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The State and the Maoist Challenge in India

Christophe Jaffrelot



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The State and the Maoist Challenge in India

Abstract

The Maoist movement in India began to develop in the late 1960s, taking advantage of the political space provided when the Communist Party of India (Marxist) abandoned its revolutionary fight. In the early 1970s the Maoist, also called Naxalites, were the victims of intense factionalism and severe repression which led the militants to retreat to the tribal zones of Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, their two pockets of resistance during the 1980s. This strategy explains not only the transformation of the Indian Maoist sociology (which was led originally by intellectuals but became increasingly plebian) but also its return to power in the late 1990s. That decade, notable for economic liberalization, witnessed the exploitation of mineral resources in the tribal regions to the detriment of the interests of the inhabitants. The growth in Maoism during the 2000s can be explained also by a reunification under the banner of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) which was created in 2004. The reaction of the government in New Delhi to this phenomenon which affects half the Indian states has been to impose repressive measures. In contrast the Maoists see themselves as the defenders of a State of rights and justice.

L'Etat face au défi maoïste en Inde

Résumé

Le mouvement maoïste s'est développé en Inde à partir de la fin des années 1960 à la faveur du recentrage du Communist Party of India (Marxist) qui lui a ouvert un espace politique en abandonnant le combat révolutionnaire. Les maoïstes, également appelés naxalites, ont été victimes au début des années 1970 d'un factionnalisme intense et d'une répression sévère qui a conduit les militants à se replier sur la zone tribale de l'Andhra Pradesh et du Bihar, les deux poches de résistance du mouvement dans les années 1980. Cette stratégie explique non seulement la transformation de la sociologie du maoïsme indien (qui, d'abord porté par des élites intellectuelles est devenu plus plébéien) mais aussi son retour en force à partir des années 1990. Cette décennie marquée par la libéralisation économique voit en effet la mise en valeur agressive des ressources minières de la zone tribale en question au mépris des droits de ses habitants. L'essor du maoïsme dans les années 2000 s'explique toutefois aussi par un retour à l'unité, sous l'égide du Communist Party of India (Maoist) créé en 2004. Face à ce phénomène qui touche maintenant la moitié des Etats indiens, le gouvernement de New Delhi tend à opter de nouveau pour la répression alors que les maoïstes se veulent les défenseurs d'un Etat de droit plus juste.

The State and the Maoist Challenge in India

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The communist movement in India is one of the oldest in the world. The Communist Party of India (CPI) took shape back in 1924 out of small groups started abroad by Manabendra Nath Roy, a former Bengali revolutionary who took part in the second Komintern congress in 1920 in Moscow. In 1948, just after independence, the CPI went down the road of revolutionary armed struggle, as evident from its mobilization in the Telangana region in today's Andhra Pradesh. There, the communists took control of three thousand villages and handed administration over to the peasants. A million acres were redistributed to some six thousand of them. But New Delhi sent in troops to conduct counterinsurgency operations that would last until 1951. With the failure of the Telangana revolution—etched in gold on the communist memory—the CPI resigned itself to entering electoral politics and became the main opposition force in Parliament the following year. But revolutionary armed struggle continued to have many advocates among followers of Maoism, who believed the party was going down the wrong track—even demeaning itself—by playing by the rules of the bourgeois democracy.

The Maoist stream in the Indian communist movement would gradually become a magnet to those who advocated the revolutionary path after the split in 1964, often analyzed as the result of the divorce between Moscow and Peking. In fact, the large majority of the CPI leadership, starting with Secretary General Shripat Amrit Dange, wished to remain aligned with the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. And the breakaway members did not all support Peking's cause wholeheartedly, but their leaders accused the party management of joining in parliamentary politics with no other ambition than to influence bourgeois democracy from the inside, whereas in their eyes the aim was to build a revolutionary party. Moscow, indeed, was strongly encouraging the CPI to back Nehru's Congress government. In fact, the 1964 split, which gave birth to the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M)¹, however, placed the more centrist communist leaders before a delicate choice. Many of them from Bengal (such as Jyoti Basu) and Kerala (such as Elamkulam Manakkal Sankaran

¹ The usual abbreviations for the parties that grew out of the 1964 split are CPI(M) for the pro-Chinese party and CPI for the party that remained loyal to Moscow's line. The CPI (ML) was formed in 1969 and would become the closest faction to China and the most radical.

Namboodiripad) opted for the CPI(M) due to the number of breakaway members in these two strongholds. But the new party did not explicitly lean toward Peking until 1967 and continued to play along with the “bourgeois democracy”, especially under the influence of the “centrists”.

It was in this context that the Maoist movement was born in India in the late 1960s. The CPI(M)'s and then the CPI's electioneering shift to the right had made room on the left for “true” revolutionaries who claimed descent from the Great Helmsman. This initial phase, short-lived due to fierce but foundational reprisals, was followed by another phase in which the Indian Maoist movement became divided, but diversified as well, even “vernacularized”, as some of its currents ceased to be embodied in the upper caste urban intelligentsia, but instead took to the villages in search of a rear base and began to blend with untouchable and tribal movements whose demands were complementary. With a broader popular but fragmented component, Indian Maoism reverted to the path of unity and expansion in the early 2000s in a context transformed by economic liberalization: not only did this trend widen social and geographic gaps, but it went along with the exploitation of natural resources that often implies displacement of rural populations whose land is thus confiscated. The Maoist intensification of their struggle has thrown up a paradoxical challenge to India: whereas the insurgents are mainly demanding justice (including in the context of the rule of law which theoretically characterizes Indian democracy), the authorities tend to make undue use of force at the expense of human rights.

NAXALISM, OR THE GENESIS OF INDIAN MAOISM

If the increasingly bourgeois attitude of the CPI was one of the reasons for the 1964 split that saw the birth of the CPI(M), the latter's electioneering soon disheartened diehard Maoists who had joined up to make revolution, starting with Charu Mazumdar, a party cadre from Shiliguri district north of West Bengal. Imprisoned in 1965 for subversive activity, he wrote an essay, *Nine Deeds*, in which he denounced the party's drifts and suggested an alternative inspired by the Great Helmsman: an underground, rural-based party fit to carry out armed revolution². Although he managed to bring together a circle of loyalists in his area, Mazumdar would never gain the ear of the CPI(M) leadership, which was fielding candidates in the 1967 elections—successfully in Kerala, a little less so in West Bengal, where the party

² See R. Ray, *The Naxalites and their Ideology*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1992[1988], p. 84. Kanu Sanyal dates Mazumdar's first writings criticizing the CPI(M) leadership to 1964, and adds that it had sent a delegation to Shiliguri to investigate him. His supporters—including Sanyal—stood by him (S. Chakravarti, *Red Sun. Travels in Naxalite Country*, New Delhi, Penguin, 2008, p. 156).

nevertheless was in a position to form a coalition government (with partners, moreover, who in no way shared its ideology). This alliance strategy prompted it to join hands in other states with explicitly conservative or Hindu nationalist parties in order to oust the Congress party from power. At the very moment when this approach, which Mazumdar accused of being opportunistic, enabled CPI(M) leader Jyoti Basu to become Interior Minister in Calcutta, a peasant jacquerie broke out in Naxalbari, in Shiliguri district.

Although Mazumdar himself did not take part in the uprising, it had been orchestrated by one of his lieutenants, Kanu Sanyal³. On March 3, 1967, his group lent its support to three sharecroppers from the village of Naxalbari who forcibly took over a *jotedar's* (landholder) stock of rice⁴. One of the communist militants who had taken part in the operation, Punjab-da, dates the start of the movement to May 24, 1967 in Naxalbari⁵.

In a neighboring village, Bengajote, to which the movement had spread, eleven people were killed during the police crackdown⁶: “Naxalbari had its first martyrs” (*dixit* Punjab-da). The uprising lasted 52 days and claimed some fifty lives. No fewer than six communist ministers made the trip from Calcutta to urge the peasants to calm down. This outburst of violence, immediately praised by *Radio Peking*, marked the start of a wide scale movement henceforth called “Naxalite”, after the name of the village where it began.

Only two and a half years later, in November 1967, Mazumdar and his followers left the CPI(M) to form the All India Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries (AICCR). The CPI(M) proceeded to record mass defections in Andhra Pradesh (6,000 people, or one-sixth of its members), in West Bengal (5,000), in Kerala (4,000) and in Bihar (about one thousand)⁷. The breakaway was sealed in 1969 with the creation of the CPI(ML), the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), unofficially on Lenin’s birthday, April 22, officially on May 1st at a huge rally in Calcutta. Kanu Sanyal, who had just spent several months in prison—during Jyoti Basu’s tenure as Deputy Chief Minister—and who returned

³ Kanu Sanyal, the movement’s last historical leader, committed suicide on March 23, 2010 in the village of Seftullajote, near Naxalbari, to which he had finally retired and led a the life of a recluse. Haunted by remorse for the violence perpetrated in the 1960s, he was also critical of the recent killings by those claiming to walk in the footsteps of the early Maoists. See <http://www.insafbulletin.net/archives/717>

⁴ P. Singh, *The Naxalite Movement in India*, New Delhi, Rupa & Co, 1995, p. 3.

⁵ “‘Landless peasants had had enough’. Anger had been brewing over scarcity of food, issues of landlessness and bonded labour for a year. ‘There was talk of revolution, but they just wanted to assert their rights’, he recalls. ‘They had taken over land. Then the police came, called by the jotedar. As soon as we heard about it, we set off with whatever we had—swords, bows and arrows, spears, farming implements. The people with us, as soon as they saw the group of police and landlords, they let the arrows fly. One hit the landlord, another hit someone in the leg. The police ran away. That was the beginning’”. (quoted in S. Chakravarti, *op. cit.*, p. 139).

⁶ Rabindra Ray mentions ten deaths, nine of them tribals (five women and four men) and one a police officer (R. Ray, *op. cit.*, p. 96).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

underground for three years (during which he would travel to China and meet Mao)⁸, announced the birth of a “truly revolutionary” party drawing inspiration from Mazumdar⁹.

The latter strongly believed a party organization was essential. He had clearly expressed his thoughts on the matter in 1967:

“...revolution can never succeed without a revolutionary party, a party which is firmly rooted in the thought of Chairman Mao Tsetung, party composed of millions of workers, peasants and middle-class youths inspired by the ideal of self-sacrifice...”¹⁰

Although there was nothing very new about this—Bhagat Singh had already called for such a party and sacrificed his life to the cause¹¹—Mazumdar innovated by introducing to the practice of revolution a previously uncharacteristic sense of method. Ray says he was a “technicist”¹². Mazumdar was too driven and in a rush to be methodical, but he introduced method—even a method—in the communist approach in which the pursuit of revolution had until then remained very incantatory or improvised. The method was first of all Chairman Mao’s. He had outlined ten “operational principles” that can be summarized as follows:

- 1 – first attack dispersed enemies;
- 2 – take small and mid-sized towns—not large ones;
- 3 – make annihilating the enemy the priority goal;
- 4 – in each battle, mobilize forces superior to the enemy’s to encircle and eliminate him;
- 5 – never undertake any battle unprepared;
- 6 – do not fear self-sacrifice or fatigue;
- 7 – attack the enemy when he is on the move;
- 8 – in towns, attack weak points—do not tackle the best-defended places;
- 9 – rearm with weapons captured from the enemy;
- 10 – use the time between two attacks to rest and consolidate gains.

⁸ According to an interview published in the *Times of India* in May 2007 and again upon Kanu Sanyal’s death, Sanyal claimed to have had a 45-minute meeting with Mao and Zhou Enlai. “Mao’s advice was: whatever you learn in China, try to forget it. Go to your own country, try to understand the specific situation and carry the revolution forward” (*Times of India*, March 23, 2010). Heeding this advice, Sanyal disagreed with Mazumdar, who wanted to follow the Maoist “annihilation of class enemies” line to the letter.

⁹ R. Ray, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

¹⁰ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 144.

¹¹ Bhagat Singh (1907-1931) is considered to be one of the first Indian revolutionaries influenced by Marxism. He was hanged by the British for the murder of a policeman. See C. Jaffrelot, “Inde : la révolution introuvable ? Des révolutionnaires en quête de légitimité au pays de Gandhi (1895-1935)”, in H. Bozarslan, G. Bataillon and C. Jaffrelot, *Passions révolutionnaires. Amérique latine, Moyen-Orient, Inde*, Paris, EHESS, 2011.

¹² “What distinguished Mazumdar’s thought was rather the technicist (perhaps one should say also mechanical) reduction that made it possible to arrive at a line of action from concerns that were principally symbolic. In having arrived at the interpretation of Revolution as technique, he had cut through the confusions with which the leadership of the CPI(M), and indeed the dissidents as well, were having to grapple” (R. Ray, *op. cit.*, p. 130).

Mazumdar did not realize that in such conditions, revolution would be a long and arduous task—for which Kanu Sanyal criticized him from the start¹³—but Maoism offered him a revolutionary method that could be applied to the Indian countryside. From its very beginning, in the “political resolution” of its founding congress, the CPI(ML) considered that the main opposition in Indian society pitted feudal landlords against the peasants. Priority thus had to be given to guerrilla actions in rural surroundings. In February 1970, Mazumdar published in *Liberation*, the mouthpiece of the CPI(ML), a program-setting article entitled “A few words about guerrilla actions”, urging party comrades to follow the steps below:

- conduct prior propaganda activity among the local inhabitants by word of mouth;
- form seven-member units, including a commander, by selecting the fiercest opponents to local class enemies after having whispered in their ear “don’t you think it a good thing to finish off such and such...”;
- carefully observe the movements of the “class enemy” to be eliminated;
- prepare a shelter far removed from the place where the action is to take place;
- kill, disperse, and return after a time to induce the villagers to rejoice at the liquidation of an exploiter through a whisper campaign and take advantage of the popularity of this action to recruit new members and undertake new actions¹⁴.

Their aim is both to strike terror in the local exploiters and thus identify truly reliable militants, as Mazumdar believed “he who has not dipped his hand in the blood of class enemies can hardly be called a communist¹⁵”. These “annihilation campaigns”, which began in 1970, show systematic and doctrinal recourse to violence. According to Mazumdar, “in the present era the sole criterion to judge whether a party is revolutionary or not is whether the party is directing an armed struggle or not¹⁶”. Another component of his method had to do with his obsession with secrecy, which harked back to the underground revolutionary societies founded at the turn of the 20th century. Mao’s thought had to be spread among the public, but as it was subversive, this had to be done clandestinely:

“The foremost duty of the revolutionaries is to spread and propagate the thought of Chairman Mao and to try to intensify the peasants’ class struggle. Consequently, the Party organization must organize propaganda by means of secret meetings.”¹⁷

Who were these revolutionaries? Mainly young upper caste urban dwellers—most of them students—who joined the CPI(ML) out of idealism or a taste for adventure, and from which Mazumdar believe a new man would emerge¹⁸:

¹³ Sanyal thus confessed to Chakravarti: “...he wanted revolution. Instant revolution. I didn’t believe in that” (quoted in S. Chakravarti, *op. cit.*, p. 156).

¹⁴ P. Singh, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28.

¹⁵ Quoted in R. Ray, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

¹⁶ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹⁷ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹⁸ Chakravarti transcribed several interviews of Naxalite veterans in which the sincerity and romantic dimension of their commitment is clear and which sometimes led them to take incredible risks (see in particular the interview with his own father-in-law, in S. Chakravarti, *op. cit.*, p. 122 ff.).

“Only by waging class struggle—the battle of annihilation—the new man will be created, the new man who will defy death and will be free from all thoughts of self interest. And with this death defying spirit he will go close to the enemy, snatch his rifle, avenge the martyrs and the peoples army will emerge. To go close to the enemy it is necessary to conquer all thought of self. And this can be achieved only by the blood of martyrs. That inspires and creates new men out of the fighters, fill [sic] with class hatred...”¹⁹

Mazumdar’s revolutionary fervor led him to open up several fronts. The one with the greatest potential of all proved to be in Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh, where a peasant resistance movement had already been active in the early 1960s. Tribal peasants had then risen up against landholders and moneylenders who had enslaved them, led by Satyanarayana, a schoolteacher from the plains. After having won some land and a reduction in interest rates, he suspended the movement. It got a fresh start in October 1967 when two Adivasis (aboriginals) on their way to a communist meeting were murdered by landholders. Satyanarayana organized about one hundred squads (*dalam*) of insurgents. Starting in March 1968, about 800 men entered the armed rebellion. In the liberated zones, these insurgents organized people’s courts in charge of dispensing justice, particularly to try and sentence the local oppressors. Satyanarayana went to Calcutta, joined the CPI(ML) and continued the struggle not only by plundering the local oppressors, but also by leading targeted attacks (29 police officers were slain between December 20, 1968 and January 30, 1969). Charu Mazumdar came to the area in March 1969 and perceived it as fertile ground to create “India’s Yanan”, after the name of the city where Mao had set up his headquarters from 1935 to 1949²⁰.

Mazumdar was in a greater hurry than Mao. He diversified the fronts, not only in rural areas but also in cities. On March 3, 1970, a cycle of urban violence began with the attack on seven movie theaters in Calcutta billing *Prem Pujari*, a patriotic film that denigrated China—whose attack that set off the war of 1962 was present in everyone’s memory.

In both rural and urban areas, a series of raids were organized, taking the form of targeted killings of landholders, moneylenders and police officers. The movement spread to neighboring states, in particular Bihar where in 1971 fifty Naxalites attacked the Singhbhum police headquarters, killing two police officers and making off with nine rifles, a success that marked the beginning of the People’s Liberation Army.

This early Naxalite movement, which ran from 1967 to 1972, was put down in blood. Until 1970, the CPI(M) government in West Bengal—where Jyoti Basu was Deputy Chief Minister in charge of the Ministry of Finances—appeared rather conciliatory with men it still sometimes regarded as former brothers in arms. After the government in Calcutta was dismissed and President’s Rule decreed over the state, repression became fierce; Operation Steeplechase was launched on July 1st, 1971. Naxalite leaders were arrested or killed one

¹⁹ Quoted in R. Ray, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

²⁰ P. Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

after the other²¹, with Congress organizing its own volunteer militia led by its main local leader, Siddhartha Shankar Ray²².

Arrested following a tip from a source who remains unknown to this day, Mazumdar died in prison—officially of a heart attack—on July 28, 1972²³. At the same time, China betrayed the Bengali cause by supporting Pakistani domination over its province to the east. Peking's attitude did not stop Bangladesh from being created with India's help, but will be costly in terms of popularity to the Indian communist movement, which was mostly Bengali at that time.

NAXALITE TRAJECTORIES: FRAGMENTATION AND VERNACULARIZATION OF A REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT

After Mazumdar's death and the repression of the early 1970, the Naxalite movement was weakened by another wave of coercion linked to the declaration of the state of emergency in June 1975. This decision, which amounted to suspending democracy for a period of eighteen months, was motivated by a growing popular protest against Indira Gandhi. The Emergency moreover resulted in the arrest of several opposition leaders. But it also offered a means of going after underground forces such as the Sikh separatists and the Naxalites. Weakened, the latter tore themselves apart through internal conflicts that in fact began at the very founding of the CPI(ML), the Indian extreme left being unmatched for its doctrinal disputes and factionalism. In the 1970s, one of the debated topics had to do with elections. The CPI(ML) decided to enter the running in 1977 to openly combat Indira Gandhi's authoritarianism. Satyanarayan Singh, who since 1971 had led a faction opposed to the Mazumdar line—and which retained the CPI(ML) label—expressly dissociated himself from the violent reputation attached to the Naxalites:

“We wish to state emphatically that it is not our party which indulged in violent activities first at any state of its activities. It is not our party which chose to go underground. It was the policy of ‘kill and burn all’ pursued by the Congress regime that was responsible for driving us underground. We wish to state categorically here that violence is not our ideology. Our ideology is Marxism-Leninism.”²⁴

²¹ In early 1972, there were 4,000 Naxalites in jail in West Bengal, 2,000 in Bihar and 1,400 in Andhra Pradesh (P. Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 91).

²² R. Ray, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

²³ Prakash Singh, former police chief of Uttar Pradesh who followed the Naxalites as an intelligence officer, remembers having seen Mazumdar at that time: “He was a shattered man by that time; his lieutenants had already deserted him. I had occasion to meet him before he breathed his last. It was amazing that such a lean and frail man had so much of fire within him. He was crestfallen and also perhaps disillusioned” (P. Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 91).

²⁴ Quoted in P. Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

This reflects the communists' traditional discomfort with taking responsibility for violent acts. Other veteran Naxalites went even further. From their prison cells, former Mazumdar lieutenants such as Kanu Sanyal called on Bengali voters not only not to boycott elections, but even to vote for the CPI(M). As for Satyanarayan Singh, he brought the CPI(ML) into the electoral arena by fielding three candidates in West Bengal, one in Bihar and another in Punjab. He won a seat in the West Bengal provincial assembly²⁵.

The power of the temptation to enter electoral politics—which however was only true of a minority of Naxalites—attests to the persistent malaise that the revolutionary route brings out among many Indian communists. After the CPI, and later the CPI(M), the CPI(ML) in turn indulged in what the other Naxalites called “parliamentary cretinism”. The decision to go down the road of elections could probably be explained as much by the hope of changing Indian society at the polls as by the failures of the revolutionary strategy—at a time when the most impatient Naxalites were becoming aware that it was very hard to apply methods in one place that had been successful in another. Mohan Ram, a historian of Indian communism, thus noted that the successes of armed struggle in Srikakulam—tempered by Satyanarayana's tragic end who was killed by the police in July 1970—gave rise to ill-advised shortcuts:

“The same tactics were tried indiscriminately in other Andhra Pradesh districts where there was no tradition of mass movement. The results were disastrous: the guerrilla actions were unrelated to peasant demands. Squads belonging to one region would travel scores of miles to carry out an annihilation raid, and then flee to another region. In the absence of political follow-up work, the raids appeared to the local peasants no different from acts of banditry, devoid of political significance.”²⁶

Beyond the failures of armed struggle and the temptation to take the road of electoral politics, the Naxalites who gave up the revolutionary path could also be lured by the government's overtures. After having severely repressed the insurgency in the 1970s, and after power changed hands in 1977 following the Emergency, the Indian government resolved itself to negotiating with factions that had grown out of the fragmentation of the Naxalite movement—which in any event were no longer in a position of strength. But although there were a growing number of “renegades”, those who did not disarm but on the contrary became more professional by correcting past errors were increasing in number as well. Such diversity in trajectories can be seen in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, the movement's two strongholds in the 1980-1990s, where the Naxalite strand vernacularized by establishing stronger ties with Dalit (untouchable) and Adivasi (indigenous or tribal) movements respectively. The sociology of Indian Maoism, until then dominated by urban, upper caste intellectuals—especially by *bhadralok* (“noble people” in Bengali) students, was changing.

²⁵ Santosh Rana was reelected in the constituency of Gopiballavpur, precisely where the CPI(ML) had unleashed armed struggle on the Naxalbari model. It should be noted that the CPI(ML) supported the Akali Dal in Punjab and elsewhere the Janata Party—born of the merger of most of the opposition parties to defeat Mrs. Gandhi (P. Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 100).

²⁶ M. Ram, “The communist movement in India”, in K. Gough and H. P. Sharma (eds), *Imperialism and Revolution in South Asia*, New York and London, Monthly Review Press, 1973, p. 351.

The People's War Group in Andhra Pradesh or the Defense of the Adivasis

In Andhra Pradesh, one of Mazumdar's former lieutenants, Kondapalli Seetharamaiah, left the organization he had helped to found after his leader's death to form the CPI(ML)-People's War Group in 1980. But it was all the better to follow the total annihilation path laid out by Mazumdar, which he believed the other Naxalites were tending to stray from. In the space of a few years, the PWG—to use the most common abbreviation—would carve out a number of strongholds in the tribal zone where Adivasis, most of them landless peasants, were victims of exploitation bordering on slavery. In the late 1980s, the PWG set up parallel governments in Karimnagar, Warangal and Adilabad districts. It collected taxes, set fines on wealthy oppressors—whether landholders or businessmen—and held people's courts to deal with cases of economic exploitation as well as those involving corrupt civil servants or private cases such as female harassment and dowry cases. Under pressure from these *gorakala dora* ("lords of the bushes")²⁷, farm worker wages were increased and some land was redistributed, achievements that heightened their popularity, as did their decision to forcibly shut down drinking establishments in areas they controlled to combat alcoholism. The value system of this peasantry fighting for its rights and to live in dignity was expressed in the repertoire of a Naxalite minstrel, Gaddar, who traveled the roads of Andhra to denounce the condition of the masses and point the way to emancipation²⁸.

As its name implies, the PWG is a guerrilla movement that gradually acquired highly sophisticated weaponry. In 1989, it for the first time used AK-47s and remote-controlled landmines (probably supplied by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, LTTE, to attack the police, killing seven in Adilabad district. Nor did the group hesitate to take hostages to obtain the release of arrested comrades or to inflict bodily punishment on informants by amputating hands or feet. The number of "Naxalite incidents" rose from 53 in 1981 to 753 in 1990, following a nearly linear curve, with the number of deaths increasing from ten to 94. In response, the government unleashed a severe repression campaign. The PWG was disbanded in 1992, year in which 248 Naxalites were slain and 3,434 cadres arrested. The number of "incidents" thereafter declined sharply, from 2,230 in 1991 to 212 in 1992.

Significantly, the government aimed to hold talks as soon as it believed the movement had been weakened. It legalized the PWG in 1995 before banning it once again the following year.

²⁷ The Naxalites' choice of this name was tongue-in-cheek, *dora* also being a word that refers to landholders in Andhra Pradesh.

²⁸ P. Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

Naxalism in Bihar, an Army to Defend the Dalits?

In Bihar, Naxalites had been extremely active since the early 1980s, adopting a *modus operandi* based on mass action and caste issues, which were highly salient in the province. Charu Mazumdar did not disregard caste. Abolition of the caste system was part of the forty-point program adopted by the CPI(ML) in May 1970²⁹, even if Mazumdar, like all communists, considered class as the primary unit of analysis of social relations. Some Bihar Naxalites abide faithfully to this aspect of Mazumdar's legacy.

First of these were the members of the Dakshin Desh group (group of the "Southern land" vis-a-vis its big Chinese brother in the North) which did not merge with the CPI(ML) when the latter formed, but instead founded the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) in 1969³⁰. This movement opted for mass consciousness raising campaigns rather than the armed raids preferred by Mazumdar and his heirs in the PWG. It thus organized squads of urban militants who went into the villages at nightfall to politicize the peasants. The movement built a military wing in the 1980s, the Lal Raksha Dal (Red Defense Corps), about ten thousand members strong, with five hundred of them full time. Its members were primarily from lower castes and target oppressors, who not only exploit the peasants but were also from the upper castes³¹. The Bhumihar, a caste of farmers with large land holdings claiming to have the same status as Brahmins, was thus a favorite target of the Bihar Naxalites partly due to the rank they claimed in the caste hierarchy. And indeed, although the situation of poor peasants with respect to the means of production continued to be the main motive behind the violence, it is colored by caste antagonisms that were more prominent in Bihar than elsewhere and are behind a strong tradition of *vendetta* and reprisals. So much so that the victims of these attacks in the 1980s founded Savarna Morcha (Upper Caste Liberation Front). A number of castes similarly formed their private militias (*jati sena*).

The MCC eventually came to use the same methods as the PWG, meting out justice and inflicting corporal punishment on the guilty.

The other components of Bihar Naxalism took other routes. The Liberation group went down the electoral road via its Indian People's Front, which fielded candidates in 1985 and won eight seats in 1989, seven of them in the Bihar state assembly and one in the national Parliament, a record that was not likely to be emulated.

Although the first two decades of the movement's history thus describe a sort of bell curve, finally reaching a plateau in the case of Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, the 1990s saw a resurgence affecting not only the historic areas of Naxalism, but also new geographic zones that until then had remained untouched by the phenomenon.

²⁹ Cited in Inquilab Zindabad [Long Live the Revolution—name of a Naxalite group], "The red sun is rising: Revolutionary struggle in India", in K. Gough and H. P. Sharma (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 367.

³⁰ See the MCC section on the Maoist Resistance (<http://maoistresistance.blogspot.com/>) blog posted from Kerala by a sympathizer, which moves from one mirror site to another to dodge hackers (among the previous versions that are still online: <http://resistanceindia.blogspot.com>). Other sympathizer blogs (<http://peoples-march.blogspot.com/> and <http://naxalrevolution.blogspot.com/> in particular) show to what extent the Indian Maoists are able to carry their struggle into the virtual jungle.

³¹ P. Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

XXIST CENTURY REVOLUTIONARIES OR THE NAXAL REVIVAL

Since the start of the 2000s, the “Naxal” movement, to take up the new terminology used in the press, has experienced an upsurge, due in particular to an unprecedented effort toward unity. After decades of division, the Maoist forces of India have grouped together in a single movement to implement a somewhat different strategy from previous ones.

The CPI(Maoist), a “Single Party” on a Methodical Conquest of the Countryside—and the Cities

On October 14, 2004, after two years of negotiations, the leader of the People’s War Group renamed People’s War CPI(ML), Muppala Laxman Rao (*alias* Ganapati) and the secretary-general of the Maoist Coordination Committee of India (MCCI) central committee, Kishan (a pseudonym), announced the merger of their two organizations and the birth of the CPI(Maoist), of which “Ganapati” took the lead³². Their joint communiqué was issued together with a program document that Mao himself could have penned:

“This New Democratic Revolution will be carried out and completed through armed agrarian revolutionary war i.e. the Protracted People’s War with area wise [sic] seizure of power remaining as its central task. The Protracted People’s War will be carried out by encircling the cities from the countryside and thereby finally capturing them. Hence the countryside as well as the Protracted People’s War will remain as the center of gravity of the party’s work from the very beginning.”³³

While building on the work already accomplished, the CPI(Maoist) would also innovate, demonstrating in rural areas greater professionalism than some of its predecessors and also turning its attention to the cities.

As R. K. Majumder, director general of West Bengal armed police, explained, the XXIst century Naxals had little to do with the *shokher naxals* (hobby naxals) of the 1960s and 1970s³⁴. The romance that led young students down the revolutionary path had given way to cold strategic calculations that were not devoid of some degree of revolutionary ideal. From their elders’ mistakes, the new Naxals have simply learned that they must really implement the methods Mao recommended and this with greater rigor, not seeking to cut corners as

³² Muppalla Laxman Rao, alias Chandrasekhar, alias Ganapati, is a former schoolteacher 51 years of age. From Karimnagar district in northwest Andhra Pradesh, he went underground in the 1970s. India’s press and television networks released video footage on October 24, 2009 (dated and probably leaked by the police) revealing his face for the first time.

³³ A text taken up in the Constitution of the CPI(Maoist), “Maoist documents”, <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/maoist/documents/papers/partyconstitution.htm> (accessed on June 9, 2011).

³⁴ Quoted in S. Chakravarti, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

Charu Mazumdar had done. This change of course could already be detected in a document put out in 2002 by the People's War CPI(ML), *Social Conditions and Tactics - A report based on preliminary social investigation conducted by survey teams during August-October 2001 in the Perspective Area*. The "perspective area" referred to is in Karnataka, but could also be anywhere else in India. From the report one can deduce that when the Naxals identify a new area to liberate, they first examine its sociology, the land survey, indebtedness and agricultural prices. Particular attention is focused on landless peasants. In this case, they are usually Dalits and Adivasis—as often the case in India—subject to domination by upper castes, Brahmins and Vokkaliga (the dominant caste there), a detailed list of which is given in the report (including which Brahmin landlord is "known to break two whipping sticks on the backs of his tenants")³⁵. Landless peasants are exploited to the point of being paid up to 15% less than the legal minimum wage. The land survey recorded land farmed by wealthy peasants having no title deeds and therefore in breach of the law. Yearly interest rates are 30% higher and since the moneylenders are landlords, the "marginal" or landless peasants indebted to them are often reduced to giving up all or part of their land to them, or else they succumb to a version of slavery euphemistically known in India as bonded labor. The decline in agricultural prices affecting crops grown in the area (pepper, cardamom, coffee) varied between 40 and 70% over a two-year period, resulting in a drop in farm wages of between 25 and 40%. Lastly, the report takes stock of the available weapons in the village. On the basis of this detailed analysis, its authors suggest a two-part strategy. First, the aim is to create secret organizations for women, *coolies* (mostly landless peasants and Dalits) and Adivasis to familiarize them with the Naxals' program. This political work is seconded by military action. The movement's armed wing—the People's Guerrilla Army—is thus to establish bridgeheads for groups of villages, each squad having to cover 800 km², a network of four squads theoretically able to cover 3,200 km²³⁶.

In many areas targeted by the Naxals, political work is supplemented by social work. Like fundamentalist groups, they have become experts in charity work, owing to the state's neglect of its social duties³⁷. Once they identify potential recruits, they look after their family, pay them wages, organize their marriage, and so on³⁸. Beyond that, they sometimes set up a parallel health care and educational systems, however rudimentary they may be. Once the area is partially liberated, this charity work is supplemented by economic development action. Priority is everywhere given to land redistribution so that plots are owned by those who farm them³⁹. In fulfillment of this goal, a number of judgments have been pronounced by revolutionary tribunals similar to those held in the 1970-1990s mentioned above. Beyond that, and this is a recent development, the Naxals have organized the economic development

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ See C. Jaffrelot (dir.), "Les 'bonnes œuvres' des extrémistes", *Critique internationale*, n°4, Summer 1999.

³⁸ S. Chakravarti, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

³⁹ The Naxals enforce a 5-acre limit on land holding ("Spring thunder", *Tehelka*, March 19, 2005: http://www.tehelka.com/story_main11.asp?filename=Ne031905SPRING.asp).

of the area under their control via “Village Development Committees”, promoting a virtually self-reliant system that drills its own wells, builds dams, roads, irrigation canals, etc.⁴⁰.

In recent years, in addition to this highly sophisticated rural strategy, further action has been directed at the cities. In 2004 the newly founded CPI(Maoist) produced an action plan outlining its urban strategy with great precision⁴¹. It is stated from the outset, however, that “the work in the cities will play a secondary role, complementary to the rural work”:

“However, while giving first priority to the rural work, we must also give due importance to the urban struggle. Without a strong urban revolutionary movement, the ongoing people’s war faces difficulties; further, without the participation of the urban masses it is impossible to achieve countrywide victory. As Com. Mao says, ‘the final objective of the revolution is the capture of the cities, the enemy’s main bases, and this objective cannot be achieved without adequate work in the cities.’”⁴²

Despite emphasis on loyalty to the traditional Naxalite program—buttressed in due form by a quote from the Great Helmsman—this new interest in urban areas evidences several innovations regarding target groups and *modus operandi*. As regards the former, the Naxals go a step farther in the social differentiation they had already begun to make in the countryside. They have ceased to interpret society solely in terms of landlords vs. tenants and landless peasants, making way for caste and tribal considerations. In cities they would go farther still, recognizing “special social groups like women, dalits, and religious minorities⁴³”. This last category merits particular attention, as it did not appear in the Naxalites’ program before then. It referred first of all to the Muslims by virtue of a militant secularism that led the Naxals to identify Hindu nationalists, the Muslims’ main oppressors, as their public enemy number one. A resolution of the Ninth Congress of the CPI(Maoist) thus made a call:

“...to build a broad U[nited] F[ront] of all secular forces and persecuted religious minorities such as Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs against the Hindu fascist forces. [...] This task has appeared in our documents now from many years, but very little has as yet been done. One of the explanations for this failure is the weakness of our urban organisations, but the other more important reason is our neglect of work among the minorities. [...] particularly the Muslim masses who are the most numerous and the worst victims of the Hindu fascists’ atrocities. However due to extreme ghettoisation in almost all Indian cities, this is only possible if we take a conscious decision to shift out at least some forces from Hindu dominated areas and base them in the slums and localities inhabited by the Muslim poor. This would be the first step to building any united front.”⁴⁴

⁴⁰ See the achievements in Andhra Pradesh listed by a veteran Naxalite (S. Chakravarti, *op. cit.*, p. 199).

⁴¹ This report is posted on the Resistance India blog: <http://resistanceindia.wordpress.com/2007/10/30/cpi-maoist-urban-perspective/>

⁴² S. Chakravarti, *op. cit.*, p. 17. The quote from Mao is from *Selected Works*, Vol. II, Peking, Foreign Languages Press, 2004, p. 317.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43. To this author’s knowledge, there are no Muslims or Christians among Naxal leaders.

The use of the conditional here not only reveals the Naxals' weakness outside Hindu circles, it also attests to the hesitations that punctuate implementation of the brand new urban strategy.

The *modus operandi* recommended by the report in fact only appears between the lines. The strategy advocated is based on three main themes that sometimes overlap: secrecy, entryism and empathy. In urban areas even more than in the countryside where the state is less present and "class enemies" less numerous, Naxal action should be conducted underground. This is all the more important when existing institutions are to be infiltrated, one of the main avenues indicated in the report. The aim can be to penetrate the enemy ranks—particularly security forces (the army, the police, etc.)—not only to glean valuable information but also to recruit new members⁴⁵. Other organizations can also be targets for infiltration: "slum-dwellers organisations, basti or chawl committees [neighborhood committees], mahila mandals [women's circles], youth clubs, sports clubs, cultural bodies, committees for various festivals like Ganesh festival, Durga puja, Ambedkar Jayanti [birthday], etc."⁴⁶. Whatever the organ, the main thing is to take control of it. Whether the Naxals have created their own structures or have engulfed others, the strategy followed thereafter should be empathetic in that, rather than declaring themselves revolutionary at the outset, these organizations should promote the local population's most pressing needs—whether it is to build latrines, secure access to water, supply electricity and so on. There, too, the Naxals must hide their hand to gain acceptance before stepping up the revolutionary tone.

Extension of the Naxals' Dominion

Before even implementing the urban strategy announced in the 2004 report, the Naxalite movement underwent significant expansion with the turn of the XXIst century. It boasts about 50,000 well-armed combatants. In addition to the six or seven thousand traditional weapons it possesses (from pistols stolen from the police to AK-47 imported from Sri Lanka and Nepal), the movement has mastered the manufacture of improvised explosive devices. Having learned to build them with the help of the Tamil Tigers, the Naxals now produce them in their own underground factories scattered throughout India to mine the roads⁴⁷. The number of their victims—most of them due to explosives—has risen from about five hundred killed per year until the early 2000s to nearly double that by the middle of the decade (951 in 2006) according to the Indian Home Minister. The amplification of the phenomenon has gone together with the movement's geographic extension. In the year 2004, 55 districts spread over nine states (Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, West Bengal

⁴⁵ "It is very important to penetrate into the military, para-military forces, police, and higher levels of the administrative machinery of the state. It is necessary to obtain information regarding the enemy, to build support for the revolution within these organs, and even to incite revolt when the time is ripe" (S. Chakravarti, *op. cit.*, p. 47).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3. Some of the more sophisticated weapons come from Sri Lanka where the LTTE was able to supply them to the Naxals up until 2009. The use of landmines (usually remote-controlled), which has claimed a large number of victims among the police, is facilitated in India by the fact that the roads are often dirt tracks (*Ibid.*, p. 75).

and Uttar Pradesh) were affected. In 2005, the number of “infested” districts⁴⁸, to use the official terminology, had increased from 76 in 2006 to 175 (out of 602)⁴⁹, fourteen states, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Uttarakhand and Haryana having been added to the previous list⁵⁰.

Growing Inequality, a Fertile Ground for Naxal Expansion

This expansion is not only explained by the unification efforts that culminated in the founding of the CPI(Maoist). It also owes much to the socio-economic situation in India after economic liberalization policies were introduced in 1991, leading to an increase in social and geographic inequalities due to the retreat of the state⁵¹. Economic liberalization has enabled those who already possessed some form of capital—financial, social and/or intellectual—to grow wealthier while those who have none (or not as much) have stagnated. In the mid 2000s, the percentage of households living with less than 90,000 rupees (1,800 euros) per year was over 70% of the population. This disparity was coupled with an enormous gulf between urban and rural dwellers, those who spent more than 1,100 rupees per month making up 38.3% of the urbans and only 6% of the rurals according to the National Sample Survey, one of the most reliable sources in this regard (see maps 2 and 3 in the appendix).

These figures reflect the stagnation, even the decline of the agricultural sector. In the 1980s, the average annual gross agricultural product growth rate was 4%. It dropped to 3.5% in the 1990s and to 2% in the years 2000 to 2007, at a time when the secondary and tertiary sectors recorded two-digit growth rates. Consequently, the share of agriculture in India’s GNP fell from 29.76% in the 1993-1994/1995-1996 period to 23.15% in the years 2000-2001/2002-2003 and to 17% in 2010/2011, whereas the primary sector continues to employ more than 60% of the active population. The agricultural crisis in India that is Naxalism’s bread and butter can be explained especially by the state’s growing disinterest in this sector. Fertilizer subsidies decreased by 20.18% between 2000-2001 and 2004-2005. Electricity subsidies—essential for operating irrigation pumps—dropped by 21.28% in 2002-2003, thereby hitting a point lower than in 1996-1997. Beyond that, state investment in agriculture shrank from 32.3% of agricultural investments in 1993-1995 to 23.6% of the total in 2003-2004. Total investment, public and private combined, moreover stagnated in the 1999-2000/2002-2003 period⁵².

⁴⁸ It is difficult to measure Naxal control over these territories. True to Chairman Mao, the Naxalites distinguish three levels of presence in a territory: a territory can be “a struggle”, a guerrilla zone, or “liberated”. The Naxals first do reconnaissance and blend in with the population. They then introduce weapons and form squads (*dalam*). Once an area is “liberated”, they hand power over to the peasants through the creation of people’s committees (*sangham*).

⁴⁹ These figures must of course be put in perspective. As Nihar Nayak, an expert at the IDSA (Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis) notes, the central and provincial authorities have trouble getting their statistics to match. For instance, regarding the state of Orissa in 2008, New Delhi announced nine infested districts, whereas the provincial authorities count seventeen. N. Nayak, “Orissa: Industrial Zones Vs Naxalite Liberated Zones part-II”, June 21, 2008, http://www.sspconline.org/opinion/Orissa-IndustrialZonesVsNaxaliteLiberatedZonest-II_Nihar-Nayak_210608

⁵⁰ S. Chaktavarti, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

⁵¹ See P. Sainath, *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*, London, Review, 1999.

⁵² Himanshu, “Recent trends in poverty and inequality: Some preliminary results”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.42, n°6, February 16, 2007, p. 498.

The state also dropped its guard by reducing customs tariffs on certain commodities to very low levels in the mid 1990s. Competition from cheap imported commodities thus brought agricultural prices down. Some of the cotton-producing regions were the first victims of this policy. Customs duties on this textile fiber being reduced to naught, imports increased by 75% and the price of Indian cotton plummeted by 55% between 1996 and 2003. In eastern Maharashtra, in the Vidharba region, an area where cotton is sometimes the peasants' only cash crop, the introduction of GM seeds and crops, the infamous BT Cotton, further worsened the peasants' plight. Since the seeds of this variety, imposed by the state (by refusing to purchase traditionally-grown cotton), are sterile, the peasants, already disadvantaged by the drop in price and several damaging monsoons, had to go into debt to purchase new seeds. When their creditors claimed their due, some preferred to take their own lives—the cotton belt around Nagpur then taking on the name of the “suicide belt”—while others joined the Naxals. In 2000, the state of Maharashtra (the country's second largest cotton producer after Tamil Nadu) raised customs tariffs to 5%, then to 30%, but this measure came very late and was contradicted by another in 2006. Insensitive to the agricultural crisis, the government of Maharashtra lowered the price at which it bought cotton by 20%. A police official Chakravarti interviewed in the former's Bombay headquarters did not hesitate to declare, anonymously, that the development of the Naxalite movement in Vidarbha owed much to politicians' negligence, who only had eyes for the state's prosperous areas: the Bombay-Poona corridor and the sugar belt, where sugar cane is the main cash crop. It took the wave of peasant suicides that received wide press coverage for a chief minister to visit the area: none of his predecessors had done so in thirty years⁵³!

Table 1
Peasant suicide: the five hardest hit Indian states compared to the rest of the country (2006-2010)

Year	Maharashtra	Andhra Pradesh	Karnataka	Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh	Total of the five	Total in India	% of the five
1997	1,917	1,097	1,832	2,390	7,236	13,622	53.1
1998	2,409	1,813	1,883	2,278	8,383	16,015	52.3
1999	2,423	1,974	2,379	2,654	9,430	16,062	58.6
2000	3,022	1,525	2,630	2,660	9,837	16,603	59.2
2001	3,536	1,509	2,505	2,824	10,374	16,415	63.2
2002	3,695	1,896	2,340	2,578	10,509	17,971	58.5
2003	3,836	1,800	2,678	2,511	10,825	17,164	63.1
2004	4,147	2,666	1,963	3,033	11,809	18,241	64.7
2005	3,926	2,490	1,883	2,660	10,959	17,131	64
2006	4,453	2,607	1,720	2,858	11,638	17,060	68.2
2007	4,238	1,797	2,135	2,856	11,026	16,632	66.3
2008	3,802	2,105	1,737	3,152	10,797	16,196	66.7
TOTAL	41,404	23,279	25,685	32,454	122,823	199,132	61.5

Source: P. Sainath, “Farm suicide: a 12 year-saga”, *The Hindu*, January 25, 2010.

⁵³ S. Chakravarti, *op. cit.*, pp. 273-274.

When pauperization does not drive the peasant masses to suicide, it induces them to lend a more willing ear to the Naxal discourse. This is a classic scenario. The only significant difference with the previous decades is that poverty is less linked to landlord greed and the uncertainties of the weather than to state policies. But since the 2000s, additional factors combined their cumulative effects, among which agricultural issues are less central. These factors played a major role in areas conjugating three characteristics: a concentration of mineral resources⁵⁴, a highly uneven terrain covered by jungle, and a population made up for the majority of Adivasis.

Three contiguous states—Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Orissa—share this triple characteristic. The second state warrants particular attention, because in recent years it has truly become a laboratory of Naxalism—and the anti-Naxal fight.

Chhattisgarh, Laboratory of Naxalism and the anti-Naxal Fight

Formed in 2000 after the division of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh combines the three features listed above that each in its own way has contributed to making it one of the strongholds of Maoism in India.

- the region is known as the heart of the tribal belt: there is a strong Adivasi presence (precisely 31.8% of the population according to the last census in 2001);

- the region harbors rich deposits of coal, iron ore, manganese, bauxite, quartz, gold and better yet, diamonds and uranium.

- the area is hilly with dense vegetation, two factors that make access extremely difficult, all the more since there are few roads and tracks. A district such as Bastar (also known by the name Dandakaranya or DK), at the crossroads of Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh, is thus very isolated.

The effects of these three characteristics began to conjugate in the 1980s. In the late 1970s, the Naxalites in Andhra Pradesh had already initiated the “Go to the Village Campaign”. It prepared them to go work among the Adivasis who were subjugated by feudal-like landlords and the state (which in particular limited their access to forest products such as *tendu* leaves from which *bidis*⁵⁵ are made), not to mention the violent scorn with which non-tribal police officers treat the Adivasis. When the Naxalites were subjected to repression by the Andhra Pradesh state government in the 1970-1980s, they used the tribal area in southern Chhattisgarh as a rear base, because the jungle made them difficult to track down.

This sanctuary gradually turned into a laboratory⁵⁶. Militants from the cities took the trouble to learn the local dialect, married tribal women and above all obtained better wages for Adivasis who gathered *tendu* leaves and bamboo stalks for paper mills (the price of a bundle of twenty bamboo stalks thus went from 1 to 7 rupees). These successes were made possible by an effort to organize the Adivasis that in 1989 culminated in the foundation of the

⁵⁴ In 2010, Samarendra Das and Felix Padel for instance estimated bauxite reserves in Orissa at 2.27 trillion dollars, i.e. twice India's GDP (S. Das and F. Padel, *Out of this Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminum Cartel*, Orient Blackswan, 2010).

⁵⁵ Little cigarettes.

⁵⁶ For an account of how the Naxals came to be established in a DK village, see Gautam Navlakha, “Days and nights in the Maoist heartland”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.45, n°16, April 17, 2010, pp. 38-47.

Dandakaranya Adivasi Mazdoor Kisan Sangh (DAKMS), boasting 100,000 members today. Himanchu Kumar, a Gandhian activist who established his ashram in Dantewada (Bastar Sud), gives valuable testimony to the motives for the Maoists' popularity:

"I have seen how the Naxalites have worked among the adivasis. For carrying one bundle of firewood, the forest guards would punish an adivasi woman by raping her. If they did not pay a three-rupee fine, the guards would extort Rs 300. Then in the 1980s, the Naxalites came there. They would capture a forest guard and tie him up and ask the adivasis to beat him. That was the first time the adivasi realised they too had some power. The State should have empowered them by punishing the guards! The State never fixed a minimum price for mahua; the Naxalites did."⁵⁷

Beyond that, the Maoists literally developed a state within the state and an alternative society. They set up their own political and administrative system: villagers from three to five villages elected "revolutionary people's committees" (RPC), about fifteen of which then voted to choose "area revolutionary people's committees" (ARPC). Between three and five ARPC appointed a "regional committee". They also established their own educational and legal systems⁵⁸.

The Maoists thus enjoyed a certain degree of popularity and had already developed a strong infrastructure when the rush to the area's mineral resources began in the 1990s. These treasures attracted public and especially private investors in droves once India embarked on the path of economic liberalization that promised to make such riches accessible. For these resources to be exploitable, especially when it involved opencast mines, entire tribes were displaced and their land confiscated. The building of plants to process these raw materials posed the same sort of problems. In 2006, a private consultant, CLSA Asia-Pacific Markets, inventoried no few than seven projects for steel mills, coal-fired power plants and aluminum plants financed by Indian multinationals such as Tata Steel, Essar Steel, Jindal Steel and Vedanta⁵⁹. In Chhattisgarh, intensification of the conflict coincides with the entrance on the scene of both Indian and foreign companies that not only began expropriating Adivasis with the help of police wielding excessively brutal methods⁶⁰, but also managed to get roads built to facilitate access to the region, thereby making the Naxalites more vulnerable. The insurgents, with support from new partisans recruited among the tribes, reacted to the multiplication of mines and factories by targeted attacks. The National Mineral Development Corporation iron ore mine in Bachel (Dantewada district) has for instance been the object of repeated attacks since 2006 in attempt to block supplies to the Essar steel mill in Andhra

⁵⁷ H. Kumar, "Who is the problem, the CPI(Maoist) or the Indian state?", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.44, n°47, p. 11.

⁵⁸ This strategy sparked considerable debate among the leftwing intelligentsia in India. Some doubted the very existence of this alternative development model and others (or the same ones) argued that instead of standing in for the state, the revolutionary militants should force it to fulfill its duties.

⁵⁹ A. Dutta, "India's Naxalites", CLSA Asia Pacific Markets (<https://www.clsa.com> accessed on August 20, 2006), p. 24. Since then, the discovery of a platinum deposit west of Bastar has whet new appetites (D. Dasgupta, "Gond-pipri live", *Outlook*, February 28, 2011, p. 18).

⁶⁰ Regarding the violent methods of the police—made up of non-aboriginals from outside the area—toward the tribals, see H. Kumar, *article cited*.

Pradesh⁶¹. These attacks also enabled the Maoists to obtain explosives that they later use to plant landmines along the tracks. To fund their operations, they do not hesitate to extort money from mine or factory owners, threatening them with retaliation if they do not pay up.

A comparable situation is developing in Jharkhand and Orissa, but also in regions less endowed with mineral resources, where Adivasis are just as violently expelled from their land to make way for building factories. Until recently, that was the case in West Bengal, where the communist government pushed the tribes into the Naxals' arms in areas such as Lalgarh by handing over land they had been promised to large industrial groups⁶².

Developments in Chhattisgarh are even more critical due to the way in which the authorities have handled the rise in tensions. Ill equipped and poorly trained in counterinsurgency methods, the state's police force has proven more powerless than elsewhere in the face of the Naxals' strike force. The local political elites, both those connected with the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party, BJP) and the Congress Party, thus set up a volunteer militia in 2005 with support from the state's business community and the government itself. This organization, named Salwa Judum ("peace hunters" in the language of the Gond tribes, abbreviated SJ), recruited among the urban youth, and began by emptying entire villages of their inhabitants to prevent them from being used as Naxal bases. Using strong-arm tactics, its militants readily engaged in plunder, rape and other such atrocities as the local elites customarily inflict on Adivasis. The number of displaced persons seeking shelter outside their devastated villages prompted non-governmental organizations to set up makeshift camps for them. In 2007, between 70,000 and 100,000 displaced persons were allegedly en route for Orissa, Jharkhand and Andhra Pradesh—47,500 of them from Dandewada district alone, according to the NGO Campaign for Peace and Justice in Chhattisgarh⁶³. Furthermore, acting as if they were a new security force, Salwa Judum set up checkpoints on Chhattisgarh roads. In fact, it was as if the state had delegated its policing powers to a private army equipped with a uniform and firearms. Special forces officers were found to rejoin its ranks, and the Collector took part in its meetings, another sign of government involvement. Petitioned by human rights advocates, the Supreme Court ordered the state to assume its responsibilities and take direct action rather than playing with fire by arming citizens against others. If SJ continued to operate in the area, it was doing so illegally, underground or even under cover of a new name. In October 2010, human rights activists, including Professor Nandini Sundar, brought the case before the courts,

⁶¹ Another, smaller scale attack took place in 2010 (A. Sethi, "Maoists attack NMDC mine in Dantewada", *The Hindu*, July 13, 2010).

⁶² The case of Lalgarh has been written about extensively, partly because the communist government in West Bengal since 1977 has used methods that have greatly disappointed the Indian intelligentsia. Among the most interesting can be cited S. and T. Sarkar, "Notes on a dying people", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.44, n°26 & 27, June 27, 2009, pp. 10-14 (three-quarters of this article is taken up by an enlightening interview with Sumit Chowdhury, a Lalgarh activist); M. Bhattacharya, "The Lalgarh story", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.44, n°33, April 15, 2009, pp. 17-19; A. Bhattacharya, "Is Lalgarh showing the way?", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.45, n°2, January 9, 2010, pp. 17-21; and A. Bhattacharya, *Singu to Lalgarh via Nandigram. Rising Flames of People's Anger Against Displacement, Destitution and State Terror*, Delhi, Visthapan Virodhi Jan Vikas Andolan, 2009.

⁶³ M. Chandra, "Salwa Judum: Unreported India's hidden war", *SACW*, September 15-18, 2007.

claiming that Salwa Judum was now acting under a new name: Dandakaranya Shanti Sangharsh Samiti (Dandakaranya Peace Struggle Committee)⁶⁴.

GUERRILLAS FIGHTING FOR RIGHTS, A STATE OVERTURNING THE RULE OF LAW?

Ten years after the intensification of guerrilla warfare, the Maoists and the Indian state seem to be playing a strange game of back and forth. The former, who have always counted partisans of democratic politics among their ranks—some even having defected, as we have seen, in favor of the electoral route—pursue their guerrilla tactics while asking the state (although considered bourgeois and hence in short beyond redemption) to better respect the law, and join hands with legal political forces (in West Bengal in particular). And the state, without ruling out negotiations with Maoists who abjure violence, readily resorts to strong-arm tactics and use illegal means that the courts cannot help but condemn. These same courts nevertheless lose all sense of proportion when they punish harshly anyone who demonstrates the slightest sympathy for the Maoists: the development of Maoism not only gives the most authoritarian politicians a good excuse to lock up their opponents, but also drives those whose role it is to guarantee the rule of law to err on the side of security reflexes that weaken it.

A State in Search of a Strategy

Directed by the Supreme Court to assume its responsibilities rather than resort to private militias such as Salwa Judum, the Indian government wavers between an economic development policy and a strategy of repression that emphasizes military action.

The herald of such policy is none other than Palaniappan Chidambaram, the Union Minister of Home Affairs appointed to this post after the attacks on Mumbai in November 2008, crowned with his achievements while in charge of the Finances portfolio since 2004. His leitmotiv has not varied: “There is no place for violence or so-called armed struggle for liberation in a republican, democratic form of government⁶⁵”. In answer to those who object that it would be wiser to invest in development efforts that would restore Adivasi confidence in the state, Chidambaram hastens to reply that in each area where the Maoists are powerful,

⁶⁴ J. Venkatesan, “Salwa Judum does not exist: Chhattisgarh Govt.”, *The Hindu*, October 29, 2010.

⁶⁵ Quoted in “Army won’t be used against Maoists: Chidambaram”, *The Hindu*, September 26, 2009.

“[t]he security forces first have to dominate the area, establish civil administration and then the state governments have to rush in resources and take over the development.”⁶⁶

This is the spirit in which the Home Minister launched Operation Green Hunt in autumn 2009, mobilizing thousands of police and paramilitary forces to pacify an area that has Chhattisgarh as its epicenter, in order to promote its development through capital and infrastructure investments. Although the army was not involved, both because the military refused to be dragged into an undertaking it believed the police’s responsibility⁶⁷, and because it would pointlessly dramatize the issue, in 2011 the Defense Minister nevertheless decided to build an exceptionally large military training center in the area of Abujmarh forest in Chhattisgarh, known to be a Maoist stronghold: this military school, the second of its kind—the first was established in 1970 in Mizoram—stretches over between 600 and 900 km², depending on the method used to measure the military training camp⁶⁸. This decision comes in the wake of Chhattisgarh state’s creation of the Counter-Terrorism and Jungle Warfare College and another similar training center, the Counter Insurgency and Jungle Warfare School.

The policy has come up against a number of limits. First, even if the military is not in the front line, they nevertheless literally involves deploying an occupation force that moreover often uses aggressive methods. In 2010, in the Bastar zone alone, an area of about 40,000 km², the twenty paramilitary battalions in addition to the 6,000 policemen amounted to a force of 20,000 troops⁶⁹. These men have besieged the region better to comb the area, requisitioning schools, for instance⁷⁰. Beyond that, the interrogations they conduct to unmask Maoists have apparently degenerated more than once, resulting in several accusations of torture⁷¹, not to mention the “fake encounters” and other forms of extrajudicial killing⁷² that have become an Indian specialty. Security forces act all the more often with full impunity as they are covered by politicians who are eager for concrete results they can use in their election campaigns—or even before. For instance, in 2009, a vast operation conducted by the Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (CoBRA) at the border between Andhra Pradesh and Chhattisgarh resulted in the physical elimination of peasants who did not belong to the Maoist movement, as the ensuing inquiry confirmed⁷³. Having had access to remote zones

⁶⁶ Quoted in B. Vij-Aurora, “Raising a red flag”, *India Today*, March 8, 2010, p. 34.

⁶⁷ K. V. Prasad, “Army, air force wary of getting involved in anti-Maoist operations”, *The Hindu*, June 7, 2010.

⁶⁸ A. Langer, “Red flag in the red corridor. Army camp proposal rattles Maoists”, *Tehelka*, February 19, 2011, p. 14.

⁶⁹ A. Sethi, “Green Hunt: The anatomy of an operation”, *The Hindu*, February 6, 2010.

⁷⁰ A. Sethi, “Children at risk as schools become barracks in anti-Maoist war”, *The Hindu*, March 24, 2010.

⁷¹ A. Sethi, “Chhattisgarh scheduled tribes panel to probe charges against BSF personnel”, *The Hindu*, September 14, 2010.

⁷² “Fake encounters” refer to security force interventions during which police claim to have been ambushed to justify opening fire. Extrajudicial killings refer to operations that result in the death of combatants while being held in prison on remand.

⁷³ A. Sethi, “Witnesses allege biggest anti-Naxal operation of 2009 was fake”, *The Hindu*, March 20, 2010.

in Dantewada district to take part in the release of five police officers held hostage by the Maoists (see *infra*), Swami Agnivesh⁷⁴ offers highly meaningful testimony in this regard:

“To see why this is so pivotal, so urgent, you will have to understand the darker side of our journey, to hear tribals tell of the daily torture and brutality they suffer at the hands of the State, to hear the women tell of the hundreds of men dead or thrown into prison on flimsy charges, sometimes no charges at all. In their eyes, across their faces and limp bodies, I have seen exploitation written large. Travelling through this land is like being in a place of secret genocide that has been eating away people through 63 years of Independence; of a willful and systematic abdication of the Constitution. In the past year, the exploitation has continued in the shadow of the many well-equipped CRPF⁷⁵ camps across Chhattisgarh, the faces of Operation Green Hunt. Travel through this land, through the many visible and invisible faces of genocide, and perhaps you can understand why young men and women have chosen to take up arms. Not many of them know who Mao was, or what Maoism is. Yet, they have come together because they believe that armed resistance is the only way out.”⁷⁶

Overall, the military option preferred by Palaniappan Chidambaram has tended to induce more vocations for the Maoist guerrilla rather than “sanitize” the area for development schemes. The Chief Minister for Chhattisgarh, Raman Singh, moreover admitted to Swami Agnivesh that Salwa Judum and the use of force in general had been counterproductive⁷⁷. The deployment of additional forces has also provided the Maoists with new targets. In April 2010, they killed 76 members of the Central Reserve Police Force out of a group of 82 paramilitaries ambushed in Dantewada district (Bastar Sud). The number of deaths among security forces has risen sharply, from 123 in 2006 to 312 in 2009—and is more than Maoist victims of repression, although this toll is also on the rise (from 192 in 2007 to 294 in 2009, see Table 2). This spiral of violence which for the first time pushed the number of casualties over one thousand in 2010 is even more costly in civilian lives, 626 in 2010, as opposed to 270 among the Maoists and security forces.

Another limit to Palaniappan Chidambaram repressive course of action is political in nature. At the state level, first of all, many officials are not in favor of a military escalation, which at the very least could stick them with an image of making war on their own people⁷⁸, and at worst could tip their political hunting ground into civil war, making the holding of elections—their stock in trade—impossible in the long run. Such considerations hold particularly true for Adivasi leaders. While Chief Minister of Jharkhand, Shibu Soren thus

⁷⁴ Although a member of Arya Samaj, the crucible for highly conservative Hindu nationalism, this religious figure, always dressed in the ochre robe customarily worn by monks, has been heavily involved for over thirty years in a number of struggles to improve the social conditions of peasants, Dalits and Adivasis.

⁷⁵ Central Reserve Police Force.

⁷⁶ S. Agnivesh, “The Dantewada syndrome. And a chance for peace”, *Teelka*, February 26, 2011, p. 25.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ It should be noted that the head of the new military school in Abujmarh himself, when questioned by the press regarding the risk of seeing the army sent in against the Maoists, dismissed the idea, exclaiming: “After all they are also people of our country” (“Our centre in Maoist zone is for training only: Army”, *The Indian Express*, February 16, 2011, p. 8). The Times of India reports an even more emphatic assurance: “We will exercise maximum restraint. This is our country, they are our people” (“Army calls Naxals our people, vow restraint”, *Times of India*, February 16, 2011).

dodged the Home Minister’s order to act with firmness and secretly negotiated with the Maoists—particular for prisoner exchanges (a state civil servant for two dozen Maoists).

Table 2
Number of victims by category in the seven states most affected by Naxalism
(2006-2010)

States	2006			2007			2008			2009			2010		
	C	F	M	C	F	M	C	F	M	C	F	M	C	F	M
Andhra	18	7	127	24	4	45	28	1	37	10	0	18	17	0	16
Bihar	16	5	19	23	21	5	35	21	15	37	25	16	54	24	20
Jharkhand	18	47	29	69	6	45	74	39	50	74	67	76	71	27	49
Chhattisgarh	189	55	117	95	182	73	35	67	66	87	121	137	72	153	102
Maharashtra	13	3	33	9	2	8	2	5	7	12	52	23	22	15	3
Orissa	3	4	16	13	2	8	24	76	32	36	32	13	62	21	25
West Bengal	9	7	4	6	0	1	19	4	1	134	15	9	328	36	61
Total	266	128	348	240	218	192	210	214	214	391	312	294	626	277	277
Year total	742			650			638			997			1180		

C = civilians; F = security forces; M = Maoists

Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal, http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/maoist/data_sheets/fatalitiesnaxal.asp

At the national level, some leaders of ruling coalition have also expressed their hostility toward the military option, either because they have an eye on the constituencies where Maoists hold sway (such as Mamta Bannerjee, former Railway Minister who won West Bengal in the Spring 2011 regional elections, ousting the communists with the indirect help of the Maoists—see *infra*) or they prefer a longer-term perspective that involves development schemes. This last strategy is preferred by many Congress Party leaders, beginning with Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee, who does not hesitate to contradict his government colleague Palaniappan Chidambaram. Noting that a total of 60,000 CRPF were involved in anti-Maoist operations throughout India, in late 2010 Mukherjee declared

“I am particularly concerned at the spread of left-wing extremism to some of the more backward areas. In part, it is a reflection of our failure in meeting the expectations of the local people.”⁷⁹

Making a connection between the level of development and the spread of Maoism, Mukherjee has promoted the idea of an action plan to finance development in zones where the Maoists have gained influence. This idea in fact dates back to the work of the Planning Commission, which in 2006 put together a group of experts to reflect on the theme “Development challenges in extremist affected areas”. The report this group filed in 2008

⁷⁹ *The Hindu*, December 29, 2010.

clearly showed the existence of a correlation between poverty and Maoism⁸⁰. To address this problem, in September 2010, the Planning Commission officially announced the launching of the Integrated Action Plan⁸¹ for the 35 districts “most affected” by Naxalism⁸². It was finally extended to 60 districts⁸³.

Its primary weakness lies in the fact that it is limited to handing out funding—250 million rupees per district for 2010-2011 and 300 in 2011-2012—, whereas the expert group in its recommendations had emphasized the need for land reform so as not only to provide the Adivasis with aid (assuming that the promised subsidies reach them), but also put them in a position to produce, even sell marketable surplus. This is a constant in Indian politics: even when the country’s rulers acknowledge that political unrest is a reflection of social injustice, they do not seek to remedy it through structural reform but instead try defuse the strongest tensions with stopgap solutions. The issue of access to land is in this respect the most sensitive of all. Each time Congress officials embark on any sort of land reform, they backpedal when it comes to implementing it⁸⁴.

Chidambaram’s relative isolation within his own camp—in the past two years some of his main backers have in fact come from the BJP⁸⁵—has led the Home Minister to admit publicly that his hands were tied and that he only had a “limited mandate”. The message he was trying to convey via this vague assertion was very simple, even simplistic: the states, not the center, were responsible for keeping law and order.

The divide within the Indian government between advocates of the repression/development sequence and adepts of a more political approach laying greater emphasis on economic development from the outset probably explains the apparent incoherence of Chidambaram’s calls to the bargaining table. True to his principles, he urged the Maoists to honor a 72-hour ceasefire as a sign of good will in order to open talks in 2010. Swami Agnivesh, who acted as mediator between the two camps, recounts what happened next:

“[During] the summer of 2010 [...] I first attempted a peace initiative between the government and the Maoists. A letter from Home Minister P. Chidambaram suggested five steps to peace in the region. The most important was the cessation of violence from the Maoist side for 72 hours, to be reciprocated by the paramilitary forces. During this 72-hour period of no-violence, there would be a

⁸⁰ “Development challenges in extremist affected areas”, Report of an Expert Group to Planning Commission, New Delhi, Government of India, 2008, p. 21.

⁸¹ S. Gupta, “Naxal-hit states must bridge trust deficit”, *The Hindu*, September 27, 2010.

⁸² S. Gupta, “Design holistic development plan for Maoist-hit areas”, *The Hindu*, July 25, 2010.

⁸³ V. Kumar, “Action plan for 60 Naxal-hit districts”, *The Hindu*, November 27, 2010.

⁸⁴ In October 2004, the PWG had agreed to a truce until the month of December in exchange for a promise from the government in Hyderabad regarding land redistribution to peasants that had none. As the government delayed delivering on its promise, the Maoists themselves carried out the announced land reform: “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” (S. Banerjee, “On the Naxalite Movement”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.43, n°21, May 24, 2008, p. 12).

⁸⁵ Arun Jaitley thus declared in May 2010 that half-hearted measures would not be enough to solve the problem (N. Vyas, “Half-hearted measures won’t do, says Jaitley”, *The Hindu*, May 19, 2010) and BJP spokesman Tarun Vijay publicly mentioned resorting to army intervention (“Take stern action against Maoists, demands BJP”, *The Hindu*, September 6, 2010).

formal invitation to the Maoist leaders, talks would begin, and a long-term ceasefire would follow. I communicated this to Maoist leader Azad who was keen to join the peace process. He was carrying the home ministry's letter to his comrades when he was killed in cold blood. The murder of Azad, alleged to be the handiwork of the State, completely derailed the peace process."⁸⁶

Some observers explain Palaniappan Chidambaram's hardline attitude by pointing to his past activities: as an attorney he in fact had defended mining companies that had set their sights on gaining access to resources in the "red corridor", the zone in which the Maoist guerrilla is concentrated, from Bihar to Karnataka, and even sat on the board of Vedanta (a very powerful multinational corporation) until being appointed to a ministerial post in Manmohan Singh's government. His strategy nevertheless goes beyond his personality. If the Prime Minister has never criticized him, at least not publicly, it is indeed because he shares his viewpoint. The Indian establishment, already known for its strong-arm tactics—from Kashmir to Assam and including many states on the northeast periphery—is in this case inclined toward firmness due to the extent of the economic stakes involved. Manmohan Singh has already expressed concern that foreign investors might lose interest in India if access to natural resources becomes too problematic.

Maoists in Pursuit of Rights and Respectability

While the Indian government wavers between repression and development without managing to dispel a strong sense of incoherence, with strong-arm tactics taking the fore, the Maoists are going in the opposite direction, manifesting their moderation—doubtless relative and in the service of a sharp sense of political communication—in more legalistic behaviors.

Recourse to the Judiciary and Action in the Name of Human Rights: the Communication Battle

The Maoists have skillfully exploited the government's typical reactions by positioning themselves as victims of the state's transgression of the law. They first sought to fit their program in with a legalist vein: to believe them, they demand nothing more than respect for Indian citizens' constitutional rights. These basic principles have taken on a new dimension over recent years as the state continues to trample the law. Azad's murder thus offered the Maoists an opportunity to make the government face up to its responsibilities: either it admitted being behind the messenger's killing and thereby explicitly abandoned the peace process or it denied all responsibility for the crime and appointed a commission of inquiry to elucidate its circumstances, a sign that the Maoists have confidence in the Indian legal system. This alternative put the authorities in an all the tougher spot as mediator Swami Agnivesh sided with it:

⁸⁶ S. Agnivesh, "The Dantewada syndrome. And a chance for peace", *Tehelka*, February 26, 2011, p. 25.

“Either let the Prime Minister flatly refuse commissioning a judicial probe into Azad’s killing or keep the promise he made to me on July 20 to look into the issue. Unless the Centre comes out clean about the allegations that Azad was killed in cold blood, no peace process could be initiated.”⁸⁷

And when Palaniappan Chidambaram dodged the issue by claiming that such an inquiry did not come under his mandate but instead fell to the local state government, the Maoists had the tastefulness to demonstrate their protest peacefully by city shutdown operations (*bandh*) in all their strongholds.

They have made a show of their newfound sense of moderation—and political communication—in many other ways over the 2010-2011 period. In February 2010, they answered Chidambaram’s request to hold a 72-hour ceasefire by offering a 72-day truce⁸⁸! In 2011, such publicity stunts reached less symbolic heights. In February, militants in Chhattisgarh took five policemen hostage near Narayanpur. After having attempted to obtain something in exchange for their release, they magnanimously decided after 18 days—thanks to Swami Agnivesh’s mediation—to release them “in the name of humanity”. A similar scenario took place ten days later in Orissa: the Maoists released two bureaucrats—including a collector, a senior civil servant—this time in exchange for the withdrawal of a government complaint against five sympathizers, who were thus released. Collector Ravella Vineel Krishna, who was very well treated, became a sort of spokesman for the Maoist cause when he stated: “Staying in the jungles and experiencing how adivasis live has brought greater sensitivity to my life. It was a life-changing experience⁸⁹”.

It was finally in the course of the Binayak Sen case⁹⁰ that Maoists scored the most points against the state in the communication battle in the name of constitutional rights. Doctor Sen, honored many times over for his social work⁹¹, came to Chhattisgarh in the early 1980s to join a charismatic union leader, Shankar Guha Niyogi, who defended the region’s mine workers and was murdered in 1991 by thugs in the service of local industrialists⁹². Binayak Sen first helped to set up the Shaheed [martyr] Hospital in Dallirajhara (Durg district), then worked in the Tilda hospital in the same district. In 1990, he joined his wife, academic Ilina Sen, in Raipur, to found the NGO Rupantar. In this framework, he trained country doctors and went from village to village running a mobile clinic⁹³. When the Salwa Judum was formed in 2005, Sen, secretary of a Gandhian human rights movement, the People’s

⁸⁷ R. Bose, “Bihar should free Maoists: Agnivesh”, *The Hindu*, September 3, 2010.

⁸⁸ The news made headlines (see *The Statesman*, February 23, 2010). This counterproposal was greeted by commentators as “tactically brilliant” (S. Gupta, “Careful of the calm”, *The Indian Express*, February 24, 2010, p. 10).

⁸⁹ S. Sharma and R. Satapathy, “Freed collector bats for dev[elo]p[men]t. Told captors he’s doing his best for tribals”, *The Times of India* (Mumbai Edition), February 26, 2011.

⁹⁰ A book has been written about the case: M. Vaid, *A Doctor to Defend. The Binayak Sen Story*, New Delhi, Rajpal, 2011.

⁹¹ Born in 1950 and hailing from West Bengal, Dr. Sen grew up in Calcutta. He was 20 years old when the first wave of Naxalism hit this metropolis in the East. He later taught public health at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi, cradle of the Indian left. He received the an award for his work among the poor from his alma mater, the prestigious medical school in Vellore, and the Indian Social Sciences Academy gold medal in 2007.

⁹² “No country for good men: The doctor, the state and a sinister case”, *Tehelka*, February 23, 2008.

⁹³ A number of socially committed practitioners in India, Nepal and Bangladesh have modeled their work on the Chinese Maoists’s “barefoot doctors”.

Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL)⁹⁴, rose up against its unconstitutional methods, which he documented through field investigations. This made him an enemy of Chhattisgarh state, certain officials of which accused the troublemaker of being a Maoist. Having become head of the PUCL for Chhattisgarh, he was finally arrested and tried according to procedures that are counter to all the principles of the rule of law. In May 2007, the police accused a *tendu* leaves merchant, Piyush Guha, of supporting the Maoist movement and arrested him. Investigators searching his home “found” three letters said to have been written by veteran of the Maoist movement, Narayan Sanyal, in prison at the time. The police considered that the letters could only have reached Guha through Sen’s intermediary, as the latter had visited Sanyal in prison in 2006 for medical reasons. Aside from the fact that these letters were of no great consequence, they were not signed and according to Sen had been fabricated and added to the evidence by the police after the search. In the course of the investigation, prison warders had moreover stated that Sanyal could not have given such documents to Sen because their meetings were under strict supervision⁹⁵. Due to these numerous holes in the indictment, the Supreme Court decided in favor of releasing Sen on bail—two years after he was jailed on May 14, 2007 while denying bail to his two fellow accused, Sanyal and Guha. But the court in Raipur, at the end of a preposterous trial⁹⁶, found him guilty of conspiracy to commit sedition, and sentenced him to life imprisonment. The presiding judge justified the sentence—also handed down to the two co-accused—in eloquent terms:

“The way that terrorists and Maoist organisations are killing State and Central paramilitary forces⁹⁷ and innocent adivasis and spreading fear, terror and disorder across the country and community implies that this court cannot be generous to the accused and give them the minimum sentence under law.”⁹⁸

Widespread vehement protest was fueled by revelations by Ilina Sen, who immediately organized his appeal, that the cell her husband was placed in was merely “five iron cages in a large courtyard⁹⁹”. Nobel economist Amartya Sen, calling Sen’s imprisonment “unjust”, took up his defense with rare determination, not only disputing the charge of sedition, but also laying emphasis on the fact that he “chose to serve the people¹⁰⁰”. Following his lead, in January 2011, forty Nobel Prize laureates from twelve different countries signed a petition for his release on bail¹⁰¹.

⁹⁴ The PUCL was founded by a Gandhi disciple, Jaya Prakash Narayan, in 1976, during the state of emergency declared by Indira Gandhi.

⁹⁵ J. Punwani, “The trial of Binayak Sen”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.45, n° 52, December 25, 2010, pp. 21-23.

⁹⁶ The prosecution for instance alleged a connection between Sen and Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistani’s military intelligence, on the basis of an email sent by his wife, Ilina Sen, to the Indian Social Institute in New Delhi. (K. Majumder and A. Mishra, “Still no country for good men”, *Tehelka*, January 15, 2011, p. 11).

⁹⁷ i.e. the government in New Delhi.

⁹⁸ A. Sethi, “Life term for Binayak Sen,” *The Hindu*, December 25, 2010.

⁹⁹ Quoted in J. Kattakayam, “My faith in judiciary shattered: Ilina Sen”, *The Hindu*, January 4, 2011.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in “Binayak’s work is great, his conviction unjust: Amartya”, *The Hindu*, January 9, 2011.

¹⁰¹ “Nobel laureates rally behind Binayak Sen”, *The Hindu*, 10 February 2011. The forty signatories of this letter (including France’s Claude Cohen-Tanudji and François Jacob) had successfully appealed to the Supreme Court for Sen’s pretrial release on bail.

The Supreme Court granted this request in April. Nevertheless, the government of India has jeopardized its position as an upholder of human rights and damaged one of the mainsprings of its soft power, its very image of a democratic state. The longer the Binayak Sen case drags on, the more New Delhi loses its credibility in this regard in the eyes of the world. In April, Angela Davis took part in “Binayak Sen Solidarity Events¹⁰²”. Other intellectuals and human rights activists are also mobilized. Sen is admittedly not a Maoist, but the fact that he has been unjustly punished for fighting against Salwa Judum amounts to placing his struggle alongside the Maoists. The publicity given to his humanitarian work also serves the Maoist cause defending the Adivasis.

Toward (Selective) Political Normalization?

The CPI(Maoist) has not altered its strategy since its inception in 2004, at which time its constitution stated:

“If we do not formulate a military line corresponding to the correct political line we cannot achieve our revolutionary objective [...] Hence, in order to completely smash the state machinery of the exploiting classes or overthrowing it, the building of the people’s army as the organized armed force of the masses is indispensable.”¹⁰³

The party’s creation was moreover preceded by that of an army, the PLGA (People’s Liberation Guerrilla Army), which later became the party’s military wing¹⁰⁴. Its expansion remains a priority. For its tenth anniversary celebrations, the party announced additional battalions would be formed to liberate new zones¹⁰⁵.

This military strategy continued to manifest itself in attacks on schools¹⁰⁶—now habitual for the Maoists—and calls to boycott the 2009 general elections¹⁰⁷. Calls to boycott not being enough, the Maoists tried to make voting impossible in a large number of constituencies in

¹⁰² See the Free Binayak Sen website: <http://www.freebinayaksen.org>. Further evidence of internationalization of the case can be seen in the publication of an article by Dr. Sen on access to health care for the poor in India in *The Lancet* (February 12, 2011) and awarding of the South Korean Gwangju Prize for Human Rights 2011 in April. He had already won the Jonathan Mann Award in 2008 in the United States. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as the Harvard School of Public Health, have all taken up his cause.

¹⁰³ “Party Constitution”. <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/maoist/documents/papers/partyconstitution.htm> (accessed on June 9, 2011).

¹⁰⁴ The PLGA was formed on December 2, 2000, exactly one year after the murder of three Central Committee leaders in Koyyuru (Visakhapatnam district, Andhra Pradesh), in honor of these “martyrs” (<http://revolutionaryfrontlines.wordpress.com/2010/12/12/india-formation-of-plga-a-turning-point-in-the-maoist-movement/>).

¹⁰⁵ G. Narasimha Rao, “Maoists planning liberated zones”, *The Hindu*, December 8, 2010.

¹⁰⁶ On this issue, see the Human Rights Watch report, “Sabotaged schooling. Naxalite attacks and police occupation of schools in India’s Bihar and Jharkhand states”, Human Rights Watch, 2009, <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2009/12/09/sabotaged-schooling>

¹⁰⁷ In September 2009, the CPI(Maoist) spokesperson found these calls to boycott elections to have been effective in Jharkhand, West Medinipur district (where Lalgah, West Bengal, is located) and Malkangiri district (Orissa): Spokeperson, CPI(Maoist), “On the election boycott tactic of the Maoists”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.44, n°38, September 19, 2009, p. 75.

Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. Their violent actions claimed some twenty lives.

Given the widespread disapproval such methods met with, including among the Indian left, the CPI(Maoist) has made a wise tactical retreat. Its leaders have distanced themselves from militants who attacked election officials, civil servants merely carrying out orders¹⁰⁸, and, especially, they softened their traditional line in April 2009. Azad, party spokesman at the time, stated in the *Maoist Information Bulletin* that the CPI(Maoist) was now in favor of "...allowing the voters the minimum democratic right to reject the parties and candidates contesting the election¹⁰⁹". As it so happens, the idea of being able to express their refusal to choose by casting a blank ballot rather than having to resort to abstention appeals to many Indian voters who are disgusted by the degenerate behavior of an increasingly corrupt and/or populist ruling class.

In the past two years, the Maoists have moved closer to mainstream politics in another way. Rather than fight elections themselves, they have made a sort of secret pact with a leader of national stature, Mamta Banerjee, chairperson of Trinamool Congress, whose political base is in West Bengal. The CPI(Maoist) and Mamta Banerjee share a common enemy, the CPI(M), whose reputation for invincibility had been accredited by repeated victories in this state since 1977. On one side, Mamta Banerjee set herself the goal of ousting the CPI(M) from power in Kolkata, on the other, the Maoists made it their preferred target due to the atrocities perpetrated by a communist government that had not hesitated to violently repress its people in order to attract investors (particular in the mining and steel industries). In 2008, the Lalgarh incident, after which Adivasi victims of state repression formed People's Committee against Police Atrocities before turning to the Maoists, was a turning point. The trench warfare since carried out between the communist government and the Maoists explains that West Bengal has recorded the highest number of victims Maoist-related violence in 2010 (see Table 2) and that the CPI(Maoist) sought an ally in a figure such as Mamta Banerjee—herself in search of backers. Party leader Ganapati made no secret about the tactical nature of the alliance¹¹⁰ when in late 2010 he stated that it was a means of fighting "the tiger which is in front of them [the CPI(M) communists]¹¹¹".

In 2010-2011, Mamta Banerjee made a number of gestures toward the Maoists. On August 10, 2010, she said she regretted Azad's murder¹¹². She immediately earned the support of Swami Agnivesh and other Maoist sympathizers such as Medha Patkar, eager to oust the CPI(M)¹¹³. A week later, the Maoists declared they were prepared to negotiate a ceasefire with the state provided that Mamta Banerjee serve as an intermediary. In February 2011, she came out in favor of releasing "political prisoners" in West Bengal¹¹⁴. Shortly beforehand, the Maoists had indicated they would back the Trinamool Congress if she left the coalition in power in

¹⁰⁸ The CPI(Maoist) spokesperson thus wrote, "It is not our policy to harm poll staff" (*Ibid.*, p. 74).

¹⁰⁹ S. Banerjee, "The Maoists, Elections, Boycott and Violence", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.44, n°18, May 2, 2009, p. 8.

¹¹⁰ R. Bose, "Maoists ready for talks if Mamta mediates", *The Hindu*, August 18, 2010.

¹¹¹ A. Sethi, "Maoists consolidating control, says CPI(Maoist) leader", *The Hindu*, November 10, 2010.

¹¹² R. Bose, "Come to the dialogue table, Mamta tells Maoists", *The Hindu*, August 10, 2010.

¹¹³ R. Bose, "Medha, Agnivesh back Mamta's campaign", *The Hindu*, August 10, 2010.

¹¹⁴ "Mamta promises freedom to political prisoners", *The Indian Express*, February 21, 2011.

New Delhi, the United Progressive Alliance¹¹⁵. Even if such a breakaway did not come about, the Trinamool Congress victory in the May-June 2011 regional elections was also a success for the Maoists. Mamta Banerjee will not be able to treat them as badly as the CPI(M) did, at least not right after being sworn in. Among the promises made by the new West Bengal Chief Minister is the development of the Mahal Jungle, one of the Maoists' main strongholds in this state (located in West Midnapore district), although she did not go so far as to request the departure of CRPF troops sent in by Delhi. Nor has she freed political prisoners, but she nevertheless promised to appoint a commission of jurists to examine each case. In fact, the nature of the relations between her government and the Maoists remains uncertain today.

CONCLUSION

Naxalism, which had virtually disappeared from the Indian political scene in the 1980s, has made a spectacular comeback since the 1990s owing to the widening social and regional gaps brought about by economic liberalization and predatory economic policies regarding the exploitation of certain natural resources. Its upsurge in several central-eastern regions of India, where the first Naxalites took refuge to flee the repression in the 1970-1980s, indeed owes much to the mining of new mineral deposits on tribal lands in a new perspective, one of Chinese-style fast track development. Added to this trigger factor is the authoritarianism of a state that has always mistreated the Adivasis and indulged in harsh repression when it comes to protecting investors' interests.

Recent developments have offered the spectacle of a peculiar game of back and forth between a state that tends to prefer repression both on the ground and in the judicial sphere, and Maoists who, all the while conducting a bloody guerrilla campaign, make reference to the Indian Constitution to assert their rights, opportunely display humanity to groom their image and rub elbows with legal political forces such as the Trinamool Congress. In the long run, the Indian government is in danger of losing the communication battle for its image and not winning the one being fought in the jungles of the tribal belt.

Indeed, the sheer size of the forces facing one another—and the sophisticated weaponry used on both sides—risks prolonging the conflict, as the Maoists have ever-growing means at their disposal. First of all, their financial means are estimated at 20 billion rupees (350 million euros), a budget that appears to be increasing by 15% yearly in particular due to the cut the Naxals take from mining corporations¹¹⁶, the timber industry and other economic actors

¹¹⁵ "Maoists offer support to Mamta if she quits UPA", *The Hindu*, January 18, 2011.

¹¹⁶ It is of course paradoxical for the Naxals to combat mining companies on one hand and allow them to operate in their "zones" on the other, as long as they pay a sort of revolutionary tax. The lure of profit can be one explanation.

on whom this revolutionary tax (which must be paid if one hopes to remain in business) is levied. These receipts not only enable the movement to acquire increasingly hi-tech weaponry (even rocket launchers), but also serve to pay combatants' wages, which can be as high as 3,000 rupees per month.

Second, India's Maoists are not isolated. They maintain fairly close ties with related movements such as the CPN-M in Nepal (especially its radical wing), which raises the specter of a "red corridor" stretching from the Terai plains in Nepal to Andhra Pradesh. Such a "liberated zone" is far from certain today. In addition to outside partners¹¹⁷, the Naxals certainly cooperate with rebel movements in northeastern India (ULFA in Assam, NSCN in Nagaland, People's Liberation Army (PLA) in Manipur, Bodo, Gurkha, etc.).

Third, recruitment of new militants does not seem to pose a problem for the CPI(Maoist). Renewal of its cadres seems to go together with a "plebeianization" that ensures an ever broader popular base. The Naxalite movement has long been dominated by upper caste intellectuals who are now getting on in years (when they are still active). The movement's strong presence in tribal zones has been accompanied by an injection of young blood (there is talk of youth organizations—*bal sangathan*—in Orissa, for instance)¹¹⁸ and a sociological renewal, its ranks as well as many of its officials now coming from tribal backgrounds, although doing the sociology of Maoism in India remains difficult due to lack of sources. This evolution does not call into question the Maoists' intellectual proclivity. Whether from an urban or tribal background, they nurture a keen interest in intellectual matters: they make it a point of honor to educate their children, read extensively and their websites are of a higher standard than most. As regards recruitment, retired military personnel (sometimes from tribal origins) have joined their ranks to serve as weapons instructors.

Last, the Maoists enjoy the sympathies of major figures in India's intelligentsia, starting with the bestselling author Arundhati Roy whose account of her visit to Maoist territory published in the weekly *Outlook* magazine was a piece of literary and humanist bravura taken up by all the Maoist websites¹¹⁹. The government moreover has expressed its scorn over the press' indulgence toward the Naxals¹²⁰. But beyond the media, the entire intellectual left wing tends to identify with the Maoist combat at a time when disappointment runs high regarding the official communists, in particular the CPI(M), due to their espousal of economic liberalization and their strong-arm tactics. This intelligentsia is well represented in Sonia Gandhi's circles, particularly in the National Advisory Council of which several activists are members, such as Aruna Roy, Harsh Mander and Madhav Gadgil, the same figures who spoke out in favor of Dr. Binayak Sen and also mobilized several Nobel laureates in his favor.

Since the Maoists thus have plenty of resources, their rise in power risks inducing the Indian security establishment of shifting into higher gear. In the short term, this tug of war is likely to intensify at the expense of civil liberties. In several states, an accusation of Naxalism

¹¹⁷ In a recent interview CPI(Maoist) leader Ganapati claims to have never had ties with the LTTE, on its way out in any case since the death of Prabhakaran ("We shall certainly defeat the government", <http://www.open-themagazine.com/article/nation/we-shall-certainly-defeat-the-government>, accessed on June 19, 2010).

¹¹⁸ See N. Nayak, *article cited*.

¹¹⁹ A. Roy, "Walking with the comrades", *Outlook*, March 29, 2010.

¹²⁰ S. Vadarajan, "Centre for new war on Maoists", *The Hindu*, September 24, 2009.

is already grounds for imprisoning human rights advocates who work with minorities (Adivasi, Dalit, etc.). The case of Gujarat is particularly edifying in this regard: Chief Minister Narendra Modi took advantage of the opportunity to put certain human rights activists out of commission. The danger at hand is none other than a drift toward a police state, a risk already fueled by the dread of Islamist attacks.

Regarding the most sensitive zone, Chhattisgarh being its epicenter, retaking control would take no less than seven or eight years according to the Union Home secretary himself¹²¹. Between then and now, the continuation of an unprecedented cycle of violence in the heart of India risks changing the political situation. The debate over the army's involvement will inevitably resurface at regular intervals. Some will express a fear of having to conduct a counterinsurgency operation on an unknown scale and will recall the terrible experience of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka in 1987 and the long counterinsurgency operations in Kashmir, Punjab and North East India. Others will point out that leaving the matter in the hands of the notoriously ineffectual police force cannot be considered policy and that in Punjab, counterinsurgency triumphed over the rebels. In the end, the coherence of the team formed by Manmohan Singh's government and the party led by Sonia Gandhi may well be another collateral victim of the combat against Maoism in India¹²².

Translated by Cynthia Schoch

¹²¹ V. Kumar, "Maoists aiming to overthrow Indian state by 2050: Centre", *The Hindu*, March 6, 2010.

¹²² This study originated in three memoranda written for the Policy Planning Department of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I would like to thank Arnaud d'Andurain for the kind attention he devoted to them within this institution in 2010 and 2011. Any shortcomings the study may have remain mine alone.

Appendices

Map 1

POLITICAL MAP OF INDIA



Map 2

CHANGE IN MONTHLY PER CAPITA EXPENDITURE IN RURAL AREAS

1993 - 1994, Indian average: 281 rupees



Deviation from the mean

- over 140%
- from 120% to 140%
- from 100% to 120%
- from 80% to 100%
- less than 80%
- no data

Gujarat : State

Delhi : Union territory

• : State capital

■ : Union capital

- | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------|
| 1 Jammu and Kashmir | 10 Chhattisgarh |
| 2 Himachal Pradesh | 11 West Bengal |
| 3 Punjab | 12 Gangtok |
| 4 Uttarakhand | 13 Assam |
| 5 Haryana | 14 Nagaland |
| 6 Delhi | 15 Manipur |
| 7 Daman and Diu | 16 Mizoram |
| 8 Dadra and Nagar Haveli | 17 Tripura |
| 9 Pondichery | 18 Meghalaya |

2007 - 2008, Indian average: 772 rupees



Sources: For 1993-94, National Sample Survey Organisation, Department of Statistics, Government of India March 1996 and for 2007-08, National Sample Survey Organisation, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, March 2010.

Map 3

CHANGE IN MONTHLY PER CAPITA EXPENDITURE IN URBAN AREAS

1993 - 1994, Indian average: 458 rupees



Deviation from the mean

- over 110%
- from 100% to 110%
- from 90% to 100%
- from 80% to 90%
- less than 80%
- no data

- Gujarat : State
- Delhi : Union territory
- ♦ : State capital
- : Union capital

- | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------|
| 1 Jammu and Kashmir | 10 Chhattisgarh |
| 2 Himachal Pradesh | 11 West Bengal |
| 3 Punjab | 12 Gangtok |
| 4 Uttarakhand | 13 Assam |
| 5 Haryana | 14 Nagaland |
| 6 Delhi | 15 Manipur |
| 7 Daman and Diu | 16 Mizoram |
| 8 Dadra and Nagar Haveli | 17 Tripura |
| 9 Pondichery | 18 Meghalaya |

2007 - 2008, Indian average: 1472 rupees



Sources: For 1993-94, National Sample Survey Organisation, Department of Statistics, Government of India March 1996 and for 2007-08, National Sample Survey Organisation, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, March 2010.