Underdevelopment and Naxal Movement

The iniquitous development agenda pursued by successive governments at the centre and the state has rendered several tribal groups in Orissa, who reside in some of the poorer, more inaccessible districts of the state, largely marginal to the governance process. Arguably, it is this alienation and underdevelopment that has afforded a fertile ground to several Naxalite groups to set up base in these districts.

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Development sans people’s participation has always been seen as a breeding ground for political unrest. Orissa that figures predominantly in the list of underdeveloped states in India has been a victim of some ill thought-out development strategy. Despite being a rich state in terms of its mines and minerals and natural resources, Orissa has not made any real progress as far as the development of the state and its people are concerned.

The Planning Commission of India has identified Orissa as having the highest overall poverty figures of any major Indian state, with around 48 per cent (17 million) of its population living below the poverty line. The literacy rate in Orissa is 63.61 per cent whereas the national literacy rate is 65.4 per cent. Infectious diseases (acute respiratory infections, diarrhoea, tuberculosis and malaria) still affect many regions in Orissa. The state still has one of the highest infant mortality rates. The healthcare facility is in real bad shape, as it has lowest number of doctors per capita in the world. The state is poverty-stricken, yet surprisingly less than 5 per cent of its population has access to subsidised food aimed at poverty alleviation.

Though the seeds of the Naxal movement in Orissa were sown as early as 1968, it gained momentum and strengthened its position only during last two decades. Now the Communist Party of India (CPI) (Maoist), which came into existence after the merger of Peoples War Group (PWG) and Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) in September 2004, has established a strong support base in nine predominantly tribal districts, i.e., Koraput, Malkangiri, Nabarangapur, Rayagada, Gajapati, and Ganjam abutting Andhra Pradesh and Sundargarh, Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar districts that are adjacent to Jharkhand. While the above nine districts remain naxal strongholds, the movement has also grown stronger in different parts of Sambalpur, Kalahandi, Bolangir, Phulbani, Deogarh, Jharsuguda, and Angul. As a study of the development process in these areas reveals different development projects and the industrial growth in these areas might have benefited only the agriculturists and industrialists, but not the tribal rural people.

It is worth mentioning here that among nine Naxal affected districts of Orissa, Rayagada, Koraput, Malkangiri and Nabarangapur fall in the infamous poverty-stricken KBK region. Since the reports of starvation deaths in the mid-1980s, the KBK zone has always attracted special attention. In 1995, then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao announced a Rs 4,600 crore package for accelerated development of the region but all that the state got in the next three years was a meagre Rs 20.49 crore. Again in 1998, Atal Bihari Vajpayee announced a new package for the same region. It was renamed the Revised Long-Term Action Plan (RLTAP) and the amount promised was a whopping Rs 5,600 crore but again, hardly any of this money has reached the people of the region. During 2003-05, KBK region received a sum of Rs 500 crore as special central assistance under RLTAP; government report shows the money was spent, but these districts continue to figure in the list of 150 most backward districts of the country as identified by the Planning Commission of India.

Incomplete Resettlement

Nature has bestowed Orissa with plenty of minerals and mineral resources. The state is blessed with 99 per cent chromate ore, 92 per cent of nickel ore, 65 per cent of graphite and pyrophyllite, 66 per cent of bauxite, 31 per cent of mineral sand, 32 per cent of manganese, 28 per cent of iron ore and 24 per cent of coal resources of the country. Yet, Orissa is one of the poorest states of the country. Ironically, the under-developed and Naxal infested western and southern belts of Orissa are the storehouse of most mines and mineral deposits of the state. Over the years several industries, big and small as well as several irrigation projects, have come up in these areas. The ongoing development process in these areas has not benefitted the rural masses. State-sponsored development in Orissa remains largely divorced from people’s participation in decision-making. The nexus between Naxalism and lopsided development have considerably damaged the democratic values and institutions.

Over 42 steel plants are poised to come up in Orissa requiring 1.600 million tonnes of iron ore in the next 25 years. Multinational giants like BHP-Billiton, Vedanta Resources, Rio Tinto Mining, Alcan, Aditya Birla Group, Tata Group and Saudi Arabian companies had queued up to exploit the state’s resources. The state government has already given lease to mine 1,000 million tonnes of bauxite ore to different companies. These are but misleading signs of development in Orissa. One cannot take this massive industrialisation and mining activity as the scale to judge the rise in human development indicators among the people in remote areas of southern and western Orissa. Exploitation, zero healthcare and educational facilities, malnutrition, in-human torture, rising unemployment, inordinate delay in disposal of land cases, unwillingness to undertake land reforms are the cruel realities which speak to us about the development syndrome of the area.

Tribal exploitation and suffering has become the destiny of many ever since the establishment of the Rourkela Steel Plant (RSP). The Steel Authority of India (SAIL) had acquired about 35,000 acres for RSP and another 12,000 acres for its reservoir, the Mandira dam. As per one gazette of Orissa notification, over 33 villages covering 25,03,524 acres of land had been acquired by the Orissa government in 1954 to set up the RSP. Another 31 villages spreading over 11,92,398 acres were acquired for the construction of the Mandira dam in
1956-57. A total of 36,95,912 acres were acquired for the RSP and Mandira dam resulting in the uprooting of 4,251 families. Both SAIL as well as the state government have failed miserably to rehabilitate and resettle the evacuees of the last 50 years.

In recent years, hundreds of sponge iron factories have mushroomed all over in the Naxal-hit district of Sundargarh. Existing environmental laws have been flouted openly by industrialists who have no concern for pollution and environment degradation. They have been dumping their waste quite liberally for which most agricultural land in the area has lost its fertility. Local people have witnessed and complained about the polluted air and water being emitted from the Rexon Strips plant in Kumarkela village of Gurundia block. The polluting units are emitting ammonia fumes, strong enough to corrode tin sheets and burn paddy and even green vegetables. Thousands of people who live in the villages of Ramabahar, Jampali, Jhagarpur, Bhaluguda, Koraput, Bikaner, Kora, Bongaon, Tensa, Birmitrapur, Bijabahal, etc., in Sundargarh suffer from various skin diseases, tuberculosis and other allergies. Similar is the case with people in the Barbil and Joda region of Keonjhar district. The failure of the government to take action against the local tribals in the development process was successfully exploited by the erstwhile MCC in establishing a strong Naxal support base in this tribal district of Sundargarh.

Affected Districts

Now let us turn our focus to another Naxal-affected district, that is Malkangiri. Poverty, rampant corruption, failed government mechanisms and programmes are some characteristics associated with this area. The CPI (Maoist), under the banner of the erstwhile PWG has created a red bastion in the more remote areas in Malkangiri. In the 1970s, the government of Orissa constructed the Balimela dam project in Chitrakonda at Malkangiri. Villagers from more then 250 villages were displaced as well as a number of villages of Kudugulugumma block remained cut-off from the mainland and from supplies provided by the government system. The government’s performance on the rehabilitation front can be simply termed as disastrous. Thousands of people are still living in tiny islands within the dam area, which the government terms as the “cut-off area”. One would find hardly any sign of governance in these areas of Janbai, Panaspit, Jodamba and Andrampali panchayats; where there is no school, no hospital and even no public distribution system. To visit other parts of the district, the villagers solely depend on motorboats that run twice a week. The cut-off areas are not even interconnected by road. Government-sanctioned development projects in these areas remain on paper; residents of these areas complain of gross financial irregularities because of an unholy nexus between contractors and government officials. It is an irony that habitants of these areas have sacrificed everything for the dam but till date they haven’t seen the benefits of the electricity produced by the dam. Who says big dams bring prosperity; for the people of Malkangiri, the Balimela dam has only brought broken dreams. Extreme poverty and lack of basic requirements of life in most areas of Malkangiri have made people move closer to Naxals. As of now Naxals have created a strong base in different areas of Chitrakonda, Balimela, Motu, Gompakhunda, My 90, Janbai, Jantabai, Jantri, Jodamba, Panaspit, Maliguda, Bhaluguda, Padmagiri, Gunthabeda, Padia, Korkunda, Kudumulugumma, Mathili and other areas adjoining the Andhra Pradesh and Chhattisgarh borders.

Another Naxal-affected southern district of Orissa is Rayagada, which bears the same hallmarks of underdevelopment: extreme poverty, rampant corruption and a chaotic but violent social atmosphere. It has a dominant tribal population and a total of 72.03 per cent people in the district live below poverty line. To the outside world, the area is known for its backwardness and starvation deaths. Between 1990 and 2000, more than Rs 100 crore has been officially spent, but most of the money went to the pockets of leaders, bureaucrats, contractors, traders, etc. State government as part of its development activity also began extensively planting eucalyptus trees but this only helped the J K Paper Mill to get cheap raw material. A concrete road was constructed from Tikiri to Kashipur via Maikanch only to welcome the Utkal Alumina Industries. To sum up, all these so-called development projects in no way helped the majority tribes of the region. This has alienated the rural tribal people and taking advantage of this anger and frustration among tribals, Naxals have made significant inroads into Narayanpatana, Langadbeda, Pedakamara, Ranigonda, Upperlachu, Talalachhu, Kesili, Berla, Barigi, Sekharam, Tikarpada, Pitinabalasa, Kapalada, Sanpalumunda, Kadabeda, Dadua, Kuntevu, Kankanpant, Gunupur, Rambaguda, Padampur, Kolanara and Chandrapur areas of the district. As such the area is blessed with a huge content of bauxite: 1,957.3 lakh tonnes in Baphli Mali, 810 lakh tonnes in Sasubahu Mali, 860 lakh tonnes in Siijj Mali near Kasipur. Utka Alumina International (a joint enterprise of the Aditya Birla Group and ALCAN, a Canadian company) is constructing a Rs 4,500 crore aluminium plant site at Doraguda near Kasipur. The project threatens displacement of over 20,000 people, and would have an impact on the rights to life and livelihood across 82 villages. It has been 12 years now that the local communities in Rayagada began protesting against bauxite mining, condemning the breach of constitutional provisions that bar the sale or lease of tribal lands without consent. People are against the devastation of their ecosystems, histories and futures, the destruction of forests, agricultural lands, mountains, perennial water-streams, the water retention capacity of mountains, so very integral to life and livelihood. So far the government has not been able to come out with an answer to people’s apprehensions, instead it uses police methods to suppress the people’s voice. And, this gives Naxals an excellent chance to drive a wedge between peoples and their own government.

Another Naxal-affected district is Koraput, which has a poverty ratio of 78.65 per cent and the literacy rate is miserable at 36.20 per cent. With a tribal population of 5,85,830, this district has been a hotbed of Naxal activity since decades. It was as early as in 1980 that an armed group of the PWG moved into interior area of Koraput and established its control by successfully motivating the Bangladeshi refugees and local tribals against the corruption-ridden and failed state. The government’s insensitivity towards basic problems of the poverty-stricken rural tribals are the main cause for the meteoric Naxal growth in Koraput. It is a sad reality in Koraput that the government-declared programmes never really reach the people for whom it is really made. It was in March 2000 that the state government made a declaration that the tribal peoples have the right to collect minor forest produces. But
the declaration has not been implemented till date. Government measures on development has been mostly limited to lip service only, without really understanding the problem typical to the lifestyle of most of the tribal people in Koraput. There is no market for minor forest produce in Koraput and tribes do not even have the access to financial institutions to secure loans for investments. It is surprising as well as shocking that how the government has never thought of developing self-help groups for the forest dependent communities in Koraput. Koraput has no dearth of mineral deposits, but the government’s failure to take a proper approach to utilise these resources in favour of local people has only worsened the situation. Taking advantage of this alienation among the masses, the Naxals have shown them the dream of a revolution – a Maoist Revolution. In the name of revolution the Naxals now control over 400 villages in Koraput, where they collect tax (extortion) and have established a sort of parallel administration. There are several reports of Naxals holding training camps, recruitment campaigns as well as jan adalats in remote villages like Kanduruguda, Suvaput, Jadi, Badiput, Pantulum, Padub, Ankaput, Pudu, Dabang, Tamdingi, Pradhaniput, Patangi and Machhakund.

Realities of Displacement

Rehabilitation of people displaced by dams like the Hirakud in Sambalpur district, built way back in 1950s, is not yet complete. Compensation amounting to Rs 15,41,46,994 has not been paid for years. Finally when some compensation was paid to some people, it was a saga of gross financial irregularity as many displaced persons have complained. People still have not forgotten this humiliation and this is one prime reason for the meteoric growth of Naxal violence in different parts of Sambalpur. As per the recently published Ghadei committee report, of nine blocks of the district, three are grossly underdeveloped, three are underdeveloped and three are developing. Hirakud is the world’s largest earthen dam, thus 28 per cent area of the district is irrigated whereas remaining 72 per cent area have seen no sign of it. Except in some areas in Rengali, Maneswar and Jujumura block, the rest six blocks are not linked with canal system. It is a sad reality that in all the nine blocks of Kuchinda, Jamankira, Jujumura, Naktideul, Bamra, Maneswar, Rengali, Rairakhhol and Dhankauda there is an acute shortage of drinking water facility. The electricity requirement of the state is mostly catered to by the Hirakud dam, whereas most villages in the district are yet to get proper electric connection and supply. The government continues to ignore the poor, downtrodden people of the area, which was successfully exploited by the Naxals. Today, Naxals belonging to CPI (Maoist) are very much active in most areas of Sambalpur, especially in the remote villages like Jujumura, Burda, Meghapal, Chhamunda, Khalsaduni, Naktideul, Rairakhhol, Badarama, Mahulpali, Karadapat, Biriaam, Debikhol, Khariyakani, Dabatadahar, Dingijharan, Dhinikirduma, Hikpali and Jangula. Living conditions in these villages are simply inhuman; there is no sign of credible governance in these Naxal infested areas of Sambalpur.

It is the cruel reality borne out of the ill thought-out development strategy in Orissa that in all of the resettlement operations, the majority of oustees have ended with lower incomes; less land than before, less work opportunities, inferior housing, less access to the resources of the commons such as fuel wood and fodder and worse nutrition and physical and mental health. It is estimated that around three to five million people have been displaced since 1950 in Orissa on account of various development projects; of the displaced, more than 50 per cent are tribal. The Tenth Five-Year Plan (2002-07) makes a very special mention on different poverty alleviation schemes and programmes; however their impact on rural poverty remains dubious. When it comes to implementation, the government agenda is grossly mismanaged, and it is mostly corruption-ridden, which raises serious doubts over the government’s commitment for human rights and social security. This failed state of affairs so far has been successfully exploited by Naxal groups to win over the local tribals as a formidable support base. The asymmetrical development in Orissa has fostered a conflict between values of democratic governance and aspirations of the people. The Naxal movement in Orissa has so far managed to sustain because it successfully exploits the life of marginalised people in these areas. It has established a link between underdevelopment, regional imbalance, economic disparity and gun culture. But the deplorably poor condition of the people has ironically seen the use of excessive violence and counter violence in the name of upliftment of the poor.

On the other hand, while the Naxal leadership makes a strong claim for fighting for the rights of the poor, the former has so far remained apathetic in enhancing the quality of life in villages, arguing instead that all reforms have to follow from revolution. To them development is adversarial to revolutionary consciousness. In fact, Naxal groups in these areas have vehemently opposed any type of construction work, it seems that they are afraid the government will win over the poor ignorant tribals to its side once they allow the development process to start.

A study of Naxal violence in Orissa reveals that today’s explosive situation has been largely fostered by a continuous absence of development. But violence itself is by no means a way to attain development, rather it is an extreme form of exploitation. To evade “maldevelopment” and to replace the existing atmosphere of chaos and terror, what is required is the creation of appropriate institutions, systems and relations. The need of the hour is to free the system from exploitation and corruption which would bring down societal tension by ensuring equality of status and opportunity. To deal with the ever increasing Naxal problem, Orissa must sufficiently increase and properly manage fund allocation in the field of healthcare, education, nutrition programmes, disease control, irrigation, rural electrification, rural roads and other basic requirements, especially in its Naxal-affected rural areas. The state must ensure that its institutions do not breed exploitation. It must work on a formula where there is larger democratic participation in the processes of decision-making and development. Email: rujatkujur@gmail.com

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