On the Naxalite Movement: A Report with a Difference

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The report, Development Challenges in Extremist Affected Areas, authored by an expert group set up by the Planning Commission, looks at the Naxalite/Maoist movement in a way that is different from the prevalent official attitude and draws attention to many of the positive effects of the movement. The report rejects the official “security-centric” approach in dealing with the movement and instead suggests an “ameliorative approach with emphasis on a negotiated solution”.

The official bibliography on causes of popular discontent in India and ways to tackle it has been expanding at an impressive rate as discontent itself. Our government can boast of a staggering collection of statistical data, reports of investigations, research papers, recommendations, among other things, that by its sheer size can absolutely bowl over any archivist. Amongst the major institutions, the Planning Commission can claim to be the most reliable repository of comprehensive information of such a nature – and also a helpless witness to the government’s unpardonable apathy to its important proposals for remedying the situation all these years. Further, the commission’s role has been reduced from the position of a steering to that of a merely indicative nature by the present generation of policymakers, who prefer to leave planning to the magnates of the market economy, instead of the state.

Yet, the government’s need for hard statistical facts and figures, and understanding of what is happening at the ground level (apart from the feedback provided by its intelligence agencies), makes it dependent on the intellectual resources of the still extant Planning Commission. It thus periodically sets up expert groups which review the state of poverty, collect, verify, and collate facts, arrange and then make deductions from them to prepare reports. As a result, we are lucky enough to get, at regular intervals, immense information that lay bare the grassroots reality – some confirming what we had always known, some revealing hitherto unknown, even worse, cases of atrocities on the poor. Along with such information, these reports also end up with the usual obligatory list of remedial measures – which may sound repetitive, but cannot be wished away since they had remained unimplemented all these years.

The latest exercise in this direction is the report of an expert group set up by the Planning Commission entitled Development Challenges in Extremist Affected Areas, dated March 2008. It is an important document, which while meticulously arranging the latest facts and figures, rigorously examines the causes of the continuing economic exploitation and social discrimination in the adivasi and dalit-inhabited areas even after 60 years of independence. It is significant that this particular expert group was set up by the government in May 2006, in the background of increasing Naxalite activities in Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Orissa. The group consisted of a variety of people ranging from veteran ex-bureaucrats (like D Bandyopadhyaya who chaired it, and is well known for his implementing the Operation Barga land reform measure in West Bengal, and S R Sankaran who heads the Hyderabad-based Committee of Concerned Citizens which had been trying to bring the Andhra Pradesh government and the Maoist rebels to the negotiating table) to retired police officers like Prakash Singh, ex-director general of police, Uttar Pradesh and Ajit Doval, former director of the Intelligence Bureau. From the other end of the spectrum, we have well known activists and academics like K Balagopal of the human rights movement and Sukhadeo Thorat, chairman of the University Grants Commission among others. That a mixed bag of this nature, consisting of experts from different disciplines with differing opinions, could prepare a consensus report on several contentious issues and come up with a unanimously agreed set of recommendations, suggests that all is not lost. Activists struggling for a change in the prevailing bleak socio-political situation, can make use of the report to educate the otherwise indifferent and passive middle classes about the basic issues of economic equity and social justice, which are fast disappearing in the urban public mind.

Dalits, Adivasis and Naxalites

Although the terms of reference did not specifically mention Naxalites (or Maoists), the group’s brief was to identify causes of
unrest and discontent in areas affected by widespread displacement, forest issues, insecure tenancies and others forms of exploitation like usury, land alienation and imperfect market conditions...". Clearly, such areas fall in the above-mentioned five states – and significantly enough, the group organised field visits in these areas to observe the situation at first hand, on the basis of which it has come out with stark revelations that expose the culpability of the state in denying the poor their basic rights, the treachery of a corrupt bureaucracy to implement the laws, and its complicity with a trigger-happy police to suppress popular protest. All these explain, as the report states in unambiguous terms, why the victims of such official crimes support the "extremists" – the term used for Maoists. Maintaining that "the main support for the Naxalite movement comes from dalits and adivasis", the group concentrated on these two sections (termed as scheduled castes and scheduled tribes respectively in official parlance) which comprise about one-fourth of India's population, the majority living in rural areas.

Apart from the high levels of poverty, the dalits suffer from various types of disadvantages like limited employment opportunities, political marginalisation, low education, social discrimination, and human rights violation. As for the adivasi population, besides remaining backward in all aspects of human development including education, health, nutrition, etc., they have been steadily losing their traditional tribal rights and command over resources. The report points out in this connection the administration's failure to implement the protective regulations in scheduled areas, which has resulted in land alienation, forced eviction from land, dependence of the tribals on money-lenders – made worse often by "violence by the state functionaries".

All these facts as described in the report may not come as a surprise to those who have followed the findings of earlier publications like the National Commission on scheduled castes and scheduled tribes; the government of India Report of the Expert Group on Prevention of Alienation of Tribal Land and Its Restoration (2004), as well as the various reports by civil rights groups. But the present report stands out from them in several respects. It explains the causes and success of the Naxalite movement in a particular territorial stretch by locating it in the macroeconomic scene today. Incidentally, every dalit and adivasi poor in India have not joined the Naxalite movement. There are many states with pockets of high proportion of adivasis and dalits but little Naxalite influence, as in Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat and Rajasthan. The report quite rightly points out that "poverty does create deprivation but other factors like denial of justice, human dignity, cause alienation resulting in the conviction that relief can be had outside the system by breaking the current order asunder". It adds that for such a violent upheaval to happen, there is the likelihood of the "spread of awareness and consciousness". And this is where, as the report suggests, the Maoists have played a significant role by stepping into the craters of dalit and adivasi deprivation in the five states, and organising the deprived for their rights.

Its authors situate the Naxalite movement in the historical context of the "development paradigm pursued since independence", which they assert, has "aggravated the prevailing discontent among marginalised sections of society". While explaining the current surge in Naxalite activities, they slam the neoliberal "directional shift in government policies towards modernisation and mechanisation, export orientation, diversification to produce for the market, withdrawal of various subsidy regimes and exposure to global trade" as "an important factor in hurting the poor in several ways". Following this conceptual approach, they look at the Maoist movement in a way that is different from the prevalent official attitude which primarily blames the Naxalites for the violence. Instead, the present report lays stress on the "structural violence which is implicit in the social and economic system" and which in the opinion of its authors prompts the radical groups to justify their own violent acts. At the same time, the authors distance themselves from the Naxalites, who "are engaged in a violent fight against the state for overpowering and overthrowing it", and who, they feel "exploit the situation for their own political gain by giving the affected persons some semblance of relief or response. Thereby they tend to legitimise in the eyes of the masses their own legal or even illegal activities." Yet, the authors of the report have to admit that the Naxalites have indeed carried out certain socio-economic reforms in their areas of control.

**Naxalites as a Surrogate State**

From the investigation carried out by the Planning Commission group of experts in the Naxalite areas, it appears that the Maoists are actually carrying out the reforms that the executive ought to have implemented, and are replacing the judiciary and the police in ensuring law and order for the poor and the oppressed. Take for instance their findings relating to land redistribution. In Bihar, the government had taken under its possession land which had been declared as beyond the ceiling that a landlord can own. The government, the report states, "has the power to distribute such land to the poor, but has failed to do so". On the other hand, "the Naxalite movement has succeeded in helping the landless to occupy a substantial extent of government land whether for homesteads or for cultivation".

Similarly, in the forest areas of Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, Orissa and Jharkhand, the Naxalites have led the adivasis to occupy forest lands that they should have enjoyed in the normal course of things under their traditionally recognised rights, but which were denied by government officials through forest settlement proceedings that have "taken place behind the back and over the head of the adivasi forest dwellers". While the government remained indifferent to the need for paying minimum wages to the adivasi tendu leaf gatherers in Andhra Pradesh, the Naxalites by launching a movement have secured increases in the rate of payment for the picking. The practice of forced labour (‘begari’) in the same state, under which the toiling castes had to provide free labour to the upper castes – and which should have been abolished by the government under Articles 14 to 17 of the Constitution – was done away with due to a "major upsurge led by the Naxalites in
the late 1970s and early 1980s of the last century...". Commenting on the “peoples courts” set up by the Naxalites in their areas of control, the report observes that “disputes are resolved in a rough and ready manner, and generally in the interest of the weaker party”.

While drawing our attention to these positive effects of the Naxalite movement, the authors of the report also come out against the high level of violence that its cadres indulge in, and from a bourgeois democratic liberal viewpoint assert: “...no state could agree to a situation of seizure of power through violence when the Constitution provides for change of government through electoral process.” But their findings also reveal how despite change of government, successive rulers who get elected use and misuse laws to suppress the poor and the disadvantaged. There is a design behind this continuity. The rulers, irrespective of party affiliations, are lackadaisical and sloppy in implementing pro-poor legal measures. But the moment the Maoists try to enforce those measures they are quick to use against them with extreme efficiency another set of laws – the draconian laws that have been enacted over the years (e.g. Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act; Chhattisgarh Public Security Act; Andhra Pradesh (Suppression of Disturbances) Act, etc). As the authors of the report rightly observe, Naxalite attempts to redistribute land have been “defeated by the state's determined opposition to letting lawless means succeed, even for the beneficial purpose of giving land to the landless”.

In order to put an end to this anomalous state of affairs where the law enforcement agencies breach the laws while the lawless “extremists” enforce them, the authors of the report have recommended among other things modifications to some laws (e.g. the Land Acquisition Act), effective implementation of protective laws in favour of the dalits and adivasis, better coordination between different programmes (e.g. Backward Region Grant Fund and National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme), and extension of panchayati raj to the scheduled areas. Asserting that the Naxalite movement has to be “recognised as a political movement with a strong base among the landless and poor peasantry and adivasis”, they warn the government against resorting to “security-centric” measures like setting up vigilante groups such as Salwa Judum in Chhattisgarh. Instead, they have called for “an ameliorative approach with emphasis on a negotiated solution”, and urged the government for a resumption of the peace talks with the Naxalites which was initiated in October 2004, but broke down in January 2005. Their proposal should be welcomed by all. But the authors should have gone into the causes of the failure of the past talks. To recapitulate, the government of Andhra Pradesh sat with the then People's War Group (now merged into Communist Party of India-Maoist) in October 2004, and agreed to a ceasefire till December 16 that year, and promised to consider in the meantime the Naxalites’ main demand for distribution of land among the landless. But when the then Congress government failed to keep that promise, the Naxalites stepped in to forcibly distribute the land. The government retaliated immediately by sending its police which gunned down Naxalite cadres in the forests of Warangal, West Godavari and other districts in January 2005. (Yet another example of the state's abdication of responsibility for helping the landless, followed by its active intervention to oppose whenever the Naxalite try to carry out that responsibility.) At that time, the Naxalites came out with a public statement blaming the state police for violating the norms of the October truce, and withdrew from the talks.

**Future of a Negotiated Settlement**

Given this background, if there is to be another round of talks, both the Maoists and the Indian state have to be circumspect, balancing their respective long-term objectives with their immediate goals. The Maoists may have to shelve their maximalist aim of seizure of power for the time being, and negotiate with the state in the humanitarian interest of the thousands of poor and innocent families who have been caught in the crossfire between the police and the Naxalites. As for the Indian state, let us be frank. In quite a large swathe of inaccessible territory, the state's writ does not run, and the Naxalites have been able to establish a parallel and alternative order that has largely benefited the poor – especially the dalits and adivasis (as acknowledged by the present report, despite reservations about their violent methods). In any future talks therefore, the state should recognise this reality and legitimise the positive Naxalite contribution to the implementation of the pro-poor laws – which the state had failed to carry out. In other words, the government should negotiate a settlement that allows the Naxalites to run their administration in their pockets of control – on the lines of the settlement arrived at with the Naga rebels of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak Muivah) who have not given up their arms and run a parallel government in parts of Nagaland. Referring to the Indian government's conciliatory approach to such insurrectionary groups, the authors of the report raise the legitimate question: “Why a different approach to the Naxals?” “The answer”, as Bob Dylan sang, “‘is blowin' in the wind”.

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