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The Maoist Attack in Chhattisgarh

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The ambush of a convoy of cars returning from a political rally and the murder of 27 people on 25 May 2013 in Chhattisgarh state in central India brings together various threads that make up “the Maoist movement” that has been an intermittent feature of rural life for 50 years.

The list of victims makes this clear. Among the dead were the leader of the Congress Party in Chhattisgarh state, Nand Kumar Patel, and Mahendra Karma. Karma was the architect of the *Salwa Judum*, a controversial and bloody movement of anti-Maoist vigilantes begun in 2005 and later declared illegal by the Indian Supreme Court. Not surprisingly, Karma was high on the Maoists’ hit list. Among the wounded is V C Shukla, 83, from an old Congress family and the reviled Minister of Information and Broadcasting during Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s 1975-7 “emergency”.

The Motive

The Maoists in a statement on 28 May claimed that the primary aim behind the attack was to kill Karma. It also said the attack was “revenge” for the federal government’s ‘Operation Green Hunt’ targeting the Maoists. To the government of Chhattisgarh, however, the *Salwa Judum* was perfectly legal and performed an admirable public function. A former chief of the

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Chhattisgarh police told journalist Suvojit Bagchi (currently with *The Hindu*), “I don’t consider it a vigilante group. The moment you say that I refuse to talk”.²

Close to one-third of the population of Chhattisgarh, carved out of the state of Madhya Pradesh in 2001, are tribal people, officially known as Scheduled Tribes. In Bastar district, where last Saturday’s killings occurred, two-thirds of the people are tribals. Karma came from tribal elite that controlled land. In fact, the Maoist statement identified Karma as belonging to a feudal family which had traditionally oppressed the tribals. Beginning as a member of the old Moscow-line Communist Party of India, Karma transited through a period as an independent. He landed softly in the Congress Party in time to be a minister in both the Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh governments until 2003, when the party lost power to its bitter rival, the Bharatiya Janata Party.

The Larger Picture

Bound up here are questions of land, ethnicity, ideology, big-time capitalism and small-time political rivalries. The more immediate provocation for the Maoist attack is the state election in Chhattisgarh later this year, which the insurgents will do their best to disrupt in their strongholds. Indeed, the Congress leaders were on their way back from a political rally when they were gunned down.

For the past 20 years, Indian capitalism has pushed into remote forested areas to find and extract timber, water and minerals. In the best of circumstances, forced sales and the acquisition of land by outsiders would cause resentment. But the Indian state appears incapable of introducing the schools, health centres and agricultural improvements that might mitigate the disruption to tribal ways of life that are harsh but at least are known and understood.

Maoist ideologues, usually caste-Hindus, have found a rewarding refuge by taking to the remote forests. Fired with schemes for a Maoist-style insurgency, these leaders have invoked the bloody legacies of Naxalbari, a village in West Bengal where similar insurgencies began in 1967. The village gave rise to the term “Naxalite” to refer to violent insurgents inspired by the cry that “China’s chairman [Mao] is our chairman”.³

Just as there are class divisions among tribal people, there have been numerous Maoist and Naxalite splinters since the 1960s. Sectarian and ethnic divisions led to the emergence of rival groups, but in 2004, most hatchets were buried and a Communist Party of India (Maoist) was born. At the same time, the Maoists became adept at striking deals with local criminals and politicians in resource-rich areas to ensure flow of money and weapons for survival.

The recent ambush and killings were another in a series of carefully planned guerrilla assaults on high-profile targets. The Maoists tried to murder the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh in 2003 and the Chief Minister of West Bengal in 2008. They killed 76 paramilitary police, beheaded a captured policeman and derailed a train killing 140 people in 2010. In 2012, Maoists kidnapped a district collector but released him alive.

² Vishwa Ranjan, Director-General of Chhattisgarh police, in Robin Jeffrey, Ronojoy Sen and Pratima Singh eds., *More than Maoism* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2012), 436.

³ Jeffrey, Sen and Singh, 69.

The Indian state usually strikes back with ham-handed and often brutal counter-insurgency. Tribal villages suffer the stationing of lonely, frightened paramilitary units. Schools are occupied, huts burned, villagers beaten, women molested. Strange soldiers living in one's midst are no more popular in rural Chhattisgarh than they were in eighteenth-century Boston.

The State Response

The security forces struck back in 2011 and 2012 and captured or killed Maoist leaders, while civil authorities attempted to improve the provision of basic services in remote areas to lessen the Maoist appeal. This had led to a decline in the number of incident involving Maoists over the past two years. The federal Minister for Rural Development, Jairam Ramesh, an advocate of the developmental approach, said right after the attack that the government's "two-track" strategy of development along with security will continue in Maoist-affected areas.

The poor record of national and state governments in resettling people who lose their lands as a result of "development" projects is widely known. Tribal people are especially vulnerable since they have few skills with which to make new lives on the streets of chaotic towns and cities.

The link between high-caste, well-read Maoist leaders and tribal people lies in a willingness to share deprivation and suffering. The readiness to suffer stems from the utopian belief that rural revolt can capture the Indian state. The combination of the short, hard lives of tribal people with the calculated ruthlessness of Maoist ideology can be brutal. "One who has not smeared his hands red with the blood of the class enemy is not fit to be called a communist", Charu Majumdar, a leader of the 1960s Naxalites told his followers.⁴ That is perhaps why Karma was brutally stabbed some 78 times before his death, according to the post-mortem report.

For today's Maoist leaders, this is Mao Zedong's China 1930, and victory is at least a generation away. It's a misguided belief — India 2013 differs vastly from China 1930 — but the thought provides inspiration to some.

For the Indian state, the insurgencies in central and eastern India are an annoyance, not an existential threat; but it is an annoyance to which the state seems incapable of responding effectively. The sad cycle of atrocity and retaliation looks set to continue, while economic forces of an industrialising, capitalist India nibble away at the country's remote, resource-rich regions.

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⁴ Jeffrey, Sen and Singh, 71.