

Naxalites' Urban Push

Will They Succeed?

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Undoubtedly, the Naxalites pose a serious threat to India's progress. Their influence has spread across a few important states in the eastern part of the country, among which the worst affected by the threat include Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal and Maharashtra. Though the entire area of these states are not entirely in the grip of the Naxalites, certain districts within each state are under their serious influence. Among these, the districts in Bastar region of Chhattisgarh can be ranked the most affected.

Naxalites rely on violence primarily to let the state feel their presence and be aware of the causes for their existence. This makes the movement dangerous and perhaps is the major reason why the threat is so serious, with its intensity having grown over the years. Clearly, their presence in rural areas has been hampering developmental efforts in those places. There have been frequent attacks by the Naxalites on economic targets like railways, mining companies such as the National Mineral Developmental Corporation (NMDC), and communication infrastructure. There were 109 attacks on economic targets in 2008 and the number of attacks on the targets in the preceding year was 80. The number of Naxalite-related incidents in 2008 was 1591, and ranks far higher than the number of violent incidents reported from Jammu and Kashmir (J&K).

While there are several dimensions of the Naxalite threat; the objective of this essay is to discuss in particular the Naxalite strategy in urban areas.

What are the implications of their urban penetration? What are likely to be the security implications of this new strategy of the Naxalites? More importantly, will the Naxalites be successful in carrying out their will in urban areas? How can this new push be arrested?

I NAXALITES: THE URBAN PUSH

Naxal related incidents and violence have been largely reported from a few rural areas in the country. However, this is no longer a rural phenomenon alone. They have been making constant efforts to make their presence felt in urban areas, especially in cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai. Their urban focus is in line with their resolve to extend the struggle outside rural areas. Encircling cities by increasing their influence and dominance in rural areas is one of the primary goals of the Naxalites.

Accordingly, the resolve to carry their struggle into urban areas was made at their Ninth Unity Congress at an undisclosed location in January/February 2007. Making their ideology better known and compelling the establishment to attend to the issues raised by them could be regarded as the significant reasons for the Naxalite's decision to expand their struggle from rural to urban areas.

The Naxal-related urban incidents, so far, have revealed that they have a different strategy for these areas. Triggering attacks against targets like government buildings, the police, railways and public infrastructure does not seem to be their

strategy in these areas; they find it difficult to replicate the tactics used in rural areas in urban centers. Unlike in rural areas, there is no mass support for them in urban areas. The factors on which the Naxalites rely to woo masses towards them in rural areas do not exist in urban areas. Lack of awareness among masses, lack of infrastructure, illiteracy and unemployment are a few such factors. Relatively, urban areas have better infrastructure and the populace in these areas is more aware than elsewhere. Finally, the state has a better reach among masses and is more responsive.

The focus of Naxalites in urban areas is to mobilize industrial workers, students, people from the lower strata of society, those who occupy lower positions in the government and private sectors and left leaning intellectuals and academics. Naxalites have been attempting to influence these sections of society covertly through their frontal organizations, by supporting the protests and demonstrations called by them against the ruling establishment.

It is believed that in the Uttar Pradesh when the government sanitary workers called for protest demonstrations against the government, demanding the regularization of their services, the Naxalites supported them in carrying forward their struggle. The sanitary workers occupy the lowest position in the administrative hierarchy. Furthermore, people who occupy these positions are generally members of the Valmiki community, one of the most disadvantaged sections of

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society, whose status is comparable to the tribals living in rural and semi urban areas of the country, especially in states where the Naxalites exercise substantial influence. Significantly, the protests held by these people in UP followed a definite pattern that comprised relay hunger strikes, encircling district administration buildings and blocking access to them. Offering support to protests that demand a redress of the grievances that people belonging to the lower strata of society is a strategy typical of the Naxalites. Furthermore, the definite pattern witnessed in these protests also raised suspicions about the involvement of Naxalites in the protests in support of the sanitary workers.

As a part of extending support to protest demonstrations against the government by various civil groups, the Naxalites are also believed to have been supporting groups and movements fighting against land acquisitions, environmental issues and displacement. The alleged role of the Naxalites in sustaining the protests against the coming up of industries in Singur and Nandigram in West Bengal is a case in point.

Among others, they have been using a section within the intelligentsia to reach out to the masses. The arrest of the foreign educated Kobad Gandhi on 22 September 2009 at a location in South Delhi indicates that intellectuals supporting Naxalites are moving freely in major cities and have been attempting to influence people in favour of the Naxalites. According to open media reports, Gandhi was one of the central committee and politburo members of the Communist Party of India (Maoist), which are the highest decision-making bodies of the Naxalite outfit. He was also allegedly involved in coordinating the activities of the frontal organizations and other civil liberty groups in urban areas.

The involvement of intellectuals like Kobad also reveals that they have been attempting to lure urban educated youth into the Naxalites fold. For instance an article in the media dated 15 December 2008, revealed that the police in Paradip town of Orissa were on vigil to prevent Naxalites from roping in college students and unemployed youths into their fold.

In addition to winning over the masses, Naxalites also use urban areas for the purpose of recreation, buying rations, shelter and getting treatment in hospitals. For instance on 30 January 2008, the police arrested three Naxalites from a hospital in Bhubaneswar in Orissa. The arrested Naxalites were in the hospital attending to one of their associates who was being treated for her illness.

Finally, urban areas have also been used by the Naxalites to procure and manufacture arms. In the second week of January 2007, the police unearthed an arms factory at Bhopal, the capital city of Madhya Pradesh. The factory was allegedly manufacturing arms for Naxalites. In another similar incident, in September 2006, the police arrested six persons in Chennai for their alleged involvement in manufacturing arms for Naxalites.

II

MAJOR ATTACKS IN URBAN AREAS

The Naxalite's urban strategy, which is free of violence, is different from the strategies they follow in rural areas. However, it seems that in the medium to long run they are interested in replicating the strategies they follow in rural areas in the urban areas. This is evident from the fact that they had carried out a few attacks in the urban towns in Orissa and Bihar.

For example, on 15 February 2008 over 400 Naxalites attacked Nayagarh and Daspalla towns in Orissa. 13 policemen and a civilian were killed. They targeted the district armory, a police station and a police training school. In another incident, on 24 March 2006, over 500 Naxalites attacked the Orissa State Armed Police camp at R Udayagiri town in Gajapati district of Orissa. Three policemen were killed. They also looted arms and managed to free 40 prisoners. Earlier, on 12 February 2004, over 500 Naxalites cordoned off the town of Koraput and looted the district armory in a dramatic incident. In another Naxal affected state of Bihar in November 2005, over 300 armed Naxalites raided the district jail in Jehanabad town and freed their comrades.

Significantly, Jehanabad town is located close to Patna, at a distance of about 50kms. Incidents like these vindicate the Naxalite's zeal to extend their

The attacks on towns closer to their strongholds may continue for the reasons like, it would be easier for them to retreat into forest and jungle areas after the attack and escape the police action. On the other hand, the limited number of attacks even in the semi urban towns like Nayagarh and Koraput exposes the lack of capability in Naxalites in carrying out the sustained struggle in the urban areas.

armed struggle to urban areas as well.

III

CHALLENGES AHEAD

So far, the attacks carried out by the Naxalites in urban areas have been confined to towns closer to rural areas that are considered the strongholds of the Naxalites.

The attacks on such towns may continue since, it would be easier for the Naxalites to retreat into forest areas after the attack and escape police action. On the other hand, the limited number of attacks, even in semi-urban towns like Nayagarh and Koraput, exposes the lack of capability of the Naxalites to carry out a sustained struggle in urban areas.

Significantly, the inability of the rebels to trigger attacks in major towns and cities in the country, reflects the limitations of the Naxalites and their leadership. Moreover, working under the cover of frontal organizations in urban areas means they lack a concrete base in towns and cities. This shows that they are not working independently in urban areas and consequently, find it difficult to execute their planned action at will.

So far, the rebels have been successful in continuing their dominance in rural and forest areas which are their strongholds because they have raised certain genuine issues of concern to the local populace like alienation, lack of attention, poor governance and exploitation. As a result, they have gained the support of the local

people, especially the tribals on the pretext that they are delivering the requirements of the people instead of the state. They have been successful in projecting before the tribals that the state is a failure and an oppressor.

On the other hand, in the urban areas, Naxalites are finding it tough to retain their supporters. The issues on which they made their base in the rural areas are missing on the urban side, which means that the Naxalites are issueless in towns and cities. As a result, they are failing in successfully conveying the message to the people that the state is a failed institution and there is a need for its replacement. Further, operating in groups as they do in rural and forest areas, is not as easy in urban areas which has proven to be one of the major handicaps for the Naxalites in their expansive agenda. Significantly, the Naxalites lack leadership in urban areas unlike in the rural areas and whatever their leadership in the cities, so far, it seems that the police has been successful in arresting them and containing the spread of the Naxal influence in the cities.

Clearly, the Naxalites are desperate to carry forward their struggle into urban areas. Nevertheless, they lack a clear strategy in pursuing their goal. On the one hand, they want to carry out physical attacks on the symbols of state machinery like police stations and district armory and on the other, they refrain from exposing their real identity, operating instead covertly, through their frontal organizations. Hence, it is unlikely that the Naxalites will have a similar impact on the ruling establishment in the urban areas at least in the short to medium term, as they have successfully done in rural areas.

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