

Extremist Violence and Life of the Indigenous People inside Red Corridor in India

¹Dipak K Midya

Abstract: India's mineral-rich districts in and along the so-called *Red Corridor* are the abode of the country's poorest of the poor indigenous people. It is no surprising that these people are mostly illiterates and have been suffering from severe malnutrition. For the last four decades or more, the region has been extremely affected by the extremist violence led by the Maoists *vis-à-vis* the counter-insurgency programme of the state. The people, mostly tribals, living in the midst of the two embattling forces operating across the region are now bewildered. They are losing many of their socio-cultural distinctiveness. The paradoxes between the Maoist ideology and acts made the indigenous groups worry of about the contradictions between the projected aspiration and apparent result of the extremist violence. In the course of time, they are found to distancing themselves from the movement and adopt a survival strategy based upon the revival of their ethnic consolidation. With a case study of Junglemahal in Southern Bengal, the present study observes that stronger the elements of ethnic consolidation, lesser the possibility of engaging with the extremist violence.

Keywords: Red Corridor, Maoist paradox, Junglemahal, boundary, ethnic identity.

The Red Corridor: How much is it 'red'?

Let us begin with three citations:

The ultimate aim of the party is to bring about communism by continuing the revolution under the leadership of the proletariat and thus abolishing the system of exploitation of man by man from the face of earth.

The Communist Party of India (Maoist) dedicates itself at the service of the people and revolution, cherishes high affection and respect for the people, relies upon the

¹Department of Anthropology, Vidyasagar University, Midnapore 72102, W.B., India

people and will sincerely learn from them. The party stands vigilant against all reactionary conspiracies and revisionist manoeuvres.

Aims and objectives, the Constitution of the CPI (Maoist)¹

The Naxalite movement is not a movement of landless peasants and tribals seeking to overthrow state power. It is a project defined as such by those who are neither peasants nor workers nor tribals, but who claim to represent their interests.

Dilip Simeon (2010)²

Santals have an innate relationship with forest from the time immemorial. Our *haram* [forefathers] used to live in forest. At that time, *burara* [ancestors] used to subsist on jungle tubers and mushrooms supplanted at times by hunting of small games. Then cultivation was not in practice. Forest remained our source of food for generations.

Now we are dying in the midst of the Maoists on the one hand and the police on the other. At the time of proceeding toward jungle for gathering, we are comfortable to wear *saree* usually above the knee keeping the most part of it kept around the waist. It gives a bulging appearance around our waist portion.

The police patrolling in the forest suspect us as Maoists carrying weapons hidden under our sarees in the waist portion. We are, therefore, forced to put off our sarees to show that no weapon is kept inside and get assaulted. And, in the pretension of searching for weapons in our body, if any, we are assaulted and tortured frequently.

We're, therefore, ready to thrash and drive out the police wherever we get them. That is why, we took part in the movement against police by the Janasadharaner Committee at Lalgah with our battle-axes, bontees, broom sticks and swords.

Midya *et al.* (2012: 82)³

The above three citations reveal the contradictions between the Maoist idealism and realism in the *Red Corridor*⁴ in Indian territory. The area is also called the 'natural resources corridor' of the country as it contains a high deposit of natural resources such as diamond mines, coal mines, bauxite, iron ore, limestone, copper, chromite, etc. The area has been the abodes of the marginal people, mostly tribals, who are traditionally forest dependents or day-labourers. Many of them are living on the brink of starvation. Throughout the area the Maoists and/or Naxalites have been building up a strong movement 'under the leadership of the proletariat' in order to seize the State power and to create liberated zones through 'annihilation of class enemies'. The movement has grown out of strong belief in Mao T'se-tung's philosophy that 'Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun'. In more than one-third districts out of 634 districts in India the Maoists have strong influence at present (Chunduri and Singh, 2012). As much as 23 states are witnessing the violent movement. But they are very active particularly along the loosely

contiguous mineral-rich territory of the Red Corridor (Chopra, 2012). Their presence is so strong that their movement appears to be, in the words of the preceding Prime Minister of India, 'the single biggest security threat' to the country since it often gives rise to highly violent and fatal activities.

The region has got its familiarity as such because of two reasons: first, it has high contents of 'red' minerals and second, it has become the strong base of the extreme 'red' party. The movement has got in particularly with the tribal groups along the red corridor. This is, Shah and Pettigrew observed (2009: 228), not for these marginalised peoples are the 'natural vessels of a revolutionary consciousness', but for they live in the terrain that is difficult to access by the state and is well suited for guerrilla warfare. But this may be partly true. The Maoists have developed good rapport with the disadvantaged people on several grounds (Sinha, 1989; Banerjee, 1980; Ghosh, 1974; S. B. Singh, 2005; Gomes, 2012; Midya, 2015b). There are actually many preconditions for developing insurgency and revolutionary violence (Midlarsky and Roberts, 1985; Midlarsky, 1981, 1982; Nagel, 1976; Paige, 1975; Muller and Seligson, 1987; Muller, 1985, 1986).

In this paper I am trying to depict the life of the indigenous people inside Red Corridor and to understand their cultural strategy to withstand the inherent contradictions present within the bloody encounter between the extremists and the counter-insurgency forces. Within the larger backdrop of red corridor, the study deals with life of indigenous people and extremist violence within Junglemahal in West Bengal, India. The study is based primarily on the data yielded through fieldwork at four villages, viz., Bhimarjun under Banspahari Police Station, Sangram and Amlatora under Jamboni Police Station, and Kushboni under Jhargram Police station in Junglemahal and on the secondary data already available. The primary data were collected principally through observation, interview and case study methods. Snow-ball technique was utilized to locate the victim families in the study.

Maoist Idealism vs. Activism

The Maoists streamlined their fight against the Indian nation-state on the ground as argued by their spokesperson Gaur Chakravarty in the following words:

You people say that India [has] got a republican, independent government, we say NO it is not so, and between these two there is a contradiction. You people say that India got independence on August 15, 1947, we say power-transfer happened. Semi-feudal, semi-colonial, politicians, rich people and land owners are looting the country, and benefiting. You may know the current law is from 1898, from Victorian times, so what has changed? What has changed is a few faces who sit in the parliament today. Like a new cap on an old bottle. The content of the bottle is still the same. So the common people are still deprived and they will rise.⁵

And particularly the indigenous people who are the original occupants of the forested corridor are at marginal economy. Many a people are suffering from malaria, but having little or no idea about the suffering. Children with 'bloated bellies' tell about their health status with chronic malnutrition. High rate of illiteracy and early marriage are no exception all over (Midya, 2012, 2014, 2015a). They are being uprooted from their own land for this is being grabbed for its rich mineral resources. All these push them towards impoverishment to a greater extent. In the words of the noted social activist Binayak Sen:

These focused processes of expropriation are forcing these people who are already living on the brink of starvation off the land and into more severe poverty. And I would submit that the condition that is created today in large sections of the population, particularly those living in the forest areas that are mineral rich...correspond to a genocidal situation.⁶

The conditions propelled an arms struggle under the leadership of the Maoist activists. For Gautam Navlakha (2010), it is a rebellion in which people were fighting to save their resources like land, forests, water and minerals. In the early seventies, the then Naxalites in the Telengana region (particularly the northern part) of Andhra Pradesh and in West Bengal extended their activities mainly through the mass organizations of agricultural labourers, youths and students. The Maoists have gained support of the tribal people in Chhatisgarh through providing them daily food in some areas and through their attempt to protect tribal land from being grabbed for mineral extraction. Similar case is also observed in Odisha, particularly in Khandadhar District, where the poor tribals came out to support the extremists in order to evade the threat of displacement (for mining) from their own territory. In West Bengal, Bihar and Jharkhand the Maoists are getting support from the tribal and other marginal communities in their fight against the alleged age-long deprivation and oppression by the state power or the ruling upper caste people. In one of my recent studies, it was found that there was a positive correlation between underdevelopment and insurgency (Midya, 2015b). It was found that the districts with higher per centage of population living under Below Poverty Line (BPL), along with certain geophysical conditions suitable for guerrilla warfare, were more prone to insurgency violence. Interestingly, to resist the Maoists the Government of the affected states as well as the Union Government did not look into the issue of underdevelopment, but adopted counter-insurgency measures with the principal objectives to 'clear, hold and build'. The central focus of the latter was to clear an area of Maoists and occupy it militarily, which generally involved severe repression over the Maoist activists.

A comparative analysis of the poverty estimates of the Indian states showed that the states, with the exception of Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, with the poverty estimate above 20% are more susceptible to the Maoist insurgency and violence (Midya, 2015b). It is,

therefore, no exaggeration to say that the regions which are underdeveloped in terms of per capita income and/or per centage of population living within below poverty line, added with some geophysical conditions, are vulnerable to Maoist violence in India. It is no doubt that poverty has definitely a positive relation with insurgency.

In the face of severe state repression the Maoists were retaliating by reliance more upon armed rebellion. However, John Harris observed that the Maoist violence was a response to the appalling structural violence historically perpetrated by the elites, and supported by the state, against landless poor peasants (Harris, 2010:2). After India opted for economic liberalization, the struggle became increasingly of extreme violent nature. In one of its biggest attacks, for instance, the rebels massacred 76 counter-insurgency force troopers in Baster region of Chhatisgarh in 2010. In Junglemahal of West Bengal tribal support for the movement seemed spontaneous as appeared from the third citation. Throughout the red corridor the movement was posing direct challenge to the state political form by blocking the latter's development initiatives. In an interview to *The Statesman* on 13 December, 2011 Mr. Brijmohan Agrawal, the then Public Works and School Education Minister, Chhatisgarh admitted that:

Maoists are not allowing construction works worth about Rs. 3000 crores in the interior for 45 years...No one is ready to participate in tenders for certain projects. We issued some tender notices seven times, but the work was not awarded. Even the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) has backed out of road projects in Maoist areas...Maoist have blown up about 250 school buildings in the Baster interior.⁷

During the last one decade or more, the rebels became engaged in several mass killing activities in which the most of the victims were tribal and other marginal people. Their agenda became 'an insistence on killing'. Simeon argued that 'petty-bourgeois intellectual comrades' were accorded freedom to instigate murder of any one they deemed their class enemy. Such activities were done mainly because of two reasons: first, the victims were suspected to be the informers of the counter-insurgency forces or the *vice-versa*; and second, in a bid to keep the marginal people under their control. This phase was also marked with a paradigm shift where the leadership of many squads came in the hands of those who were neither peasants, nor labourers, nor tribals, but who claimed, as Dilip Simeon (2010) argued as in the second citation, to represent their interest. For Simeon and others, it was an attempt to fulfil the 'revolutionary fantasies' of the leadership at the cost of lives of the tribals. Thus the movement went contrary to the aims and objectives set out in the constitution of the Maoists as quoted in the first citation. This situation disillusioned the people they claimed to fight for. For instance, George Kunnath observed that the *Dalit* support for the Maoists in Central Bihar weakened due to the latter's attempt to bring in

middle and upper caste people in order to fulfil their goal of capturing state power (Kunnath, 2006).

Junglemahal Scenario

In Junglemahal area⁸ of Paschim Medinipur district in West Bengal the Maoist movement focused principally on arms struggle, particularly during its later stage of development (Midya *et al.*, 2012). The Maoists were trying to put up their organisation at Junglemahal since not late than 1990s and were found to take many pro-people programmes and gained people's spontaneous support. However, since 2009 they resorted to terror operation. It took so many lives of common men, mostly tribals, and involved in destruction of public properties. This phase was marked with imposition by the Maoists of several compulsions that were the most unacceptable to the tribal groups. It included compulsory participation of male persons from every house in the night rallies initially and, in the later phase, participation of at least one woman from each house at night rallies, participation in *Ganaadalat* (People's court) to deliver instant justice publicly, extortion of money in huge amount, and so on. The leadership was taking decisions on behalf of the tribals without taking into consideration the cultural ethos of the tribal groups. The Maoists even went bizarre extreme to use the tribal people as human shield in their battle against the state counter-insurgency forces. This strategy eventually backfired for the movement. The tribal and other poor people became traumatized by the Maoist paradoxes. They were trying to distancing themselves from the movement. Taking advantage of this situation the state adopted a counter-insurgency strategy to hit the leadership of the movement as reported to have been said by a senior officer of the Counter Insurgency Force (*The Statesman*, p.5, 19 December, 2011). The security forces were also not hesitant to use the tribals as human shield against the Maoists in Junglemahal.

After killing or arrest of the members of the Central Committee (CC) and several action squad leaders of CPI (Maoist), the Maoist movement certainly suffered a setback.⁹ Particularly the killing of Kisenji, who was the master mind behind building up of the movement in Junglemahal, caused sudden decline in severity of the movement. But this does not seem to bring an end to this movement at all. In this connection the argument of Mr. Dipankar Bhattacharya, the national general-secretary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) worth mentioning:

It is true that the agitation in Junglemahal has suffered a setback because of the Maoists' sole focus on armed struggle. But the movement is far from over. It started as an indigenous agitation; with the ground situation remaining the same and the state resorting to more oppression, the movement will not die anytime soon.¹⁰

This is because the ground reality of Junglemahal remains almost same. Majority of the villages of the region are predominantly inhabited by the tribal and other marginal people. They are living a life well below every measure of development indices. Normally in tribal population the sex ratio is found to be well balanced, unlike that in a non-tribal population. But in my earlier studies, I have shown that in most of the tribal villages within Junglemahal males outnumbered the females. For example, distribution of population by age and sex in Bhimarjun under Banspahari Police Station and in Sangram and Amlatora under Jamboni Police Station, for instance, illustrated a great disparity in sex-wise distribution particularly in the age groups below 15 years (Midya, 2012, 2015b). This was reportedly for healthcare measures taken in cases of illness of girl children were relatively less. This led to higher death rate at the after-birth stage and thereafter in case of girl child. Illiteracy rates among the Santal, Lodha, Bhumij were shamefully high. This was 60.00% (at Kushboni), 65.86% (at Sangram) and 61.12% (at Bhimarjun) respectively. This was worse for the females: 73.33% and 78.66% in Kushboni and Bhimarjun respectively, for instance (Midya, 2012, 2015b). I selected these villages because all the villages were marked with severe political disturbances involving killing and counter-killing of poor tribal people by the rival groups.

With regard to early marriage, there was no differential pattern found among the tribes and other backward castes of this region. The rate of early marriage for all parsons varied from 69.01% to 81.27% among the village communities (Midya, 2015b). This was as high as 67.13% for girls at an age from 11-15 years, while 11% for them at 16-17 years and only 21.87% after the age of 17 years. The bodily structure of the Sabar and Bhumij children and women spoke itself of severe malnutrition. Most of these tribal people were still unskilled day-labourers who were at the same time highly dependent on forest. These villages had no provision of safe drinking water or sanitation. It appeared that they were not getting the benefits of the country's independence. And their life was suffering from more insecurity in the neoliberal era. The state did not bother about their state of starvation. However, the present state government undertook some measures. This has been a two-dimensional process involving strict administrative surveillance over the insurgency activists on the one hand, and initiating some welfare measures for the disadvantaged people on the other. The latter included special drive for recruitment of the youths of Junglemahal in police force, organizing football tournament specially for the girls in every block and promoting the best players to the next level, thereby establishing a good rapport with the locals, taking administrative initiative to provide BPL cards to the deserving families, making Public Distribution System (PDS) functional to provide daily amenities to poor families, building roads in remote areas, establishing educational institutions in the marginal areas and highlighting tribal culture and values by organizing

local fairs focusing on tribal icons, culture and literature. All these schemes aimed at cutting the supply-line across the extremist activities. In reality, the Maoist violence noticeably decreased at Junglemahal in recent past. There was hardly any such violence at Junglemahal nowadays.

The present government was talking about many dreams for the youths. But in the post-Sarada scam phase administrative and political machinery seems more or less lethargic or aimless towards developmental works in Junglemahal. Only time would show what happen. The situation remained almost similar to what was before the killing of Kisenji, except commencement of a few development projects. The grass root level activists were, however, in sleeping mode. They would wake up if the conditions of underdevelopment persist. A recent study on comparative analysis of poverty estimates of the Indian states showed that the states, excepting Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, with the poverty estimate above 20% were more susceptible to the Maoist insurgency and violence (Midya, 2015b). It is most likely that the regions which are underdeveloped in terms of per capita income and/or per centage of population living below poverty line, added with some geophysical conditions, are vulnerable to Maoist violence in India. Poverty has obviously a positive relation with insurgency.

There is another dimension of the conflict-ridden Junglemahal life. The tribal groups who have witnessed extreme violence perpetrated upon them both by the Maoists and the counter-insurgency force are trying to develop a strategy of their own for survival. It involves effort to increase ethnic consolidation of each ethnic group inhabiting the area. This in other way disintegrates the supporting ethnic groups and weakens the movement. Ethnic consolidation makes collective identity of an ethnic group strong to withstand diverse pressures within situation of extremist violence. It simply implies how one ethnic group construes about itself in relation to their past, present and future. The collective identities always involve certain categorisation made by social actors that are, according to Fredrik Barth, either acknowledged or rejected by others (Barth, 2000: 34). This categorisation determines the scheme of inclusiveness of social phenomena which are reinforced by and are expressed through their social practices such as ritual actions associated with different phases of life or those attached to the sacred groves (e.g., the Santals' *Jaher* or the Bhumij' *Sarna*). The social practices have positive reinforcement in favour of satisfying identity consolidation of the respective ethnic groups, which is currently appreciable. This social phenomenon is acting toward dissemination of the larger boundary that was encompassing different ethnic groups (e.g., the Santals, Bhumij or others) during the peak moments of the insurgency movement at Junglemahal. It is in turn weakening the movement led by the Maoist in the region.

Conclusions

The political situation at Junglemahal hangs in balance at present. The indigenous people of the region supported the Maoists because there was enough reason to think that the latter was fighting for their cause. They spontaneously took part in the extremist activities. But sooner they became more or less disappointed with the Maoists for the latter's disparaging activities amounted to killing of their own men. Now, some developmental programmes are in process of implementation under state initiative. The indigenous peoples are expecting the programmes to bring in change in the world of 'have nots'. They are also desperately trying to focus upon their traditional sociocultural practices and values. This tendency is acting in favour of making ethnic identity of individual ethnic group stronger. It also percolating catalytic effects toward dissemination of the larger boundary of all ethnic groups who stood up to fight the alleged state deprivation and oppression under the leadership of the Maoists. It appears that weaker the ethnic elements of the engaging indigenous groups in the *Red Corridor*, more will be the possibility of their attachment with the extremist violence. However, the action squad activists did not quit the movement at all. They are in the state of sleeping mode, particularly after the killing of Kisenji. In the post-Sarada scam phase the administrative surveillance has been reluctant and developmental initiative seems to lack focus. This may be causal factor to wake up the activists, which may turn the situation further complicated.

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Notes

1. *Aims and objectives* stated in the Article 5 of the Constitution of the CPI (Maoist), retrieved on July 9, 2012 from www.satp.org.
2. The noted writer Dilip Simeon's (2010) observation on the Maoist movement in India.
3. A case study of a Santal woman on her assessment about the Maoist movement and the counter-insurgency programme of the State (Midya *et al.*, 2012: 82).

4. The Red Corridor is a wide and forested area stretching from the state of Andhra Pradesh in the south in India through the states of Andhra Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Odisha, West Bengal, Jharkhand and Bihar to Nepal in the north.
5. As quoted by Imran Garda in the *Al Jazeera Correspondent* (20 October, 2011).
6. *Ibid.*
7. Quoted in *The Statesman*, p.3,14 December, 2011.
8. Junglemahal area commonly refers to the forested area of Pachim Mednipur, Bankuar and Purulia Districts of West Bengal.
9. The Politburo member Cherukuri Rajkumar, alias Azad, was killed in July 2010 and Koteswar Rao, alias Kishenji, on 24 November, 2011 in encounters with security forces. Pramod Mishra (arrested in May 2008 from Dhanbad), Akhilesh Yadav (arrested in June 2011 from Gaya), Amitava Bagchi (arrested in August 2009 from Ranchi), Kobad Gandhi (arrested in Sept. 2009 from Delhi), Baccha Prasad Singh (arrested in Feb. 2010 from Kanpur), Narayan Sanyal (arrested in January 2006) and Sushil Roy (arrested in May 2005 from Hoogly) were jailed.
10. Quoted in *The Statesman*, p. 7, 3 December, 2011.

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