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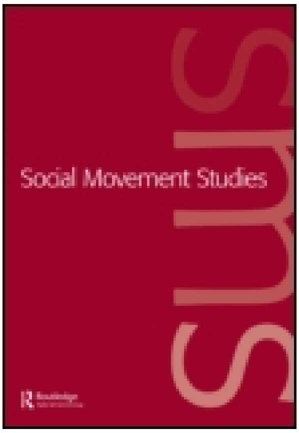

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PROFILE

The Maoist Movement in Contemporary India

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Opposing the neoliberal rhetoric of a shining middle class India, the Communist Party of India [CPI (Maoist)] has, since 2004, called for a New Democratic Revolution. Indian Maoists dismiss parliamentary democracy as a sham insofar as it fails to address the concerns and aspirations of the majority of its citizens, nearly four-fifths of whom live on less than US$2 a day. In their party programme,[1] Maoists characterize the postcolonial Indian state as 'reactionary' and 'autocratic' and seek a 'worker-peasant alliance' to overthrow 'imperialism, feudalism and comprador bureaucratic capitalism' via an armed revolutionary struggle. The CPI (Maoist) politburo, which constitutes its ideological leadership, is thus supported by an underground People's Liberation Army. The party's long-term objective is to establish a 'people's democratic state under the leadership of the proletariat' that will 'guarantee real democracy for the vast majority of people while exercising dictatorship over a tiny minority of exploiters'.

The CPI (Maoist) is active mostly in eastern and central India, where human development levels rank among the lowest in the world; forest cover and rugged terrain facilitate guerrilla tactics and protracted low-intensity insurgency, and tribal and lower caste groups are preponderant. According to the Indian prime minister, Maoist rebels pose the greatest internal security threat to India since independence. In reality, however, Maoist cadres are estimated to be anywhere between 10,000 and 40,000 in a country of nearly 1.2 billion people, though this number does not include sympathizers and non-combatants. These thinly spread cadres are concentrated chiefly in what journalists, policy-makers and scholars call the Red Corridor, running from the Nepalese border through the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Orissa, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh. In these areas, regular elections are held, state and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) routinely participate in rural development, and state police and forest officials coexist with armed rebels and their rural supporters. Since 2005–2006, the

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state has deployed paramilitaries to supplement state police forces in combating Maoist guerillas, which has intensified state-sponsored violence and led to widespread human rights abuses, yet it has been incapable of establishing anything akin to a monopoly of legitimate violence. Shared sovereignty is thus the norm, not the exception, as in other insurgent zones in India such as Kashmir and the north-eastern frontier. This state of affairs also suggests that the everyday realities of Indian Maoism are somewhat different from its ideological self-image as a vanguardist revolutionary movement.

Intellectual and Social Origins

The origins of revolutionary Marxism in India, particularly its Maoist avatar, are typically traced to 1967, when the radical left split from the CPI (Marxist). In May 1967, the revolutionaries who later formed the new CPI (Marxist-Leninist, M-L) supported a local peasant uprising in the village of Naxalbari in the Himalayan foothills of north Bengal. The CPI (M-L) thus came to be popularly known as ‘Naxalites’ or simply ‘Naxals’. Inspired by the revolutionary writings of Mao Zedong, the Naxalites selectively targeted rich peasants or ‘kulaks’ in the countryside and ‘bourgeois’ representatives of the ‘comprador state’, and endeavoured to mobilize rural masses to encircle major cities such as Delhi and Kolkata and eventually seize power. They tapped into widespread disillusionment, especially among students and intellectuals, with the postcolonial regime dominated by the Congress party. By 1970, hundreds of young men and women from the country’s most prestigious universities had joined the movement to fight for their peasant and proletarian comrades. Urban middle class and invariably upper caste activists thus made common cause with the struggles of subalterns, particularly peasants in eastern and central India, whose interests had been betrayed by Congress nationalists towards the end of the anti-colonial movement. From its epicentre in West Bengal, the Naxalite movement spread initially to the neighbouring states of Bihar and Orissa, and then, up the northern plains to Uttar Pradesh and Punjab as well as westwards to Maharashtra and southwards to Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

From the early 1970s, however, the state launched a brutal counter-insurgency to check the advance of the Naxalites, imprisoning, torturing and even murdering activists without remorse. Ironically, the campaign against the Naxalites came to be led by their old comrades in the ‘revisionist’ CPI (Marxist), along with, of course, the ruling Congress party in New Delhi. In the face of state violence, many Naxalite cadres who survived police brutalities gave up their revolutionary dreams; others went underground in the countryside to undertake grassroots mobilization; the party itself split numerous times on ideological and regional lines. In Bihar alone, there emerged three major Naxalite factions – the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC), CPI (M-L) Liberation and CPI (M-L) Party-Unity – and by the mid-1990s, as many as 17 different Naxalite groups were reportedly active in the state. All of these groups saw themselves as farther left than the ‘revisionist’ CPI (Marxist), which participated regularly in parliamentary elections, yet they differed widely on the ‘correct’ revolutionary line to be adopted. In the early 2000s, a decade after India introduced neoliberal economic reforms, attempts were made to unify disparate Naxalite splinter groups, but it was only on 21 September 2004 that a formal merger took place under the aegis of the two largest groups, the MCC and the CPI (M-L) People’s War. The newly minted CPI (Maoist), which was produced by this merger, retains the core Maoist principles outlined by their revolutionary predecessors in the 1960s and 1970s, but unlike before, there is now an appreciation of the need for a ‘protracted people’s war’ in order to eventually overthrow the existing state.

Social Bases

Why ordinary men and women participate in the Maoist movement and to what extent they exercise any meaningful agency within it are fiercely debated in contemporary India. Critics of the Maoist movement today argue that Naxalites have always been violent, bloodthirsty ideologues who coerce subalterns to do their bidding. Sympathizers, however, see the movement as the authentic voice of the most marginalized sections of Indian society. At any rate, there is widespread agreement that dalits (ex-untouchable castes) and adivasis (tribals) are the most important social groups whom Maoists seek to mobilize for their revolutionary ends. Yet not all dalits and adivasis participate in or favour Maoist revolutionary activities. There are significant differences in the social bases of Maoism both within and across regions. At the same time, it is widely accepted that the leading ideologues of the Maoist movement do not belong to these subaltern communities. Top Maoist leaders such as Koteswara Rao (alias Kishenji) and Cherukuri Rajkumar (alias Azad) have almost invariably been men from upper or middle caste backgrounds. While their superior caste status carries much significance in rural India, it must be recognized that Maoist leaders do not come from the small privileged circle of Westernized elites based in Indian metropolises. It is true that there is now an underlying layer of dalit and adivasi leadership within the movement, but it is equally true that men and women from subaltern backgrounds have yet to assume top leadership posts in the party. The social bases of the Maoist movement are, therefore, best understood in terms of the constraints and opportunities available to radical youth in rural India today.

Among dalits, especially in rural eastern India, local struggles for dignity and political assertion go back to the late colonial period. As landless peasants and bonded labourers, formerly untouchable castes have been indispensable to capital accumulation and social reproduction in modern India. The legal abolition of untouchability has meant little in practice to dalits reeling under oppressive upper caste regimes in Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Orissa. In south Bihar and northern Jharkhand, for example, dalits have been instrumental in carving out a Maoist stronghold by aligning their interests with those of the party. During the caste conflicts of the past three decades, dalit castes such as Musahars and Dusadhs actively fought their landlords with the assistance of the Maoists. Yet others such as Doms chose not to displease their landed patrons. In Orissa, a similar situation has played out, especially among Christian dalits who have joined the Maoist movement to combat the hegemonic designs of the ruling rightwing Hindu upper caste groups. In 2008, the assassination of Swami Lakshmananda Saraswati, an aggressive proponent of Hinduization among dalit and tribal communities, by Christian Maoist youth laid threadbare the social polarities that fuel revolutionary action in that state. In adjoining West Bengal, the birthplace of the Indian Maoist movement, the upper caste-dominated CPI (Marxist) denied caste discrimination over 34 years of its rule. But lower caste groups, who were kept out of its patronage structures and the benefits of land redistribution policies, have been at the forefront of the contemporary Maoist movement.

Among adivasi communities, officially recognized as ‘scheduled tribes’ by Indian law, the Maoist movement did not emerge from within. Instead, it was brought to the forest highlands of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh by committed cadres seeking to expand their revolutionary ambit. The Maoist entry into tribal homelands has coincided with the growing presence of NGOs there. In Jharkhand, for example, tribal youth with the appropriate language and technical skills can join the Maoists, NGOs, and sometimes, even both. These young men and women find a new sense of camaraderie and non-farm employment within Maoist ranks that contrasts with what they see as the drudgery of farm labour in a gerontocratic society. Resisting the gerontocratic rule of tribal elders also entails negotiating local state structures insofar as the elders, especially in their role as village headmen, are key local state functionaries. The primacy of local power dynamics can be clearly seen from the tribal youth's relative disinterest in Maoist ideology per se. Supporting or participating in the Maoist movement thus seems quite compatible with implementing NGO programmes or enrolling in state welfare schemes. In Chhattisgarh, however, adivasi support for and participation in the Maoist movement have been closely linked to the counter-insurgency campaign led by the Salwa Judum, a state-sponsored militia. The gross human rights violations carried out by the Salwa Judum have, ironically, had the effect of turning even fence-sitting adivasis into committed Maoist cadres. As in Jharkhand, it is possible to participate in state and NGO programmes as a member of the Maoist party, though, in a more polarized situation, it is harder to keep one's allegiances secret. In the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh, it is particularly interesting to note the prominence of Gond adivasis in the Maoist movement, even as local and regional party leaders, though smaller adivasi groups such as the Dhurwas and Murias, have tended to keep the Maoists at arm's length. In sum, while the social bases of contemporary Indian Maoism, therefore, do not encompass *all* adivasis or dalits, it cannot be denied that these marginalized groups form the backbone of the movement.

Movement Dynamics

Over the past decade, the Maoist movement has passed through three distinct phases. In the first phase, prior to the formation of the CPI (Maoist) in late 2004, Maoist leaders sought to expand their operations from their strongholds in south Bihar into new territories in Jharkhand, Orissa and the districts of West Bengal that border these two states. In these predominantly adivasi areas, the Maoists recruited local youth and offered protection to rural communities from the predations of state police and forest officials. In the central Indian states of Chhattisgarh and neighbouring Andhra Pradesh, they consolidated their previous gains among rural dalit and adivasi communities by campaigning for higher minimum wages and support prices for forest products such as tendu leaves. In eastern and central India alike, Maoist groups attempted to capture the hearts and minds of target populations, especially young and willing combatants, by promising to overturn traditional class, caste and gerontocratic hierarchies. In doing so, they displayed a clear willingness to think in local or regional terms, thereby shelving temporarily their long-term goal of capturing state power throughout India. At the same time, they made common cause with their Maoist comrades in Nepal, with whom they shared much in common in terms of ideology and organization.

In the second phase of the movement, with the formation of the CPI (Maoist) in September 2004, a centralized executive committee or Politburo came to head the movement comprising regional and district committees and a growing guerilla army. Greater centralization under the Politburo, along Nepalese Maoist lines, may have been an aspiration, though the complexities and constraints of local and regional politics in India compelled the CPI (Maoist) to negotiate power structures on a case-by-case basis in each context. Decentralized political calculations and outcomes invariably meant greater autonomy in decision-making for those occupying lower rungs of the party organization.

In frontier areas such as Jharkhand and Orissa, greater autonomy brought in more recruits and entrenched the movement firmly in local webs of power. However, these gains for the Maoist movement came at a significant cost, namely, the sharing of political space with political parties, NGOs and local state bodies, which postponed the revolutionary agenda to an indefinite future. Likewise, in their old strongholds in Bihar, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh, the Maoists struggled to articulate revolutionary aims beyond attacks on local power holders. Many dalits in south Bihar, for instance, increasingly turned to other forms of political assertion via political parties, egalitarian religious sects and festivals celebrating lower caste icons. More disturbingly, as the Maoist movement expanded in the region, it assumed a more elitist character insofar as it often inducted landed upper castes, compromised with local power structures and blocked dalits' opportunities for political advancement within the organization. While outright desertion remained rare, many dalits were justifiably dismayed at the Maoists' inability to overturn local and regional hierarchies irreversibly. In sum, a unified party-led movement has, paradoxically, ended up deepening the challenges of fragmentation and mobilization that had existed already.

In the third and final phase, the state's counterinsurgency initiatives have forced the Maoist movement to retreat and contract. Since 2009, the Home Ministry's Operation Green Hunt has unleashed central paramilitary troops into the forested and hilly terrain of eastern and central India. Illegal detentions and torture of suspected Maoists have been commonly deployed to break the existing ties between Maoists and their rural supporters. In addition, the Indian state has sought better coordination among the police in states where Maoists enjoy popular support. Lastly, new development schemes and special aid packages have been devised to wean adivasis and dalits away from the Maoist movement. All of these counterinsurgency initiatives have placed severe restrictions on the operations of the Maoist movement, which already faced internal challenges of fragmentation and localization. In Bihar and Jharkhand, Maoists have experienced a steady decline in recruitment and even defections. Some ex-Maoists have begun providing intelligence on their former comrades and even contesting elections. In Chhattisgarh, however, Maoists may have actually gained fresh followers due to the atrocities committed by the state-sponsored militia, Salwa Judum. In the short run, the Maoists may have prevailed over the statist militia, but they now face the far greater challenge posed by central paramilitaries in the region. The situation today is, therefore, not too different from the early 1970s, when the Naxalites were forced into retreat though committed leaders kept the embers of revolution alive.

Conclusion

It is possible to view the contemporary Maoist movement in India as yet another revolutionary endeavour that has failed. Yet this view misses not only the very real gains in subaltern political participation produced by the CPI (Maoist), but also the movement's tendency to retreat to subterranean levels before surfacing again when conditions are favourable again. The term 'failure' thus misdiagnoses the present situation, which may be described more accurately as a temporary retreat. Longer time horizons permit us to better appreciate the waxing and waning of social movements in response to internal and external challenges and constraints. If the history of Maoism in India tells us anything, it is that the basic structural conditions for revolutionary struggle continue to exist, yet those who lead such struggles must inevitably compromise their revolutionary ideals in the face of local and regional constraints on mobilizing subaltern populations. Despite its ambitious revolutionary aims, the contemporary Maoist movement in India has been compelled to exist as a fragmented entity alongside the state and domestic and international NGOs. The movement's underlying strategy is, ostensibly, to garner maximum support at the grassroots level without imposing a centralized party discipline on local cadres, and ultimately, to incorporate every kind of political dissent within Maoist ranks. Nonetheless, fragmentation of social protest also suggests severe principal–agent problems within the party, while coexistence with the state signifies the inability of the Maoist movement to control particular areas exclusively as 'liberated zones'. As the current wave of Indian Maoism ebbs due to internal and external factors, we may reasonably expect another wave in the next generation, and there is every reason to believe that future Maoists will inherit the opportunities and challenges of their predecessors.

Note

1. http://www.bannedthought.net/India/CPI-Maoist-Docs/Founding/Programme-pamphlet.pdf

Uday Chandra is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science at Yale University. His research interests lie at the intersection between agrarian studies, comparative studies of state formation and resistance, postcolonial theory, political anthropology and South Asian history. His dissertation studies the historical origins and social bases of the contemporary Maoist insurgency in India, focusing on the forest state of Jharkhand in eastern India.

Beyond academia, he is writing a novel inspired by the extraordinary history and politics of ordinary people in the forests of Jharkhand; he is co-founder of a non-profit organization that promotes tribal rights, livelihoods and culture in the region; lastly, he is starting work on a film that foregrounds many varied voices of popular critique of the Indian state from the Maoist fringes of eastern-central India.