The ironies of Indian Maoism

Jairus Banaji

Editor's introduction

"A spectre is haunting South Asia—the spectre of Maoism," the *Financial Times* rather melodramatically announced in April 2006, reporting that the Indian prime minister, Manmohan Singh, had described Maoist guerrillas as "the single greatest threat to Indian national security".[1] The scale of the Maoist-led insurgency in rural India has surprised and alarmed ruling classes for whom Marxism-Leninism was supposed to have been safely confined to the dustbin of history after 1989. The Indian Maoists have also become a subject of discussion on the left both in India and internationally. In particular, a recent article by the writer and campaigner Arundhati Roy describing her visit to a Maoist-controlled area attracted much controversy.[2]

In the following piece, the Indian Marxist scholar and activist Jairus Banaji offers a much more critical analysis of Indian Maoism than Roy provides. But first here is a little background to help the reader unfamiliar with Indian politics and society (see also the glossary).

India is by far the most important country in the world where Communism remains a powerful political force. Reflecting the twists and turns of Moscow's foreign policy, the Communist Party of India (CPI) during the struggle for national liberation from Britain had an ambivalent relationship to the dominant nationalist party, the Indian National

1: Johnson, 2006.
2: Roy, 2010a.

Congress. But its role in different social movements gave it a significant popular base. After independence was won in 1947, Congress-ruled India pursued a policy of neutrality in the Cold War that led to a strategic partnership with the Soviet Union. Moscow's demands that the CPI moderate its opposition to Congress caused increasing tensions within the party.

These were exacerbated by the split in 1960 between the USSR and China under Mao Zedong, who denounced the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's policy of "peaceful coexistence" with the West. The rise of Maoism, purporting to offer a more radical version of Marxism-Leninism than Moscow, divided the international Communist movement. Nowhere was this more true than in India. The 1962 border war between India and China deepened the divisions within the CPI, and in 1964 the pro-China faction broke away to form the Communist Party of India (Marxist,) or CPI(M).

The new party's rhetoric was more radical than the CPI's, and indeed it remains strongly "Marxist-Leninist", not to say Stalinist. But in practice the CPI(M) has pursued the same kind of parliamentary strategy that the pro-Moscow CPI also continues to follow. This has brought the CPI(M) a significant degree of success in bourgeois politics, particularly at the level of state governments (India has a quasi-federal political system in which the states have significant powers). Today the CPI(M) is the largest left party in India, dominating the state governments of West Bengal, Kerala, and Tripura. But the gap between rhetoric and practice has grown, as these governments implement neoliberal policies that have caused internal conflicts within the party as well as clashes with popular movements.[3]

It was the same gap that gave rise to Indian Maoism proper in the late 1960s. At a time when the Chinese Cultural Revolution was inspiring young radicals everywhere, the CPI(M) itself split as Charu Mazumdar and other local leaders in West Bengal placed themselves at the head of a rising in the Naxalbari district. Banaji's article traces the subsequent development of the Indian Maoists. It is worth underlining that, as he notes, they continue to operate within an ideological framework that, in common with the more mainstream Communist parties, treats India as a "feudal" or "semi-feudal" society, but that follows Mao in treating the peasantry as the key revolutionary force.

In fact, India is a thoroughly capitalist society, though one shaped by the process of uneven and combined development that Neil Davidson discusses elsewhere in this issue. A large proportion of the rural poor in India consists of workers drawn from the so-called "Scheduled Castes"

3: Sarkar, 2007.

and "Scheduled Tribes", that is, those who have traditionally been at the bottom of the caste hierarchy or beyond its pale and subject to centuries of domination. Today the Scheduled Castes are generally referred to as "Dalits", with the general sense of the crushed or oppressed, and the tribals known as "Adivasis", a term that highlights their character as the original inhabitants of the subcontinent.

The bulk of the Scheduled Castes are agricultural labourers. They have worked, traditionally, as farm servants and casual labourers for a substantial peasantry drawn from the upper castes and so-called OBCs (Other Backward Classes). In Andhra Pradesh where the Naxalites sank deep roots in the 1970s, over 70 percent of Dalits are landless labourers. With the great awakening that swept through these masses for much of the 20th century, large parts of rural and small-town India saw a pro-slavery rebellion of sorts by the late 1970s and a dramatic increase in the number of caste atrocities, that is, murderous assaults on Dalits, their families and their settlements.

For their part, Adivasis make up a little under 10 percent of the country's population (some 84 million at the last count), with the bulk of them concentrated in the central Indian states of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. The Santals in eastern India and the Gonds of central India are among the largest groups numerically, and both have figured prominently in the Maoist movement. The Adivasis are mostly forest dwellers and migrant workers, the vast majority of them sunk in an abject poverty whose chief causes have been expanding state control of the forests and the encroachment of non-tribals.

But the last two decades have seen strong tribal resistance to the expansion of mining capital as the reopening of India to the world economy increased competition among both Indian states and industrial capitals and encouraged a quite scandalous exploitation of non-renewable resources in the resource-rich tribal belts of Orissa, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand that remain among the most impoverished parts of the country. The picture is one of unabated ecological depletion (which includes a rampant growth of illegal mining and the widespread use of open cast mining techniques) and a continuing displacement of tribals. Elsewhere in the countryside millions of agricultural labourers from the Dalit and other communities face the grim prospect of growing joblessness and land hunger, because the central government is unwilling to risk the kind of confrontation with state legislatures that any substantial tackling of these issues will inevitably bring.

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Glossary

Adivasis: the term for tribals (Scheduled Tribes in official parlance), signifying their character as the original inhabitants of the subcontinent; called girijans ("hill people") in Andhra Pradesh; the majority are forest dwellers.

BJP: Bharatiya Janata Party, currently the main opposition party and the parliamentary face of a network of organisations whose stated aim is the replacement of India's democracy by a Hindu state. This conglomerate, controlled by the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), is India's closest parallel to a fascist movement, seeking to win support among Hindus by targeting minorities. The BJP was behind the horrific communal violence in Gujarat in 2002.

CRPF: Central Reserve Police Force, the chief paramilitary force involved in counterinsurgency operations

Dalits: the name (self-description) now generally used for the Scheduled Castes; it has the general sense of "the crushed" or "the oppressed"; the bulk of them are landless and many have converted to Buddhism or Christianity.

podu: shifting cultivation

zamindars: landowners; used loosely of the dominant group in village society

A rough periodisation of the Maoist movement in India might read as follows: (1) The seminal years of "Naxalism" from the late 1960s to the end of 1972 were defined by a split from the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) in 1967 when a large-scale exodus began, and by mass upsurges in various parts of West Bengal, in largely tribal-dominated districts, and in Srikakulam along the Andhra coast, construed by the split-away "Marxist-Leninists" as uprisings of the peasantry and struggles for state power. (2) A period from the main part of the 1970s to the 1980s, when the movement reassembled itself outside Bengal, chiefly in central and southern Bihar and in the Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh. Here two major "armed-struggle" tendencies survived with substantial continuity through the whole of the 1970s: the Chandra Pulla Reddy group and a group around Kondapalli Seetharamaiah. (3) A dramatic escalation of conflict from 1985 that would lead eventually to a wholesale militarisation of the movement in the 1990s and to the civil war that is currently raging in the tribal heartlands of the formerly undivided district of Bastar in the state of Chhattisgarh.

If the party launched by Charu Mazumdar in April 1969 had disintegrated by 1971 and fragmentation remained a characteristic of the Maoist groups throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the most recent phase has seen a series of mergers and a more consolidated Maoist movement. Today the two major currents of Indian Naxalism are the CPI (Marxist-Leninist) (from here on, Liberation) which is a more or less open party that has contested elections since the late 1970s, and the CPI (Maoist), which is waging the guerrilla war in Bastar and parts of Orissa. When the Indian government describes Maoism as the country's biggest "internal security threat", it is referring not to all the various Maoist parties, which are still numerous, but specifically to the CPI (Maoist) which emerged in 2004 as a merger between People's War (PW) and the Maoist Communist Centre of India (MCCI). PW was itself the outcome of a merger between the People's War Group (PWG) founded by Seetharamaiah

and a Bihar-based party, Party Unity. Unlike Liberation, the PWG had been banned (on and off) for most of its history, and so of course is its avatar, the CPI (Maoist).

Andhra Pradesh has always been the true backbone of Indian Maoism. It was the only state in the country where the Maoists were in a majority in mid-1967, when a series of state-level coordination committees revolted against the CPI(M) leadership, egged on by the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) call for a fight against "revisionism". "The party lost 60 percent of its membership in the state," with Nagi Reddy carrying 11 of the 14 district committees with him.[1] But the Andhra Maoists stayed out of the All India Co-ordination Committee of Revolutionaries in November 1967.[2] When the dissidents either left or were forced out of the CPI(M) and the coordination of state committees renamed itself the All India Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries (AICCCR) by the middle of 1968, it had more or less committed itself to forming a separate party.

Yet, as Mohan Ram wrote, "there was intense confusion in the AICCCR about the priorities towards building a party and about the kind of party to be built".[3] For Charu Mazumdar "the primary condition for building such a party was to organise armed struggle in the countryside".[4] "The major task of revolutionaries was to plunge into work among the peasant masses and set up revolutionary bases".[5] Mazumdar "had nothing to say about the role of mass organisations and the accent was on a secret party".[6]

The divisions within the AICCCR were essentially on the issue of mass work and whether a party formed in this way, with middle class youth being sent out to "rouse the peasant masses in the countryside" to "wage guerrilla war" and "build rural base areas",[7] would be in a position to sustain armed struggle. Brushing these differences aside, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), or CPI(M-L), was formed on 22 April 1969 and launched at a May Day gathering that year, and had more or less disintegrated by 1971, with a section led by Bihar's Satya Narayan Singh dissociating itself from

1: Ram, 1971, p81.

2: I shall use the term "Andhra" as shorthand for the state of Andhra Pradesh; Andhra otherwise refers to the largely coastal region within the state.

3: Ram, 1971, p84.

4: Ram, 1971, p83.

5: Ram, 1971, p86.

6: Ram, 1971, p87.

7: Duyker, 1987, p79, citing the CPI(M-L)'s "Resolution on Party Organisation" dated 22 April 1969.

Mazumdar.[8] Singh (or "SNS", as he was called) had described Mazumdar's line as "individual terrorism" as early as July 1970.[9] By November that year "a majority of the CPI(M-L)'s 21-member Central Committee withdrew support from Mazumdar", and he was expelled from the party in 1971.[10]

The CCP had come down heavily on Mazumdar, denouncing his conception of annihilation as "secret assassination", claiming he had no agrarian programme, and describing his "policy" as "wrong". Most substantially, it argued, "Without mass struggle and mass organisation, the peasants' armed struggle cannot be sustained." "Regarding the formulation that if a revolutionary does not make his hands red with the blood of class enemies, then he is not a Communist; if this be the yardstick of a Communist, then that Communist Party cannot remain a Communist Party".[11] Top leaders like Kanu Sanyal, in jail by 1972, referred to their "great disappointment, regret and disgust" at the fact that Mazumdar had refused to learn any lessons from the "valuable suggestions" of the CCP.

Class roots of revolt

Naxalbari in the north of West Bengal became a template for the Indian revolution and gave the Naxalites their names. But there was no serious attempt by the Maoist leadership to look at the nature of the struggles there or in Midnapore (Medinipur) or Srikakulam or Kondamodalu. For example, Duyker notes that in the Santal-inhabited areas of Debra and Gopiballavpur (in Midnapore) the Naxalites succeeded in "mobilising large numbers of landless labourers and sharecroppers".[12] There was widespread landlessness among the Santals of districts like Midnapore and Birbhum,[13] and it was essentially these landless tribals who formed the backbone of the mass agitations that the new party led in 1969, in harvesting campaigns that Mazumdar himself was opposed to![14] The rural upsurges in Midnapore and Birbhum coincided with the monsoons when "the landless could least expect to gain work".[15]

In Naxalbari, in the Siliguri subdivision of Darjeeling in the north, the

8: Mohanty, 1977, pxx.
9: Mohanty, 1977, p121.
10: Mohanty, 1977, p122.
11: Sanyal, 1972, p15, citing excerpts from a letter received from the CCP in November 1970.
12: Duyker, 1987, p81.
13: Duyker, 1987, pp44–46.
14: Duyker, 1987, p85, citing the testimony of Santosh Rana who led the movement in Gopiballavpur, with his wife and brother.
15: Duyker, 1987, p101.

land occupations that mushroomed between March and May 1967 involved Santal tea garden labourers who worked as sharecroppers on the excess land of the estates.[16] The local leadership here, Kanu Sanyal and Jangal Santhal, did not subscribe to the strategy of small squad actions and concentrated on mass agitation.[17] The agitation (on issues like eviction of sharecroppers and recovery of excess land) was given the character of a nascent insurgency because the Santals were armed with bows and arrows and remained "poised for attacks on police parties",[18] as the CPI(M)-led United Front government decided to break the movement with large-scale arrests and hundreds of tribals fled to the forest where they formed ill-armed and inexperienced guerrilla units besieged by a massive police force.[19] By August wholesale surrenders began to take place—the government had succeeded in breaking the movement by force.

In the Srikakulam Agency Area the bulk of Adivasis (or Girijans, as they were called here) were agricultural labourers.[20] Andhra Pradesh accounts for the highest incidence of tribal land alienation in the country, with non-tribals owning more than half the land in the scheduled areas. Thus here landlessness stemmed from a widespread process of dispossession that had occurred on a larger scale in the coastal tracts of Andhra where primitive accumulation by the state and by moneylenders involved the suppression of customary rights like *podu* and the appropriation of large tracts of land either as "state forests" or land seized by non-tribals.[21] In Srikakulam the Communists had built a broad-based organisation of tribals by the late 1950s, and the land occupations and crop seizures that exploded in 1968 were directed as much against those forces as against any abstract "feudalism".[22] In Kondamodalu in East Godavari "the first demand that was taken up [by the party] concerned the indebtedness of the tribals and their exploitation by the moneylenders", but "the issue on which the movement really picked up was farm wages".[23] Here the land seizures of 1969 targeted land that had been alienated to the non-tribals or mortgaged to moneylenders and did not include "the 'self-cultivated lands' of the landlords over which the tribals as yet felt they had no claim".[24]

16: Samanta, 1984, pp64, 77.
17: Samanta, 1984, p79.
18: Duyker, 1987, p71, citing the *Times of India*, 25 May 1967.
19: Duyker, 1987, pp74-75.
20: Mohanty, 1977, p49.
21: See the study of this by Rao, Deshingkar and Farrington, 2006.
22: Ram, 1971, p89.
23: Sinha, 1989, p192.
24: Sinha, 1989, pp192–193.

The movement in Srikakulam was crushed by the middle of 1970 and a period of decline set in.[25] Mazumdar died in custody in July 1972. On one estimate, by March 1973 there were some 17,787 Naxalite prisoners in West Bengal alone.[26] Shock attacks on the class enemy had had disastrous results. In Andhra, Nagi Reddy's group, the Andhra Pradesh Revolutionary Communist Committee (APRCC), argued, "Some persons, forming themselves into groups and without any relation to the mass movement, attack the landlords and other exploiters. We want to make it clear that these attacks carried on without any relation to a mass revolutionary movement cannot enable us to dissolve feudalism".[27] Annihilations would not "annihilate the system or the forms of exploitation".[28] The CPI(M-L)'s "methodology made the people feel that someone else and not they were the liberators".[29]

The setback was so severe that the CPI(M-L) fragmented rapidly and was badly divided in the months leading up to the state of emergency declared by prime minister Indira Gandhi in June 1975. During the emergency of 1975-7 some ten Maoist groups were banned and an estimated 40,000 cadres were in jail.[30] But within the Maoist mainstream the disintegration of the Central Committee spawned repeated attempts at reunification. Nagi Reddy, who had been opposed to the formation of a centralised party[31] and had repeatedly emphasised the need for a longish period of mass work, teamed up with Parimal Das Gupta (one of Mazumdar's earliest critics) and others nationally to form the Unity Centre of Communist Revolutionaries of India (Marxist-Leninist). This more or less disintegrated when Nagi Reddy died in 1975. In Andhra itself Nagi Reddy's group was the weakest of the three groups that existed there in the 1970s. The Andhra Pradesh Revolutionary Communist Party led by Chandra Pulla Reddy, the strongest group in the state in the 1970s, defended the armed defence of the cadres in the face of repression,[32] but combined this with mass struggles or at least the need for an active mobilisation of masses in struggle.

Despite this, CP Reddy supported SNS's drive to regroup the CPI(M-

25: Mohanty, 1977, p78: "When the period of decline of the CPI(M-L) started in the middle of 1970".
26: Duyker, 1987, p151.
27: Cited in Ram, 1971, p146.
28: Sinha, 1989, p179, summarising the APRCC position.
29: Ram, 1971, p149.
30: Mohanty, 1977, pxxi.
31: Dubey, 1991, p164.
32: Sinha, 1989, p218.

L) and was part of the "Provisional Central Committee", till he split in 1980. Thus the C P Reddy group absorbed very different sorts of influences. It would abandon the boycottism of the CPI(M-L) and start contesting elections from 1978, even winning a seat in the Andhra Assembly elections. It was also the C P Reddy group that was first active in forming the Ryothu Coolie Sanghams or agricultural labour unions. These spread rapidly in the late 1970s and were a key factor in creating substantial popular support for the Naxals in Andhra.[33] The third Maoist group in Andhra was in some ways the most orthodox, since its leader, Kondapalli Seetharamaiah, had joined the AICCCR early in 1969, and when the Central Committee disintegrated Seetharamaiah was the Andhra face of the "pro-Charu" Central Organising Committee (COC). These coordinations meant little in practice, since the Andhra Maoists were largely independent in their evolution.

In the general retreat and disintegration of the CPI(M-L) that dominated the early 1970s, both CP Reddy and the Andhra COC retained the elements of a squad organisation in north Telangana, and again the issues were less those of a peasantry than of the purely landless and Scheduled Caste labourers and farm servants in districts like Karimnagar and of tribals and other working people in the Godavari valley region.[34] Unlike the insane putschism that had controlled and destroyed the party under Mazumdar's leadership, Telangana in the late 1970s and early 1980s saw major developments that laid the groundwork for the "people's war" of the 1990s and 2000s. The PWG, formed in 1980, had substantial control of Telangana by the end of the 1980s, and it is crucial to see why.[35]

The reason, as the late human rights acivist K Balagopal explained, was that "unlike the rest of [Andhra] where the Naxalites spread through the armed squads, in northern Telangana there was a clear period in the late 1970s and early 1980s…when it was the mass organisations, mainly the agricultural labourers' associations and the student and youth fronts, that were the instrument for the spread of Maoism as an ideology and a political practice".[36] That phase "was soon to pass and the people would start depending on the armed squads for justice".[37] But Seetharamaiah, who attracted the younger generation to his group in large numbers,[38] saw no conflict between mass organisation and

33: Balagopal and Reddy, 1982, p1897 onwards.

34: The best account of these struggles is Balagopal and Reddy, 1982.

35: Singh, 1995, p109, citing the editor of *Andhra Prabha*: "The PWG practically runs a 'parallel government' in Karimnagar, Warangal and Adilabad districts."

36: Balagopal, 2006a, p3183.

37: Balagopal, 2006a, p3183.

38: Sinha, 1989, p281.

armed struggle,[39] and their combined impact was to strike "fatally at the power relations of rural Telangana society" and endow "the poor, the Dalits and the tribals with a voice of their own and the courage to speak out".[40] For all the violence they unleashed, their own and the even worse, more widely spread violence of the state in Andhra, it was possible for Balagopal to maintain that "there is this fear that if the Naxalites go away, 'the poor cannot survive'."[41]

If the PWG emerged as the dominant group in Andhra, even more so when the CP Reddy group split in 1984, in Bihar the field was equally divided between Liberation, Party Unity and the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC). A key factor in the survival of the PWG was its expansion into the largely tribal districts of Telangana, where the cadre encouraged tribals to cut down and cultivate reserved forests,[42] forced a substantial increase in the wages paid by tendu leaf contractors,[43] and put an end to the harassment Adivasis suffered at the hands of forest officials and the police. In Bihar the oppression of the rural poor took a different form. Though called "zamindars" by the labourers, the Bhumihars of districts like Bhojpur were in fact a substantial peasantry (kisans) and the suppression of the rural poor was as much a struggle for dignity (izzat), that is, for freedom from violence and caste oppression, as a struggle over wages and land rights. The violent colonial repression of the military labour markets of North India[44] had done little to modify the warrior ethos of zamindars and peasants alike in states like Bihar, and the Dalits who formed the bulk of labourers (mazdoors) knew that "any open challenge to upper and middle caste domination would eventually and inevitably result in armed violence".[45]

One student claimed that in the village he studied most Dalits "wanted the Maoist armed squads to remain in the area as they feared that the landlords would re-establish their dominance" if the Maoists withdrew.[46] Another was told, "Because we have arms, the zamindars have shrunk with fear".[47] Thus all of the main Bihar groups were committed

39: Sinha, 1989, p282, citing a PWG document: "the armed form of struggle is not the only form of struggle."
40: Balagopal, 1997, p2255.
41: Balagopal, 2006a, p3183.
42: Balagopal, 1990b, pp1884-1885.
43: Tendu is the leaf from which beedis (cigarettes) are made.
44: Richards, 2004, pp398-399.
45: Kunnath, 2009, p319.
46: Kunnath, 2009, p320; see Bhatia, 2005, p1545, for a similar narrative about the origins of Party Unity in Jehanabad district.
47: Bhatia, 2005, p1546.

to "armed struggle" to one degree or another. The Naxalites who were brought into Bhojpur in the late 1960s would later split from the CPI(M-L) (pro-Mazumdar, pro-Lin Piao faction) led by Mahadeb Mukherjee without gravitating to S N Singh's Central Committee at the other end of the pro/anti-Mazumdar spectrum.[48] Liberation was the outcome of the new Central Committee formed in July 1974 by Subroto Datta alias Jowhar, the young leader of this "third" tendency, and of the three Bihar parties was the one that showed the most substantial evolution in terms of seeking strategies for both survival and growth.[49]

In an extraordinary combination of legal and illegal work, Liberation floated a front organisation, the Indian People's Front (IPF), that contested 50 seats in the Bihar Assembly elections of 1985,[50] even as its armed squads pulled off over 60 "annihilations" between 1980 and 1984![51] Much of this violence was part of the titanic struggle the Bihar groups were engaged in against the caste-based private militias formed by the Bhumihars, Kurmis and other landed castes in their drive to exterminate Naxalism from the plains of Bihar. This warfare dominated the whole of the 1980s and much of the 1990s, and while the CPI(M-L) was successful in fighting the smaller militias, it was drawn inexorably into a caste dynamic that shaped the nature of the movement and its struggles.

Party Unity, formed in 1982, successfully fought the Bhoomi Sena in Jehanabad,[52] but by the 1990s it drew much of its support from the Kurmis, and its Dalit supporters (all of them workers) felt deserted and betrayed.[53] The MCC, which had evolved from Dakshin Desh, one of the Maoist groups that had stayed out of the AICCCR and eventually built its base in Jharkhand (then south Bihar) had a large following among Yadavs,[54] and became deeply embroiled in caste vendettas that involved horrific massacres on all sides.[55] The MCC had no interest in open organisations of any sort;[56] Party Unity's style of politics effectively drove its one open front, the Mazdoor Kisan Sangram

48: Dubey, 1991, p179.
49: Dubey, 1991, pp185-186. He was killed in November 1975 and Vinod Mishra became the leader.
50: Dubey, 1991, p235.
51: Dubey, 1991, p223.
52: Dubey, 1991, p251.
53: Kunnath, 2009, pp321 onwards.
54: Mohanty, 2006, p3164.
55: See, for example, Liberation's description of the MCC as "practitioners of caste war" (*jati sangharsh chalanewala*)—Dubey, 1991, p227.
56: Dubey, 1991, p254.

Samiti, underground (which was banned in 1986);[57] and Liberation had to disband the IPF in 1994, worried that its popularity was actually a threat to the "identity of the party"![58] Finally, not the least of the problems with this total absorption in left wing militarism (less true of Liberation which seems to have dismantled its squads by the late 1990s) has been the armed clashes between the various Naxal groups, involving the liquidation of each other's cadre.[59]

Militarisation of the struggle

The late 1980s saw a dramatic escalation of conflict once the PWG took the fateful decision to target the state directly by mounting attacks on the police, inaugurating a spiral of violence that has not abated till today. "It was in July 1985 that the first incident of deliberate murder of a policeman by the Naxalites took place; that was in Jagtial, a 'disturbed area' of Karimnagar, where the police in collusion with armed BJP landlords had been subjecting Naxalite youth to repeated and savage torture".[60] Balagopal himself referred to these escalating levels of violence as a "new" phase. They would transform the conflict into a full-scale war, with sizeable para-military forces converting Telangana and the adjoining forest areas into a "vast police camp" and with a profound militarisation of the PWG itself.[61] By the end of the 1980s "whole tribal hamlets were set on fire to teach them a lesson not to harbour Naxalites".[62] By 1997 Balagopal could write that "the 1990s have seen an unprecedented escalation in the magnitude of the killings. More than 60 percent of the encounter killings of the [last] three decades have taken place in the last six years".[63]

57: Dubey, 1991, pp252–253.

58: Bhatia, 2005, p1546: "IPF had to be disbanded in 1994 because it had become so popular that the identity of the party itself was at stake."

59: Dubey, 1991, p226, describes armed clashes emerging between Party Unity and Liberation by the late 1980s; they continued to slaughter each other in the 1990s. Balagopal, 1990b, p1884, refers to the "murderous assaults the Naxalite groups have been making upon each other", meaning mainly PWG attacks on CP Reddy cadre which left 30 dead on both sides in a period of just five months in 1990. Finally, see Kumar, 2003, p4982: " In a booklet brought out in August 2002, the CPI (M-L) Liberation claims that the People's War killed 52 [of its] supporters between 1998 and 2002."

60: Balagopal, 1990a, p591.

61: Singh, 1995, p111, a phrase penned, ironically, by a retired police officer, one time director general of the Border Security Force!

62: Balagopal, 1990a, p592; see Balagopal, 1987, p1171, for the burning of tribal hamlets, of the Koyas in east Godavari and the Konds in Visakhapatnam.

63: Balagopal, 1997, p2257.

Since then, over the period 1997 to 2007, the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee has recorded roughly 1,800 "encounter" killings by the police.[64] It is crucial to note that the vast majority of the victims of these extra-judicial killings are Dalits and tribals, many of them with no direct connection to the Naxalites. The culture of impunity extended to the police establishment by the two dominant parties in the state has left a pall of fear hanging over large parts of Telangana,[65] and though it has driven the PWG into the forests of Bastar and the border districts of Orissa, spawning the delusion that Andhra has solved its Naxalite problem, the sheer incoherence of the state's strategies (repeated banning of the PWG, repeated legalisation and unmitigated repression) has left a legacy of substantial underlying support for the CPI (Maoist) (or former PWG) leaders in Andhra itself.[66] For the radical left, the key issue is whether the armed struggle that has now been displaced to the adjoining districts in Chhattisgarh and Orissa is truly the form of a movement for socialist emancipation and the kind of political culture it wants and sees as viable in a country as vast and complex as India. Before coming to this, we should look briefly at the latest phase of the conflict.

Bastar is today the frontline of the "explosive Naxal battle" that is retailed to millions of households in India through the news channels. PWG's expansion into Bastar and Gadchiroli began in the early 1980s, fleeing early waves of repression in Andhra, and by 1989 the party felt strong enough to form a mass "peasant" front called the Dandakaranya Adivasi Kisan Mazdoor Sanghatana,[67] backed by a series of armed squads that contained something under 200 cadres.[68] These expanded rapidly in the early 1990s, a period when Seetharamaiah was hounded out of the party and a new, younger leadership consolidated its hold. In fact, the 1990s threw up an explosive conjuncture.

As state governments began dreaming of the fabulous sums of money to be made from the mineral-rich tribal districts they had abandoned to decades of oppression and misery, the PWG rapidly militarised itself, with major increases in lethality (vastly more sophisticated weaponry including the extensive use of landmines), an elaborate organisation of platoons, battalions and military commands, and new expansion into the tribal districts of southern Orissa. By 2001 the party (now called People's War) decided to intensify the war in ten states,[69] and in 2004 PW and the MCCI merged to

64: *Economic and Political Weekly* editorial, 2009, p6.
65: Balagopal, 2003, p517.
66: See Kannabiran, 2005.
67: Navlakha, 2010, pp42–43.
68: People's Union of Civil Liberties, 1989, p2239.
69: Dash, 2006, p59.

form the CPI (Maoist).

With police forces too demoralised to handle the insurgency, in Chhattisgarh the BJP government secretly funded and armed a "private" lynch mob called Salwa Judum ("Purification Hunt" in Gondi) that has since emptied hundreds of villages by forcing inhabitants into internally displaced persons camps where they can be easily controlled. "Large swaths of Dantewara are now abandoned. Villages in Salwa Judum-controlled areas that refuse to cooperate are deemed 'Maoist' villages, and are then attacked".[70] On one count, some 40,000 tribals have been herded into these camps and others have fled deep into the forest or across the border into Khammam. Meanwhile, in the last year the Maoists have inflicted major losses on the CRPF (the official military operation in Chhattisgarh), forcing the central government to take control of counterinsurgency operations. The wholesale militarisation of the movement since the 1990s has culminated in a vanguard war trapped in an expanding culture of counterinsurgency, with tens of thousands of civilians caught between them.[71]

The critique of arms

In 2006 K Balagopal wrote, "Nothing justifies the tendency in democratic circles to talk as if all that is relevant for understanding the role of the Maoists in the area (Bastar region and Dantewara in particular) is the poverty and general backwardness of the tribes living there".[72] What he meant by this was that ultimately the kind of militarised Maoism that has emerged in India would have to stand or fall in terms of a critique from the left itself. The dispossession and oppression of tribals and the redoubled drive to open their districts to exploitation by large industrial capital, with the displacement and impoverishment this causes, have been major sources of the tenacity of Maoism in India, a movement to which tribal support has always been crucial.[73] But it is pure naivety to reduce one to the other or identify the tribals and the Maoists as if their agendas were the same or the victory of one would mean the emancipation of the other.

Responses, critical or otherwise, from the left can be classified

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70: Miklian, 2009, p452; by far the best account.

71: Balagopal, 2003, p515: "Inevitably, the common people have got caught between the two parties." For "vanguard war", see Debray, 1977, chapter 2 (fundamental).

72: Balagopal, 2006b, p2183.

73: Duyker, 1987, p109, underlines the voluntary nature of tribal support for the Naxalites in Bengal: "The vast majority of Santals extended their support voluntarily. In the final analysis, the Naxalite mass-base began to crumble because this support was voluntarily withdrawn, in the face of severe police and army operations."

broadly into four categories. Maoists and Maoist sympathisers abstract from the profound deformities of the movement to engage in solidarity with it at any cost. They posit an almost mystical identity between the Maoists and "the people" and do precisely what Balagopal advised democratic circles not to do, namely use the poverty and general backwardness of the tribal areas as an excuse for not engaging with the CPI (Maoist) politically.[74]

A second line of response has been the CPI (Marxist)'s savage repression of all popular movements that challenge their own agendas for the state of West Bengal, using the machinery of the state to crush both the Maoists and much wider layers of the population (again largely tribal) they see as sympathising with them or opposing their own policies. Thus, whereas the CPI (Maoist) sabotaged a struggle like the one in Lalgarh by infiltrating the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities and eliminating all political rivals, the CPI (Marxist) fell back on its own vigilante groups and on state counterinsurgency forces to quell the movement there.[75] Both parties (and large parts of the state apparatus, of course) have an interest in branding what began as and was for months a democratic popular upsurge as "Maoist". And, of course, the two "Marxist" parties have been slaughtering each other's cadre.

Sharply different from both the above has been the civil liberties critique that was largely represented in the writings of the late Balagopal through most of the 1990s down to his death in 2009. Balagopal's critique recorded features that displayed an unmitigated authoritarianism on the part of a movement he had been closely associated with, features he saw as undermining its sources of support. He referred to the "ruthlessness" of the party (the PWG) that had evolved by the early 1990s,[76] to the calculated use of terror as a political instrument,[77] the "medieval forms of violence" that characterised the so-called People's Courts,[78] the lack of possibility of any opposition to the party "so long as the police are taken care of",[79] the "new" culture that had "permeated the Naxalite organisations" as they recruited large numbers of new cadres "more attracted by its weapons than its politics", and the "recog-

74: Navlakha, 2010, especially p23; Roy, 2010a.

75: The best accounts of their role in Lalgarh are Sarkar and Sarkar, 2009, and Rana, 2009.

76: Balagopal, 1990a, p591, about the PWG, "whose reputation for ruthlessness is as real as it is disquieting".

77: Balagopal, 1997, p2254: "That the Naxalites, in particular the CPI(M-L) (People's War), employ terror as a political instrument is a fact…"

78: Balagopal, 1990b, p1885.

79: Balagopal, 2006a, p3185.

nisable deterioration of quality" this had brought with it.[80] More substantially, he saw the movement in Andhra culminating in "stagnation" by the 2000s and forced to sidestep the crisis by expanding into new territory, failing to consolidate a second generation of support.[81] And finally, there were clear elements of a critique of the substitutionism of a vanguard struggle where most decisions were "taken and implemented over the heads of the people but justified in the name of the people",[82] a politics that had simply "corrupted the masses into receivers of justice rather than fighters for it".[83]

These are among the most political criticisms that have been made of the obsessively violent forms Maoism has come to take and they are profoundly more significant for any future left movement in India than the uncritical solidarity of fellow travellers. The indiscriminate killing of village headmen, the widespread laying of landmines, the recruitment of minors, the sabotage of all means of communication, the ban on employment-generating public works have all started to drive a wedge between the party and its tribal sympathisers precisely in the "liberated" zones.[84]

A fourth sort of response would have to come from Marxists who have never identified with any of the Stalinist political traditions in India and do not see revolutionary movements developing in a class vacuum, in complete isolation from industrial workers and the more organised groups of wage earners and employees in the economy at large. The bulk of the Indian labour force remains unorganised into unions, and it is stupefying to imagine that a revolution against capitalism can succeed while the mass of the workers are in a state of near-complete atomisation. The impoverished notions of democracy that either reduce it to a battle for electoral supremacy or dismiss it as a fraud, the failure to encourage and develop a culture of working class organisation and debate, to encourage forms of intervention that contest capitalism in concrete ways, and build a movement that can address the widest possible range of issues starting from the desperate struggle for survival of the millions of landless in India, are all part of the legacy of a left that was mori-

80: Balagopal, 2003, p515.

81: Balagopal, 2006a, p3186; 2003, p515: "While expansion into new areas…is taking place steadily, they are not able to recover lost ground in Telangana and in their earlier tribal strongholds."

82: Balagopal, 1997, p2254.

83: Balagopal, 2006a, p3185.

84: Independent Citizens' Initiative, 2006, pp2978–2979; Sundar 2006; Balagopal, 2006b, pp2185–2186. To the point about the training of minors in the use of arms, the general secretary of the CPI (Maoist) responded with this flash of brilliance: "Making a fuss over age has no relevance in a situation where the enemies of the people are targeting children too, without any mercy"—Ganapathi, 2007, p69.

bund intellectually and deeply conservative in its culture.

Shankar Guha Neogi (murdered in 1991) and AK Roy of the Marxist Coordination Committee (expelled from the CPI(M) in 1973), both charismatic union leaders, stood in sharp contrast to that political tradition. They drew their popular support precisely from the landless tribals employed in the iron ore and coal mines of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. The CPI (Maoist)'s conception of the working class is a rhetorical one, since it is the party that embodies the "leadership" of the class and conducts the class struggle on its behalf, unelected, unaccountable and never subject to recall. This has been a consistent feature of the Naxalite groups since the late 60s.

Secondly, the Maoist grasp of theory is unbelievably primitive, a collage of abstractions that bear little relation to reality at any level (analysis or strategy). "Semi-feudalism", "comprador bourgeoisie", "four-class alliance", "protracted people's war", etc are all slavishly copied from Mao's theorisations for China that will soon be almost a century old! For example, a leader of Liberation defends the label "comprador bourgeoisie" by saying it refers to the "increasing organic integration between Indian big business and imperialist capital".[85] But "organic integration" between capitals across national boundaries is precisely what defines capitalism, unless one is going to see the latter as an aggregation of national economies.

Third, even the mass organisations fail to be truly democratic as long as they are "controlled by a secretive and hierarchical party".[86] Yet "parties like the CPI (Maoist) require secrecy not just from the state, but also to penetrate democratic mass movements" to gain control of them, as Santosh Rana showed for Lalgarh.[87] And finally, of course, the Marxist critique will have to be able to absorb the civil liberties one, not simply ignore it. As Balagopal's colleague, Andhra's most distinguished civil rights lawyer, noted years ago, no political movement working for the overthrow of an exploitative order "has any right to reproduce the brutalities practised" by that order.[88]

85: Bhattacharya, 2006, p5191.

86: Bhatia, 2005, p1546, who goes on to say, "The 'vanguard' party lets the people bear the brunt" of actions undertaken on their behalf "without their knowledge and consent."

87: Menon, 2009, p18.

88: Kannabiran, 1993, p498.

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