

Maoist Insurgency Spreads to Over 40% of India. Mass Poverty and Delhi's Embrace of Corporate Neoliberalism Fuels Social Uprising

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On May 25, 2013, Maoist insurgents in the Indian state of Chattisgarh wiped out almost the entire leadership of the Congress Party in that state by killing 28 of its members in an ambush. The Congress Party forms the central government in India, but is in opposition in Chattisgarh, which is ruled by the Hindu supremacist and fascist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

This attack followed an even more devastating one by the Maoists in April 2010 in the same state, which killed 76 paramilitary troops. Sonia Gandhi, the Congress Party leader, was “aghast” at the Maoist assault on her party members, and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has called the insurgents “the single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by our country.”

The Maoist rebellion in India is 40 years old. It started in 1967 in the town of Naxalbari in West Bengal, because of which the guerrilla group is also known as Naxalites. The state suppressed the early Naxalites, but did not completely eliminate them. New Delhi seems unable to deal with the Maoists' latest incarnation, which was created in 2004 with the birth of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) that united two major Maoist factions.

Since then, the insurgency has spread like wildfire over 40% of India's land area, encompassing 20 of the country's 28 states, including 223 districts (up from 55 in 2003) out of a total of 640. The seven most affected Indian states in terms of fatalities are Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Orissa, Bihar, and Andhra Pradesh, in that order. These regions comprise the “Red Corridor.” About 10,000 people have been killed in the expanding civil war since 1980. The Maoists wield about 20,000 armed fighters and another 50,000 supporters. The Indian government complains that the insurgency has crippled economic activity in Central and Eastern India.

The long-term objective of the Maoists is the armed overthrow of the Indian state and the creation of a socialist-communist government. The Maoists term this a “democratic revolution, which would remain directed against imperialism, feudalism, and comprador bureaucratic capitalism.” The insurgents do not consider the Indian electoral system and governments to be democratic, but rather tools that benefit the landlord and capitalist classes.

The insurgency stems from the Indian government's turn to neoliberal capitalism that began in 1991 and which has massively increased poverty and inequality in the country, especially to the detriment of farmers and Adivasis (Indigenous tribal Indians). At the same time, this economic strategy has enriched a small élite such as the Tata, Ambani, and Jindal

families, which is why India is depicted by the Western mainstream press as an economic superpower, the poster child of globalization and successful capitalism.

Seven hundred and fifty million Indians, about 75% of the country's population, live in poverty while the top 5% of Indian families hold 38% of total assets.

India has the third highest number of billionaires in the world, after the U.S. and China. According to the prominent Indian author and ecologist, Dr. Vandana Shiva,

“Four of the top billionaires of the world are now Indian, and I work at the other end of how they became billionaires because I work with the communities whose land is grabbed, city dwellers whose water bills or electricity bills jumped to ten times more. These few billionaires that have emerged, we never had this scale of billionaires — they now control one-third of the Indian economy, which means someone else lost their part of the economy. The Tatas and the Ambanis are using armed might. I think everything that happened in Latin America and Central America with the creation of Contras, the arming of society, dividing of society, is being tried in India.”

The Indian capitalist class, in league with Western multinational corporations and governments, is continuing the rapacious legacy of Western colonialism (the British ruled and exploited India for 200 years) by looting the country's land and mineral resources to increase its wealth, while driving most of the population to destitution. As Dr. Shiva says, the Indian élite is using armed might to maximize its wealth, which is mainly the military might of the Indian state that has been thoroughly corrupted by neoliberalism both at the national and provincial levels.

The state has accelerated its grabbing of the mineral-rich land of the 84 million Adivasis (8% of the population) in India for iron and steel corporations including Tata, Jindal, Mittal and other companies. This has displaced and impoverished millions of Adivasis and driven them to join the Maoists, who claim to represent their grievances. The Adivasis, the original people of India, were among the poorest people in the country to begin with, being denied basic services by the Indian state with their land being stolen by New Delhi since 1947 when the country became independent. This thievery violates the Indian Constitution itself, which protects the land rights of Adivasis.

Adivasis have been surviving by subsistence farming and by scraping a living from forestry. But even these precarious means of livelihood are threatened by the Indian state's and corporations' growing confiscation of Adivasi lands since 1991, so the tribal people “risk losing everything they've ever known.” The Maoist war is a resource war over land and the enormous mineral wealth under it, but also a war for the very survival of the Adivasi people. Most of the fighters among the Maoists are Adivasis, although the leaders are not.

The Indian state's response to the Maoist challenge has been to send 81,000 paramilitary troops into the affected areas in “Operation Greenhunt,” which, by attacking Adivasis, has only driven them further into the arms of the Maoists. There is a positive development component to the state response, too, but central and provincial governments in India are so corrupt that only about 10% of development funds trickle down to the people they are supposed to benefit. The face of government that Adivasis see is therefore usually one of wide-scale violence and corruption.

The state of Jharkhand in eastern India is a main focus of the insurgency. According to one observer, corruption is rampant in Jharkhand, which is turning away from electoral politics and “slipping into the hands of the Maoists.” During the last 12 years, not a single provincial government in Jharkhand has completed its term, and there have been eight of these during this period. India’s electricity generation is mainly dependent on coal, and Jharkhand, along with four other states in which the insurgency is strongest, accounts for 85% of India’s coal deposits. Jharkhand also contains the world’s biggest iron ore deposit.

The corrupt Jharkhand government has signed 42 Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with various large iron and steel companies, including Tata, Jindal, Mittal, and Essar. The Central Bureau of Investigations (CBI), India’s top official investigating agency, has launched a probe into the giving of coal mines by the state to Jindal Steel and Power and other companies. Jindal has benefited greatly from a policy that gave away coal mines without auctions – a policy that may have cost the government \$30 billion, according to the state auditor’s 2012 report. The CBI raided Jindal’s offices and the New Delhi residence of the chairman, Naveen Jindal, on June 11.

Adivasis make up 26% of Jharkhand’s population, and many depend on forests for their livelihood. These kinds of industrial projects have already ravaged the forests, and their increase will expand such damage. Jharkhand contains the Saranda forest, Asia’s largest sal tree sanctuary, for which the government has granted 19 mining licenses. Saranda is where the world’s biggest iron ore deposit is located. At present, there is one state-owned mine operating in Saranda.

“It’s the genocide of the Adivasis,” says Xavier Dias about the opening of Saranda to mining companies. Dias is spokesperson for the Jharkhand Mines Area Coordination Committee (JMACC), the biggest alliance of Adivasi organizations affected by mining, and the editor of a newspaper dedicated to the communities impacted by mining. He has worked in support of the rights of Adivasi communities in Jharkhand for 30 years. Dias was jailed by the Jharkhand government for his activism in November 2012, on false charges. In June 2013, he won the court case that followed his arrest.

According to Indian journalist Sayantan Bera,

“Saranda is to eastern India what the Amazon rainforests are to the world. Its springs feed rivers like the Karo, the Baitarani, and the Sanjay. Extensive mining operations are killing these perennial streams. Wastewater from washeries of iron ore mines on the periphery has already contaminated the groundwater aquifers. Mine workers and residents in the periphery of Saranda are dying from liver disease caused by contaminated groundwater.”

State security forces have launched three major military operations in the Saranda forest, aimed at clearing the Maoist presence there for the mining companies. Says Indigenous activist Gladson Dungdung, convener of the Jharkhand Indigenous Peoples’ Forum, “The government has been helping in securing land, water, and minerals for the corporate giants through military operations.

“In Saranda in June, July, and August 2011, there were three massive operations: Operation Monsoon, Operation Bravo Boy, and Operation Anaconda. The security forces killed two Adivasis, raped several women, and tortured more than 500 Adivasis. They also disrupted the Adivasis food grain

supply, destroyed the harvest, ate livestock, and destroyed all official identification papers of the Adivasis (ration cards, voter ID, land titles). The Adivasis were forced to leave their villages and they only returned after our intervention. The end result is that the the government gave mining leases to 19 mining companies in the region including Tata, Jindal, Mittal, Rungta Mines and others.”

Dias adds:

“Today Jharkhand is a fully militarized zone. There are over a hundred bases with a total of 50,000 official paramilitary troops involved in military action. There are Indian Army bases, too, but these are not involved in direct action yet. Aside from government paramilitary forces here, we also have the mining corporations’ security forces. The government claims that its troops are there to counter the Maoists, but in actuality it is the democratic movements such as people resisting land grabs or fighting police repression that are intimidated into silence. By creating this drastic panic among the people, the corporations are free to suck out the minerals and forest resources.”

Dias points out that

“Tata Iron & Steel Company’s iron ore mine lies in Noamundi, Jharkhand. It is one of their first mines in India, operational since 1907 and supplying ore to Tata’s furnace in Jamshedpur. This is the homeland of the Adivasi people of India, from whom resources were expropriated to convert the House of Tata from an opium trader to a full-fledged monopoly capitalist company, one of the first in British India.” Tata first became prominent by handling the opium trade for the British, who forced China to buy the drug which helped destroy both the Indian and Chinese economies. The opium plant was grown in India under British orders.

“The Adivasis of Jharkhand,” says Dias, “have centuries of history of struggle against the outside colonizer. The East India Company in June 1855 got the British Crown’s army to wage a war against them and, even with no firearms, they fought back. Today, their struggle is against the Indian monopoly capitalists and the state sector corporations. They are fighting for the right to self-determination within the Indian constitution, the right to a distinct culture, economy, and existence. It boils down to having the right to their land, their forests, and their water sources.”

As Gladson Dungdung explains,

“Today, we live in the corporate Indian state, not in a welfare state. The government makes all the laws and policies in favour of the corporate houses. For example, the Jharkhand government introduced the Industrial Policy of 2012, which clearly says that 25 kilometers of both sides of the four-lane road from Kodarma to Bahragora [towns in Jharkhand] will be handed over to the corporations as a Special Economic Zone. Where can people go from here? The state is simply not bothered about its people. See the example of [the state of] Chattisgarh, where 644 villages were forcibly vacated by Salwa Judum and handed over to corporations.”

In addition to paramilitary troops, the state has also used death squads known as Salwa

Judum (SJ), meaning Purification Hunt, to spread a reign of terror and drive out Adivasis from villages for the benefit of companies — and on a massive scale, as Dungdung says. One of the Congress Party leaders killed by Maoists in Chattisgarh in May 2013 in the attack that eliminated 28 of them (see above) was Mahendra Karma, who created the Salwa Judum in 2005. Karma was stabbed 78 times by the Maoists and shot 15 times.

The Salwa Judum was responsible for displacing 300,000 Adivasis, killing, raping, and looting them and burning down their villages. Five hundred charges of murder, 103 of arson, and 99 of rape have been levelled by citizens against the Salwa Judum, but the Chattisgarh government has not investigated or processed a single case. According to Human Rights Watch,

“Since mid-2005, government security forces and members of the Salwa Judum have attacked villages, killed and raped villagers, and burned down huts to force people into government camps... The conflict has given rise to one of the largest internal displacement crises in India.”

Ironically, the SJ itself was made up of Adivasis, and Karma himself was Adivasi, too. The Indian Supreme Court declared the SJ illegal in 2011 and ordered the Chattisgarh government to disband it.

The Maoists have also killed civilians some of whom they claim were police informers. According to Dias, in Jharkhand, the insurgents attack Adivasi villages, extort money from mining companies, and protect the ones that are grabbing land from Adivasis. He says:

“No corporate boss has so far been killed by the Maoists. When the Maoists call a general strike, those companies that pay levies to them are allowed to function and the rest are attacked. I do not believe that a mining company can function here without paying levies to the Maoists. Jharkhand is the place from where Maoists finance their operations in other states, too.”

Gladson Dungdung is critical of the Maoists, too, saying that, “As far my knowledge and experience is concerned, they are not fighting for the Adivasis [in Jharkhand]. Instead, they have created more problems for the democratic people’s movement. It’s very easy for the government to call these democratic struggles Maoist and suppress them. I think the Maoists are part of the problem, not the solution.”

Xavier Dias, however, admits that “there are places where the Maoists are providing some good services to the Adivasis, such as Bastar [a town] in the state of Chattisgarh. He also does not think that the Maoists are corrupt, but considers them “misguided.” Dias does not see armed struggle as the way to solve India’s class and Adivasi problems.

Dayamani Barla, an Adivasi activist also based in Jharkhand, says that Adivasis support the Maoists. She points out that “New Delhi’s failure to protect the interests of the tribals has led them to lend their support to the Maoists, whom they believe are fighting for their basic rights.”

According to the Arabic news channel Al Jazeera, which has sent correspondents into Maoist-controlled areas in Jharkhand, in many of these places the insurgents

“have organized the Adivasis and taken up community projects to provide services the government doesn’t. In 2010, Al Jazeera visited one such village, Tholkobad in Jharkhand state, where, under the name of the ‘agrarian revolution,’ the Maoists were providing support to the villagers to improve farming methods. One village leader told Al Jazeera that the Maoists frequently visited their villages, and treated everyone equally.”

Indian novelist Arundhati Roy, author of the acclaimed book *The God of Small Things* which has sold six million copies worldwide, has also visited Maoist-controlled areas in Chattisgarh. She, too, commends the Maoists in her 2010 article “Walking with the Comrades.” Referring to the Adivasis’ and Maoists’ fight against the Indian Forest Department in the Dandakaranya area, she states: “Emboldened by the people’s participation in these struggles, the party decided to confront the forest department. It encouraged people to take over forest land and cultivate it.

“The forest department retaliated by burning new villages that came up in forest areas. In 1986, it announced a National Park in Bijapur, which meant the eviction of 60 villages. More than half of them had already been moved out, and construction of national park infrastructure had begun when the party moved in. It demolished the construction and stopped the eviction of the remaining villages. It prevented the forest department from entering the area. On a few occasions, officials were captured, tied to trees, and beaten by villagers. It was cathartic revenge for generations of exploitation. Eventually, the forest department fled. Between 1986 and 2000, the party redistributed 300,000 acres of forest land. Today, Comrade Venu says, there are no landless peasants in Dandakaranya.”

Asad Ismi is the CCPA Monitor’s international affairs correspondent and has written extensively on India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. His latest radio documentary Capitalism is the Crisis has been aired on 41 radio stations in Canada, the U.S. and Europe reaching an audience of more than 33 million people. For his publications visit www.asadismi.ws.

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