohan Guruswamy, "The Heart of our Darkness," Centre for Policy Alternatives, New Delhi.
6. Ibid.
7. During an interaction with the author in February 2011.
8. The development effort is large and cannot be covered in an article of this nature. It has been comprehensively covered in the CLAWS Study Report, "Left Wing Extremism: An Internal Security Challenge and Response Strategy for the Security Forces-2015," New Delhi.
9. PV Ramana, *Understanding India's Maoists* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2014), pp. 47-48.
10. For more details, see R Krishna Das, "Anna Hazare's Movement Reaches Naxal Heartland in Chhattisgarh," *Business Standard*, August 29, 2011, available at [http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/anna-hazare-s-movement-reaches-naxal-heartland-in-chhattisgarh-111082900073\\_1.html](http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/anna-hazare-s-movement-reaches-naxal-heartland-in-chhattisgarh-111082900073_1.html)
11. CLAWS Study Report, n. 8.
12. The present constituent parties of CCOMPOSA are United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), Poorba Bangladesh Sarvahara Party (CC), Communist Party of East Bengal (ML) Red Flag Communist Party of Bhutan(MLM), Communist Party of India (MLM), Communist Party of India (ML) (Naxalbari), and Communist Party of India-Maoist. The CCOMPOSA members have agreed to share each others' experiences and strengthen one another in "fighting back the enemies in the respective countries" and "making South Asia a blazing centre of world revolution". Further details are available in the Press Release of 5th Conference of CCOMPOSA, March 23, 2011.
13. CLAWS Study Report, n. 8.
14. Ibid.
15. Data on casualty figures is available at [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/maoist/data\\_sheets/fatalitiesnaxal05-11.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/maoist/data_sheets/fatalitiesnaxal05-11.htm)
16. Praveen Swami, "CRPF, State Police Ignored Pinpoint Warning on Ambush," *The Hindu*, March 13, 2014.