

Ideological Faultlines of the Naxal Movement in India

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Abstract: The Naxalite movement in India, right from its inception in late 60s, has not been able to turn into a People's movement. This lack of mass mobilisation has been primarily due to the Naxalite leadership not being able to strike a common cause for the masses to identify themselves with. The present phase of the movement is primarily against the Government and the conventional ideology of 'class war' is not in line with the course being taken by the CPI (Maoist), simply because the situation in the country is non conducive for the same. This is in contrast to the successful leftist revolutions across the world, like in Russia and China where Lenin and Mao, respectively laid emphasis on mass mobilisation to make the respective movements populist, thereby enticing mass following.

Naxalism in India, like any other leftist movement around the globe draws its ideological basis from the Bolshevik revolution. After the success of the Lenin-led revolution in Russia, the intellectual class in many countries started thinking of ushering in a change in their respective nations. Prominent amongst them were Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh and Mao Tse Tung. These leaders became architects of revolution in their countries, inspired by the Bolshevik revolution.

Vladimir Lenin, who was originally a Marxist, modified Karl Marx's doctrine to become founder of Leninism. He tweaked Marxism to suit the conditions that prevailed in Russia in the early twentieth century. The modifications were made to suit conditions in a society where imperialism was not very strong, peasantry was to have a larger role owing to its predominance and the Russian army was to play a major role in the planned armed insurrection. Marx had propounded a working class-led revolution, which could never see light of the day in his lifetime, but for a brief period during 'Paris Commune'. The Russian backdrop of war weariness (First World War), poor economy, flexible industrialization and substantial peasantry were the main drivers for Lenin to modify Marxism so as to suit Russia. Advocacy of armed nature of the revolution was seen as the only potent means against the despotic and hegemonic Tsar, who had no stomach for any democratic process.

The prime intent was to bestow power in the hands of the exploited and marginalized, irrespective of their configuration. With egalitarianism as its basis, the idea was to enforce societal control over the aspects of governance and nation building. As per Leninism, the revolution was to be steered in, over several phases. These were People's revolution leading to Socialism, which eventually was to pave way for Marxism based on commune. The call made by Lenin had mass appeal in the sense that the commoners could identify with the ideological underpinning, thus bringing in their optimum participation. Lenin's efforts to embrace the burning issues were translated into three slogans (land, bread and peace)- "land to the tiller", "bread to the hungry" and "rest to the army". The effective tool of 'mass mobilisation', made Lenin an international icon and inspired 'left revolutions', across the world.

Prevalent conditions in China that provided background to Mao led People's revolution, were marked by predominant and marginalised peasantry, nascent industrialization, competing colonial powers (USA, Japan, France etc) and a turmoil-ridden society. In such ripe conditions for a revolution, Mao too, like Lenin, opted to take up societal cause for developing a mass following.

Success of left revolutions in various parts of the world inspired the political left in India to strive for a similar feat in order to liberate the exploited class. However, the planning lacked deliberations and efforts were not made to mould the foreign experience to Indian conditions. Unlike Lenin's methodology of enabling the desired changes in a phased manner, the left political class in India strived to outdo (the prevailing) capitalism, imperialism and feudalism in one stroke.

The inception of Naxal ideology could be traced to the advocacies of the peasant leader Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, who gave a call for United Front (samyukt morcha) comprising of peasantry and the working class. The movement was dovetailed into the Indian freedom struggle and aimed at a three-pronged objective of peasant revolution, national independence and liberation for downtrodden. An effort towards this was also attempted in the Telangana movement. Unfortunately, a united front could not manifest in Telangana due to weak, divided and dissent-ridden leadership.

The Communist Party of India, drawing lessons from the Telangana movement, wrongly, inferred that

a socialist revolution in India could only be initiated at the behest of capitalists, rather than as people's revolution. Resultantly, CPI supported the Nehruvian model of mixed economy that had elements of public and private sector. This approach did not find appeal amongst the entire party, leading to a split in CPI and giving rise to CPI (Marxist), followed by falling apart of the Charu Mazumdar-led faction called Naxalites. Initially, the anti establishment political tone of various resistance movements was anti-congress. However, post 1967 several non-Congress government(s) were unable to make a mark, thereby establishing that liberation for the marginalised and exploited class had to be anti-ruling class as against merely being anti-Congress. In other words, pitching the ruling class versus the rest gained ground and continues to be the tenor of Naxal movement till today.

The Naxalites of late 60s, led by Charu Mazumdar have often been termed as 'men in hurry'. Romanticism was the prime motive for this section, with little understanding of ideology; they did not gauge the cruciality of 'mass mobilisation' and went on to commit grave blunders while pursuing their version of revolution. Firstly, in their wisdom, they rechristened India 'Dakshin Desh', China being 'Uttar Desh' and Chairman Mao as the Chairman for both Dakshin and Uttar desh. Secondly, they carried out relentless and unwarranted class annihilation, thereby segmenting their own support base. These steps did not go down too well with the masses and an opportunity to develop the crucial mass following never came their way. Also, in a revolutionary bid to encircle cities from the country-side, these ill prepared romantics with urban background, holed themselves up in cities, and were consequently neutralised. With no emphasis on mass mobilization, this initial phase of Naxalism was smothered by early 70s.

As in China, had Naxalism gained roots in India in 30s, things would have been different. By late 60s, when the ideology gained a foothold in India, capitalism had made substantial inroads. At that time in history, blind replication of Mao's model, without a mass mobilisation was attempted by Charu Mazumdar, to no avail. In fact, the Chinese premier Chou En Lai had pulled up one of the Naxal leaders of that time during his visit to China, for attempting blind replication of the Chinese model.

In the 80s and 90s, a number of Naxal groups were active, mainly in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh. The leaders of those times like Vinod Misra, Nagbhushan Patnaik, Nagi Reddy drew out correct lessons from failure of the preceding phase and laid due emphasis on mass mobilisation. The aspects of class annihilation and armed insurrection were somewhat diluted, resulting in several sections of the society aligning with the movement, including the people from intelligentsia as also segments belonging to the JP movement. However, any semblance of a united front (samyukt morcha) comprising of peasants and working class was still missing and therefore the movement could not be transformed into a populist one. For example, in rural Bihar, social churning led to caste wars, and class war as a base of Naxalism lost ground. Private armies and militias (funded by the rich) belonging to various castes sprung up, resulting into clashes amongst the lower strata of society. A common thread of cause that could have provided a platform for mobilisation was missing, mainly because of the prevalent constitutional democracy and equity inspite of being perceived to be lopsided. Within the ambit of the Naxalite movement, a conflict existed between short and long term gains of the rural poor. Shorter one being destruction of resources and infrastructure of the establishment and the landed class, which hampered the long term benefits of amelioration of the conditions of poor by dissuading investments and development. Incidentally, the said conflict exists till date, which has seen shrinking of ideological bandwidth of the movement.

The present phase of Naxalism has no class war as its basis and is mainly directed against the Government, with the conspicuously missing ideological edifice to stand upon. CPI (Maoist) the present vanguard continues to remain in the shadow of old ideological structure that is not synchronous to the façade of 'tribal cause' that they claim to champion. Periodic spate of Naxal violence in the central-east tribal belt of India can be compared to the flicker of a flame before it extinguishes. The movement can survive till the time they don't become a major threat to the sovereignty of the nation. Also, their policy documents appear to be 'Stalinist' with the predominant tone of centralisation and secession; aspects that remain unacceptable not only to the Government but also to the people who form their support base.

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