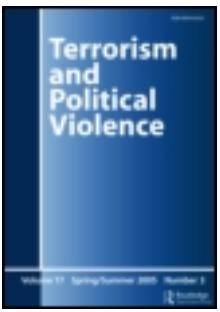

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Naxalism in India: Revolution or terror?

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Naxalism in India: Revolution or Terror?

AJAY K. MEHRA

How to start guerrilla warfare? To this question the revolutionary peasants in India have given the answer that guerrilla warfare can be started only by liquidating the feudal classes in the countryside ... the annihilation of the class enemies is the primary stage of the guerrilla struggle. The annihilation of the class enemy does not only mean liquidating individuals, but also means liquidating the political, economic and social authority of the class enemy.

Charu Mazumdar

Charu Mazumdar, who was at the vanguard of the Naxalite movement, which shook the Indian state out of slumber in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, succinctly highlights the significance of guerrilla warfare for Marxist/Maoist revolutionary technique. However, neither in this brief quotation, nor elsewhere in any of his writings, does he indicate how revolutionary guerrilla warfare also has a tendency to deteriorate into terror. The crucial question, however, remains regarding the stage at which the tactics of a revolutionary movement, the one under discussion here, or any other elsewhere, begins to resemble terror. While a revolutionary movement uses terror selectively and in a measured dose to instil fear amidst its opponents, overwhelming dependence on terror as an indiscriminate political tool distinguishes a revolutionary movement from terrorism. This article[1] attempts a critical analysis of the Naxalite movement in India from this perspective.

Since Naxalism (which draws its name from Naxalbari, a small village in the state of West Bengal in eastern India) is the reference point for this article, the focus is largely on the post-1967 period when, inspired by Mao's thoughts, Naxalism added a new dimension to militant and 'revolutionary' peasant movements in India. However, reference to the colonial or the post-independence period is made in locating the root-causes.

Naxalism in India typifies a particular kind of militant and violent armed struggle by the peasants, led by a leadership drawing doctrinal support from Marxism/Leninism and strategic inspiration from Mao. But despite periods of co-operation and co-ordination, the movement has not been unified in different parts of the country. In fact, it has at times been fragmented even at a particular local context. This necessitates a comparison of the

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movement's context, purpose, strategies, leadership profile and social base. Further, the existence of the movement five and a half decades since the first spark and over three decades since it acquired its present identity (i.e. Naxalism), deserves analysis, particularly since both international and national contexts of socioeconomic change have been under transformation for a decade. Obviously, the response of the Indian state and that of the movement's leaders to each other under a rapidly changing socioeconomic scenario also needs to be contextualized.

The Communist party-led peasant uprising in Telangana in the Hyderabad state (now part of Andhra Pradesh)[2] in 1944, and the Naxalite uprising in West Bengal in 1967 and in Srikakulam (Andhra Pradesh) in 1968, have contextual similarities in terms of the iniquitous land tenure system and exploitation of the peasantry by the landlords. Such similarities, compounded by caste and other social factors, have been present in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh as well. But the reasons why the Naxalbari movement ebbed and never resurfaced in West Bengal, why the violent movement resurfaced in Andhra Pradesh after the end of the Telangana uprising, why the movement festered in Bihar for over three decades, why it found a fertile ground in Bastar in Madhya Pradesh, and why despite making an appearance in Punjab (and some other states) it did not develop roots there, need examination.[3]

Contextualizing Peasant Movements in India

Contrary to the impression that peasant movements and uprisings in developing countries arise as consequences of the process of modernization, which began after these societies had overthrown colonial regimes, peasant uprisings took place in India even during the late Mughal period. The trend continued during the British colonial rule; British colonialism certainly was not meant to improve the peasants' lot. Since the logic of exploitation was rooted in colonialism, the East India Company strengthened the existing structures of intermediaries designed by the indigenous regimes and created its own (e.g. zamindari) system under the permanent settlement to extract surplus and revenue from agriculture, the predominant contemporary mode of production.[4] As Ranajit Guha points out:

> Rents constituted the most substantial part of income yielded by property in land. Its incumbents related to the vast majority of agricultural producers as landlords to tenant-cultivators, sharecroppers, agricultural labourers and many intermediate types with features derived from each of these categories. The element that was constant in this relationship with all its variety was the extraction

> of the peasants' surplus by means determined less by the free play of the forces of a market economy than by the extra-economic force of the landlord's standing in local society and in the colonial polity.[5]

The stratum of zamindars, inamdars and similar people endowed with 'land titles' formed a strong basis of indirect British rule, a stratum that assisted and participated in the drain of agricultural surplus.[6] Not surprisingly, 'agrarian disturbances in many forms and on scales ranging from local riots to war-like campaigns spread over many districts were endemic throughout the first three quarters of British rule until the very end of the nineteenth century'.[7]

Ranajit Guha points out that in none of the 110 known instances of violent peasant uprisings in 117 years, from 1783 to 1900, was the rebellion spontaneous or undertaken in a fit of absent-mindedness. Mobilization for rebellion could not have taken place without 'consultation among the peasants in various forms' and at various levels – clan elders and caste panchayats, neighbourhood conventions, larger mass gatherings, and so on.[8] That violent or militant revolt was not the first option of the agitating peasants is also borne out from the fact that in many instances they tried to obtain justice from the authorities by deputation, petition and peaceful demonstration before they took up arms; this trend continued with subsequent movements. At no stage did any of these movements either use terror as a political or strategic tool to achieve their objectives or degenerate into a terrorist movement, though in the time and space they were acting state terrorism was almost taken for granted.

In poorer rural sections, landless labourers, tenants, sharecroppers, smallholders formed an essential part of the mass basis of the Indian National Congress in its struggle for self-rule and internal autonomy (*swaraj*), and later for full independence. The Congress in 1935 officially included agrarian reform in its programme, and later demanded even more radical transformations of the agrarian structure (e.g. co-operative agricultural production).[9] But the continued pauperization of the peasants even after independence, the inability of the state structure to effectively enforce meaningful land reform to mitigate the woes of the small, marginal and landless cultivators, and the complicity of the state apparatus with the landlords in exploitation and oppression of the poor, kept the possibilities of peasant movements, peaceful or militant, alive in India even after independence.

It is necessary to ask at the very outset why most militant peasant movements in post-independence India have operated within the ideological framework of Marxism/Leninism/Maoism. The explanation lies in the fact

that a movement, peaceful or militant, requires an aim, a programme and a leadership. Each one of these, Ranajit Guha points out, was present in the peasant uprisings in colonial India. In many cases, the peasant kings emerged as 'a characteristic product of rural revolt throughout the subcontinent'.[10] Each militant peasant movement had an aim, a programme and perhaps an internal leadership. The Marxist leadership, working with the peasants of the area, came in with a visible and organizationally supported leadership and an ideology that strengthened the rationale for the struggle against the exploitative landlords and the state structure, both of whom supported and perpetuated each other.

The Telangana Movement

The Communist-led Marxism-oriented peasant movement in India, the ideological context in which movements of the Naxalite kind are rooted, begins from the uprising of the Telangana peasants in 1944. Contextually, the social fabric and political economy of the region as well as the organizational contribution of the Communist Party of India (CPI) are crucial in understanding the origin, the abrupt end and the contribution of the Telangana movement.

The domination of the *deshmukhs*, originally revenue collectors with magisterial powers, who survived regime changes to be entrenched as landlords with near complete control over their *parganas* (an administrative unit consisting of 20 to 60 villages) and over the lives of peasants in their domain, was the decisive factor for the uprising in the Telangana countryside in the 1940s. Their domination could be challenged only by a higher authority (e.g. the Mughal administration, the Nizam or the British). Revenue collection being the primary objective of the successive regimes, functional autonomy to the landlords *vis-à-vis* their *praja* subjects was essential for the smooth operation of the revenue collection machinery.

Hence, as long as the *deshmukhs* fulfilled their revenue collection obligations, they were left free in their domain. The prevalence of revenue collection in kind, which was paid in cash to the state, was largely responsible for the indispensability of the *deshmukhs* for different regimes. This enabled them further to consolidate the exploitative structure by taking on the role of merchants and usurers.[11]

The complex socioeconomic formation led to the emergence of servile labour. The *deshmukhs* and landlords (honorifically addressed as *doras* in the Telangana countryside) reduced a vast majority of sharecroppers and landless labourers to a life of slavery. The service castes (e.g. washermen, cobblers, potters, etc.) and the *harijans* had to offer free service to the *doras*, others had to send one male member daily for household work under the

vetti (forced labour and exactions) system. Even women of these families were not spared from the worst kind of exploitation and physical abuse by the *doras*.[12]

The food crisis in the wake of the Second World War made the supply situation critical. The Telangana peasantry faced a paradoxical situation. They received a reduced price for their grain, while the economy was reeling under inflation: in sum, they received less for their produce and paid more for their necessities. Taking advantage of this the *deshmukhs* seized as much land as they could. The natural consequence was a tremendous rise in the number of landless peasants.[13]

The CPI, which had been consolidating itself in the Hyderabad state since the 1920s, infiltrated and gradually took control of the Andhra Mahasabha, an organization founded in 1928 as a reaction against domination of the Telugu culture and language in the Nizam-ruled Hyderabad state by the Urdu-speaking Muslim élite and the Marathis. By 1941 the CPI had taken over and so transformed the Andhra Mahasabha that it had taken the style of a radical nationalist organization. The grain levy campaign[14] launched by them in 1941 proved the most crucial issue in this respect as it really galvanized the rural masses. In the wake of the economic crisis of 1945, there was concerted resistance from the peasants to any attack on them by the landlords. The movement turned violent in 1946 when the people of Jangaon Taluka resisted the *deshmukhs'* attempt to seize the harvest of a woman supporter of the Mahasabha. The Central Committee of the CPI then decided upon militant development of mass struggle. The party was banned by the Hyderabad government in the same year.[15]

D.V. Rao, who was closely associated with the movement, describes the struggle thus:

> The comrades representing the revolutionary trends in Nalgonda district, who had gone to the peasant masses took up not only issues like forced labour and illegal exactions, but also boldly championed the cause of tenants, who were faced with the threat of evictions and were victims of exorbitant rents. Besides this, they took up the issue of forcible grain collection from peasants by government offices. The revolutionaries relied on mobilising and organizing masses ...[16]

P. Sundarayya, a senior CPI leader who later joined CPM after the split in the party, summarizes the achievements of the movements in the following words:

> During the course of the struggle, the peasantry in about 3000 villages, covering roughly a population in three million in an area of about 16,000 square miles had succeeded in setting up *gram raj* on the

basis of fighting village panchayats.

The landlords were driven out of their houses and their lands were seized by the peasantry. One million acres of land were redistributed under the guidance of people's committees. All evictions were stopped and the forced labour service was abolished. The daily wages of agricultural labourers were increased and minimum wage was enforced.

The people could organise and build a powerful militia comprising 10,000 village squad members and 2000 regular guerrilla squads, in defence of the peasantry ...[17]

The movement ran into rough weather after the accession of Hyderabad to India in 1948. The military was rough on the communists, arresting and eliminating several of their activists. As the Congress became the main advisor to the brief martial law administration and later participated in the civil administration, landlords, rich peasants and other sections of the population enthused by independence switched their support to the Congress. After serious reconsideration, the party relaunched its guerrilla warfare. But they could not keep up in the face of the army's campaign. Popular support also started dwindling after Gandhi's disciple and *Sarvodaya* (literally meaning upliftment of all) leader Acharya Vinoba Bhave toured Telangana extensively, and realizing the importance of land, launched his famous *bhoodan* (donation of land) movement from there. Eventually the CPI had to withdraw the movement in 1951 on Soviet pressure.[18]

Obviously, the withdrawal of the popular support owing to dilution of the rationale of the movement proved critical. The abolition of the *jagirdari* system by the Congress government and initiation of land reforms, howsoever imperfect, gave hope to the masses and they were weaned away from the path of violence. Clearly, the CPI did not initiate the movement; it only provided ideology, strategy and leadership to a mass discontent against exploitation. The dilution of the discontent owing to the disappearance of the threat of exploitation weakened the mass support to the Communist ideology.

The Spring Thunder over India

The eruption in 1967 of peasant violence in Darjeeling, the northern frontier district of West Bengal, the state on the eastern coast of India, was so described by China, which supported the uprising in every manner. It proved that though rooted in the country's feudal and colonial past, the seeds of peasant uprising of the Srikakulam kind had remained in

independent India despite the warning signals given by the Telangana movement two decades back. Significantly, West Bengal had for the first time since independence rejected the Indian National Congress to be ruled by a coalition, which had the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) as a major partner.

The villages in Naxalbari, Phansideva and Kharibari Police Stations (PS) in Siliguri subdivision in Darjeeling district exploded with peasant revolt on 3 March 1967. In Naxalbari[19] too, like in Srikakulam, peasant revolt was precipitated because of exploitation and oppression by the landlords in the villages, as well as the role of the CPM/CPI(ML).[20] The first spark started with an attack on a *jotedar*'s[21] granary and it spread after clashes with the police. The ideological indoctrination as well as the organizational support came from the militant wing of the CPM, which later split from the parent party as CPI(ML). The difference, however, is that in the Naxalite movement the role of the CPM/CPI(ML) in building up the movement was more sustained, though not necessarily more important, than that of the CPI in Telangana.

Darjeeling district, in which Naxalbari and the other two PSs fall, has an area of 1,256.6 square miles out of which close to 99 per cent (i.e. 1,241.1 square miles) is rural. The district with the lowest density of population in West Bengal, Darjeeling, had a population in 1971[22] of 756,677. The Siliguri subdivision, in which the three PSs lie, has an unusually high tribal population, with 58.59 per cent of the total tribal population in the district.

The 1971 census reveals that in each of the three PS areas, a very small number of rich peasants, or *jotedars* (four per cent in Naxalbari, seven per cent in Kharibari and six per cent in Phansideva) cultivated a large quantity of land. In fact, these figures are for those cultivating more than 15 acres of land. The number of those with larger holdings would be even smaller. The level of landless population in the district was high and nearly 60 per cent of the area's population were non-workers. The poor cultivators and the non-workers formed the bulk of the Naxalites in 1967.[23]

This clearly points out that land reforms promised after independence and enacted in the 1950s were not implemented effectively.[24] The ceiling provisions of the 1954 Act made 17,000 acres available for redistribution, of which only 7,500 acres had been redistributed by 1967. A high percentage of cultivators – 68 in Naxalbari, 44 in Kharibari and 59 in Phansidewa – were left holding one–five acres of land, which was not enough to make both ends meet. Most such cultivators ended up as sharecroppers, cultivating *jotedars'* land on a year-to-year basis and dividing the harvest with them. But whereas the West Bengal Estates Act of 1954 provided that the cultivator-sharecropper should get two-thirds of the harvest, in reality the produce was being equally divided. Moreover, the

sharecropper was always at a disadvantage *vis-à-vis* the landlord. Since he received his share only in kind (paddy), which was insufficient to support his family through the year, he was forced to borrow from the *jotedar* both grain and money. Most sharecroppers also had to borrow for seeds, fertilizers and for festivals and other special occasions. The landlords, aside from charging high interest, imposed all kinds of unfair conditions to maximize their returns from the sharecroppers and to keep them in a state of serfdom.[25]

The iniquitous agrarian situation in West Bengal, despite several agrarian unrests since the 19th century, had perpetuated rural poverty. The indigo movement of the 1860s[26] and the Tebhaga (one-third) movement in the undivided Bengal on the eve of independence[27] did result in restoration of rights of or concessions for the farmers in legal terms, but the situation on the ground did not really change. The Tebhaga movement, which also had affected the Siliguri region, succeeded in enhancing the sharecroppers' share to two-thirds of harvested grain through the 1954 Act of West Bengal. The land-ceiling Act was meant to restore equity in land rights. But there was a wide gap between the protection provided by the legal provisions and in the real ground situation. The resulting popular discontent became compounded as the Indian economy was severely jolted by wars in 1962 and 1965 and two severe droughts.

Since the end of the Tebhaga movement in 1950 at Patharghata in the Siliguri subdivision, the CPI was banned. But the Communist leaders remained active in the area, making people conscious of, and mobilizing them against, exploitation, and leading agitations against exploitative policies. The periodization of the Naxalbari movement by Kanu Sanyal, one of the chief architects of Naxalism, clearly outlines its evolution as a people's movement with active support from the Communist leadership – CPI, CPM and CPI(ML). He divides the movement into four stages:

1951–54: This was an organizational stage in which 'the peasantry of Naxalbari, advanced through clashes to get them organized'.

1953–57: This was the period of worker–peasant alliance and 'a united class of workers and peasants'.[28]

1955–62: This was a very significant stage when responding to the call given by the West Bengal *Kisan Sabha* (Peasants' Organization) 'to regain the possession of *benami* land'[29] the subdivisional *Kisan Samiti* (peasants' council) in Naxalbari 'gave a call to confiscate the entire produce of *jotedars*' land', unless the *jotedars* could furnish proof of their ownership before the peasant committee. A call was also given to the peasants to arm themselves to protect their crop from the *jotedars* and the police.

1962–64: During this stage, according to Sanyal, despite the India–China war, the peasants refused to be infested by chauvinism.[30]

The Communist movement in India faced its first major split in 1964, when the CPI, born in the 1920s, splintered into CPI and CPM. It signified the ideological rift between dominant centres of international communism: Soviet Russia and China. The pro-Chinese members of the CPI formed a new party, CPM (so named by the Election Commission of India). The CPM took off from a pro-Chinese, anti-CPI and anti-Soviet Union posture. Despite the split, several grassroots peasants' organizations had members from both the parties for some years. But it was the CPM which inherited the mantle until the next split in the party in May 1969.

Even though the CPM leadership and cadre painstakingly organized peasants in Darjeeling and nearby districts, the party leadership had sharp differences regarding the strategy to be adopted, which was reflected at two levels. First, the key leaders such as Charu Mazumdar and Kanu Sanyal, though agreeing that the 'Chinese path is the path of liberation in India; (and) agrarian revolution can be completed through armed struggle', developed serious disagreement regarding strategy as discussed in six (later eight) documents.[31] The differences between the Charu line, which preferred armed revolt and annihilation of the class enemies, and the Kanu line, which disapproved of armed revolt before solving the land problem, were resolved at Buragunj Conference in April–May 1967. The emerging consensus advocated seizure of land from the *jotedars* and plantation workers (who had purchased land from the poor peasants), cultivating the land and sharing half the produce from plantation workers' land.

The second level of disagreement appeared regarding participation in the 1967 general elections. The party joined the election fray in 1967 amidst debate. In developments significant for the Naxalite movement, the Congress party was voted out of power in several states of the country, and the CPM joined coalition governments in various states and became a prominent partner in forming the government in West Bengal. The party joined the parliamentary process with the plea that the situation in India was not yet ripe for revolution. The CPM neither anticipated coming to power as a part of the United Front government in West Bengal, nor did it anticipate power in other states. The party faced a changed perspective, which had a cataclysmic effect on its cadre.

The criticism of the party from within was spearheaded by the party wing of the Siliguri subdivision in the Darjeeling district. This articulate and active group of the party was led by Charu Mazumdar, Kanu Sanyal and Souren Bose, the persons who led the Naxalite movement. Actually, not anticipating the windfall of 'power' in the 1967 General Elections, the party

had armed the peasants in order to launch an armed agitation soon after the elections. Not surprisingly, when in power, and with two of its prominent leaders, Jyoti Basu and Hare Krishna Konar, becoming Home (Internal Security) Minister and the Land Revenue Minister respectively, the party was in a difficult situation. The extremist groups within the party, which had no faith in the electoral process whether or not the party was in power, were not satisfied with the explanations offered by the party leadership.[32] In fact, Konar, as party activist, had not only encouraged the party cadres in the Siliguri subdivision to incite militancy among the peasants, he himself had asked the peasants to be ready for an armed struggle in a peasants' meeting in 1964.

In a strange turn of events, Konar led a Cabinet mission to talk to the Naxal leadership, particularly Charu Mazumdar and Kanu Sanyal, in May 1967. Needless to say, the movement, having recorded over 100 incidents in less than three months, had rattled not only the West Bengal government, but also the CPM. Home Minister Jyoti Basu's instructions to the police not to enter the rebel strongholds had also come under severe attack.

Konar succeeded in bringing Kanu Sanyal to the negotiating table and persuading him to surrender with his associates in return for land redistribution and releasing of grains in consultation with the people's committees. But Sanyal and his colleagues did not honour this commitment. The movement took a violent turn, inviting retaliation from the police. Simultaneously, the West Bengal Cabinet issued three appeals, between 15 June and 27 June 1967, to the extremists to surrender by 4 July, which was obviously ignored. Consequently, a series of arrests of key leaders followed and by September, the law and order situation was brought under control.[33]

The salutary effect of the 'revolutionary' activities was that the administration decided to take up immediately 'those aspects of land reforms which could be tackled "completely and quickly" and thereby restore confidence among the panic-stricken people in the affected areas'.[34] The Land Reforms Committees at different levels were revived and by September, the government claimed to have distributed 984.22 acres of land among 686 persons. But despite sincere political initiative, the basic problem of peasant alienation could not be solved because the implementation of the land distribution by the bureaucratic machinery was mired in its inherent problems. It naturally created a number of fresh anomalies.[35]

The political events during this period were cataclysmic in the country, in the state and for the CPM. Between October 1967 and 1972, when a Congress government was installed in West Bengal after elections for the state Legislative Assembly, the UF government was dismissed, a Congress-led coalition came to power for five months, President's rule[36] was imposed,

the UF came back to power after a mid-term poll, and CPI(ML) was born after another split in the CPM in 1969, which decided to carry the movement forward.

The arrested Naxalite leaders kept their spirits high even in prison by protesting against their status as prisoners. The CPM, while critical of the Naxalite leaders, maintained that they should be released. Thus, when the UF returned to power with a clear verdict after the mid-term poll in 1969, it released all the prisoners. The Naxalites soon resumed the movement. In May that year the CPM split and the CPI(ML) came into existence. From December 1969 until the Naxalite movement was tamed in West Bengal, the movement turned more party-based, conspiratorial and violent. It relied increasingly on terror struck by its guerrilla squads. There was no more mass mobilization of the peasants and much less focus on agrarian issues. The impact was twofold. First, the support of the group it was fighting for was considerably weakened, diluting the *raison d' tre* of revolution. Secondly, terror became the prime tool, not only against the state, but also against anyone who would dare to oppose it. Naturally, it invited harsh retaliation from the law and order machinery, and their task was made easier by weak popular support to the movement. Consequently, by mid-1972 the movement was all but crushed.[37]

Even though the industrial scene in West Bengal during the later part of the 1960s was marked by labour unrest and there was a marked increase in the left-supported student agitations, the Naxalite movement did not have a significant urban impact. This was because:

> Compared to the poor and landless peasants in the countryside, who had a long tradition of armed rebellion, and who were provided by the [CPI(ML)] with a concrete set of objectives involving immediate action – ousting of feudal landlords from the villages, seizure of arms, formation of guerrilla squads, distribution of land, etc., the urban working class was steeped in economism and its emergence as the leader of the revolution had to be preceded by a long and complicated process of realization and self-transformation.[38]

The students' disorientation and disillusionment with the economic scene and resultant unemployment was responsible for stirrings in West Bengal, most of which were led by CPM, or later CPI(ML), cadres. But a clear direction was clearly missing. As a result, while some of these bright young men proved precious for the Naxalite movement in carrying forward the agrarian struggle, Naxalism failed to take an urban root.[39]

The Srikakulam Movement

The embers from the revolutionary fire ignited by the Communists in 1946 kept smouldering in Srikakulam, the northernmost district in Andhra Pradesh. In 1959, eight years after the Telangana movement was withdrawn and as many years before the Naxalite movement began, some Communist workers formed the Girijan Sangham (Hill People's Association) to alleviate the miserable situation of hill tribes in the area. In 1965, the Sangham organized a conference of 300 representatives of the area's agricultural workers, making them conscious of their rights. This consciousness-raising went on until 1967, when the Naxalbari uprising led to a changed perspective.

The most significant contribution in this regard came from Vempatapu Satynarayana, a schoolteacher, who organized the *girijans* of Parvathipuram taluk of the Srikakulam district into a non-violent movement to seek redress of their grievances. To identify himself with the *girijans*, he married a woman from each of the two major tribes, Jatapu and Savara, of the area. He was not a Communist. His identification with and struggle for the hill people invited the attention of the prominent Andhra Communist leaders, who persuaded him to join the CPI. He organized the Girijan Sangham as a Communist. But for a decade, until the outbreak of the Naxalite violence, he was frustrated by organizing peaceful agitations around specific issues. Though he achieved some success on the wage issue, the organized violence by the landlords and complicity of the state administration and the police turned him and his girijan followers to violent action. Finally, he was killed in a police encounter in 1970 as the leading Naxalite.[40]

Basically a rural area, the Srikakulam district had 43.1 per cent of the total population as either cultivators or agricultural labour, according to the 1961 census. The district had a large non-working population amounting to nearly half of the total population. It also had a small population of Scheduled Tribes (8.21 per cent) and Scheduled Castes (9.43 per cent), according to the 1961 census. The percentage of agricultural labour in Srikakulam rose in proportion to the decline in the percentage of cultivators. Obviously, big farmers grabbed the land belonging to small cultivators. The district also has a vast number of agricultural labourers. Even though transfer of tribal land to others is forbidden by law, poor tribespeople informally mortgage their land with the big landowners and work as labourers on their own land. According to a study by the Government of Andhra Pradesh, the annual per capita income of the tribespeople in 1968 was Rs.135 (US$18). In sum, the situation was no better than in 1946, when the Communists led the peasant uprising in Telangana.[41]

In fact, the situation was worse in several respects as far as the

tribespeople were concerned. First, the tribespeople were continuously losing their land to the plainspeople. Many among the plainspeople had discovered their vulnerability and were moving to the hill areas to grab land.

Secondly, as a consequence, indebtedness of the tribespeople had increased. The government's legislations to prevent and relieve indebtedness failed singularly in their purpose. Ironically, various reports of the Andhra Pradesh government not only accepted the existence of indebtedness among the Scheduled Tribes population in the area, they also accepted that the government's developmental schemes in the area had failed and the Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Tribes Cooperative Finance and Development Corporation, founded in 1956 for the purpose of extending credit to tribespeople and purchasing agriculture and minor forest products from them, was not in a position to meet such credit needs to a greater extent. The reports also accepted the virtual enslavement of tribal families at the hands of the moneylenders.

Thirdly, the tribespeople since 1952 suffered from limits imposed by government rules, and sometimes by corrupt local officials, on tribal access to forest land for the collection of forest products and cultivation. Sometimes in the process of reserving forest land, the tribespeople were forced to leave their homes.[42]

Under these circumstances, the persuasion of the Communist cadres to the tribespeople to assert their rights struck a chord. The movement by local tribespeople for their rights under the leadership of Satyanarayana had already become part of the left movement. It was during this time that the debate in the CPM was taking place in the context of the Naxalbari uprising. The Andhra Pradesh leadership was taking a militant posture. T. Nagi Reddy and his group were in favour of slowly building an armed struggle against the state by organizing mass seizures of land and other intermediate steps.[43] The death of a tribesman on 31 October 1967 at the hands of a landlord eventually provided the spark. Manoranjan Mohanty summarizes the development of the movement:

> ... between early 1968 and late 1970 the revolutionaries had mobilised almost the entire tribal population in the Srikakulam Agency Area, carried out numerous attacks resulting in the death of at least 34 landlords. In the high point of the movement in July 1969, the revolutionaries controlled nearly 300 villages out of the 518 in the Agency. The peasant revolutionary committees, called Ryotanga Sangram Samithis, ruled over the region, tried the moneylenders in Praja Courts (People's Courts), annulled debt agreements, redistributing land and conducted military training among the people.[44]

There were, however, differences among the Andhra Maoists regarding

strategy. The group led by Nagi Reddy advocated preparation before launching armed struggle.[45] This strategy, the Srikakulam activists and the CPI(ML) felt, was inadequate in the face of the armed offensive launched by the state and its police. They favoured attack on landlords and the police in self-defence. The differences between the Nagi Reddy group and the CPI(ML) owing allegiance to Charu Mazumdar remained irreconcilable. However, after the Naxalite leaders in Andhra Pradesh met and reconstituted themselves as part of the newly formed CPI(ML) in mid-May 1969, Charu Mazumdar's strategy of annihilating landlords, police personnel and informers was adopted. Organizationally this meeting brought a shift 'from the emphasis on mass activity to the emphasis on guerrilla squads. Programmatically annihilation overshadowed all other activities'.[46] In other words, terror was given precedence over peasants' cause. Further, pre-eminence of terror also led to undue justification of all the violent acts.

Not surprisingly, the Maoist movement in Andhra Pradesh lost its punch by the mid-1970s – first because the police launched a concerted action against the movement, declaring Srikakulam as a disturbed area,[47] and succeeded in killing and arresting a number of Naxalites, and secondly, and perhaps more important, their own strategy boomeranged. The annihilation tactics proved disastrous in the plains, where the movement was organizationally weak. In the hills it did not remain confined to *dalams* as hundreds of *girijans* participated in brutal killings. Aside from reeling under heavy police repression, the Naxals defeated themselves because of their annihilation strategy by alienating a portion of the population, including the *girijans*.[48] Obviously, elevation of terror from a tool used with discretion to achieve a purpose to an objective by itself not only alienated people at large and the subjects of the revolutionary activity, it also gave the state a reason to crack down on the movement with a heavy hand. The wrong tactics on the one hand alienated the very people for whom the movement was launched and had a disastrous consequence for itself.

The movement had nonetheless succeeded in setting the social agenda in the area. Aside from trying to give immediate visible relief to the *girijans* and introducing developmental schemes, the Andhra Pradesh government tried to address the question of landlessness among the tribal population. The total area of the Integrated Tribal Development Agency Project Area of Srikakulam is 527,000 acres. Of this, only 139,000 acres is cultivable. By 1979, 5,543.67 acres (i.e. 3.9 per cent) of total cultivable land was restored. Some more land was made available from different sources and distributed. But this whole exercise was inadequate to attend to the problem of tribal landlessness. The government was, however, defeated in its objective by the prevailing corruption and mismanagement. The beneficiaries were

wealthier vested interests, for the ruling élite was not prepared to upset the social power balance. They were not able to destabilize traditional local powers that reasserted themselves as soon as the Naxalite threat was disposed of.[49]

Not surprisingly, by the late 1970s, Naxalism resurfaced again in the same region. The peasant labour associations (*Ryotu Coolie Sanghams*, or RCSs) under the leadership of CPI(ML) launched a movement, described as 'more mature and deeper than the Naxalbari flare up and the struggle in Srikakulam'.[50] The RCSs addressed themselves to 'problems of caste, sex, corruption, drink ... In quite a few villages the Sanghams are the only local administrative authority respected by the poor and in some cases also the rich'.[51] And, of course, redistribution of land, particularly illegally occupied wasteland by the landlords, was an important function of the RCSs:

> Such occupation of illegally appropriated waste-land is an important element of the struggle in the entire region: The land thus occupied is either divided equally among the landless or cultivated collectively by them – the latter being more common in the tribal regions.[52]

The state repression during the national emergency imposed by Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi during 1975–77 completely crushed the Naxalite movement. Several leading Naxalites were jailed. After their release in 1977 many of Charu Mazumdar's colleagues left the party and formed their own groups. Two groups, led by K. Seetharamaiah and C.P. Reddy (now deceased), were from Andhra Pradesh. The third group led by Vinod Mishra and Reddy's group were active in Bihar too.[53] This explains the organizational part of the re-emergence of Naxalism in Andhra Pradesh by 1979. In fact, K. Seetharamaiah, the founder of the PWG (on 22 April 1980), gave Naxalism a new life when he discarded the Charu Mazumdar line of total annihilation of class enemies as the only form of struggle and laid stress on floating mass organizations and taking up of economic struggles to spread the movement.[54] However, two decades since his great resuscitating effort, the mass character of the movement has been genuinely questioned.

Ramifications

Two decades separating the Marxist/Leninist armed struggle against the *deshmukhs* and the *doras* in Telangana in 1946 and the Maoist revolutionary explosion of the Naxalbari in 1967 brought both qualitative and quantitative changes in the left revolutionary peasant struggle in India, then as well as in the future. Again, the ramifications of Naxalism in the present context can only be comprehended by appreciating the fact that the Naxalbari

movement, in all its manifestations and with all its contradictions, was completely crushed between 1972 and 1977. Extraordinary powers assumed by the Indian state during the national emergency declared by Indira Gandhi in 1975 played an important role in it. Naxalism of the 1980s and 1990s, again with all its contradictions, has spread and consolidated itself in certain pockets across three states, with a few bases in some adjoining ones, under different political circumstances, and has developed different strategies, established a nexus that the earlier versions of the movement did not have and is far better trained and equipped. According to some analysts, who accuse it of a nexus with the outlawed insurgent organization United Liberation Front of Assam in north-east India, the Sri Lankan terrorists Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agencies, it is also less doctrinaire and less principled.[55] In fact, the Government of India claims to have discovered a Naxalite plan to develop a corridor from Andhra Pradesh, through its influence areas in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Bihar, to Nepal for easy access of arms and ammunitions in association with the Nepal Communists.[56]

The ideological and strategic legacy as well as geographical ramifications of the Telangana movement were limited. Of course, the revolutionary embers were not extinguished even after the movement was withdrawn in 1951, but it remained localized. The Naxalbari movement, aside from becoming a synonym for Maoist movements in the country, had greater ramifications from three points of view. First, a similar movement began almost simultaneously in Srikakulam in Andhra Pradesh. Thus, despite a lack of trust, agreement and co-ordination between the two sets of movements during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Naxalbari peasants were not alone in the struggle against exploitation. Secondly, while in terms of intensity the movement was localized in West Bengal (Naxalbari) and Andhra Pradesh (Srikakulam), in terms of general spread little red dots appeared on the country's map in Bihar, Kerala (Cannanore), Orissa, Punjab, Tamilnadu (Coimbatore) and Uttar Pradesh. Thirdly, unlike the Telangana movement, which seemingly closed the chapter of armed peasant struggle in the country, Naxalism kept the prospects alive in more than one state despite being mercilessly crushed by the mid-1970s.

However, while assessing its country-wide ramifications, it has to be remembered that even during the heyday of the Naxalite movement, the West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh units of the CPI(ML) could not co-ordinate their actions. As Biplab Dasgupta has rightly observed:

> A puzzling aspect of the Naxalite activities in Naxalbari, Debra, Gopiballavapore, Mushahari, Srikakulam and other places was that these were not properly coordinated and were not parts of a strategic

> plan for the seizure of power in the whole country. In fact in none of these areas could there be any hope of sustained struggle for an indefinite period of time ... One reason for this was the Naxalite faith that the people of India were ready for revolution, and that what was needed was a 'spark' to begin a 'prairie fire'.[57]

And yet the Naxalite strategy, as defined by Charu Mazumdar, laid emphasis on seizure of political power. The three related essentials of the strategy were: (1) mass organization is unnecessary; (2) the class enemy can and should be annihilated through terrorist tactics; and (3) any agrarian programmes must wait until after the seizure of power.[58] The second strategy manifested itself in the dwindling mass support for the Maoist movement even in those areas where it was strong. In West Bengal, for example, Naxalism did not have a state-wide rural spread and it could create only minor ripples in urban areas. And as pointed out earlier, in Andhra Pradesh it lost the sympathy of the *girijans*, its main support base, because of its annihilation strategy.

The first and the third strategies had much wider ramifications. In the areas where Naxalism developed and was fully active, a lack of mass organization and the weakening peasant support, combined with its guerrilla tactics, made the movement an easy target for the state security forces. While the lack of mass organization checked its spread, the drift from the agrarian programmes, which were the mainstay of its revolutionary programme, weakened its supporting pillars.

Naturally, the support for Naxalism in other states at the height of the movement was highly scattered, if not circumscribed. Bihar, for example, had witnessed one of the earliest Naxalite uprisings in the Mushahari block in the Muzaffarpur district in 1967; there is no trace of the movement there today. Besides, its contribution to the movement during those days was marginal. However, the Naxalites sustained themselves in the state through the brutal repression of the emergency. Naxalism spread its tentacles in Bihar during the 1980s and the 1990s. From being confined to a small 'liberated' zone in Jehanabad (near state capital Patna) in central Bihar and in some parts of Bhojpur district (western Bihar), it has spread its sphere of influence during the later part of the 1990s in the districts of Ranchi, Gumla, Hazaribagh, Chatra and Palamau in south Bihar.

Splintered into many groups, it is in a rather paradoxical stage there. One of the groups, known as the Indian People's Front (IPF), emerged overground in 1990 to contest elections. Yet it maintained that it was not disbanding the Red Squads and shunning the path of revolution (read violence). The elections and parliamentary forms of protest such as sit-ins (*dharna*), protest marches and hunger strikes were resorted to as additional

means of mass mobilization, which indeed paid dividends in broadening its mass base. The IPF has undoubtedly improved its electoral support base,[59] which is not surprising, for this is the only party which is perceived by people in these areas to be 'clean'.

But herein lies the dichotomy. Where can a political outfit which both participates in elections and openly engages in extra-constitutional and unlawful activities, such as imposing economic boycotts on the supposedly 'feudal' sections of society and punishing the violators of its decree with death sentences, be placed in a democratic set-up? Despite its apparent democratic posturing, it remains a suspect in the eyes of the state and mainstream political parties. The CPI and CPM criticize Naxalism's misguided revolutionary zeal; the other Naxalite outfits engaged only in 'revolutionary' politics, such as Party Unity Centre and Maoist Coordination Centre, condemn it as 'revisionist'.[60] Contradictions also emerge as the Naxalites not only give a call to boycott polls, they impose severe punishments such as maiming those who defy the ban.[61]

In sum, Naxalism in Bihar remains fragmented – even torn between 'revolutionary' and parliamentary paths. While it has further confused the democracy question, which Naxalism today is failing to address, it has further aggravated caste violence in the state. The queer combination of class and caste violence is visible in central Bihar where most of the upper caste landlords being attacked by the Naxalites have formed their private caste armies. Thus, not only are there pitched bloody battles between the caste armies and the Naxalites, the caste armies, particularly of the higher and lower castes, also fight violent battles. Since the Naxalites' main support base is from the *dalits* and the lower strata of the backward castes, on several occasions even the poor among the upper castes are victims of Naxalite attacks. Oppressed by their richer caste brethren and targeted by the 'revolutionaries', some of them question the revolutionaries' intentions and strategy.

Naxalites are also active in south and south-eastern districts of Madhya Pradesh. But unlike in West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh, where the movement could force sociopolitical policy agenda, for a long time it remained a fringe phenomenon in Madhya Pradesh. Its importance has only been in giving an escape route to the Andhra Naxalites when the state government turned on the heat. However, for a decade or so, more particularly during the later part of the 1990s, it found fertile ground in the tribal-dominated Bastar district. In recent years, aside from the three districts created from the old Bastar district (Dantewada, Kanker and Bastar), Naxalites have spread to Balaghat, Rajnandgaon, Dindori and Kavardha in southern Madhya Pradesh and Sarguja touching Bihar in the north-east. They have conducive geography in dense forests in these areas

where they claim to have created guerrilla zones to encircle the cities and finally capture power. In order that their writ runs in the area they call 'Dandakaranya State', they have been resorting to impose taxes, extortion and murder. Of course, as in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, the Kangaroo courts are operative here as well and severe (at times brutal) punishment is awarded to 'class enemies' and 'traitors'. Among the government officials, they single out the police for special attacks. In these areas employees of the rest of the government departments prefer to work with them. Starting from two *dalams* (squads) in the 1970s, they have close to 20 with 10–12 members each. No wonder with the dawn of the new millennium they have succeeded in making several concerted efforts to demoralize the police and the state administration. It is a different matter that each of their attacks has been brutal – whether slaying of a Minister of State at his house in his hometown, or landmining police contingents which caused large casualties to the police.[62]

The story of the Bastar region is no different from the Telangana peasants, the Srikakulam *girijans*, or the Naxalbari peasants. As a recent media report aptly observes:

> At the core of the problem in Bastar division is the refusal of the bureaucracy, the ruling political class and the non-tribal population to recognise the right to self-rule of the predominant tribal population ... The development expenditure incurred in Bastar all these years by the state has not apparently reached the needy, who have become vulnerable to Naxalites' overtures. Naxalites have been able to give the tribal people not only food security, but protection from police and official repression which has facilitated exploitation by non-tribal people of the resources on which the tribal population has depended.[63]

Primacy of brutal terror as a tactic is glaring in the Naxalite strategy in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. However, there is no denying the fact that the areas in which they have struck roots have a highly iniquitous economic and social situation. Yet it is not merely a sympathy factor or the image of the saviour that has elicited support to the Naxalites. Terror, too, has played its role. If severe punishments, from maiming to death sentences, are given out by their kangaroo courts, no one would dare go against their wishes. Compliance has to be complete. The breakdown of the law and order machinery and improved fire power of the 'revolutionaries' has sustained them.

Peasants, Naxals and the State

In the rise of Naxalism, or the Maoist-led peasant uprising, we are witnessing two phenomena and three sets of actors in action. The first phenomenon is peasants' discontent with their socioeconomic plight expressing itself in a militant (not necessarily violent) movement[64] against the anomalous social structure and the state apparatus protecting, if not perpetuating, it. The second phenomenon is the ideological rationale, organized mobilization and organizational base provided by the Marxist/Leninist/Maoist outfits to the peasant uprising.

The three sets of actors are the peasants, the leftist revolutionaries and the state. The landlords could be construed as the fourth actor in this drama; but since they were reduced (to their advantage) to being victims, once the state swung into action and fought the war on their behalf they could be clubbed with the state for our analysis.

The peasants' discontent was the issue and the left revolutionaries' concern with ameliorating their condition was the stimulus which activated the three actors. True, the resulting drama exposed the age-old exploitation of the rural poor and brought them some relief, weakened the traditional hold of the landowning classes to varying degrees in different areas, exposed the social and welfare rhetoric of the post-independence Indian state,[65] opened a new chapter in human rights debate and activism. However, did Naxalism make a long-term contribution to the cause of the Indian peasants and revolutionary politics in aid of the downtrodden? If yes, to what extent, and if not, why not?

The Maoist-led peasant uprising lost its mass character by the early 1970s, and Maoism died in West Bengal by the mid-1970s. Indeed the CPM's dominance in the state politics since 1977 and land reforms carried out by the government led by Jyoti Basu ended the rationale of Naxalism in West Bengal. However, it survives in small pockets in different parts of the country, particularly in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and lately in Madhya Pradesh.

Having lost the mass character and having developed a secretive style of functioning, Maoist activities in Andhra Pradesh has been on a rollercoaster ride. In Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, it is no different, 'guerrilla zones' and 'liberated zones' notwithstanding. Because of the existence of contradictions and anomalies related to land in the absence of land reforms in these states, small farmers, landless labourers and the tribespeople continue to suffer. The ruling class in India has also failed to reconcile the traditional dependence of the tribal population on forests and its produce with the contemporary concepts of land rights – both individual and that of the state. In the absence of adequate social and economic development of the tribal population, this remains a crucial factor affecting their survival.

Similarly, the *deshmukhs* and the *doras* may not be there, but large landlords remain in rural Andhra.

The Maoists, the PWG and a dozen other outfits draw their sustenance from the existing inequity. The available accounts suggest that complicity of the state administration (the civil as well as the police) with the rural rich over the years has given the Maoists a rationale to continue their campaign. Stories of police atrocities abound. The police are charged with killing extremists in cold blood in fake encounters. The controversy over 'encounter' death of three senior PWG leaders by the Andhra Police in December 1999, that led to concerted attacks by the Naxals on the police, ministers and public property in three states, is the latest example where police action has come under suspicion.[66] On several occasions, innocents also get killed. Torture and custodial deaths of 'extremists' have also been reported.[67]

The police approach to the Naxalite problem exposes weakness in the approach of the state government, and the Indian state to this socioeconomic problem. Even though the state apparatus's approach is open to criticism, it should be remembered that

> [the] state and the movements ... do not work in tandem. On the contrary, through political and social mobilization of populations, often on issues of rights, the movements seek to compel the state – which is guided primarily by the reason of governance rather than transformation – to adopt policies and enact legislations which, left to itself, is not inclined to pursue.[68]

This is where the Naxalism seems to have failed. The issues it has raised are genuine. But stuck as it is in Maoist ideological mode, which even China has rejected today, it has allowed its strategy to have the better of its main objective, causing an hiatus even with its main clientele – the peasants. Mohanty rightly observes that the Indian communists were engaged in strategic parallelism until about the early 1970s: '... they used to draw parallel between the strategy of the Chinese revolution, and even policies and tactics followed by the CCP (Chinese Communist Party), and those to be pursued in India.'[69] This led to Charu Mazumdar's proclamation in 1969 that 'China's path is our path and China's Chairman is our Chairman'. In the process, what began as a militant movement was reduced to a violent movement, giving the state apparatus a rationale to look at it more as a law and order problem than as a socioeconomic problem.

Surprisingly, while many senior civil and police officers in the Andhra Pradesh administration, the state most severely affected by Naxalism currently, appreciate that it is a socioeconomic problem, they put the blame on the political leadership for not tackling them so far because of political expediency. Pressured by the violent activities of several of the *dalams*

(groups), battered by the political executive for not tackling the 'Naxalite menace' effectively, criticized by the judiciary for legal and professional incompetence in chargesheeting the accused and condemned by the civil rights groups for high-handedness and human rights violations, they blame the country's procedural law. And as if drawing a leaf from the classic study of the Indian police by David Bayley,[70] in which he argued that the police could influence political development by deliberate inaction, some of them suggested that if the police were not given sufficient legal instruments to tackle the unusual phenomenon of Naxal violence they may have to decide to treat their activities as legal.[71]

They succeeded in persuading the political leadership in June 1996 to reimpose the ban on the Naxalite movement that was lifted in 1992. The ban gives the police extraordinary powers to deal with Naxal violence. Predictably, civil rights groups have criticized the move as they expect police high-handedness. There is no doubt that armed with extraordinary powers the state government is likely to forget the socioeconomic agenda highlighted by Naxalism and may rely on its strong arm to suppress the movement with a heavy hand.[72]

The police and other law and order enforcement machineries in the affected states have been feeling the heat from all sides. They are the Naxals' first, most visible and natural targets, as their demoralization helps the Naxals the most. They are first to be taken to task by the political executive for failure to rein in Naxal violence. For their lapse or inability to prepare a foolproof case despite unavailability of evidence, they usually receive reprimand from a self-righteous judiciary. They also carry the enormous burden of expectations of an unsympathetic and unco-operative public. These follies are further compounded by organizational weaknesses and inefficiencies since the Indian state and the police leadership have failed to carry out substantive reforms since independence. It is natural that under such circumstances the law and order machinery feels helpless without legal instruments for detention. Aside from the 'law's deadly delays', the conviction rate falls for want of witnesses. Naturally, the legal ban order and the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Act (TADA) become handy and highly desired instruments. Yet experience shows that these instruments are misused with impunity. The ban order too has not helped in turning the tide. However, if the media reports of three-and-a-half years since the ban order (imposed in June 1996) in Andhra are any indication, the battle between the police and the PWG has continued unabated. Obviously, such a ban either nation-wide or in affected states is unlikely to help. Yet, in the wake of the stepped-up Naxalite violence since December 1999 the Government of India has been considering a ban order and a stricter TADA.[73]

Civil rights groups and the administration, particularly the police, seem to be talking from opposite banks of a river. The human rights activists have

continuously exposed 'police brutality' and violations of civil rights in the administration's campaign against the 'extremists'. The police leadership (Hyderabad, October 1995) in conversation with this researcher adopted an appreciative posture about it, but questioned why they did not appreciate the fact that the police had eliminated the incidence of fake encounters (sic). They also questioned why the matter of human rights is never raised when the *dalams* kill in cold blood, or maim suspected informers or deserters. A young Superintendent of Police who was once in charge of building roads in the 'PWG infested' underdeveloped area asked why the civil rights movement did not say anything when the PWG resisted building of roads, which would have benefited everyone. Many in the police felt that human rights groups had become front organizations for the Naxalites.[74]

The civil rights activists considered this an utter lie. Fake encounters by the police, according to them, continued unabated. They felt that the question of development and underdevelopment could be seen only in the larger social context, which needs to be changed. They were not prepared to accept the police version regarding anything.

The movement, if it can still be addressed so, is highly splintered. The police reported the existence of a dozen extremist groups, which was confirmed from other sources. Naturally, such a fragmented movement is unlikely to mobilize the mass of peasantry, for this level of fragmentation is unlikely to be on ideological grounds alone. Operating as *dalams*, these groups are highly secretive and closed organizations. Their process of recruitment, too, is highly secretive. They attract ideologically committed youths, unemployed youths, those who hold a fancy for guns, or those who think they can make a fast buck through extortion. Many of the *dalams* have indeed done a remarkable job for the poor peasantry. It is pity that though they have been setting the social agenda in the Srikakulam, Karimnagar, Warangal and Nizamabad districts for several years, most of them have become a law unto themselves. They hold *Praja* courts and hand out their own brand of justice, including the death sentence. On several occasions they are reported to have killed in cold blood anyone opposing them. In the absence of mobilization of peasants and truly representative peasant associations, substantive issues of the peasantry have been pushed into the background.

Overview

There is no denying the fact that in each of the above cases, before the peasant movement turned militant under the inspiration of Marxist/Maoist leadership, not only did there exist a mass of exploited and pauperized peasantry, there already was stirring within the peasantry and symptoms of

a movement under a loose organization. It would be incorrect to underplay either the extent of resentment and anger among the exploited peasants, or the scale of organization among them. It is likely that without the ideological, organizational and leadership support from the 'left', these movements, like many others during the colonial period, would have been crushed much earlier. In fact, these movements would not have reached the scale they did. They nonetheless would have erupted and given a blow to the feudal exploitative structure.

The leadership as well as the ideological thrust provided by the Marxists/Maoists, proved both an asset and a serious limitation to the movement. While the leadership gave critical strategic inputs and a definite direction to the movement, the Marxist/Maoist ideology strengthened the *raison d'être* for struggle among the peasantry. As mentioned earlier, the movement might not have reached the stage it did without its input.

Yet the movements reached a dead end at a certain stage. They either fizzled out, as in the case of the Telangana and Naxalbari movements, or lost their mass character, degenerating into pogroms conducted by a small group, with or without local support, as in the case of Andhra Pradesh and Bihar at present. The reasons leading to this are as follows. First, having aroused the aspirations of the peasantry, the leadership failed to adapt to the fast-changing political circumstances to keep the movement going in the face of the administrative repression. Secondly, they failed to give a long-term goal, agenda and perspective to the movement at a time when it had become clear that such a movement was neither capable of overthrowing the regime through revolution, nor drastically changing the social situation. Thirdly, the leadership became a prisoner of Marxist/Leninist or Marxist/Maoist perspective drawn entirely from foreign situations. This not only revealed a lack of understanding of the local Indian situation, but also a dearth of original ideas applicable exclusively to the Indian situation. Finally, Charu Mazumdar's call for annihilation of class enemies and similar strategies in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar gave a new logic of violence to the movement, whereby violence became an end in itself and defeated the basic cause for which the movement was launched.

Mohanty observes two distinct changes in the Naxalite movement since the 1980s. While affirming the validity of the path of Chinese Revolution and proclaiming their adherence to Marxism/Leninism/Mao Zedong thought, their ideological and strategic formulations show some break with strategic parallelism and they are only just beginning to launch authentic investigation into the Indian condition. Secondly, they have been trying to characterize the Indian state.[75]

This, however, has not given direction to Naxalism so far, its contribution in setting major social agenda in two states notwithstanding.

The PWG and other Naxal groups in Andhra Pradesh have survived because of existing social exploitation. They have built a social base as well. However, they lack the kind of mass support they enjoyed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In Bihar, they have increased their area of influence during the 1990s. However, embroiled in dichotomous caste conflict, they cannot claim to have mass character. Their location in Madhya Pradesh is not better, though they have the support of the impoverished tribespeople in the Bastar division.

Conflict generated by Naxalite violence is multifaceted and deserves to be understood in its complexity. First, it is a result of conflict inherent in an inequitable exploitative social order. The repressive violence of the landlords, the privileged and the higher castes on the poor. The underprivileged and the lower castes contain seeds of counter violence too. The lesson of history is that counterviolence from the exploited has waited only for a spark.

Secondly, violence and conflict against the exploitative order either by the downtrodden or their leaders generates defensive as well as offensive violence and results in violent conflict.

There is no need to mention that the privileged are either in control of the state apparatus, or they have the support of the state. Naturally, the state steps in with its force, which is invariably used against the 'rebels'. This is the third crucial facet of the conflict inherent in this situation.

Finally, as the experience of the situation in the Naxalism-affected areas in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and some adjoining states reveals, violence and conflict emanating from this triangular situation becomes even more jumbled and complex. The exploitative violence continues. Organized by the Naxalites, the exploited respond with violence. Incapable of changing the existing socioeconomic situation and 'class relations', the state too steps in with a fair degree of repression and violence. The revolutionaries also turn their firepower against the state. Since the state machinery lacks the capacity to respond to this violence sufficiently, the landlords develop their own defence system (as in Bihar), which meets similar response. In this conflict there are a number of people who are not party to this drama, yet they become trapped in a whirlpool of violence. They become victims to police violence, who are rough with them either on suspicion or to obtain some evidence on the rebels. They are handled roughly by the 'revolutionaries' too in liberated zones. They have to pay taxes, provide information and follow their diktat. It makes them suspects for both sides. The social and civic atmosphere thus deteriorates, breeding and compounding conflict and violence.

The Naxalite movement has not been sensitive to the question of democracy, their credibility and acceptance by voters in their areas of

influence in Bihar notwithstanding. As the movement exists today, it cannot take on the Indian state. If it realizes this, it has serious questions to answer. Does it plan to remain a movement confined to small pockets of the country? How and where does it plan to locate itself within the Indian polity? Considering the cataclysmic changes in world communism, how does it plan to restructure popular representation? Is the movement representative in character? Until the leaders of the movement attend to these questions, it is likely to remain a potential source of conflict without substantive impact on the Indian political system. The impact is, and would remain, geared more towards unproductive and directionless terror than a meaningful revolution in aid of the downtrodden.

NOTES

1. The original version of this article was written initially for a project on Conflict and Conflict Resolution in South Asia, conducted by the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Kandy, Sri Lanka. Naturally, research on this theme was facilitated by financial grant of the ICES, Kandy. It has been possible to look at the question of Naxalism from different perspectives only with the initiative of the ICES and discussions at several workshops convened by it in connection with the above project. I acknowledge with thanks all the help I received from the ICES and its Executive Director, Prof. Kingsley De Silva, and Director, Prof. Sam Samarasinghe.
2. The city of Hyderabad, now capital of the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, was the seat of the government of a Princely State of the same name under the British Paramountcy. The Mughals had appointed a Governor, the Nizam-ul-mulk, located in Hyderabad to manage the southern half of the empire in the Deccan region. The then Nizam broke away from the disintegrating Mughal Empire in the 1720s and became virtually independent ruler of the Princely State of Hyderabad.
3. The ordering of the three movements discussed here may seem anomalous. Geographically, the Telangana and the Srikakulam uprisings should be discussed in succession. However, the Naxalbari movement merits a discussion between the Telangana and Srikakulam movements for two reasons. First, influenced by Lenin and the Soviet experience, the Telangana movement was launched by the CPI. Despite ideological and contextual similarities, the Srikakulam movement was not a natural extension of the Telangana movement. Secondly, the Naxalbari movement, which inspired the Srikakulam uprising in 1968, did not merely effect a break in ideology and strategy from Leninism to Maoism; in the process it also caused two splits in the Communist movement in India. Naturally, the Srikakulam uprising can be sequenced only after the Naxalbari movement.
4. G. Parthasarathy, 'Land Reforms and the Changing Agrarian Structure in India', in Anil Kumar Gupta (ed.), *Agrarian Structure and Peasant Revolt in India* (New Delhi: Criterion Publications 1986) pp.20–21
5. Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford 1983) p.6.
6. Theodore Bergmann, *Agrarian Reforms in India* (New Delhi: Agricole Publishing Academy 1984) p.1.
7. Guha (note 5) p.1.
8. Ibid., pp.3–9.
9. Bergmann (note 6) p.1.
10. Guha (note 5) p.9.
11. I. Thirumali, 'Dora and Gadi: Manifestations of Landlord domination in Telangana',

Economic and Political Weekly, 19 Feb. 1992, pp.477–81.

12. Ibid.; K. Ranga Rao, 'Peasant Movements in Telangana', in M.S.A. Rao (ed.) *Social Movements in India* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications 1979) Vol. I p.152; P. Sundarayya, *Telengana People's Struggle and Its Lessons* (Calcutta: Communist Party of India (Marxist) 1972) p.11.
13. The iniquitous situation in the Telangana region is described by S.C. Dube who found that in 1951–52 one family in a village in the region owned 800 acres, eight others approximately 100 each, 20 more about 40 acres, and another 169 no more than five acres each. One holding of four acres of dry land and six acres of wet land was in fact being shared, and cultivated jointly, by seven families. As many as 110 out of 380 families had no land at all: S.C. Dube, *Indian Village* (London: Oxford University Press 1955) p.72. See also Barry Parier, *The Telangana Movement 1944–51* (New Delhi: Vikas 1981) p.43.
14. The Nizam's regime had started a system of compulsory levy of grains from the peasants. This system too helped the landlords. The Andhra Mahasabha launched a campaign against it in 1941, which proved to be the launching pad for the Telangana movement.
15. Rao (note 12) Vol. I pp.158–61: Parier (note 13) pp.85–100; Sundarayya (note 12) p.26. The details of the events during the movement, particularly since 1946, which include impact of the national movement, collaboration between the Congress and the CPI against the regime of the Nizam, the activities of the razakars (the Islamic volunteer group set up by the Nizam against accession to India), etc. are deliberately not discussed here. They are indeed important, but they do not qualitatively add to the issues being discussed. Moreover, the details are available in the references being cited in the article.
16. D.V. Rao, *Telengana Armed Struggle and the Path of Indian Revolution* (Calcutta: Proletarian Path 1974) p.4.
17. Sundarayya (note 12) p.4
18. Mohan Ram, *Maoism in India* (New Delhi: Vikas 1971) p.52.
19. Since the movement is known after the village Naxalbari, hereafter we shall use Naxalbari as the representative name for the entire area of the three police stations.
20. Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist). Manoranjan Mohanty, *Revolutionary Violence: A Study of the Maoist Movement in India* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers 1977) p.31.
21. Landowners who had been leased out lands for specific periods by the British government under the Acts of 1859 and 1879.
22. Since the uprising began in 1967, the reference to 1971 comes closest to it.
23. Mohanty (note 20) pp.32–3.
24. 'The 1954 Estates Act of West Bengal had prescribed a ceiling of 25 acres of land for each household. But the loopholes in the Act were large enough for the big landowners to escape the ceiling provisions': ibid., p.37.
25. For details of the conditions imposed by the *jotedars* see Mohanty, ibid; Partha N. Mukherji, 'Naxalbari Movement and the Peasant Revolt in North Bengal' in M.S.A. Rao (ed.), *Social Movements in India* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications 1979) Vol. I pp.17–90; Sumanta Banerjee, *India's Simmering Revolutio* (New Delhi: Select Book Syndicate 1984); and Prakash Singh, *Naxalite Movement* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co. 1995).
26. For details see Jogesh Chandra Bagai, *Peasant Revolution in Bengal* (Calcutta: Bharati Library 1953).
27. For details see Sunil Sen, *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal* (Bombay: People's Publishing House 1972).
28. Close to ten per cent of the 219,848 (1961 census) population of the Siliguri subdivision were wage-labour in plantations (mainly tea), mining, forestry, etc. They formed an important part of the Naxalite movement. The Communists had cleverly built a strong peasant-worker bond through the Bonus Struggle of 1955: Mohanty (note 20) p.34.
29. 'Benami' literally means 'without name'. It refers to the reaction of the landlords to the Land Ceiling Act, whereby they transferred the 'surplus' land in the name of other family members, sometimes even in a fictitious name.
30. Kanu Sanyal, 'More About Naxalbari', *Proletarian Path*, II/4, 5 (May–Aug. 1974) pp.21–7.
31. Ibid. For details of these documents see Mukherji (note 25) pp.42–5. The disagreement was

also with regard to the manner in which Charu Mazumdar distributed these documents disregarding the Siliguri group (Kanu Sanyal, etc.), most of whom were in jail.

32. The party leadership argued that the Congress defeat at the polls had brought qualitative change at the political firmament, and as the revolutionary party CPM had the responsibility to provide an example so that the process could engulf the entire country. Hence, the political report adopted by the Central Committee of the party argued that 'the fortunes of the entire party at the present stage of development are closely linked with the successful running of ministries ...': Ashish Kumar Roy, *The Spring Thunder and After* (Calcutta: Minerva Associates 1975) p.74.
33. Mohanty (note 20) pp.44–5; Mukherji (note 25) pp.42–57.
34. Mukherji, ibid, p.57.
35. For details see Mukherji, ibid, pp.57–61.
36. Emergency Provisions provided for in Part XVIII of the Constitution of India make provisions for an emergency (one of the three kinds) under Article 356. It stipulates provisions in case of failure of constitutional machinery in states. A state in which emergency is imposed under the provisions of this Article comes under the direct administration of the central government. Under the presidential proclamation the elected government is dismissed, and the Legislative Assembly is either dissolved or put under suspended animation. The state government is run by the Governor (constitutional head of state), who is appointed for five years by the President of India (read the central government), with the help of advisors appointed for the duration of the 'President's rule' by the central government. These provisions have been misused by successive governments and are considered as the roughest edge in intergovernmental relations in India.
37. Mukherji (note 25) pp.62–73.
38. Banerjee (note 25) p.47.
39. Ibid., pp.50–53.
40. Leslie J. Calman, *Protest in Democratic India: Authority's Response to Challenge* (Boulder and London: Westview Press 1985) pp.45–8.
41. The following statement filed by the state's Inspector General of Police on behalf of his department to the Bhargava Commission, instituted in 1977 by the state to investigate allegations of police excesses during the anti-Naxalite drive, indicates that the girijan movement turned violent in Srikakulam despite the state government knowing full well the ground situation: 'In Srikakulam District ... the local issues like podo cultivation, occupation of lands by plainsmen in the tribal areas, money lending by plainspeople to these illiterate tribespeople, inaccessibility of the areas and the absence of an effective administration and political machinery to redress their grievances in accordance with law and the policy of the Government have provided a ready-made and explosive ground for the Naxalite to exploit.' Calman, ibid., p.63.
42. Calman, ibid., pp.21–38.
43. Ibid, p.65.
44. Mohanty (note 20) p.53.
45. Their three-pronged strategy was like this:
    (a) form People's Committees with the participation of agricultural labour and poor peasants;
    (b) form self-defence squads and local squads to resist the onslaught of the enemies and arm them with locally available weapons;
    (c) form militant mass organizations among peasants and workers and raise their political consciousness, and prepare for armed struggle.

    Mohanty (note 20) p.144.
46. Shantha Sinha, 'Andhra Maoist Movement', in G. Ram Reddy and B.A.V. Sharma (eds.), *State Government and Politics: Andhra Pradesh* (New Delhi: Sterling Publications 1979) p.274.
47. On 7 June 1969, the Andhra Pradesh government declared the Agency (tribal dominated) areas in Srikakulam district as 'disturbed areas' under the Andhra Pradesh Suppression of Disturbances Act 1948, giving the police sweeping powers. Section 5 of the Act read:

> Any Magistrate, and any police Officer not below the rank of Sub-Inspector, may if in his opinion it is necessary to do so for restoring or maintaining public order, after giving such warning, if any, as he may consider necessary, fire upon, order fire to be opened or otherwise force, even to the causing of death, against any person who in a disturbed area is acting in contravention of any law or order for the time being in force in such an area, prohibiting the assembly of five or more persons or the carrying of weapons or of things capable of being used as weapons.

(quoted by Calman (note 40) pp.77–8).

48. Calman, *ibid.*, p.79.
49. Ibid., pp.99–125.
50. Bergman (note 6) pp.116–17.
51. K. Balagopal, 'Peasant Struggle and Repression in Pedapally', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 15 May 1982, p.815.
52. Ibid., p.815.
53. Manoranjan Mohanty, 'Chinese Revolution and the Indian Communist Movement', *China Report* 27/1 (Jan.–March 1991) pp.30–31.
54. Ashok Das, 'Naxalism: Y2K Problem sans Solution', downloaded from the *Hindustan Times* website, www.hindustantimes.com.
55. M.K. Narayanan, 'Naxal Movement's Cruel Spring', *The Asian Age*, 28 Feb. 2000. Narayanan, an ex-IB chief, claims in this article connections of the Naxalites with the Shining Path movement in Central America. Though in the above article he not only displays complete blindness to the socioeconomic origins of the movement in 1946 and its recurrence and sustenance in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, he is emphatic about anti-national nexus of the Naxalites and decline of ideology in the movement.
56. 'Panel to foil PWG's "Nepal corridor" plan', *The Hindu*, 14 Jan. 2000.
57. Biplab Dasgupta, *The Naxalite Movement* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers 1975) p.9.
58. Calman (note 40) pp.72–3.
59. In 1990 elections to the State Legislative Assembly, the IPF secured 550,000 votes; in the 1995 elections it secured 750,000 votes. Similarly between 1991 and 1996, in parliamentary elections in two constituencies, Arrah and Jehanabad, considered to be Naxalite strongholds, the IPF improved its votes from 116,000 and 113,000 respectively, to 146,000 and 130,000 respectively: N.R. Mohanty, 'Naxalite Movement's Crisis of Identity', *The Times of India*, September 27, 1996, p.10.
60. Mohanty, ibid., p.10.
61. 'People's War call to skip polls', *The Statesman*, 29 Jan. 2000; Nalin Verma, 'In MCC country, a voter has to pay through his nose', *The Statesman*, 7 Feb. 2000.
62. Lalit Shastri, 'Running a parallel government', *The Hindu*, 26 Dec. 1999; V. Venkatesan, 'Another PWG offensive', *Frontline*, 17 March 2000, p.36.
63. Venkatesan, ibid., p.37.
64. A distinction needs to be made between 'militancy' and 'violence' generally, but more particularly in this context, because it has influenced the future of the peasant movements in India. Even though militant groups may use violence as one of the strategic options, militancy could be just a forceful assertion of rights (individual as well as group) or of a point of view, without being violent.

    Strategically, violence for a militant group is both a reactive (defensive) as well as a proactive (offensive) option, which could be selected or combined in accordance with the ground situation. But when the use of violence is excessively proactive (or offensive), as in the case of the Naxalism, the movement transgresses the thin line which separates its militant character from its violent character.
65. Despite the populist rhetoric inherent in electoral politics of a liberal democratic state, 'The movements owe their existence to the fact that an effective assertion of rights of all kinds ... is prevented by the prevailing inequalities within the social structure and, just as often, even by the democratic state which tends to act in favour of a status quo in the social realm': D.L. Sheth, 'Movements, Intellectual and the State: Social Policy in Nation-Building', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 22 Feb. 1992, p.425.

66. In this incident, the police claimed that the three leaders were killed in an encounter in Karimnagar district, while the PWG and the civil libertarians claimed that they were picked up from Bangalore and killed in cold blood on the way to Hyderabad. It is important that when the matter was brought before the Andhra Pradesh High Court, the civil libertarians were able to prick several holes in the police's story and the High Court ordered preservation of their bodies for proper investigation. See K. Srinivas Reddy, 'Murder of a Minister', *Frontline*, 31 March 2000, pp.38–9; *The Indian Express*, 4 Dec.1999.
67. See K. Balagopal, 'Two Missing Women of Karimnagar', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2 Feb. 1991, pp.201–5, and 'Excerpts from the Memoirs of Death', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 March 1992, pp.569–73, and his reporting on the civil rights dimensions of the PWG movement in the *Economic and Political Weekly*. See also K.G. Kannabiran, 'PWG Ban: State Government Flouts Law', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 13 June 1992, pp.1234–5, and 'Extra-Judicial Killings', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23 March 1996, pp.705–7, and his reporting and writings in the journal.
68. Sheth (note 65) p.425.
69. Mohanty (note 53) pp.28–30.
70. David H. Bayley, *Police and Political Development in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1969).
71. These observations are being made on the basis of an extensive field study conducted by the author in Hyderabad city in October 1995 with financial support from the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Kandy, Sri Lanka.
72. Ajay K. Mehra, 'A Ban will not wish away the PWG', *The Indian Express*, 25 July 1996, and '"Revolution" in the Age of "Globalisation"', *Mainstream*, 29 April 2000, pp.7–15.
73. In fact, in terms of political and administrative strategy a less Draconian, though Machiavellian, alternative has been tried out in Andhra Pradesh. Dr M. Channa Reddy, one of the state's Chief Ministers, lifted the curbs on the PWG in 1990. K. Seetharamaiah had himself admitted that this strategy led to popular deligitimization of the organization, as in the name of social justice they began perpetrating atrocities on people.
74. M.K. Narayanan's (an ex-IB chief and a columnist with the *Asian Age*, now India's multi-edition élite newspaper) disparaging comment about the civil rights groups in his recent article bears this out. See Narayanan (note 55).
75. Mohanty (note 53) pp.31–5.