Maoist Movement (Naxalbari)

One of the world’s longest running insurgencies, India’s Maoist Movement has its roots in Naxalbari village in West Bengal when, in 1967, peasants attacked local landlords, forcibly occupied land, burned records, and cancelled old debts. This was no ‘spontaneous’ peasant uprising, but marked the revolutionary line of armed peasant struggle organized by communist radicals under Charu Mazumdar (1918-1972), the son of a progressive Bengali landlord family whose father was a freedom fighter. These radicals felt that the transition to socialism could not be achieved by the parliamentary means and ‘peaceful co-existence’ of communism and capitalism that Nikita Kruschev (1894-1971) had chosen for the Communist Party of the Soviet Union at the time. The Chinese Communist Party hailed the Naxalbari rising as the ‘Spring Thunder Over India’ and Mazumdar tried to spread the struggles across the country, founding the ‘Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist)’ [CPI(ML)] in 1969. A separate group of radicals, who later became the ‘Maoist Communist Centre’ (MCC), did not join CPI(ML) but also took a similar revolutionary line. These parties analysed India as semi-feudal and semi-colonial and adopted Chairman Mao’s (1893-1976) strategy of a protracted people’s war which was supposed to spread from the rural areas to the cities. The immediate task of the party thus became the organization of a united four-class alliance of the proletariat, the peasantry, the petty bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie in armed struggle to seize power in what they called a ‘new democratic revolution’, establish socialism and ultimately foster a communist society.

The struggles of these revolutionaries spread to the forested and hilly tracts of Srikakulam in Andhra Pradesh, Koraput in Orissa, and the plains of Bhojpur in Bihar and Birbhum in West Bengal. But the 1970s saw massive police repression by Indira Gandhi’s (1917-1984) Congress-led government. Many leaders were killed or imprisoned, and Charu Mazumdar died in police custody in 1972. Against the backdrop of the repressive regime, some revolutionaries tried to build up their strength once more in the late 1970s: ‘CPI(ML) Party Unity’ was formed in 1978 by a small group of previously imprisoned Naxalites, and they built strongholds in the plains of central Bihar; similar motives led to the formation of ‘CPI(ML) People’s War Group’ in Andhra Pradesh in 1980. Over the years, various groups attempted mergers and, significantly, in 1998, significantly, the People’s War Group and Party Unity combined to form the ‘Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) People’s War.’ This set the stage for the most important merger to date between the former MCC and People’s War who, in September 2004, united to form the ‘Communist Party of India
Since the 1990s, in particular, the Maoists have increasingly run a parallel government in guerrilla zones that they would like to turn into liberated bases (where the Indian state will not be present at all). These are areas of remote parts of the forests and hills of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar that are predominantly inhabited by Adivasis, India’s indigenous peoples. These are lands which are also rich in mineral reserves of coal, iron ore and bauxite in particular, but where land sales and transfers are difficult because of colonial laws protecting Adivasis. It is perhaps then no coincidence that, as India liberalized its economy and signed Memorandums of Understanding endorsing the sale of Adivasi lands to multinational corporations keen to harvest these minerals, in 2006 the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh (b.1932), declared the Maoists as the greatest single internal security threat that the country faced, and mounted a military offensive of an unprecedented scale to ‘wipe them out’ from these remote but mineral-rich regions. In Chhattisgarh, as part of a ‘purification hunt’ called the Salwa Judum, villagers were even armed by the police and instructed to kill their neighbours (see Indian Citizen’s Initiative [ICI] resolution 2006). The application of criminal laws, public security acts and anti-terror legislation in these ‘terrorist areas’ means that suspected Maoists are arrested on little or no evidence, causing severe infringements of civil rights, and many have been killed and then presented as killed in an encounter – India’s infamous ‘encounter killings’. In the remote rural areas of central and eastern India, the security forces act with impunity and the violence of the state is experienced as random and unexplainable. Meanwhile, the ‘People’s Liberation Guerrilla Army’ of the Indian Maoists is growing.

The question of how and why such revolutions spread has been crucial for scholarship on peasant insurgency all over the world. In India media and government reports have often depicted the ordinary villagers as either forced into Maoist action or as rational economic peasants benefiting in some monetary and developmental way from the revolutionaries. Scholars, journalists and activists have gone deeper to explore the moral appeal of the Maoists, namely how their struggles for the poor against caste oppression, land alienation and better wages have attracted the masses (for instance Bhatia 2000; Chakravarti 2007; Chowdhry 2012; Kunnath 2012; Navlakha 2012; Pandita 2011; Roy 2011). There may, however, also be a range of other important factors involved – such as the relations of intimacy that the Maoists have been able to create and sustain in their strongholds (Shah 2013). As the Maoists become one of the most hotly contested issues of Indian politics, we are increasingly seeing a proliferation of journalistic reports as well as academic analysis.
based on secondary sources with some minimal primary data. However, most of these accounts remain speculative and superficial as in fact, there has been very little sustained research into the processes of social transformation in the Maoist revolutionary heartlands.


**Additional References**


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