

'SMART' STRATEGY FOR FIGHTING THE 'RED MENACE': AN APPRAISAL FOR ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY TO ERADICATE LEFT WING EXTREMISM IN INDIA

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Abstract:

The Indian state faces a major security threat from Left Wing Extremism (LWE) which affects the country on multiple levels. Neglect and exploitation of tribal population has created the breeding ground for LWE which led to the creation of 'Red Corridor'. This article tries to identify the nature of the threats, the inherent shortcomings in the existing policies and tries to provide an alternative approach through reformulation and implementation of policies. The article aims to provide a 'smart' approach for the Indian state in order to deal with the threat of LWE and to eradicate the causes of its rise, through a balanced strategy comprising of development, empowerment and use of force.

I

Introduction

Among the internal security perils that affect India, one of the most alarming is Left-Wing Extremism (LWE) which is also termed as the Naxal Maoist threat. The Indian state has been intermittently losing ground to this *red menace*¹ and winning it back sometimes, as the LWE has spread over a vast area in the heartland of the country. India had earlier experienced violent communist insurgencies in various regions which were more or less localized and the Indian state was successful in subduing them. Never before has the Indian state faced the

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threat of LWE in such proportion in terms of its area of expansion and influence since around 2004. Such is the gravity of the situation that the former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh on more than one occasion, alluded to it as being the most serious internal security challenge that India faces (Press Information Bureau, 2011).

In 2004, the People's War (PW)(also known as PWG or Peoples' War Group), then operating in Andhra Pradesh, and the Maoist Communist Centre of India (MCCI), then operating in Bihar and adjoining areas, merged to form the CPI (Maoist) Party. The CPI (Maoist) Party, is the major Left Wing Extremist outfit responsible for a majority of incidents of violence and killing of civilians and security forces and has been included in the Schedule of Terrorist Organizations along with all its formations and front organizations under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967. Currently, the States of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Bihar, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Kerala are considered LWE affected, although to varying degrees. From 2004 to 2018 (up to 31 July, 2018) around 7907 people were killed by the LWE in different parts of India (MHA, Left Wing Extremism Division).

The government of India at the centre and the state governments of various affected states had been engaged in efforts to quell LWE, but such efforts have been met with varying degrees of limited success. Causes for such drawbacks can be traced to the inability of the Indian state to understand the complex dynamics of Maoist insurgency. The area of its influence has expanded due its successful coordination of strategy- both politically and militarily; deployment of manpower, resources, ideology and its dedication to its cause. Its skilful choice of the theatre of operations has allowed the Maoists to enjoy the upper hand vis-à-vis their opponents. Their casus belli has found them an ally, the millions of tribal, who have been exploited and brutalized by the state policies. The Indian state has scored victories occasionally over the Maoists but at a heavy price. Organizing popular vigilante groups namely, the *Salwa Judum*^[iii], unleashed a brutal policy of terror, torture, rape and exploitation of the innumerable tribal population inhabiting the 'red corridor'. The underprepared security forces have been the staple cannon fodder for the Maoist armed squads. The incidents at Gadchiroli (The Times of India, October 9, 2009) and Dantewada (The Hindu, April 6, 2010) are such examples. Even after spending huge sums of money for infrastructure, training of security forces, and development projects for the LWE affected areas, both security and development have remained a far cry.

This paper tries to construct an alternative balanced strategy focusing on the needs of the Indian state with the principal objective of defeating the LWE by addressing the long standing issues.

II What is at stake?

In order to formulate coherent policies to deal with the threat of Maoist insurgency, there are some fundamental issues that should be taken into consideration. Firstly, the Indian state is facing the insurgency within its territorial

boundary and the insurgents are 'home grown' and of Indian origin. Secondly, the region which has been termed as the 'red corridor' is inhabited by various tribal groups, used by the Maoists as their support bases and also as manpower in the insurgency, but who are also the 'sons of the soil'. Thirdly, the region also serves as the depository of minerals in huge quantities which will play an important role in India's development and advancement as an economic and industrial power (Bakshi, 2009). Therefore, the Indian state must take precautions as the counterinsurgency policy will test the three important elements of the Indian State. These are firstly, sovereignty; secondly, equality and democracy; thirdly, growth and development. Sovereignty is threatened as long as there is a sub-state (the 'red corridor', where the writ of the Maoists has replaced the rule of law of the Indian State). Equality and democratic ideals of the nation are put to test as a sizeable tribal population remains neglected and exploited. Lastly, while the 'growth' has been expressed in terms of GDP growth, a sizeable number of the population is suffering from acute poverty, exploitation, segregation and living in deplorable conditions. Incidentally, the tribal areas hold huge deposits of minerals. The government's drive to clear such areas for mining by giving mining rights to the trans-national corporation at the cost of the displacement of the tribal population has further alienated them. Whether a policy of all inclusive growth and development can be devised as a probable solution to the burning problem is yet to be seen.

Formulation of strategy would require identification of problems and the nature of threats. Once the problems are identified and threats are assessed, the state needs to look into the inherent drawbacks in its own methods and policies. Understanding the issues at hand and the drawbacks in approach will enable the alternative methods and policies in dealing with the threats of LWE.

III

Identification of problems and understanding the nature of threats

The State needs to identify and understand the nature of the threat, determine its own objectives and harness its resources in meeting them. In case of the LWE it is pertinent to understand that unlike the other insurgencies that plague the country, the Maoists demand seizure of state power by their party through violent revolution. The Maoists claim that this Maoist state will be anti-imperialist, anti-bourgeois and pro-proletariat (Goswami, 2010). Here it is very important to understand that the Maoists are operating at multiple levels using multiple tools for achieving their goal. With the political party as its focal point, the Maoists use violence, *propaganda*^[iii], *token developmental work*^[iv], support organizations under its aegis to spearhead protests and resistance to various 'developmental' projects of the state for bolstering their cause.

The conflict that ensued due to the LWE and the counterinsurgency operations launched by the Indian state has caught the tribal population in the cross fire. This has resulted in the death, degradation, brutalization and displacement of the tribal population. Without focusing on root causes and

fundamental characteristics of the insurgency, the Indian state has been forced to operate in the 'red corridor' which has remained a terra incognita for them.

The Maoists operate in vacuum created by absence of administrative and political institutions, espouse the local demands and take advantage of the disenchantment prevalent among the exploited segments of the population and seek to offer an alternative system of governance which promises emancipation of these segments from the clutches of 'exploiter' classes through the barrel of a gun (Status Paper on the Naxal Problem, March 13, 2006). Similar view is shared by Alpa Shah who has pointed at the presence of weak state as the reason for the Maoists to generate mass support (Shah, 2006).

Dispossession and exploitation have been identified by Ramachandra Guha as the reasons behind the involvement of the Adivasi in the 'insurgency' (Guha, 2007).

The 2008 Report of an Expert Group to the Planning Commission of the Government of India (Government of India, 2008) led by intellectuals/human rights activists- Bela Bhatia and K. Balagopal, stated that the Adivasi are the main Maoist supporters. The report further added the Indian state's failure to deliver in 'extremist affected areas' resulted in 'elements of discontent of the people' (Government of India, 2008, p. VI). This 'failure, inadequacy or injustice of state mechanisms and institutions created space for the Naxalite activities' (ibid., p. 45). The report further mentioned the lack of basic necessities, limited employment opportunities, marginalization and discrimination both politically and socially. The displacement and forced evictions for 'development', maladministration, gross violations of human rights and denial of justice have aggravated the conditions of the tribal population. This has led the tribal population to choose the Maoists as a viable alternative.

The Maoist stronghold popularly termed as the 'red corridor' is inhabited mainly by a considerable number of tribal population who have been experiencing the aforementioned conditions for decades. The Maoists in their bid to build up their base took up the cause of the Adivasi, whose voice have so far been neglected, and received their full support, as Sumanta Banerjee has stated that the Adivasi who have been driven out of their lands have become the support base for the Maoists (Banerjee, 2008)

Apart from it, the manpower for filling the rank and file of the revolutionary army came from the tribal population. Thus, it is the tribal population which has been providing both the cause and the means for carrying out the Maoist project of violent revolution. The Maoists provide for some of the basic needs of the tribal population through their limited activities of token development thereby portraying themselves as the defenders of the tribal interests against the Indian state. This includes distribution of land for cultivation, right to use forest resources, nominal healthcare, schools which serve as the centres of indoctrination.

The Maoists have expanded and consolidated by exploiting the weakness of the state. Segregation and exploitation on socio economic lines coupled with weak administrative control in the remote areas, government's neglect in providing the basic needs, corruption and displacement have provided the fertile breeding grounds for the Maoists organisation to expand and consolidate.

IV

Recognition of shortcomings in existing policies and fallacies in strategy

The government policies regarding encroachment of land, curbing tribal rights over forest, leasing out land for mining operations has added misery and suffering for the tribal population. The development drive of the Indian state, neglecting the interests of the tribal population, has alienated them and pushed them further into the arms of the Maoists.

The post colonial state fails to recognize that its idea of 'development' is lopsided. The concept of 'development' is defined in relation to 'underdevelopment', and an extremely rigid conception of social evolution along set stages, taking for granted a World Bank/IMF-sanctioned division of countries and regions into 'developed', 'developing' and 'underdeveloped'(Padel, 2012). The inability of the state to understand the predicament of the Adivasi stems from social evolutionism, the idea that tribal people represent a 'primitive' or 'less advanced' stage of development.

The post colonial state of India is yet to come out of its colonial hangover. This is evident from the two colonial acts which were used until recently by the post colonial state. These are namely- the Land Acquisition Act (1894) and the Forest Act of 1927. While the post colonial state used the Land Acquisition Act (1894) to acquire Adivasi' land for "development" projects, the forest administration was based on the Forest Act of 1927. Interesting to note, the post colonial state had been using the colonial laws to administer its policies which themselves are quite neo-colonial in nature.

Even after independence, the state acquired land by using the British Colonial Land Acquisition Act (LAA), 1894 without the consent of the people in the name of 'public purpose' which resulted in acquisition of land in large scale and a number of people and communities were displaced. It was repealed by the new Land Act, formally known as the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisitions, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013. The Act not only claimed to focus on the R&R (Rehabilitation and Resettlement) of displaced people and also making the consent of people for any land acquisition compulsory. It was expected that it would reduce the arbitrary role of the state in matters related to land acquisition but it had its shortcomings. The Act legitimised the role of the private sector by including provisions of transferring acquired land to private entities in the name of 'public purpose' (Goswami, 2016). Although the Act was designed to prioritise people's consent yet citizens have a partial opportunity to give their consent on land acquisitions. The free participation of common people is still restricted. Despite resistance movements against SEZs and dam projects, the completion of such developmental projects has been the chief priority for the state. This resulted in the displacement of huge number of people and communities without proper R&R schemes.

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act was passed in 2006 (the Forest Rights Act FRA). The Act provides for recognising thirteen different rights that are central to the lives and livelihoods of tribal population and OTFDs (Other Traditional Forest Dwellers). These rights include rights to land under occupation as well as customary land, ownership of Minor Forest Produce (MFP), rights to water bodies,

grazing areas, habitat of Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs), conversion of all types of forest villages/settlements to revenue villages, the right and power to protect, conserve and manage community forest resources, and so on. All of these rights had been illegally and unjustly denied during the classification of lands as government forests (both before and after independence).

However, this act was not implemented in multiple states citing that existing arrangements offer more extensive protection. Other issues namely, illegal forest department interference in rights recognition, mining and other policies continue to assume that forest land is government land and is free for diversion, Gram Sabha being created only of gram panchayat members; continue to impede its implementation (Implementing Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006).

The Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act (1996) (PESA) is the only defensive barrier against land acquisition as it recognizes that a habitation was a natural unit of the community, and the adult members of the community constitute the Gram Sabha. PESA recognized the Gram Sabha as having the right to be consulted in matters of land acquisition and it even holds the right to veto any such acquisition if it feels so. There has been gross transgression in the implementation of PESA over issues of natural resources, management of land issues, water bodies, minor forest produce, as in most states Gram Sabhas are not empowered to exercise control over them. Often decision making powers of Gram Sabhas are reduced to a position where they can have only powers of consultation (Dandekar and Choudhury, 2012).

The Mines and Minerals Development and Regulation (MMDR) Bill has been another debatable issue. Clauses offering 26 per cent benefit sharing with affected communities have been strongly resisted by mining companies, and the bill defines the role of government as essentially that of a facilitator for mining companies, with emphasis on reducing the hurdles for clearing projects, despite the accelerating rates of forest depletion, and displacement of communities. The Bill does nothing to address the huge social costs for mining projects and the structural violence surrounding mines and metal factories throughout the country. It does not require mining companies to disclose crucial information, or to audit their environmental and social impacts (Padel, July 2012). Despite such issues related to it, the MMDR Act was passed in 2015. Now the Centre is in the process of bringing an amendment to the MMDR Act (passed in 2015) to do away with the need of the state governments' seeking prior approval for giving out mining leases (The Economic Times, Aug 21, 2019).

Security issues have been one of the major dominant issues in the state's struggle against LWE. However, the serious problem that has plagued the counter-insurgency operations launched by the state is identifying the enemy – who are the Maoists? (Nigam, March 2010) The use of brute force in their attempt to liberate areas of Maoists stronghold without being able to identify the enemy has resulted in deaths, arrests, torture, maiming of innumerable tribal people. Organizing popular vigilant groups namely, the *Salwa Judum*, as a viable measure to deal with the Maoist threat has resulted in further death and destruction of the tribal population. The senseless brutality is coupled with the reluctance to look deeper into the problems to analyse it, has aggravated the situation. Despite the state's obsession with security the state has overlooked the security of the tribal

population who had been denied justice and had been subjected to inhuman treatment over decades. Being hounded, arrested on false charges, forced confessions under torture and incarceration for long periods (The Hindu, March 03, 2015; Hindustan Times, April 26, 2015) of time have turned the tribal population to Maoists for protection.

V

Reformulating policies and their implementations

The threat posed by the LWE involves the insurgency in the red corridor which has been affecting both state and society. It involves issues related to security, development, displacement, and legality.

Therefore, a strategy must be forged combining both hard and soft approach as 'Injudicious use of firepower creates blood feuds, homeless people, and societal disruption that fuels and perpetuates the insurgency' (Kilcullen, 2010). The subject population's trust and support is the key to defeat the Maoist insurgents. Thus, it would be a competition with the insurgent for the right and the ability to win the hearts, minds, and acquiescence of the population (Kilcullen, 2010).

In other words, it should be a *Smart Approach*^[v], combining both 'Soft' (development and empowerment) and 'Hard' Approach (armed operations by police, paramilitary and may be occasional help from the Armed Forces for security requirements; coupled with economic and legal sanctions and blacklisting of rogue elements and their assets,).

The principle objective of the state is to crush the Maoist power and shift the support of the tribal population to its own side by providing them security, justice and empowerment through their active participation in the democratic political system. The state must realize that winning the 'hearts and minds' of the tribal population in 'red corridor' that would require long term commitment. Empowering them through their participation in the local administrative councils/panchayats would assert their rights of self determination and would enable them to have a voice in the decision making process which is one of the fundamental pillars of *Indian democratic system*^[vi]. Functioning of the local bodies needs to be supervised so as to ensure the proper working of the Gram Sabhas which remains the most important element for the proper working and implementation of the Forest Rights Act. The state should take the initiative for the implementation of the PESA in all states of India (under the Fifth Schedule) in order to empower the tribal population and to provide them the opportunity to decide on their future. Without giving due importance to the voice of the tribal people, the state can never ensure equal rights for them.

In order to nullify the Maoist influence over the tribal areas, it is important to stop criminalizing the legitimate spaces of protest. The non-violent tribal protests are often neglected by the government and are rejected as unimportant issues. The legal action against such movements results in branding the protest movement as law and order problem. This scuttles the democratic right to protest and paves the way for the Maoists to take over the reins of such protest movements and turn them violent.

The criminal justice system needs to be reformed in order to prevent the arrests (on false charges of being or aiding Maoists or possession of 'Naxalite Literature'^[vii]), tortures, detention in various jails without trials. Such practices have been the easy way to cover up the state's inability to identify the Maoists and limited success in dealing with the LWE problem (Press Trust of India, 2013, July 07). In this regard, the use of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act 2004 needs to be brought under scrutiny. Moreover, the state authorities need to reform and streamline the Undertrial Review Committee which will allow interagency coordination for assisting the courts to carry out speedy trials. It would also stop the police from making unnecessary arrests^[viii]. The national human rights commission's (NHRC) decision to establish human rights cell in the police headquarters in the various states is a necessary measure in order to protect the tribal population from the ongoing malpractices.

The issue related to the security of the state has been one of the major drivers of policies against LWE. The relentless use of force without understanding the enemy has resulted in limited success. The police and security forces have found themselves underprepared to meet the enemy. Before launching any form of counter-insurgency operations, the state needs to do the necessary homework. This includes assessment and preparations.

Assessment should include *SWOT analysis*^[ix] of both the security forces as well as the Maoist insurgents. As far as the Maoist insurgent is concerned, 'His successful operations give very fair evidence of his minimum capacity. His unsuccessful operations, although a less reliable source, may give accurate evidence of his maximum capabilities (Valeriano, 1962)'. Comparing them would enable the state to find the capacity gap which it has to fill in. This is done by the process of capacity building which includes specialized training, mobilization of manpower and resources, inclusion of latest technology suited for operational requirements, military hardware in terms of arms and ammunition, communications, logistics, roads and transportation, and above all the strategy and tactics. It is important to note that the operations are manpower intensive both in security and civilian capacity. Training^[x] (The Economic Times, July 13, 2018) (The Hindu, March 22, 2017) and sensitization of the operatives^[xi] is of paramount importance in dealing with the Maoist insurgents and developing trust among the subject populace. Without building and nurturing trust with the local populace and without human intelligence (HUMINT)^[xii] it would be impossible. Additionally, both SIGINT and IMINT should be used as technology needs to be geared to cater to the requirements of Counterinsurgents (D.C. Sagar, 2015).

In matters related to the idea of an 'inclusive growth' which should provide for both the state and society, the Alaska Permanent Fund can be used as a model.

Through the Alaska Permanent Fund (formed through an amendment in 1975), the state of Alaska invested 25 percent of all mineral lease, rentals, royalties, royalty from sale proceeds received, in the fund, which was used as a trust and established a programme of individual dividends to be paid from the income of the fund. This enabled all Alaskans to receive their timely dividends. This ensured the community their share in the proceeds of the minerals mined from their lands (Paul, 2013). If a similar fund can be devised, with proper

amendments catering to the needs of the state and the people then it would be an example of all inclusive growth.

VI Conclusion

The Maoist organisation has long thrived on the weakness of the Indian state. In order to deal with this threat, the Indian state must address its own shortcomings which have been instrumental in the growth and expansion of Maoist insurgency. The Indian government has undertaken schemes which are reactive in nature and therefore, they had met with limited success. It is high time; the Indian state should have a proactive policy in dealing with the Maoists and not be dictated by them. The only way in which the Maoist organisation can be crushed is through a proactive policy of using force, development, empowerment and transparency in administration.

Endnotes

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- ^[i] The term Red Menace has been used to refer to the threat of LWE posed by the Maoist organisation towards the democratic fabric of the country. This term was used earlier, during the Cold War to refer to the communist threat posed by Soviet Union towards the capitalist block.
- ^[ii] "Peace March" or "Purification Hunt" in Gondi language.
- ^[iii] Propaganda takes various forms, depending upon the target audience. The socio- economic fault lines are targeted to have an easy leverage in engaging the masses to create a broad popular support base. For example, the Maoists have been exploiting the tribal and non-tribal divide in the tribal zones with slogans 'Political Autonomy to the Adivasi territories', 'Right over the forest belongs to people and Adivasi' with their objective of mobilizing the tribal populace in creating 'Liberated Zones' where the writ of the Maoists would remain supreme. At another level, in the urban and semi urban areas, the Maoists have resorted to tap the support of the students, teachers and intellectuals by using the ideological aspect of their cause.
- ^[iv] In the 'Liberated Zones', the Maoists use Token Developmental works like distribution of land (but the seeds, organic pesticides and fertilizers are mostly missing), schools (serving as indoctrination centres for children), some limited provision of medicines (which are seldom available and most often lack professional doctors and basic medicines), fixing wages for tribal people who collect forest products (Tendu leaves etc.) (This allows the Maoists to extract a considerable amount of money for themselves from the non-tribal merchants who buy it from the tribal people). For details, see Nirmalangshu Mukherji, *The Maoists In India; Tribals Under Siege*, New Delhi, Amaryllis, 2013, pp. 117-122.
- ^[v] I have used the word 'Smart Approach' to invoke the idea of pragmatism. The policymakers need to have a flexible approach which will allow formulation and implementation of policies according to the requirements of an area. The 'one size fits all' approach should be avoided. A balanced and strategic use of force and use of developmental measures should be used to achieve the desired result. Therein lies the smartness in approach to deal with LWE.

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- [vi] The democratic practice of holding election is a threat for the totalitarian practices of Maoists. Sensing their loss of control over people, they resort to violence. The panchayat election in January and February in the Bastar region saw an increase in Maoist violence by 42 per cent. Ministry of Home Affairs, Annual Report, 2015-2016, p.22.
- [vii] The term 'Naxalite Literature' is a vague term without any proper and specific definition.
- [viii] It has been first mentioned by the Mulla Committee in 1979 and has been mentioned by numerous Law Commission Reports.
- [ix] SWOT analysis is a technique for strategic planning which helps in understanding the Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, Threats of an organisation. Based on it, assessment and preparations can be made.
- [x] Training refers to both training in specific types of warfare and also in providing support in civic capabilities.
- [xi] Sensitization refers to the operatives, both in military and civil capacity, being aware of the problems of the subject population and how best they can deal with the people in order to build trust by winning their hearts and minds through their work.
- [xii] Human Intelligence -Intelligence collected through human agency.

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