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The Naxalite/Maoist Movement in India: A Review of Recent Literature

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‘More than Maoism: Rural Dislocation in South Asia’ is an ISAS research theme focusing on socio-economic, political and security dimensions of “Maoist movements” in South Asia. The institute conducted a closed-door workshop on the research theme, and the presentations are being put together as a series of ISAS Insights and ISAS Working Papers. This is the sixth paper in this series.

Executive Summary

This paper reviews recent writing by and about India’s Maoists, much of it from the pages of the *Economic and Political Weekly*, which has been the most important forum for informed reporting and commentary. An account is given of the recent history of the Naxalite/Maoist Movement, and of the ideology and tactics of the Communist Party of India (Maoist). Particular attention is paid to the findings, both of the few social scientists who have undertaken field studies and human rights activists who have had direct contact both with party cadres and village people amongst whom they move. These illuminate the relationships between the revolutionary movement and the people of those areas in which the Maoists have a strong presence and

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highlight the contradictions to which their commitment to armed struggle gives rise. It is the tragedy of the politics of armed struggle that it is a response to the appalling structural violence that has been perpetrated historically and that continues to be perpetrated by elites, supported by the state, against landless and poor peasants, Dalits and *adivasis*, and yet it leads to a spiral of violence in which the same people may become trapped.

I am convinced that this is one rebellion which will test the resilience of the Indian state as never before. Precisely, because it is a rebellion in which people are fighting to save their land, forests, water and minerals from being grabbed, and they are convinced that they have an alternative vision.

Gautam Navlakha²

The Naxalite movement is not a movement of landless peasants and tribals seeking to overthrow state power. It is a project defined as such by those who are neither peasants nor workers nor tribals, but who claim to represent their interests.

Dilip Simeon³

The two statements that I have chosen as epigraphs for this paper reflect very well, I think, not only differences in the views of those who have been close observers of the Naxalite movement in India, but also a critical tension within it. The Naxalites – or ‘Maoists’ as they have now come to be described – have the explicit aim of establishing a ‘people’s democratic state under the leadership of the proletariat’, which requires ‘smashing the reactionary autocratic state’. The Party Programme of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) goes on:

This new democratic state will be the people’s democratic dictatorship exercised by the united front comprising the proletariat, peasantry, petty-bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie class under the leadership of the proletariat based upon the worker-peasant alliance. The state will guarantee real democracy for the vast majority of people while exercising dictatorship over the tiny minority of exploiters.⁴

The Maoists argue that the pursuit of parliamentary democracy is an exercise in futility and explain the necessity for armed struggle against the present ‘reactionary autocratic state’ given the strength of its armed machinery. The Party has been ‘compelled to take up arms and not out

² Gautam Navlakha, ‘Days and Nights in the Maoist Heartland’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XLV, no.16 (17 April 2010), pp.38-47. Navlakha is an Editorial Consultant to the EPW and a democratic rights activist attached to the People’s Union for Democratic Rights.

³ Dilip Simeon, ‘Permanent spring’, *Seminar*, No.607 (March 2010), www.india-seminar.com. Simeon’s discussion draws on Rabindra Ray, *The Naxalites and Their Ideology* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁴ This and the foregoing quotes from the Party Programme of the CPI (Maoist). Accessed at www.satp.org.

of any romantic notion' according to CPI (Maoist) General Secretary Ganapathy.⁵ The Maoists claim to represent the great majority of the people of India and aim to lead them to establish a new state as the second of the authors whom I have quoted says. They also have a history of supporting common people in struggles over the conditions of their everyday lives and projecting an alternative vision of how society can be organised. The long run aim of establishing the people's democratic state and the immediate tasks of supporting the fight to save 'land, forests, water and minerals from being grabbed' are of course not inherently in contradiction but the practice of the Maoists appears, even to sympathetic observers, to compromise their democratic principles as Dilip Simeon suggests in the second of my epigraphs.

In this paper, I aim to explore these tensions, briefly reviewing the recent history of Naxalism/Maoism in India, the ideology of the Movement and ask in particular, what may be learnt from the few detailed ethnographies that have been written, and from the accounts of those who have observed it closely about the relationships between the Movement and society.⁶ I conclude with some brief remarks about the current responses of the Indian state to the Maoists. I draw mainly on articles published over the last decade in the *Economic and Political Weekly*⁷ and contributions to a recent special issue of the journal *Dialectical Anthropology*,⁸ together with some reference to articles published in *Seminar* in March 2010.

I begin, however, by pointing to the acute problems of knowledge about the Naxalite/Maoist movement. A blogger from Chhattisgarh posted the following comment:

How does the media in Chhattisgarh report the conflict between the Naxalites and the Salwa Judum or the conflict between local communities and corporations?
Quite simply, it doesn't. The pressures on journalists in Chhattisgarh are unique.

⁵ See 'Interview with Ganapathy, General Secretary, CPI(Maoist)', released in April 2007, www.satp.org.

⁶ A qualifier must be entered immediately, about the use of the term 'Movement' in regard to India's Maoists, for it is important to recognise how fragmented they have been, with different organisations pursuing different tactical lines at least until the coming together of the major groups as the Communist Party of India(Maoist) in 2004. See 'Interview with Ganapathy', note 5.

⁷ I have not been able to find much recent writing about the Naxalite/Maoist movement based on substantial research or otherwise on close observation such as that of human rights and civil liberties activists, outside the pages of the *Economic and Political Weekly*. This review does not include consideration of the several (with one exception, older) books about Naxalism including: Sumanta Banerjee, *In the Wake of Naxalbari* (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1980); S. Chakravarti, *Red Sun: Travels in Naxalite Country* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2007); S. Ghosh, *The Naxalite Movement: A Maoist Experience* (Calcutta: Mukhopadyay, 1974); P. Singh, *The Naxalite Movement in India* (New Delhi: Rupa and Co., 1995); S. Sinha, *Maoists in Andhra Pradesh* (Delhi: Gyan, 1989).

⁸ Alpa Shah and Judith Pettigrew (eds.) 'Windows into a Revolution: Ethnographies of Maoism in South Asia' (2009) *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol.33, nos.3-4 (2009).

They are paid not to report stories that are critical of the powers-that-be, whether they are industrial lobbies or state authorities.⁹

This may, or may not be true.¹⁰ But it is certainly extremely difficult to sift information from disinformation and fact from opinion, as the Lalgarh story shows.

What is Really Going On? The Example of Lalgarh

The Lalgarh area of West Medinapur in West Bengal, came to international attention in June 2009, when a massive police action began there (on 18-19 June 2009). It was recognised that Lalgarh had experienced an insurrection against the Left Front government of the state and the region was described in the *Hindustan Times* on 10 June 2009 as being, in effect, a ‘Maoist-run state within the state’. Inevitably, the Government of West Bengal sought to re-establish its authority over the area and called upon the assistance of the paramilitary forces of the central government in order to do so. But, was there ‘a Maoist-run state’ in Lalgarh? Writing on Lalgarh whilst the police action was going on, two noted left-wing historians, Sumit and Tanika Sarkar, argued that in fact ‘Maoists have done incalculable harm’ to what had been an independent movement of tribal people. They explained that they had not themselves visited Lalgarh and that they drew on an interview with a friend who is a member of the Lalgarh Sanhati Mancha, described as ‘a group of cultural and political activists’ who work with the tribal people of the region. It was on this basis that they argued:

(The Maoists’) activities and intentions are shrouded in mystery, their secret terror operations express total indifference to human lives, their arms deals lead them, inevitably, into shady transactions with rich and corrupt power brokers at different levels... They come into an already strong and open mass movement, they engage in a killing spree, discrediting the (independent tribal) movement, and then they leave, after giving the state authorities a splendid excuse for crushing it.¹¹

⁹ From the ‘Kafila’ website. Cited by Alpa Shah, ‘India Burning: the Maoist Revolution’, Isabelle Clarke-Deces (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Anthropology of India*, forthcoming.

¹⁰ The argument seems entirely reasonable, however, in the light of the information given by Jason Miklian, ‘The purification hunt: the Salwa Judum counter-insurgency in Chhattisgarh, India’, *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol.33, nos 3-4 (December 2009), pp.441-459. Miklian reports on how ‘Media freedoms have suffered at the individual and institutional levels’, p.454.

¹¹ Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar, ‘Notes on a Dying People’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XLIV, nos.26-27 (27 June 2009), pp.10-14. Quote from p.11.

Subsequently another historian, Amit Bhattacharyya, flatly refuted these arguments,¹² making the case: ‘The Maoists have been at the helm of the movement in Lalgarh right from its inception. Even as they organised the resistance to state repression, they put in place an alternative programme of development based on the people’s initiative and their voluntary labour’.¹³ So, what has been going on in Lalgarh?

Lalgarh is a forested, hill area in the Jangal Mahal of West Bengal that extends into the adjacent Jharkhand occupied mainly by Santhal tribal people (*adivasis*). It is an area of small landholdings and of poor, rainfed agriculture. The major source of cash income is said to be from the collection of *saal* leaves (for making leaf-plates) in the forests – an activity carried on by women. According to the report of the All-India Fact Finding Team of April 2009,¹⁴ ‘The area has had a history of neglect and discrimination’, for example, it has just one doctor serving two non-functional primary health care centres. The Sarkars comment more graphically, ‘The landscape of bleak wretchedness is dominated by the bizarre splendour of the party offices of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] and the houses of local party leaders.’¹⁵

It appears that People’s War (PW) – which combined nationally with the Maoist Communist Centre of India (MCCI) in September 2004 to form the CPI (Maoist) – has been active in the area and neighbouring parts of Jharkhand for about ten years, though the All-India Fact Finding Team¹⁶ reported that the Santhals of Lalgarh have been more inclined to support the regional parties, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) and the Jharkhand Disham Party (JDP). Nonetheless, there is a history reported by the Team, of harassment of *adivasis* by both police and CPI(M) cadres, and of many cases having been brought in, particularly, against women who go into the forests to collect *saal* leaves, on the grounds that they take supplies to Maoist groups.

The recent events in Lalgarh began, however, in November 2008. On 2 November, there was a mine explosion not far from Medinapur town and 30 kilometres away from the *adivasi* tract on the route that was being taken by West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya and Union Minister Ram Vilas Paswan as they returned from the inauguration of a steel works. The circumstances of the blast remain mysterious, but it was immediately followed by reprisals by

¹² Amit Bhattacharyya, ‘Is Lalgarh Showing the Way?’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XLV, no.2 (9 January 2010), pp.17-21.

¹³ Aditya Nigam, ‘The rumour of Maoism’, *Seminar*, No.607 (March 2010), www.india-seminar.com. Nigam has pointed out errors of logic in Bhattacharyya’s own argument and in his rendering of that of the Sarkars’. As he says, Bhattacharyya expects his readers to accept that because MCC and PWG have been active in the area for ten years that they therefore ‘have deep roots’ amongst the people. Bhattacharyya’s argument also implicitly holds that *adivasis* only exercise ‘agency’ if they are supportive of the Maoists.

¹⁴ Manik Bora, Budhadiya Das, ‘The Movement in Lalgarh’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XLIV, nos.26-27 (27 June 2009), pp.15-17.

¹⁵ Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p.10.

¹⁶ Bora and Das, *op. cit.*

the state police, often – or so it was reported – accompanied by armed CPI(M) volunteers, targetting villagers in Lalgarh for (supposedly) harbouring Maoists. The police actions were so brutal as to have given rise almost immediately, on 5 November 2008, to a popular movement against them. The *Pulish Santrash Birodhi Janasadharanar Committee* (PSBJC – or People’s Committee Against Police Atrocities [PCAPA]) resolved to keep the police and state administration out of their area. On 6 November 2008, the PSBJC began setting up road blocks and barricades, and thereafter successfully held government forces at bay for six months whilst also implementing livelihood and welfare programmes, including some minor irrigation projects and the establishment of primary healthcare centres (described in some detail by Bhattacharyya: see note 12). The PSBJC’s spokesman and leader, Chhatradhar Mahato, was branded a ‘Maoist’,¹⁷ though he earlier had links with the Trinamul Congress. The PSBJC organised around locally elected village committees, representatives of which elected in turn the 45-member central committee. The movement apparently had a democratic character, and included women.¹⁸

The editorial view of the *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*¹⁹ was that the activities of the PSBJC after November 2008 further angered CPI(M) activists and officials, and that ‘The fact that mainstream politics chose to ignore the Lalgarh movement opened the door for the Maoists to voice *adivasi* demands and exercise control of the PSBJC’. Subsequently, the defeats of the CPI(M) in the general elections of May 2009 were said to have encouraged Maoist attacks on its party cadres and it was these actions that led eventually to the state government’s introduction of central paramilitary forces. The end result has been, in the view of the *EPW*, that the people’s movement in Lalgarh has been broken with the alienation of the *adivasis* complete, caught as they now are between the CPI(M), the Maoists and the state. The purpose of the violence perpetrated by the Maoists is unclear, in the editorial view of the *EPW*, and it is as much a matter for regret as are the organisational deficiencies of the CPI(M) and the failures of the state. An alternative view, expressed forcefully by Bhattacharyya,²⁰ is that ‘the Maoists did not fall from the sky’ and played a major part in the PSBJC from the start. ‘Without their active role’, he says, ‘the movement would not have taken such a shape’. The violence in which they have been

¹⁷ Chhatradhar Mahato was taken into custody by police officers disguised as journalists on 25 September 2009 with 22 criminal cases pending against him. The *Frontline* report on his arrest (Vol.26, no.21, 23 October 2009) describes him as ‘the most familiar public face of the Maoists’, though Mahato always staunchly denied this identification. In a later *Frontline* report on an interview with him (Vol.26, no.22), the CPI(Maoist) leader Kishenji says quite specifically that the PSBJC and the Maoist movement are distinct; and the same point has been made by General Secretary Ganapathy according to a report, ‘The Lalgarh Movement, the PCAPA and the CPI(Maoist)’, dated 23 May 2010 that appears on the website <http://sanhati.com>. See also the Letter ‘Fact-Finding on Lalgarh’, signed by Amit Bhaduri and others, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XLIV, no.16 (18 April 2009), p.4.

¹⁸ This and the preceding paragraph draw mainly on Bora and Das, *op. cit.*; and on ‘Lalgarh: Questions to the Left’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XLIV, nos.26-27 (27 June 2009), p.5.

¹⁹ ‘Lalgarh: Questions to the Left’, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Bhattacharyya, *op. cit.*

involved is understandable in a context in which the common people have been subjected historically to structural violence at the hands of the ruling classes and from the forces of the state. The Maoists have not ‘derailed’ a popular movement but rather have ‘shown it the way’ and have pioneered the alternative path of development with which people in Lalgarh were experimenting before the crackdown. General Secretary Ganapathy argues rather differently: ‘It was the common people [albeit] with the assistance of advanced elements influenced by revolutionary politics who played a crucial role in the formation of tactics. *They formed their own organisation...*’ (emphasis added). According to the writer who cites Ganapathy, however, a movement ‘that had a revolutionary mass character, where people were building up their own organisation... was replaced by what can be loosely termed armed warfare’ (see note 17). A similar view appeared in the news magazine *Frontline*. Its report began, ‘After a reign of terror that lasted close to eight months in and around Lalgarh... the CPI (Maoist) and the Maoist-backed PCAPA are cornered and on the run’, and it went on to argue that ‘The Maoists succeeded in making the unrest in Lalgarh *resemble* a social uprising’²¹ (emphasis added).

The Lalgarh story illustrates, I think, major questions about the Maoist movement. There is no doubt of the connection between the Maoists and the people living in marginal hill and forest areas who have gained little if anything from government programmes and who have often suffered from repressive acts by state functionaries. But how far does the Maoist movement shape popular resistance? Or does it rather take advantage of popular struggles in its bid for state power? How far can its focus be on a constructive programme that addresses people’s needs when such programmes are compromised by violent acts that encourage further state repression? Finally, the Lalgarh story illustrates the difficulty of distinguishing fact from rumour. Were the tribal women who go into the forests to collect *saal* leaves subjected to violence by police and CPI(M) cadres as the All-India Fact Finding Team thought was the case? Alternatively, have they been subjected to harassment by Maoists and most recently by the PSBJC, as the chairperson of the West Bengal State Women’s Commission maintains?²² The influence of party positioning on the judgements of different writers is usually apparent.

²¹ Suhrid Sankar Chattopadhyay, ‘Lalgarh Battle’, *Frontline*, Vol.26, no.14 (2009).

²² Malini Bhattacharya, ‘The Lalgarh Story’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XLIV, no.33 (15 August 2009), pp.17-19.

The Origins and the Ideology of the Naxalite/Maoist Movement in India

The history of Naxalism in India is described by Sumanta Banerjee, its most respected chronicler,²³ as ‘tortuous’. A complicated diagram in Bela Bhatia’s study of ‘The Naxalite Movement in Central Bihar’²⁴ shows how very fragmented the Movement became before the merger of the two principal groups, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) [CPI(M-L) People’s War] and the Maoist Communist Centre of India (MCCI) in 2004.²⁵ In 1995-96, Bhatia reports, there were as many as 17 different active groups in Bihar. Of these groups, the three most significant were: ‘Liberation’, by that time following the line of participation in parliamentary politics, and recognised by the Election Commissioner as the ‘CPI(ML)’; the Maoist Communist Centre, considered to be ‘extreme left’; and ‘Party Unity’ which stood somewhere in-between. What follows, therefore, is the merest sketch of a complex history.

Drawing on a longer history of Communist-led armed struggle by peasants against landlords, moneylenders and government officials – especially that in Telengana between 1946 and 1951 – Naxalism has its immediate origins in the debates within the Indian communist movement of the 1960s about the ‘correct’ strategic line to be taken in order to establish communism in India’s particular circumstances. The Movement took off in May 1967 and is named after a village in the far north of West Bengal where a group of revolutionaries – who repudiated the approaches of the major communist parties as ‘reformist’ – launched an armed uprising of peasants against local landlords. It spread quite quickly into parts of Bihar, Srikakulam District of Andhra Pradesh, Koraput in Orissa and some other areas where guerilla squads of poor and landless peasants drove out landlords. In many cases, however, action degenerated into indiscriminate violence following the injunction of Charu Mazumdar who had emerged as the Movement’s leader²⁶ to undertake ‘annihilation of class enemies’. Mazumdar once wrote that the battle-cry of the movement should be: ‘He who has not dipped his hand in the blood of class enemies can

²³ Sumanta Banerjee, *In the wake of Naxalbari: a history of the Naxalite movement in India*, (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1980); ‘Reflections of a one-time Maoist activist’, *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol.33, nos.3-4 (2009), pp.253-269.

²⁴ Bela Bhatia, ‘The Naxalite Movement in Central Bihar’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XL (9 April 2005), pp.1536-43.

²⁵ A diagram in *Frontline*, Vol.26, no.22 (6 November 2009) shows the following lineage of the CPI(Maoist): CPI(ML) People’s War Group, formed in Andhra Pradesh in 1980 joined in 1998 with CPI(ML) Party Unity, formed in Bihar in 1976 to establish CPI(ML) Peoples War, operating in Andhra, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. The Maoist Communist Centre, formed in Bihar in 1976, together with the Revolutionary Communist Centre of India (Maoist) of Punjab formed the Maoist Communist Centre of India in 2003, operating in Bihar and Jharkhand. It was the coming together of the latter, MCCI with CPI(ML) People’s War in September 2004, that established the CPI(Maoist). General Secretary Ganapathy describes the same lineage, though with a different date for the formation of the MCC. See ‘In conversation with Ganapathy, General Secretary of CPI(Maoist)’ by Jan Myrdal and Gautam Navlakha, <http://sanhati.com>.

²⁶ Another leader of the Naxalites was Kanu Sanyal, whose death was reported in *The Hindu* (24 March 2010).

hardly be called a communist'.²⁷ Dilip Simeon argues of this that, 'What stands out is the freedom accorded to "petty-bourgeois intellectual comrades" to instigate the murder of anyone they deemed a class enemy', the legitimacy of this being seen as self-evident and derived from 'the assumed superiority of the party's version of Marxism-Leninism'.²⁸

It is Simeon's view, expressed in the second epigraph of this paper, that the Maoist/Naxalite Movement has been intellectually driven from its origins, led by middle-class ideologues who take it upon themselves to lead 'the people' and who claim 'correct knowledge' for themselves. Aditya Nigam argues similarly:

The *adivasis* cannot represent themselves; they must be represented, it would seem. They must be represented either by agents of the state... or by the revolutionaries... (and)... the voice of the revolutionary is almost always that of a Brahman/upper caste Ganapathy or Koteswara Rao or their intellectual spokespersons. So we have a Maoist-aligned intelligentsia vicariously playing out their revolutionary fantasies through the lives of *adivasis*, while the people actually dying in battle are almost all *adivasis*.²⁹

The truth claims made by the Maoist leaders are inherently linked, Dilip Simeon argues to their attachment to armed struggle. This attachment is 'the product of a correct theory' to which party cadres have privileged access. Ultimately, it is struggle for the classless society that defines what is right but the result of this way of thinking is that 'the defining feature of the Maoist agenda' has become 'an insistence on killing'.³⁰ As discussed below, Maoists now strenuously defend themselves against this argument, claiming that 'Annihilation is the last choice'.³¹

Naxalism in the early 1970s met with matching violence from the state and it appeared to have been very largely overcome, even before Mrs Indira Gandhi's Emergency stifled opposition. General Secretary Ganapathy says that two parties, the CPI(M-L) and the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) were both formed in 1969 and 'failed to form a unified Maoist party at that juncture'. He also says that the party [he seems to refer to the CPI(M-L)] had already started to disintegrate into several groupings by 1971.³² One group, Liberation, later decided to organise mass fronts and eventually participated in parliamentary politics. By the time when Charu

²⁷ Cited by Dilip Simeon, *op. cit* (note 3).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Aditya Nigam, *op. cit.*

³⁰ Dilip Simeon, *op. cit.*

³¹ This statement by a spokesperson of the CPI(Maoist) in Jharkhand was taken by Alpa Shah as the title for her report on an interview, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XLX, no.19 (8 May 2010) pp.24-29.

³² See the historical account given by Alpa Shah, forthcoming, *op. cit.*, (see note 9); and Ganapathy's interview with Myrdal and Navlakha (cited at note 25).

Mazumdar died in police custody in 1972, the ‘revolution’ appeared to be over. The revolutionary movement has, however, risen again and again because the factors that lend it credence and give it life persist – most importantly the continuing denial of justice and human dignity to Dalits and tribals across the country.³³

The line of the Movement set out in the 1970 Programme of the CPI(M-L), and largely repeated in that of its eventual successor the CPI(Maoist) in 2004, adopts Mao’s view that in semi-feudal and semi-colonial countries like India ‘under the neo-colonial form of imperialist indirect rule’,³⁴ the immediate task of the communist party is to organise landless labourers, poor peasants and exploited middle peasants in armed struggle against their oppressors. The aim is to foster a democratic revolution:

Whose axis and content is agrarian revolution, rejects the parliamentary path of participation in elections, and pursues the main objective... (of liberating)... the rural areas first and then having expanded the base areas – the centre of democratic power in rural areas – advance towards countrywide victory through encircling and capturing the cities.³⁵

The Later History of the Movement

In the 1980s, which is the second phase in the history of the Movement as conceptualised by Sumanta Banerjee, rethinking took place on the part of some survivors of the first phase who favoured participation in parliamentary politics and trade union activities. Others stuck with the line of armed struggle whilst also encouraging mass mobilisation through the setting up of open fronts. By the end of the decade groups following the latter course, including CPI(M-L) Party Unity in Bihar, and People’s War Group [CPI(M-L) People’s War Group] in Andhra Pradesh had built strong bases in parts of these two states and others in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Orissa. It has been from these areas that the Maoists have succeeded over the last twenty years, in spite of both state repression and resistance against them carried on by the militias of dominant groups, in building the ‘red corridor’ stretching from the upper Gangetic plain

³³ On the persistence of Naxalism, see ‘Beyond the “Security-Centric” Approach’, *Editorial in Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XLIV, no.8 (21 February 2009), p.6; and on the circumstances of India’s tribal or *adivasi* population see Ramachandra Guha, ‘Adivasis, Naxalites and Indian Democracy’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XLII, no.32 (11 August 2007), pp.3305-12.

³⁴ See the CPI(Maoist) Party Programme (see note 4).

³⁵ Sumanta Banerjee, ‘Beyond Naxalbari’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XLI, no.29 (22 July 2006), pp.3159-63. This and Sumanta Banerjee, ‘Reflections of a one time Maoist activist’, *op. cit.*, together with Tilak D.Gupta, ‘Maoism in India: Ideology, Programme and Armed Struggle’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XLI, no.29 (22 July 2006), pp.3172-76., have supplied much of the material for this and the following section of the paper.

bordering Nepal across plains and through the forested hills that parallel the East Coast of India down as far as northern Tamil Nadu. The corridor is twice the geographical size of the other two insurgency-affected areas of India, in the North East and Kashmir. The Maoists are now believed to operate in over a third of India's districts.³⁶

The Movement is currently, Banerjee thinks, in its third phase following the agreement of leaders and cadres of scattered and divided groups to the creation of the single revolutionary party, the CPI(Maoist) in 2004. The reasons for 'fusion' after decades of fragmentation in the Movement are unclear. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to suppose that the Indian activists have been influenced by the example of the Nepali Maoists – even though they may also be critical of the latter for having agreed to join the electoral process. It is probably no accident that the merger in 2004 was partly facilitated by the Nepali leader, Prachanda. Whatever the factors behind the fusion that has taken place, it appears to have brought about a significant regeneration of the Movement, having 'given synergy to the new outfit in terms of strength, capability and resources – for launching attacks on the security forces'. This fusion has also provided a large swathe of the country within which the Maoists are able to move without the problems of coordination that afflict the state police forces. Both the scale and frequency of incidents in which the Maoists have confronted the security forces have increased, culminating most recently in the attack on 6 April 2010 in a forest in eastern Chhattisgarh that left 78 armed policemen dead. This occurred not long after an attack on a police camp at Silda in West Bengal in which 24 policemen were killed.

The CPI(Maoist), as I pointed out earlier, has reaffirmed the programmatic line of the CPI(M-L) of 1970, committing to a people's war for seizure of power whilst also stating that it will wage struggles against the Government of India's plans to set up Special Economic Zones and against the displacement of tribals and forest dwellers by mining and other projects.³⁷ I was informed in March 2010 by the noted human rights activist, Professor G. Haragopal of the University of Hyderabad, that the Maoists are now prioritising mobilisation, especially of tribals against mining and other projects involving displacements of people. Their prime objective has become that of mobilisation against 'imperialism' as reflected in India's economic liberalisation and the effects of globalisation rather than 'anti-feudal' struggles.

³⁶ According to *The Economist* (27 February 2010). Alpa Shah forthcoming, *op. cit.*, refers to 231 out of India's 626 districts and says that there are by now more than 40,000 Maoist cadres (though this is a much higher figure than is given in other sources). Thirty-three districts are identified as 'worst affected' by 'Left Wing Extremism' (Jharkhand has 10, Chhattisgarh 7, Bihar 6, Orissa 5, Maharashtra 2, and Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have one each) as reported by Amitendu Palit, 'Economy of the red corridor', *The Financial Express* (13 March 2010).

³⁷ See 'Interview with Ganapathy', cited at note 5, in which the General Secretary says 'The (Party) Congress has decided to take up struggles against the SEZs which are nothing but neo-colonial enclaves on Indian territory'.

Another human rights activist, K. Balagopal, provides an illuminating history of the Movement in Andhra Pradesh in particular.³⁸ In the 1970s, the Naxalites fought fairly successfully, in spite of police actions against landlordism (including the practice of *begar* or bonded labour) and then encouraged tribals to cut down reserve forests for cultivation. This was by ‘far and away the most successful land struggles of the Naxalites’³⁹ until later in the mid-1990s changing their policy in the light of changed circumstances, they imposed ‘quite a successful ban on the cutting of forests’. In the early period, in the northern Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh, Balagopal says, the Naxalites spread mainly through mass organisations of agricultural labourers, students and youth, but thereafter in this region and elsewhere in the state, heavy repression on the part of government forces brought an increased reliance on armed squads:

The immediate economic and social problems of the masses took a back seat and the battle for supremacy with the state became the central instance of struggle ... This requires a range of acts of violence, which have no direct relation to the immediate realisation of any rights for the masses, though the resulting repression invariably hits at the masses.⁴⁰

Unsurprisingly, this has led to questioning amongst people as to whether they have not been made into ‘guinea pigs of revolution’. New generations, though they may have benefited from the earlier actions of the Maoists, are less sympathetic to them than were people of their parents’ generation, while at the same time the tactics employed by the state in Andhra have seriously weakened them. These tactics included the creation of special police forces – the ‘Greyhounds’ – that live and operate like the Naxalites’ own squads and are ‘bound by no known law, including the Constitution of India’.⁴¹ ‘Today, the state stands as the best example of the success of counter-revolutionary strategies of a government’.⁴² The Movement in Andhra Pradesh has, however, supplied leaders more widely as in Bastar, in neighbouring Chhattisgarh⁴³ and nationally. Kishenji, for example a politburo member, is from Karimnagar.⁴⁴ The Andhra experience, of the shift from mass mobilisation to armed struggle and from tactics that address

³⁸ K. Balagopal, ‘Maoist Movement in Andhra Pradesh’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XLI, no.29 (22 July 2006), pp.3183-87.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p.3184.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p.3185.

⁴¹ This account is substantially confirmed in a *Frontline* report, Vol.26, no.22 (6 November 2009), which says, with regard to the first ten years or so, ‘On the whole, a generation reaped the benefits of the Maoist movement’. Thereafter, the movement rather fell apart as a result of the determination of police and politicians to change the conditions in which it had thrived: ‘It is this change in the conditions on the battleground and to some extent the change in the social climate (in the aftermath of India’s economic reforms) that contributed to the downfall of the Naxalite movement in Andhra Pradesh and not just the military capability of the elite commando force – Greyhounds’. This report also comments on the changed perceptions of the Naxalites over generations.

³⁶ *Frontline*, *ibid*

⁴³ Arundhati Roy, account of her travels with the Maoists in Bastar, *Outlook* (29 March 2010).

⁴⁴ See the report of an interview with Koteswar Rao, alias ‘Kishenji’, *Frontline* Vol.26, no.22 (6 November 2009).

people's everyday problems to the remote goal of seizing state power triggered by the proscribing of the mass movements by the state is one that has been repeated more widely – and increasingly so. The CPI(Maoist) was formally banned by the Government of India as a terrorist organisation under Section 41 of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act on 22 June 2009. It had previously been declared an 'unlawful association' by a number of states, including Andhra Pradesh.

The Naxalites'/Maoists' Programme

The programme of the CPI(Maoist), once the new people's democratic state is established, however, is one with which 'a large chunk of the Indian political class should have nothing to quarrel about'.⁴⁵ The party proposes to redistribute land to poor peasants and landless labourers according to the slogan 'land to the tillers'; to ensure the land rights of women; 'to ensure all facilities for the growth of agriculture', including ensuring 'remunerative prices' for agricultural products'; to regulate working conditions and ensure that wages are adequate and equal between the sexes; to guarantee the right to work and 'improved living conditions for the people'; and 'to move towards the elimination of regional imbalances'.⁴⁶ Much of this also appears in the Common Minimum Programme with which the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), headed by the Congress Party, set out (also in 2004), while the major established party of the Left, the CPI(M), remains committed to the abolition of landlordism and radical land reforms. Contrary to what is suggested by some commentators, the CPI(Maoist) does have a coherent programme. The Maoists are not just armed bandits, as they are sometimes represented as being (as in the *Frontline* report from Lalgargh) and in spite of the history of attachment to violence that Simeon critiques in the *Seminar* article referred to earlier. They are now seen increasingly as being more or less exclusively an armed movement with no concern for mass mobilisation has come about because state action against them leaves them with little scope for the latter, which has tended to shrink (as we saw from Balagopal's account from Andhra Pradesh outlined earlier) – or at least apparently so (close observers like Navlakha report that organising goes on wherever it is possible for the Party to do so).⁴⁷

The chances of land reform being carried out in India by intervention from above now seem remote. Neither is there significant pressure for such reforms from below in the major agricultural regions of the country. Moreover, the major left parties have chosen not to

⁴⁵ Gupta, *op. cit.*, p.3172.

⁴⁶ See CPI(Maoist) *Party Programme*, cited at note 4.

⁴⁷ Gautam Navlakha, 'Days and Nights in the Maoist Heartland', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XLV, no.16 (17 April 2010), pp.38-47. Navlakha reports 'Murali, an activist told me that mass organisations of the party may not be registered but they were there alright and functioned to the extent that these unregistered organisations spearheaded struggles and entered into negotiations...', p.41.

concentrate attention on marginal areas where the land issue still is alive. The Maoist/Naxalite organisations have filled the gap and Gupta argues that ‘the major Naxalite contribution to Indian politics is that they have kept alive the agrarian demands of the rural poor through persistent but not always successful struggles’.⁴⁸ Their emphasis, too, on armed resistance to oppression by bigger landowners and rich farmers who often still subject Dalits and *adivasis* to everyday humiliation has appeal to many of these historically oppressed people. Gupta thinks that it has a large mass following because ‘no other political party in the country has taken up the cause of the rural poor with such single-minded zeal and devotion’. He thinks this even though he questions the priority that the Maoists themselves seem to give to the path of armed revolution, reinforcing the impression that theirs is a guerilla formation rather than a political party. Gupta also believes that their strategic-tactical line is quite inadequate in the context of present day India – as he says, most of India is not Dandekaranya (one of the major tribal-occupied forest areas of Chhattisgarh).⁴⁹ Balagopal, similarly, has argued that ‘the main reason for the wide popularity of the Naxalites in the entire forest region abutting the Godaveri river in Telengana, Vidarbha and Chhattisgarh is the protection they gave to the forest dwellers for cultivation in reserve forests, the substantial increase they achieved in the payment for picking *tendu* leaf and the end they put to the oppressive domination of the headmen and *patwaris*’.⁵⁰ The massive transfers of forest and agricultural land for infrastructural, mining and industrial projects that are either planned or are now taking place will lend even greater strength to the Naxalites.

Tactics, Mobilisations and Patterns of Support

The few ethnographic studies that there are⁵¹ strongly confirm these general arguments about the extent to which the Naxalites win support amongst, and articulate the needs and aspirations of poor and landless peasants and *adivasis*, and perhaps especially of young men and women

⁴⁸ Gupta, *op. cit.*, p.3173.

⁴⁹ Gupta, *op. cit.*, p.3174.

⁵⁰ K. Balagopal, ‘Physiognomy of Violence’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XLI (3 June 2006), pp.2183-86. Quote from p.2185. Note that the history of the Naxalite movement in Bastar, recorded by Gautam Navlakha (see note 47) confirms Balagopal’s account here; while the spokesperson from Jharkhand, interviewed by Alpa Shah (see note 31) presents a similar story.

⁵¹ The studies that I have found are those of Bela Bhatia in Central Bihar, *op. cit.*; of George Kunnath, also in Central Bihar, ‘Becoming a Naxalite in Rural Bihar: Class Struggle and its Contradictions’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol.33, no.1 (January 2006), pp.89-123 and ‘Smouldering Dalit Fires in Bihar, India’, *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol.33, nos.3-4 (2009), pp.309-325; of Alpa Shah, in Jharkhand, ‘Markets of Protection: The “Terrorist” Maoist Movement and the State in Jharkhand, India’, *Critique of Anthropology*, Vol.26, no.3 (2006), pp.297-314, and ‘In search of certainty in revolutionary India’, *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol.33, nos.3-4 (2009), pp.271-286; of Amit Desai, in Maharashtra, ‘Anti-“anti-witchcraft” and the Maoist insurgency in rural Maharashtra, India’, *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol.33, nos.3-4 (2009), pp.423-439; and of Jason Miklian, in Chhattisgarh, *op. cit.* The work of Felix Padel on tribal movements in Central India, some of which is available on line, is also of value, as are reports of enquiry teams from the Peoples Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) and other bodies of this kind.

amongst these groups. This is so even if they actually enter a region through the rural middle class of upper caste elites and educated well-to-do *adivasis*, as has been the case in the part of Jharkhand studied by Alpa Shah.⁵² These studies also, however, highlight the tensions and contradictions in the tactics and actions of the movements. The relationship between the mainly urban, educated middle class leadership and the peasantry is fraught with tensions. There are contradictions between the immediate tactics of the groups, of opposing the dominant landowners, redistributing land, raising wages and generally of changing rural power relations, all of which answers to the problems that their supporters confront and on the other hand, their longer run goals of establishing socialism through the take-over of state power. It seems from the ethnographies that, unsurprisingly, the extent to which the leadership has been able to develop a ‘revolutionary consciousness’ amongst the poor peasantry is very limited. George Kunnath’s research⁵³ in particular, shows how support amongst Dalits for the Maoists in Central Bihar weakened considerably, as the latter sought to bring in men from the middle and upper castes in pursuit of the goal of capturing state power and rewarded the higher caste members of their armed squads (*dastas*) more highly than the Dalits. The tendency on the part of the leadership to romanticise the revolutionary character of the peasantry is sometimes a problem and it is clear that such as this consciousness is, it may well be suppressed when government provides adequately for the most immediate needs of the people.⁵⁴ The other big tension is between mass mobilisation and the necessarily secretive, armed power of the underground movement which is not inherently democratic at all. This relates in turn to the contradiction between the moral basis of the Maoist movement and the violence that it perpetrates. Violence can undermine that moral base and alienate supporters as has happened, according to Balagopal’s account – summarised earlier – in Andhra Pradesh. The understandable sense of their persecution amongst Maoist cadres, confronted by the violence of the state, may lead to the indiscriminate use of force and their alienation from the people they claim to fight for. It is clear, too, and also unsurprising that there is but a thin line between the ‘revolutionary’ and the criminal thug. One of the early leaders in Central Bihar (one of a pair referred to colloquially as ‘Marx and Engels’) was a Yadav *dacoit* who had served a long prison sentence for the murder of a police constable.⁵⁵

Bhatia and Kunnath provide ethnographic evidence that the social base of the Movement in Central Bihar, when the Movement was strong there, was amongst the landless, small and marginal peasants of lower and intermediate castes, though there were some supporters from amongst higher castes and classes and whose presence was felt in the leadership. These authors show that there was a perception amongst poorer people that Naxalites were ‘good people’, who

⁵² Shah 2006, *op. cit.*

⁵³ Kunnath 2006, *op. cit.*

⁵⁴ Sumanta Banerjee argues this in his 2009 article. See note 23.

⁵⁵ Balagopal 2006, *op.cit.*, says with regard to Andhra Pradesh ‘strategies of militancy attract unruly types who straddle the border between rebellion and mere rowdy-ism’, p.3186.

were opposed to their oppressors and who supported them in a struggle for their basic rights. But according to Bhatia, people understood the objective of the movement as being ‘change’, not ‘revolution’. They supported it because they felt that the Naxalites shared their sense of injustice rather than for any ideological reasons. The appeal of ‘class struggle’ was as a means of securing needs for higher wages, land redistribution and freedom from harassment. Bhatia notes that people petitioned the Maoists for exactly the same things for which they also petitioned government.

Bhatia describes mobilisations by Dalits against Bhumihar landowners in Bhojpur; Kunnath the struggles between Maoist-led landless Dalits and Kurmi landholders in another village in Central Bihar. In both cases, the accounts show that the ‘feudal’ power of the landowners was undermined but at a high cost in terms of human life. In this region, of course, the Maoists began to be opposed in the 1990s by vigilante gangs set up by the landowners, like the Bhumihars’ Ranbeer Sena. Still, the ethnographies show that the Maoist mobilisations delivered some real benefits to landless peasants. They established land rights for some, raised wages in the areas of struggle and perhaps above all, inspired poor people to assert themselves as human beings and to claim their social and political rights. ‘Honour’ or ‘self-respect’ (*izzat*) appears for many to have been their most important achievement from their participation in the mass mobilisations of the Maoists.

In practice, Bhatia argues on the basis of extensive fieldwork in Central Bihar in the mid-1990s, a large part of the Movement’s activities were non-violent (demonstrations, *dharnas* and the like). Still, there were significant differences between Liberation (castigated by General Secretary Ganapathy as having degenerated ‘after a history of glorious struggle’⁵⁶), Party Unity and the MCC over the extent of their commitment to the mass line represented by the open fronts set up by the various groups. Liberation formed the Indian People’s Front (IPF) and the Bihar Pradesh Kisan Sabha (BPKS) in the early 1980s and both flourished. Party Unity set up the Mazdoor Kisan Sangram Samiti (MKSS) was banned in 1986 but was later renamed Mazdoor Kisan Sangram Parishad (MKSP).⁵⁷ But underground, armed action was always important. At the outset and again more recently according to other commentators,⁵⁸ the groups relied almost exclusively on armed tactics. These were undertaken by the *dasta* (squads), each with 6-10 members recruited mostly locally from amongst the labouring classes, though they might also include middle class members, some from outside the area. The most important role of the *dasta*, according to Bhatia, was (in the 1990s) to protect the open fronts; open fronts and underground groups were intimately linked. Kunnath records that they were referred to always together as the

⁵⁶ This description appears in ‘Interview with Ganapathy’, see note 5.

⁵⁷ Kunnath 2009, *op. cit.*, analyses the tensions that eventually emerged between Party Unity and the MKSS, and the split in the latter.

⁵⁸ Shah and Pettigrew, *op. cit.*

sanghathan. His account, from fieldwork undertaken more recently than Bhatia's, shows that the squads increasingly included middle class and middle caste members as the Maoists sought to build a wider cross-class movement in the pursuit of the goal of securing state power. His friend Rajubhai, a landless Dalit who had been the leader of a *dasta* and who appears to be an organic intellectual, told him that:

When the *sanghathan* came here, it began among the *mazdoor varg* (working class). The cadres used to sleep and eat in the mud houses of the *mazdoor*. It fought for the issues of the working classes – land and wages, as well as against social abuses, exploitation and sexual abuse of women. But now that the *sanghathan* has got a foothold here, its ambition has grown into one of capturing state power. So they have started taking in people from dominant castes, against whom we fought previously. As a result of the entry of the landowning castes into the *sanghathan*, it is hesitant to raise the issues of land and wages. For the last twenty years, wages have remained the same: three kilos of paddy for a day's work. The working class is no longer a priority for the *sanghathan*.⁵⁹

Rajubhai's disaffection from the *sanghathan* was completed by the fact that landless Dalits in the *dastas*, though they were the ones who died or suffered physically the most, were actually paid less than were the middle caste members. This appears to be a rather shocking denial of the moral claims of the Movement.

A village study from South Bihar by Shashi Bhushan Singh⁶⁰ presents a more complex, even confusing picture, though it also bears out some of the points made by Bhatia and Kunnath. Here it appears that the IPF, the open front of Liberation and the MKSS of Party Unity – though they were both led locally mainly by Yadavs – were a source of support for Dalits in their struggles against higher castes for higher wages and for their dignity. Singh says, 'The biggest contribution of the Naxalites towards the empowerment of the poor has been the taming of the upper castes'.⁶¹ These struggles took place, however, in a context in which the traditional dominance of Rajputs had already been weakened by the effects of economic development. This, in various ways, drew people increasingly out of the village. By the later 1990s, Dalit support for the Naxalites was apparently waning, mainly because of the improvements that had taken place in the Dalits' economic condition and perhaps also because the class contradiction between the landed and landless had by then become less clear-cut: 'The importance of land as a factor of livelihood and dominance is decreasing ... [as] ... the locus of the economy has partially shifted

⁵⁹ Kunnath 2006, *op. cit.*, p.110.

⁶⁰ Singh, 'Limits to Power: Naxalism and Caste Relations in a South Bihar Village', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XL, no.29 (16 July 2005), pp.3167-75.

⁶¹ Singh, *op. cit.*, p.3173.

away from the village'.⁶² The politics of Maoism in this case were greatly influenced by caste and its implications for the wider political realignments that took place in Bihar in the 1990s. The Dalits themselves were divided by class differences (mainly between the Chamars and the rest); many of the Yadavs shifted politically to become supporters of Lalu Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD); while the MCC had entered the region later than the other groups and through upper caste Bhumihars and Rajputs, and finally became closely associated with the latter when the Bhumihars opposed to Lalu and the RJD; also shifted to become the main opposition to the Maoists through the Ranbeer Sena. In this case, 'The MCC supported Rajputs and opposed the Scheduled Castes initially in order to gain supremacy vis-à-vis the MKSS and later for survival vis-à-vis the police and Ranvir Sena. An organisation formed to support the Scheduled Castes ended up by supporting the dominant castes'.⁶³ The neatness of class conflict is completely upset in this case – and no doubt, the same is true of many other areas.

While it may be true, as it is according to the close observers of the Movement in Central Bihar whose work has been referred to here, that revolutionary violence can appeal to these who have been subjected to violence by their social 'superiors' over generations, Bhatia particularly – like Banerjee – is clearly deeply concerned about the way in which violence corrupts the Movement.⁶⁴ Her conclusion – with which, I believe, Kunnath's arguments are in sympathy – is worth quoting in full:

The Naxalite movement will thrive only to the extent that its vision resonates with the people. The wider the gap between the two, the higher the chances the movement will fizzle out. The present formula is a *mélange* of convenience between the leaders who dream of Maoist revolution and people who aspire for practical change. In order to bring about a genuine people's movement, the Naxalite leaders have to be ready to walk at the pace of the people and let their concerns guide the vision of the movement.⁶⁵

The story of the Movement in Andhra Pradesh according to Balagopal, as recounted earlier, is salutary. There, he argues, the gap between the visions of leadership and masses has seriously weakened the Movement. The leadership has the commitment to 'armed struggle' that is explained in the Party Programme (see note 4), while the Maoists are also subjected to such violence by the state that both sides have become locked into armed conflict. Then the

⁶² Singh, *op. cit.*, p.3173.

⁶³ Singh, *op. cit.*, p.3173.

⁶⁴ Bela Bhatia, 'On Armed Resistance', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XLI, no.29 (22 July 2006), pp.3179-83; and Sumanta Banerjee 2006, *op.cit.* Bhatia writes '...the use of violence has taken a heavy toll. The downside of violence has been so wide-ranging that it may well end up negating what the Naxalites stand for', *op. cit.*, p.3182.

experiences, for notable example, of the attempts in Andhra Pradesh to reach a negotiated settlement have shown just how difficult this is to achieve given the legitimate suspicions of the Maoists of the government and vice versa.⁶⁶

Thus far there are no ethnographic studies of the Movement in the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh to compare with those for Central Bihar, though Nandini Sundar who has carried on substantial ethnographic research in the region – if not in the Maoist dominated areas, as she says – has written on it, drawing on interviews conducted as part of a Citizens’ Initiative visit there in May 2006. Her information about the activities of Salwa Judum (discussed below) is substantiated by interviews and observations in the field reported by Jason Miklian.⁶⁷ Sundar records that the Maoists ‘claim to include 60 lakh (6,000,000) people in the “organisational sweep” of their Dandakaranya “guerilla zone”’, where they have established mass organisations – the most important of which are the Dandakaranya Adivasi Kisan Mazdoor Sanghathan (DAKMS) and the Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sanghathan (KAMS) – that are colloquially called *sanghams*. The Maoists claim, also, to have carried on a great deal of developmental work, including the establishment of 135 people’s clinics, educational facilities and a large number of minor irrigation works.⁶⁸ Sundar comments that while these efforts – assuming that the Maoists’ claims are accurate – are not equivalent to what the government might have achieved, they do show much greater commitment to people’s development. The KAMS is said to have taken up women’s issues⁶⁹ and the Maoists have consciously promoted Gondi language and literature. These positive efforts, however, are compromised by other Maoist activities when they have ‘resisted even genuine government initiatives’. For example, ‘While recognising that traders cheat *adivasis* over minor forest produce, (the Maoists) have defended them against government attempts to introduce cooperatives to buy tamarind and *tendu*’.⁷⁰ Miklian, too, comments that most villagers ‘are upset at Naxal opposition to government programmes and efforts to block participatory elections’.⁷¹ More significant still, than this, has been the ‘brute force’ that has accompanied their work. Sundar argues, ‘Their supporters need to debate whether armed struggle was necessary to their positive work and whether peaceful mass mobilisation would not work

⁶⁵ Bela Bhatia 2005, *op. cit.*, p.1547.

⁶⁶ On the Andhra peace talks see K. Balagopal, ‘People’s War and the Government: did the police have the last laugh?’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XXXVIII (8 February 2003), pp.513-519; and ‘Naxalites in Andhra Pradesh: Have We Heard the Last of the Peace Talks?’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XLV (26 March 2005), pp.1323-29.

⁶⁷ Nandini Sundar, ‘Bastar, Maoism and Salwa Judum’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLI, no.29 (22 July 2006), pp.3187-92; and Miklian 2009, *op.cit.* See also Arundhati Roy’s account, *op. cit.* and Sundar’s contribution, ‘Pleading for justice’, *Seminar*, March 2010.

⁶⁸ Sundar, *Ibid*, p.3189. Arundhati Roy, *op. cit.*, also gives some account of the developmental work undertaken by the Maoists; and see Balagopal 2006, *op. cit.* (note 50), on the reasons for the mass support that the Maoists have attracted.

⁶⁹ Arundhati Roy, *op. cit.*, describes activities of the KAMS.

⁷⁰ Sundar, *op. cit.*, p.3190.

⁷¹ Miklian, *op. cit.*, p.454.

better. Certainly, the attempt to defend their guerilla zone seems now to have overtaken people's needs...'.⁷² Her conclusion then is exactly like Bhatia's from Bihar or Balagopal's from Andhra.

Gautam Navlakha gives a somewhat more sympathetic account of the Maoists in Bastar from the journey he made in their 'base area' there, where they run their *Jantanam Sarkar* or 'people's government' in January 2010 (see note 47). He, like Arundathi Roy (see note 43), was evidently very impressed by the self-discipline of the young cadres amongst whom he observed remarkable gender equality. He notes the large numbers of women and that many platoons of the People's Liberation Guerilla Army have women commanders. He says 'It is significant that women comprise by far and away the most articulate members of the movement' and records its work to encourage (not 'decree') the emancipation of women as also to develop education, healthcare and agricultural production. According to Navlakha's account, the Maoists are very concerned indeed to explain and defend their policy in regard to violence. They point to the violence that is carried on against the people quite routinely by police and private militia of the Salwa Judum and strongly assert that only 'enemies of the people' were killed by them. This defence was also articulated forcefully by General Secretary Ganapathy in his interview with Myrdal and Navlakha (see note 25), and by the Jharkhand leader Gopalji, interviewed by Alpa Shah (note 31). But it is clear that there is a great deal of sensitivity amongst the Maoist leadership about undisciplined violence. Navlakha says, 'I pointed out that each time the party committed a mistake and apologised, it could not help advance the movement forward. Did not this raise issues about discipline?' This line of questioning clearly discomfited those with whom he spoke. There can be no doubt that there is a spiral of violence as Bhatia and others show. At the same time, the police who are set against the Maoists come from what Human Rights Watch has described as a 'broken system':

'A dangerous anachronism, the police have largely failed to evolve from the ruler-supportive, repressive forces they were designed to be under Britain's colonial rule ... Instead of policing through public consent and participation, the police use abuse and threats as a primary crime investigation and law enforcement tactic. The institutional culture of police practically discourages officers from acting otherwise, failing to give them the resources, training, ethical environment and encouragement to develop professional police tactics. Many officers even told Human Rights Watch that they were ordered or expected to commit abuses'.⁷³

⁷² Sundar, *op. cit.*, p.3191.

⁷³ Human Rights Watch, *Broken System: Dysfunction, Abuse and Impunity in the Indian Police* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2009).

There are some other points that emerge from the few ethnographies. One interesting finding is that of Amit Desai from his fieldwork in one of the two Naxalite affected districts of Maharashtra.⁷⁴ Here the presence of the Maoists has had the effect of bringing the police, moved into ‘advanced bases’, closer to village people. Aware as they now are of the need to ‘win hearts and minds’, the police sometimes provide support for villagers in their interactions with other bodies of the state. But they are also convinced that ‘social backwardness’ is a major reason why people may support the Maoists. With this mindset, the police have attempted at a kind of social reform by trying to regulate local religious practice and such activities as witch-detecting and ghost-finding. This has had the consequence, in this case, of pushing people into closer involvement with the alternative religious practice offered by a particular Hindu sect that is aligned with the Hindu right. The Maoists have generally been silent in regard to the increasing influence that Hindu nationalists have sought to build amongst tribals. Sumanta Banerjee writes that ‘their major failure has been their powerlessness in putting up an effective resistance to the Hindu religious fascist forces which have imposed a reign of terror over members of the Muslim and Christian religious minorities. The indifference of the Maoist leaders to these major flashpoints of popular grievances and resistance indicates to some extent the alienation they are prone to’.⁷⁵

Responses of State, the Role of Capital, and ‘Durable Disorder’⁷⁶

Here I discuss, in particular, the responses of the state to the Maoists in Chhattisgarh though I believe the key points made are ones that are of general significance. The efforts made by the Government of Chhattisgarh to tackle the Naxalites/Maoists in the state, until 2005, had proven largely ineffectual. It was said by Ajai Sahni, Executive Director of the Institute of Conflict Management, Delhi, ‘Chhattisgarh forces still lag behind other Indian states in both quantitative and qualitative terms’.⁷⁷ It has been in this context that the policy of recruiting ‘Special Police Officers’ from amongst local people was adopted by the Central Reserve Police Force in 2006 as

⁷⁴ Desai, *op. cit.*

⁷⁵ Banerjee 2009, *op.cit.*; and see Simeon, *op.cit.* for further discussion of the Maoists’ failure to confront communalism.

⁷⁶ I take the idea of ‘durable disorder’ as has Bert Suykens’ in the article cited here, from the title of a book on India’s North East by Sanjib Baruah and use it to refer to the ways in which the persistence of conflict may serve different interests.

⁷⁷ Miklian, *op.cit.*, p.443. See also Ajai Sahni, ‘The dreamscapes of “solutions”’, *Seminar* (March 2010) for extended discussion of the severe limitations that affect the actions of the security forces. Kumawat, in the same issue of *Seminar*, points out that ‘There has been (*sic*) decades of neglect of the state police forces in the states’ worst affected...The police-population ratios of the affected states are very low. As against the international norms of 250 policemen per 100,000 and national average of 143, Bihar is a low 79, Jharkhand 164, Chhattisgarh 143, Uttar Pradesh 94 and Orissa 100. Policemen in these states operate under abysmal working conditions with little technical support, antiquated weapons and hardly any training in jungle warfare’. See also the Human Rights Watch report (note 73).

a way of increasing manpower cheaply. Sundar records that many of those recruited were minors and they and others ‘were attracted by the promise of Rs. 1,500 per month, the machismo of weapons and the hope of getting permanent employment in the police force’.⁷⁸

The Bastar region of Chhattisgarh has also been the site of the activities of the Salwa Judum (meaning ‘purification hunt’). This militia was set up with the approval of the government in 2005, at the instigation of a sometime Communist, later Congress MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly), Mahendra Karma. This was framed by Karma – who has been charged for his involvement in a conspiracy over the theft of forest rights – as a popular and ‘Gandhian’ movement of tribal people against the Naxalites. In practice, there is strong evidence of the responsibility of the Salwa Judum, with Special Police Officers, for the use of considerable violence in forcing large-scale displacements of people to roadside camps: Sundar gives the figure of 46,000, Miklian figures of 60,000 according to government or 40,000 according to independent estimates.⁷⁹ Large areas have effectively been laid waste. Many villages have been destroyed. The actions of the Salwa Judum have given rise to warlordism with some of warlords being outsiders from North India, who are supporters of Hindu fundamentalism. The Movement rapidly ceased to be under the control either of Karma or the police. Miklian notes, for instance, that in September 2007, ‘Access to Dornapal Police HQ is controlled by Kuhwal (one of these warlords from North India) as the police chief of Dornapal needs to ask his permission to allow visitors or make tactical decisions’.⁸⁰ There is a very long catalogue of human rights violations in Chhattisgarh, as Miklian reports.⁸¹ Even the *Frontline* report, more sympathetic to Salwa Judum than others records, ‘Though Salwa Judum was well-intentioned, (a point that would certainly be challenged by Sundar and Miklian) it soon degenerated into yet another instrument of harassment, extortion and torture’.⁸² It is seen, nonetheless, as a model to be emulated in other states (Jharkhand and Maharashtra, according to Miklian).⁸³ Chhattisgarh illustrates very starkly the spiral of violence associated with Maoism. It also illustrates the interconnections of politicians, private companies and both Maoists and anti-Maoist forces that lead to the reproduction of conflict, because so many powerful actors benefit from it.

As a way of defeating the Maoists, the Salwa Judum has not proven successful – indeed there are reports that its actions have encouraged fresh recruitment to them⁸⁴ – but Salwa Judum ‘is in many ways a complete success, operating exactly as its founders intended, as a land and power

⁷⁸ Sundar, *op. cit.*, p.3187.

⁷⁹ Sundar, *op. cit.*; Miklian, *op. cit.*, p.452.

⁸⁰ Miklian, *op. cit.*, p.450.

⁸¹ Miklian, *op. cit.*, pp. 451-5.

⁸² *Frontline*, Vol.26, no.22 (2 November 2009).

⁸³ Miklian, *op. cit.*, p.457.

⁸⁴ See, for example, Navlakha, *op. cit.* (note 47).

grab masquerading as local uprising'.⁸⁵ Miklian proceeds to argue that finding a solution to the security problem that is presented in Bastar is 'problematised by the fact that every major actor (in Chhattisgarh) gains more from continued conflict than peace'.⁸⁶ In the Dantewara area of Bastar, it is iron that generates the funding to supply all sides in the conflict.⁸⁷ There is a publicly owned iron ore processing plant and both Essar and Tata Steel are active. Mine officials, both public and private, pay off both Salwa Judum and the Maoists. In this case, as in other parts of the 'red corridor', it appears that the existence of important natural resources is a major factor amongst the causes of enduring conflict. There is some debate amongst those who have undertaken large-*n* cross country analyses of the determinants of insurgency and civil wars on the significance of natural resources, with the principal protagonists being Collier and his co-authors from Oxford who think that there is a significant relationship, while Fearon and Laitin from Stanford University find that there may not be.⁸⁸ In the 'red corridor', the presence of natural resources appears unquestionably to be a factor, though probably one that is less significant than the fact that insurgency is favoured in forested, hill areas – a point that also comes out strongly from the large-*n* studies.⁸⁹

But it is not only the extremely valuable mineral resources of the region – such as Orissa's high quality bauxite⁹⁰ – that give the key actors material interests in the continuation of conflict. Bert Suykens has analysed what he describes as a 'relatively stable joint extraction regime' operates in the trade in *tendu* leaves, used in making *beedi* cigarettes, in the tribal areas of the Telengana region of Andhra. 'This low profile, lootable resource' provides the single most important source of income both for tribals in North Telengana (during the summer season) and the Maoists. Both the state and the Naxalites hold some degree of public authority and exercise it, in effect jointly, to control the trade and extract resources from it. The analysis shows how:

Naxalite authority has been able to extend its influence over the wages of [*tendu* leaf] collectors, the appointment of *khalledars* [purchase agents], the earning of revenue and to a lesser extent, certain aspects of the *beedi* manufacturing industry. In this role of public authority, the Naxalites do not conform to their popular image as either weapon-wielding terrorists or the vanguard of social-activism. At the same time, the Indian state does not seem to be able to prevent the Naxalites

⁸⁵ Miklian, *op. cit.*, p.456.

⁸⁶ Miklian, *op. cit.*, p.457.

⁸⁷ See also Sundar, *op. cit.*, p.3189.

⁸⁸ See, for example, Paul Collier *et al.*, 'Beyond Greed and Grievance: Feasibility and Civil War', *Oxford Economic Papers* (January 2009); James Fearon and David Laitin, 'Ethnicity, Insurgency and Civil War', *American Political Science Review*, Vol.97, no.1 (2003), pp.75-90.

⁸⁹ See also Felix Padel and Samarendra Das, 'Anthropology of a Genocide: Tribal Movements in Central India Against Over-Industrialisation' (2006), www.freewebs.com/epgorissa/FelixPadel-SamarendraDas.pdf.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

from taking up this role. Although the state clearly has the overall advantage, both in manpower and money, and provides the framework for the trade in *beedi*, the Naxalites seem to have a comparative advantage in controlling the day-to-day working of the trade.⁹¹

Alpa Shah, with regard to a region of Jharkhand, has argued that the Naxalites there became very much like the state, selling protection in return for support. They call it ‘taxation’ and the income from their levies on the *tendu* leaf trade or on the building of roads, bridges and dams, are a crucial source of income for their operations⁹². Navlakha records that the annual budget of an Area Revolutionary People’s Committee in the territory of the *Jantanam Sarkar* in Bastar was ‘made up of Rs. 360,000 in taxes on contractors, Rs. 500,000 allotted by the *Jantanam Sarkar* [origins of these funds not specified] and Rs. 250,000 collected through work days or *shram daan* by households in the area’.⁹³ He subsequently describes the revenues of the Party as follows:

‘Most of the money was now collected in the form of royalty on *tendu patta*, bamboo, tamarind and other forest produce. Revenue from looting banks or confiscating wealth was far less. They did tax some of the companies and contractors who operated in what they describe as the guerilla zone. In any case their sources were indigenous and not external, which even the government was forced to concede’.⁹⁴

‘Operation Green Hunt’

The Maoist insurgency has gathered strength since the formation of the CPI(Maoist) in 2004. In response to this gathering momentum in November 2009, the Ministry of Home Affairs announced a ‘concerted and coordinated initiative against Maoists’, framed by the principles of counter-insurgency that are summed up in the words ‘clear, hold and build’. As an official explained, ‘It is a comprehensive operational strategy that would first seek to clear an area of Maoists, occupy it militarily and follow up with socio-economic development activity’.⁹⁵ This

⁹¹ Bert Suykens, ‘Diffuse Authority in the *Beedi* Commodity Chain: Naxalite and State Governance in Tribal Telengana, India’, *Development and Change*, Vol.41, no.1 (2010), pp.153-178. Quote from p.171.

⁹² Alpa Shah 2006, *op.cit.* See also Arindam Sen, ‘Anarchism or Revolutionary Marxism?’, *Seminar* (March 2010), who notes that the Maoists’ brand of politics ‘runs, and can only run, on the strength of guns and a vast network of extortion economics. A huge ‘levy’ is regularly collected from contractors and brick kiln owners, *tendu* leaf merchants, other industrialists and businessmen, illegal forest produce dealers and coal and iron ore miners, corporate houses and bureaucrats’.

⁹³ Navlakha, *op. cit.* (note 47), p.45.

⁹⁴ Navlakha, *ibid*, p.47.

⁹⁵ *Frontline* (6 November 2009).

strategy has come to be known as ‘Operation Green Hunt’. Security experts like Ajai Sahni, some of whose statements have been referred to earlier, cast doubt on whether the central government and the most concerned states have the forces, intelligence or coordination and organisation to make this strategy work. With the sparse deployment of forces, they argued, ‘area domination’ exercises (the ‘clear and hold’ operations) would be unlikely to work. The validity of this reasoning seemed to be borne out by events over the first four months of 2010, culminating in the killing of 78 men of the Central Reserve Police Force at Chintalnad in Dantewada District of Chhattisgarh on 6 April.⁹⁶

Subsequently, the Minister of Home Affairs P. Chidambaram and Home Secretary G. K. Pillai have announced enhanced measures, including the recruitment of many more policemen,⁹⁷ while pressures have been building for the deployment of air power against the Maoists. The government has also introduced curbs on the freedom of speech, warning members of civil society organisations in a statement on 6 May 2010 that anyone in contact with the Maoists might be imprisoned for up to ten years under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.⁹⁸ The Congress Party is not united, however, on the appropriate line of action. Minister Chidambaram continues to pursue a (conventional) security-centric approach.⁹⁹ Other senior leaders such as former Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh Digvijay Singh and former Union Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar, on the other hand, argue that the focus should be on issues of livelihood and governance.¹⁰⁰ The question, ‘when will the revolt of the Maoists force the power structure to abandon its ‘security-centric’ approach and begin to deal with the causes of the rebellion?’, posed editorially by the *Economic and Political Weekly* (see note 33), remains at issue.

Conclusion

The Naxalite/Maoist Movement of India has a history extending back to 1967. For most of this time, it has been politically and organisationally fragmented and confined to relatively small pockets – though within them, as in parts of Andhra Pradesh and neighbouring Chhattisgarh and some parts of Bihar/Jharkhand, different groups established a strong presence. Different groups have given varying emphasis to mass organisation and armed struggle, and though the two forms of action have been mutually supportive, there have also been tensions between them. Mass organisation has been made increasingly difficult as governments have sought to proscribe the Maoist groups. The particular patterns of mobilisation of support have evidently varied

⁹⁶ See Cover Story ‘Flawed Operation’, *Frontline* (7 May 2010).

⁹⁷ See report ‘Deep rooted Maoists will take time to go: Home Secretary’, *The Hindu* (21 May 2010).

⁹⁸ See the Human Rights Watch statement of 7 May 2010, criticising this move.

⁹⁹ The ‘security-centric approach’ is the term of an *EPW* Editorial, *op. cit.*, note 33

¹⁰⁰ On these divisions in Congress, see Siddharth Varadarajan, ‘A Year of Living Indecisively’, *The Hindu* (23 May 2010).

considerably from case to case, both because of these variations of organisational emphasis and in view of the determination of the Maoists to build an alliance between the proletariat, peasantry, petty-bourgeoisie and national bourgeoisie. They have been influenced both by caste and local politics. There are instances where one or other Naxalite group has entered an area through winning the support of members of upper castes and the rural middle classes. The pattern of support may shift over time as in Central Bihar according to Kunnath's account. Revolutionary groups there have sought to win over powerful upper castes in their quest to secure state power, losing support amongst Dalits and others in the process. The lines of class conflict may be blurred by these factors.

The coming together of the major groups to form the CPI(Maoist) in 2004 marked a turning point and the Movement is now recognised as constituting the most serious challenge to its authority that the Indian state has ever confronted. The Maoists have gained strength from the failures of the state in regard to large numbers of poor people. There have been extensive failures of omission relating to the delivery of public services and social security, and failures of commission having to do with the abuses to which people have been subjected at the hands of the police, the forest department and other officials. Close observers have found that ordinary people in areas where the Maoists are well-organised have more faith in them than they do in the state. Actual or threatened displacement of large numbers especially of tribal people to make way for mining, power generation or other projects has given rise to resistance movements with which the Maoists have often been associated, if they have not actually organised them. Rents derived from natural resources such as the minerals of Bastar and Orissa or trade such as *tendu* leaves in northern Telengana or from supplying protection provide the funds for carrying on administration in the areas that the Maoists now control and for supporting armed struggle. These rents may make for incentives to keep conflict going. The essential reason, however, for the strength of the Maoists in the hilly, forested tracts of eastern and central India is that this terrain, in India as elsewhere in the world, most favours guerilla insurgency.

Though it has been argued that 'there are hardly any reliable empirical studies to measure the level of support or to weigh the reasons for the common people to join the movement',¹⁰¹ the ethnographic studies and some other reports cited in this review, clearly show that the Naxalites/Maoists have won support from amongst landless and poor peasants, Dalits and *adivasis* – and probably particularly amongst young men and women who have limited opportunities. They also show that the Maoists have had some positive impacts upon the lives and livelihoods of such people in many places. At best, they have changed rural power relations; more generally, they have enhanced the self-respect of poor people. Political leaders such as Digvijay Singh and others argue that it will only be when the state effectively addresses these

¹⁰¹ This statement by S.K. Jha is quoted by Suykens, *op. cit.*, p.157.

problems that it will win people back. In their view, the Maoists cannot be defeated by sheer force. Gautam Navlakha, in the first of the epigraphs to this paper, based on his experiences in Bastar concurs: ‘this is one rebellion which will test the resilience of the Indian state as never before. Precisely because it is a rebellion in which people are fighting to save their land, forests, water and minerals from being grabbed and they are convinced that they have an alternative vision’. The actions of state security forces and especially of those that are allowed to operate outside the law (such as Salwa Judum), often in support of private capital invested in mining and other projects in tribal areas that are likely not to benefit local people, continually provide reasons for such people to support the Maoists. The very uncertainty that is created in people’s everyday lives in these conflict situations may very well prompt some people to join the Maoists as a way of trying to find ‘certainty’ for themselves as Shah has argued.¹⁰²

At the same time, even sympathetic observers like Balagopal, Banerjee and Bhatia think that the violence that is inevitably a part of the Maoists’ activity – given their commitment to armed struggle, which they see as necessary and unavoidable – leads to disconnection between the Maoist leadership and followers. This is what Balagopal observed in the differences in the attitudes towards the Maoists of people from different generations in Andhra Pradesh and what Bhatia feared had happened in Central Bihar. This lends credence, of course, to the views of those like Simeon – quoted in the second epigraph and Nigam who see in Maoism a middle-class/upper caste intelligentsia ‘playing out revolutionary fantasies’. Those few scholars and activists who have undertaken studies in areas in which the Maoists are strong report the pragmatism in the attitudes of many ordinary people. The Maoists often seem regarded as being more trustworthy than the representatives of the state but this faith in them does not extend to support for their ideology or their methods.¹⁰³ It is the tragedy of the politics of armed struggle that it is a response to the appalling structural violence that has been perpetrated historically and that continues to be perpetrated by elites, supported by the state, against landless and poor peasants, Dalits and *adivasis*, and yet it leads to a spiral of violence in which the same people may become trapped. As Ramachandra Guha has said:

There is a double tragedy at work... The first tragedy is that the state has treated its *adivasi* [and other poor and marginalised] citizens with contempt and condescension. The second tragedy is that their presumed protectors, the Naxalites, offer no long-term solution either.¹⁰⁴

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¹⁰² Alpa Shah 2009, *op. cit.*

¹⁰³ See, for example, Bhatia, *op. cit.*, (note 24) and Smita Gupta, ‘Searching for a Third Way in Dantewada’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XLV, no.16 (17 April 2010), pp.12-14.

¹⁰⁴ Guha, *op. cit.*, p.3311.