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India's Security Response to the Maoist Insurgency

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Abstract

A violent conflict by the Maoists that challenges the parliamentary form of governance and the legitimacy of the Indian state has been responded in multiple ways by the state. Among the several measures taken to contain the Maoists over more than five decades, the security-centric approach has been the dominant one and common thread among successive governments and political regimes. As a result of the security response, the state has been able to reduce the level of violence as the Maoists are seen to be in the terminal decline phase. However, despite the success in bringing down the Maoist related activities, the movement refuses to die down. To understand the role and rationale behind the security-centric response against the Maoists, this article tries for a critical engagement. In this process, the article investigates the rationale behind the security approach against the Maoists and interrogates other related policy frameworks of the Indian state in response to the Maoists. The article argues that while the use of force has reduced the level of violence, it has had limited success in protecting the local people and the development projects that continue to be targeted by the Maoists. The article suggests that the security response of the state needs to converge with development programmes which eventually would help ensure rights and entitlements of local communities in the Maoist affected areas.

Keywords: *Maoist Insurgency, Naxal, Left Wing Extremism, India, Security Approach,*

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Introduction

A violent political movement led by the Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-Maoist), the Maoists in short, has been characterised as India's single largest internal security threat in the past. Spread over ten states covering 106 districts, the Maoists reject the parliamentary democratic form of governance terming it as a sham. The movement operates around its final objective of seizing political power through a protracted armed struggle to herald 'new democratic order'. Starting from a small village of Naxalbari in West Bengal in 1967, the Maoist movement in India has evolved through many forms and shades. Accordingly, the strategies and tactics of the Maoists have substantially changed in terms of fighting the Indian state. In the process of fighting the Indian state, the Maoists seek to legitimise the movement in general and the violence through a narrative of representing the under-privileged sections of society and the multiple grievances that they have. The issues of the weaker sections of the society, especially the tribal and other marginalised groups in and around Eastern and Central part of India, as the Maoists claim, range from: land alienation; feudalism; forest rights; tribal and women's rights. In the process of integrating the local issues with the violent movement, the Maoists have been able to garner some support from the people.

While the Maoists claim the legitimacy of their movement; the state rejects the violence calling the Maoists an 'armed band'. Thus, reducing the entire movement and the narratives associated with it to mere 'violent opportunism'. Despite the state's rejection of the Maoist movement, the later poses serious threats to the democratic ethos of India. Apart from inflaming politico-social and economic grievances against the state, the Maoists challenge the state's monopoly over coercion and thereby posing a threat to the state sovereignty. The mindless violence perpetrated by the Maoists over last close to six decades has claimed thousands of lives and created a scene of fear in the minds of the common people and caused massive internal

displacement, especially in the Scheduled Areas. Several responses against the Maoists by the successive governments over the years have been able to bring down the violence by the Maoist ultras. Of the many measures that the state has taken to deal with the Maoist movement; the security response has been claimed to have helped the most in terms of containing the later. The next section of the article critically analyses the state responses to the Maoist conflict in general and the security response.

Maoist Insurgency and the State Response

The Indian state has been rejective of the Maoists in terms not recognising the latter's movement as a legitimate one. Successive governments in their response to the Maoist movement believe that "some sections of the society, especially the younger generation, have romantic illusions about the Maoists, arising out of an incomplete understanding of their ideology" (MHA, 2019). Moreover the Maoists' use of violence, goes against the principles of parliamentary democracy, and is thus unacceptable.

The response of the Indian state regarding the Maoist movement has evolved over time. Starting from a security-dominated approach, to initiating of development measures, the state response to Maoist violence has been four pronged in the last six years. According to the former Minister of State in the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), "A National Policy and Action Plan to address Left-Wing Extremism (LWE) problem has been formulated by the MHA which consists of an integrated multi-pronged strategy comprising Security related measures, Development related measures, ensuring Rights and Entitlements related measures" (Lok Sabha, 2016). The minister went on to say that "For ensuring overall development of the Left Wing Extremism affected States, the Government of India supplements the efforts of the State Governments through various developmental/ flagship schemes being implemented by different Central Ministries/Departments …" (Ibid).

Notwithstanding the minister's statement, India has adopted the dual policy of combining security with development, for the longest time. The National Democratic Alliance-2 (NDA-2) government which assumed power in April 2014 has since made efforts to ensure the rights and entitlements of communities in Maoist affected areas and managing public opinion. The state acknowledges that the rights and entitlements of the local communities in the Maoist affected areas needs to be protected to wean them away from the Maoist insurgent groups. This will also serve to debunk the Maoists' claim that they are the sole representatives of the downtrodden and under privileged. The state is undertaking a public relations campaign to manage public opinion to re-assert its 'lost' legitimacy in the affected areas.

It is difficult to quantify the effectiveness of these four approaches although the security approach is believed to have yielded the most tangible results. To understand the gravity of the threat that the Maoists pose, the following section reasons with India's Security centric approach in dealing with the Maoist violence.

Security Centric Approach

The Indian state has faced several armed conflicts in different parts of the country since independence. It is important to mention that The Indian state has been facing armed movements challenging the legitimacy of the state in different parts of the country. The armed insurgency in the Northeastern states of India dates to the 1950s. These armed uprisings are mostly motivated by issues ranging from ethnic identity, greater autonomy, and control over resources. Similarly, the armed conflict in the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) has a long history. Mostly supported by external forces like Pakistan the armed movement in J&K demands greater autonomy or Azadi and (or) special status. The Maoist insurgency also has a long history. The organised violence in the form of the Naxalbari movement was initiated under the leadership of Charu Majumdar in 1967. The state has responded to these conflicts in multiple ways. However, the

dominant and common feature of all these responses has been the use of force to contain the armed conflicts. Counter violence measures against the armed conflicts are often projected as legitimate actions as the state enjoys the monopoly over coercion. The use of force against the Maoists is, in the same logic, not an exception. The security centric approach reduces the Maoist movement to a 'law and order' issue. To understand the legitimacy of the security response one needs to reflect on the scale of violence perpetrated by the CPI-Maoists since 2004 as shown in the following table.

Table No 1 - Fatalities in Maoist Violence: 2004-August 16, 2021 (SATP: 2021)

Year	Civilians	SFs	Maoists	Not Specified	Total
2004	89	82	87	22	280
2005	259	147	282	24	712
2006	249	128	343	14	734
2007	218	234	195	25	672
2008	183	214	228	19	644
2009	368	334	299	12	1013
2010	628	267	264	20	1179
2011	259	137	210	0	606
2012	156	96	125	1	378
2013	164	103	151	0	418
2014	127	98	121	4	350
2015	90	56	110	0	256
2016	122	60	250	0	432
2017	109	76	150	0	335
2018	108	73	231	0	412
2019	99	49	154	0	302
2020	61	44	134	0	239
2021	36	46	73	0	155
Total	**3325**	**2244**	**3407**	**141**	**9117**

Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP)

The founding document of the CPI-Maoist, *Political Resolution,* lays down the philosophy of the organisation highlighting on bringing about a 'new democratic revolution' by means of an armed struggle (CPI-Maoist, 2004). The document supports waging a protracted people's war (PPW) to seize political power. In this process, the level and incidents of violence unleashed by the Maoists against the state, and against the common civilians, have been serious in nature. The Maoists use violence to expand their spheres of influence. Moreover, the violent acts by the Maoists are often legitimised through the narrative of 'revolutionary cause'. As early as 2003-2004, the Annual report of Ministry of Home Affairs stated that the Maoists had a presence in 55 districts across nine states (MHA, 2004). Within three years the Maoists had extended their reach to 182 districts in 16 states (Ramana, 2009). According to the government sources "since the year 2001, the LWE have killed 5801 civilians and 2081security personnel. The ratio of the security personnel and the Maoist cadres killed in 2010, 2011 and 2012 are 285:172, 142:99 and 114:74 respectively" (Lok Sabha, 2013). A recent government report reveals that in the last decade (2005-2015) the Naxals killed 2,757 civilians and 1,753 security personnel, while 2193 Naxals have been neutralised during the same period by the security forces. Thus, the Naxals have claimed about two lives for every one life lost by them" (Yadav, 2015).

The State Response

The three main aspects of security measures taken by the state against the Maoists are: counter-violence; providing security for the population; development activities in the affected areas; and managing public perception. Arguably, the state had been largely successful in combating the earlier avatars of the Naxal movement. *Operation Steeplechase* was undertaken against the Naxals in West Bengal as early as July-August 1971, by the

combined might of the army, the paramilitary, and police forces. Over the 45-day operation the state claimed to have eliminated the Naxal extremists and regained control over the affected areas. The success achieved by the state by use of force is believed to be the major driver of the current military approach taken against the Maoists (Pubby, 2009).

These counter-violence measures against the Maoists were first mentioned in 2006 in the *Status Paper on the Naxal Problem* (MHA, 2006) that was tabled on the floor of the Parliament. A 'Fourteen Point Policy Framework' in the report prescribed strong counter-violence measures for eliminating the armed Maoist guerrillas. The very first point of this policy framework lays down that 'the Government will deal sternly with the Naxalites indulging in violence'. The report also suggested measures for ensuring security preparedness of the state. These included: better co-ordination among the Naxal affected states; sustained police action against the Naxals; drying up of the resources of the Naxals; dealing effectively with local resistance, etc (Ibid). At the central level a separate Naxal Management Division was created to, 'monitor the Maoist situations and countermeasures being taken by the affected states (GoI, 2013). The broad measures undertaken by the Indian state to combat the Maoists are discussed below.

The deployment of Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) and Commando Battalions for Resolute Action (CoBRA) and the raising of the India Reserve (IR) battalions were the main security measure taken by the state against the Maoists. The state has deployed more than 120 battalions of the CAPF, the CoBRA and the IR in the Maoist affected areas. These forces operate in active coordination with the state police, who have also specially trained personnel for fighting the Maoists. The role of elite police forces such as the Greyhounds of Andhra Pradesh and Telengana and the Special Operations Group (SOG) of Odisha in combating the

Maoists deserves special mention. The coordinated action by the CAPF and the state police forces successfully eliminated and arrested more than two thousand armed Maoist guerrillas, including most of their high-ranking leaders (SATP, 2016). Important leaders eliminated by the SFs include: Cherukuri Rajkumar alias Azad, a Politburo member; Mallojula Koteswara Rao alias Kishanji also a Politburo member; and Sande Rajamouli, a Central Committee member. At the same time the SFs also have arrested several high-profile Maoist leaders. They include: Malla Raji Reddy alias Sattenna, a CC member; Pramod Misra alias Madanji and Kobad Gandhi both Politburo members; Sadanala Ramakrishna alias RK, head of the Central Technical Committee, Varanasi Subramanyam, Pulendu Mukherjee and Vijaya Kumar Arya (members of Central Committee) among others. All these killings and arrests along with those of other armed cadres have largely succeeded in bringing down the levels of violence.

The setting up of Counter Insurgency and Anti-terrorism (CIAT) training schools and the modernisation of state police forces is another major component of the security-centric approach. It was envisaged that 20 CIAT schools in the states of Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha would be set up during the 11th Plan period, for imparting counter-terrorism training to 75000 police personnel (MHA, 2017). Currently, 16 CIAT schools are operating in Maoist affected areas where experts from the ministry of defence, central police organisations and the Bureau of Police Research and Development impart training to police personnel. The modernisation of state police forces involves construction of secure police stations; training centres; police housing; rapid mobility; modern weaponry; communication equipment and forensic capability etc (MHA, 2015). This will serve to reduce the dependence of affected states on the central government and CAPF. Apart from enhancing the capabilities of

the security forces it is important to ensure coordination among the security agencies, across the various states. Towards this end mechanisms have been put in place to facilitate intelligence sharing, assistance in community policing and civic action programmes etc.

These various security initiatives have been integrated with other projects under the Security Related Expenditure (SRE) scheme. Under the Security Related Expenditure (SRE) scheme, funds are provided for: meeting recurring expenditure relating to insurance; training and operational needs of the security forces; rehabilitation of Left-wing extremist cadres who surrender in accordance with the surrender and rehabilitation policy of the state government concerned; community policing; security related infrastructure for village defence committees; and publicity material. Across 106 Maoist affected districts, 1,63,537 projects were initiated of which 1,34,558 projects had been completed by the end of 2015 (PIB, 2015). The projects under SRE include school buildings/school furniture; Anganwadi centres; drinking water facilities; rural roads; community halls; public distribution shops; livelihood activities; skill development training centres, etc. The states have already built around 400 fortified police stations, designed to prevent   Maoists attacks and consequently the looting of arms. Along with the above-mentioned security measures by the state, the state supported social-vigilante groups' counter to the Maoist violence has also played an import role in containing the movement. The following section reflects on the local resistance to the Maoists.

Local Resistance to the Maoists

A complete picture of the security response by the Indian state can't be offered without the mention of local resistances to the Maoists. While we are talking about the local resistance it is about the people's counter to the Maoist violence. Among others, a

prominent resistance to the Maoists came from *Salwa Judum*, the Peace March, in the state of Chhattisgarh in 2005. The organised tribal youth supported and militarily trained by the state police took up arms against the Maoists. Starting from 2005 until it was banned by the Supreme Court of India, the *Salwa Judum* received enormous support from the local communities in its fight against the Maoists. Arguably, the *Salwa Judum* neutralised large number of the Maoists and that posed a serious threat to the latter. Supported by the state governance mechanism, the contribution of the *Salwa Judum* in containing the Maoists can't be merely limited to eliminating the Maoists ultras. More than anything else the *Salwa Judum* offered a sense of empowerment to the tribal and other marginalised communities in terms of standing up to the threats posed by the Maoists. However, the counter-violence activities of the *Salwa Judum* came under severe criticism by the civil society organisations questioning the legality of such organisations. As mentioned before this has been out lawed by the Supreme Court of India. The spirit of local resistance has not gone diluted despite a ban by the Supreme Court of India. Since 2011, following the ban of *Salwa Judum,* the local resistances against the Maoists continue to operate under multiple banners such as Armed Auxiliary Forces, District Reserve Group, and other vigilante groups. Criticisms apart, one can safely argue that the role of local counter-violence movements have contributes substantially to containing the Maoists. These resistance movements have also contributed to safeguarding the state-led development measures in the Maoist-affected areas. The next section of the paper reflects on the security measures by the state in promoting development activities.

Securitising the Developmental Activities

An important objective of the security approach is to secure the development projects undertaken by the state in Maoist affected

areas. Development as mentioned above, is one of the major policy approaches adopted by the state for dealing with Maoists as under-development, poverty, and deprivation are often stated to be the major reasons for the Maoist presence. A Planning Commission report on *Development Challenges in Extremist Affected Areas'* (Planning Commission, 2008) highlighted poor social economic and political indicators especially regarding tribals, scheduled castes and women. Other issues are related to: access to basic resources; forest rights; land alienation; unemployment; displacement and political marginalisation. Based on these recommendations the state has initiated several development measures to wean the local communities away from the Maoists and to create a positive perception of the state.

However, the Maoists view these development measures as fresh tools for the exploitation and domination of the poor and marginalised. The development projects are specially targeted by the Maoists, both because of their ideological compulsions and to sustain their movement. Thus, Maoists over the last one decade have attacked and destroyed school buildings, telephone towers, bridges, factories, etc. These activities not only cause damage to public property, but also create a fear psychosis among the common people and government officials.

The SFs have, to a great extent, succeeded in securing development projects and the number attacks on the public infrastructure have come down drastically. However, the Maoists continue to target and damage the development projects which exposes the limitations of the security centric approach.

Public Perception Management

As mentioned above, a major aspect of the fight against Maoists is public perception. Along with the other state apparatus, the SFs deployed in the Maoist affected areas are involved in the winning

of hearts and minds of the local people against the Maoists. The heavy presence of the SFs in and around Maoist affected areas has not been received well by the local communities, as they are mostly viewed with fear and anxiety. A dominant belief among a section of the intelligentsia and media is that the innocent tribal and other local communities are sandwiched between the atrocities of the state SFRs and the Maoists (Bhardwaj, 2016; Sekhar, 2016; Mohanty, 2016). Such a narrative place the SFs at par with the Maoists in terms of violence against the people. The SFs have undertaken several welfare activities among the local communities to change this narrative. The Civic Action Plan (CAP) initiated in the year 2010-2011 is important in this regard. Under this programme each company of the CAPF has been given a sum of INR 300,000 for promoting the welfare of local communities in their deployment areas. Through this programme the Indian state aims to reduce the gap between the SFs and the local communities. The state police forces are also involved in such activities. The Chhattisgarh police have been participating in local festivals in Order Bridge the divide between the SFs and the people (Dabarshi, 2015). Similarly, the Odisha State Police has also initiated programmes like '*Nua Mana Nua Sapana'*, (New mind and New Dreams) in the Maoist affected areas (NTI, 2012). These welfare activities have been a major game changer in terms of changing the perception of the local communities regarding the security forces. The local communities are seen to be regaining their faith in the police and other security agencies.

Conclusion

The security approach of the Indian state in countering the Maoist violence has been substantially successful in bringing down the levels of violence, neutralising and arresting several high-profile Maoist leaders, and helping completion of many development projects. As the Maoists are losing their ground, the state keeps

on modifying its tactics in keeping with changing circumstances. Engaging in welfare activities to win the hearts and minds of the local communities is a good example in this regard. That said, the security approach of the state cannot be seen in isolation. The development activities in the Maoist affected areas have also contributed substantially towards containing the Maoists.

However, the Indian state has not been able to completely wipe out the movement. The persisting inequality, deprivation and exploitation in these areas continue to sustain the Maoist movement. It will not be entirely correct to say that the Maoists represent the local communities or that all in the affected areas support the Maoist movement. At the same time, it can be safely argued that the Maoists have been successful in manufacturing a narrative against the state by highlighting the above-mentioned issues. The 'absence of the state' in many parts of the Maoist affected areas gives Maoists the opportunity to their spread their ideology. The elimination of a few cadres by the state SFs may not be sufficient to overcome the ideology of the Maoist movement which is necessarily based on an anti-state narrative. The state will need to be more visible in terms of good governance and protecting the common people from all sorts of exploitation, including that by the Maoists. A military approach, along with initiatives to ensure the rights and entitlements for the local communities, can be the way to successfully address the issue of Maoist violence.

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