

THE ULTRA - LEFT IN INDIA: CHARTING OUT A NEW COURSE

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The late eighties in world history will be remembered for the sweeping changes that took place throughout the socialist world. Unlike in earlier instances, when developments in the socialist world have had a decisive influence on the mainstream left movements in other parts of the world, now the effects felt in the extreme left spectrum, reflected a new thinking. Almost twenty seven years after its experiments in armed struggle in Naxalbari,¹ the ultra left in India, popularly known as Naxalites, seem to have taken to parliamentary struggle.

This is not a new phenomena in the history of ultra Left movements in the subcontinent. When one looks at the Naxalite movement in India at this point of time, one is reminded of the decision of the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP) in 1977 to enter the parliamentary process.

What could be the compulsion for the decision made by some Indian ultra Left groups to join the mainstream of politics? Two decades of political wilderness have led them to rethink their strategy of armed struggle and create a much needed political space for themselves. Undoubtedly, the element of compulsion can be seen in their strategic need to become a part of the bourgeois democratic political structures which they avowedly wanted to destroy and replace. However, in their official explanations which are often couched in ambiguity, this shift is passed off as a voluntary choice than compulsion.

One of the first groups to make an attempt to adopt strategies which they had earlier rejected is the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation, known as CPI (ML) Liberation or the Vinod Mishra group. The party justifies this move as a changed tactical response to recent international and national developments.

In their response to the break down of the Soviet Union, the Vinod Mishra Group shares the CPI (ML)'s traditional critique. In their view, "the erstwhile Soviet Union was not a communist country. It was a social-imperialist super power. Stalinist metaphysics and Khrushchevian revisionism had led to the ossification of the Communist system there."² They are also very critical of post-communist developments and have labelled both Gorbachev and Yeltsin as renegades.

At the national level, they now take up the position that the strategy of armed guerrilla warfare is suicidal for the Left in modern India where there exists a well-established parliamentary democracy and a well-entrenched ruling elite, the latter having an enormously superior military and communication network at its disposal.³ Though the CP (ML) Liberation and a few others have realized the futility of armed

confrontation with the State, there are still some other groups that adhere to the old strategy.

Resurgence of Armed Guerilla Groups

In the last few years, two groups have come to prominence and added to the consternation of the government. These two groups, the People's War Group (PWG) in Andhra Pradesh⁴ and the CPI (ML) Liberation in Bihar⁵ follow different strategies. However, both have initiated mass mobilization activities on a significant scale by taking up local cause and been able to attract students, youth and intellectuals.

Why, after twenty five years since the suppression of the movement, have the Naxalites resurfaced? Even the government has taken note of their revival and spread. A Union Home Ministry document acknowledges that "the Naxalite movement has shown distinct signs of revival from the mid-eighties" and has "spread to wider areas" in the recent past. The States primarily affected are Andhra Pradesh and Bihar. These are centres of extremist political activity, accounting for over 80 per cent of violent events.

In a vast country like India, with different socio-economic structures prevailing in different parts, the reasons accounting for the growth of these groups varies from one region to the other, where different groups have their own pockets of influence. In Andhra Pradesh, a backward state, there are various reasons like declining rates of school enrollment, increasing rates of school drop-outs, rising illiteracy among women, declining personal income of the self-employed poor in the unorganised sector which constitutes about fifty per cent of the backward population comprising of artisans, handloom weavers, toddy tappers and fishermen. The PWG has chosen to speak in the idiom of the poor in the unorganised sector and has acquired a strong measure of acceptance.

Among all the Naxalite groups, the PWG has an operational area with the widest reach—stretching from Andhra Pradesh to Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. In Andhra, it has considerable support in the Telengana districts of Karimnagar, Nizamabad, Adilabad and Warangal and the North Coastal district of East Godavari. In Orissa it operates in the two Southern districts of Ganjam and Koraput; In Madhya Pradesh, they are active in the Bastar region and in

Maharashtra, in the Vidarbha districts of Bhandara and Yavatmal, Marathwada districts of Nanded, Gadricholi and Chandrapur.⁷

The PWG's main plank of mobilization has been to focus on the special problem of the tribal people in the Dandakaranya forest regions in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. Alienation of tribal land, which takes place through notification of tribal agricultural land as reserve forest, is a primary cause of why the tribal people have been supporting the Naxalites. As a social group, they have been the most affected by the development programmes of the State—which is exploitative as far as the tribal people are concerned. The capitalist development model does not take into consideration the specific socio-economic needs of the tribals and the nature of the process is such that it only causes deprivation. The tribals have not been absorbed into the modern sectors of the economy but have faced disruption of their social life and culture in most parts of the country. Their economic exploitation is further compounded by unbridled social oppression and State brutality—at the hands of the dominant groups of non-tribals who control the local power structures.

Apart from tribal autonomy, the PWG's focus has also been on land reforms. Though land reforms have been carried out in some measure

in A.P since 1972, a lot remains to be said regarding the manner in which this has been done. Landowners have made use of the judiciary to escape from the land ceiling laws, thereby, enabling landowners to defeat its purpose through *benami* transfers. In their pursuit of a more equitable land redistribution, the PWG has taken over land and distributed it among landless labourers of its choice through the judgements of its 'people's courts'. These land-grabbing campaigns threaten to upset the power structures in the rural areas and hence landlords have become increasingly repressive.⁹ However, problems do remain and some of the land distributed remain fallow as they are not tilled for fear of police repression.

The causes in Bihar are different from A.P. The influence of the Naxalites in Bihar is due to "feudal social oppression" as well as "modern forms of exploitation" devised by landlords, contractors and businessmen.¹⁰ The violence unleashed by the landlords through their private armies¹¹ has allowed the space for the mobilization of the peasants, low castes and the landless *harijans* by the Naxalites. Under these conditions, the CPI (ML) in Bihar has started to coordinate mass front activities along with underground armed struggles.

Differences and Disunity

Although the PWG and the CPI (ML) Liberation have made significant inroads in their pockets of influence, they lack consensus on issues and strategy to come under a common platform. It has been felt that it is necessary to coordinate with other groups in order to launch a common struggle. However, the differences that exist between them which have much to do with their past is also acknowledged.

Splits in the extreme left can be traced back to the Sino-Soviet conflict of 1964 which had severe repercussions on the left movements worldwide and resulted in a split into opposing camps. The Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI (M)) split from the CPI on the theoretical issue of how to characterize the stage of Indian revolution, the class nature of the Indian State and the alliance of classes necessary to overthrow it. Another major contention was the refusal of the CPI (M) to characterize China as having ceased to be a socialist State and become a hegemonic power.

Three years after the 1964 split, differences between the more radical pro-Chinese groups and the larger body of moderates within the CPI (M) became antagonistic. The radicals came together to form the All India Coordinating Committee of Communist Revolutionaries (AICCCR) in November 1967 which later resulted in the formation of the CPI (ML) in April 1969.

Differences amongst the various CPI (M) groups erupted first on the interpretation of the three world theory. At one time some groups were willing to align themselves with pro-US political forces against Soviet 'Social imperialism'. Later, differences on the cultural revolution, events like the trial of the Gang of Four, China's experimentation with a dual economy, its gradual withdrawal from armed struggles in the third world had strengthened the division. While some have denounced the present Chinese leadership, others are hesitant to take such a stand.

The CPI (ML) itself has never been a cohesive group. Certain revolutionary groups, which were members of the AICCCR, had declined to join the new group when it was formed. Some of these groups, Nagi Reddy's Unity Centre of Communist Revolutionaries of India (Marxist-Leninist) (UCCRI(ML)) and the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) had differed with Charu Mazumdar on the latter's emphasis on the tactics of annihilation¹² of the class enemy. During the 1969-1973 period, the movement faced a series of splits. The first split was to take place in 1970 when Satya Narain Singh broke away and formed a separate CPI (ML). Similar splits occurred repeatedly after Charu Mazumdar's death in July 1972.

In A.P., the effect of Naxalbari was felt in Srikakulam, where the district branch of CPI (M) tested the concept of armed revolution again.¹³ Tarimala Nagi Reddy, Devalapalli Vekateswara Rao, Chandra Pulla Reddy and Kolla Venkiah had split from the CPM to build a militant mass movement based on land struggles. However, this movement split after the failure of Naxalbari.

Venkateswara Rao, a veteran of the Telengana uprising, made some efforts to bring all communist revolutionaries under a common platform, but failed. Differences emerged on the concept of armed insurrection. This method, suggested by Tarimala, was unacceptable to Kondapalli Seetharamaih who still believed in the concept of annihilation of class enemies. As a result of these differences, Seetharamaih who was influenced by the Chinese Cultural revolution, founded the PWG around 1975.

In its strategy, PWG owes allegiance to Charu Mazumdar in combining armed struggles with mass front activities like theatre shows. It has substantial mass base but in isolated pockets. In its initial years, it was able to attract intellectuals and students but now its cadres are drawn mainly from the ranks of the socially abused and the economically deprived. Bulk of the recruits comprise of school dropouts from peasant families or daily wage earners. For some of these boys, joining the Naxalites is a means of upward mobility.

After having made a considerable headway in the state of A.P., the PWG reached the lowest point in morale at this point of time due to internal differences¹⁵ and bickering. The state government banned the PWG on 21 May 1992, which resulted in a spate of surrenders. Power struggles within the organisation led to the expulsion in June 1992 of the founder, K. Seetharamaih, on grounds of anti-party behavior. Seetharamaih was arrested on 20 March 1993 and Puli Anjiah, an important functionary, was killed on 26 October 1993. The recent surrender of Nimmaluri Bhaskara Rao, the close ideologue to Lakshman Rao who replaced Seetharamaih, on 25 March 1994 has dealt a severe blow to the PWG.¹⁶

Efforts For United Action

Mobilisation against the State can be effective if it is backed by homogenized groups and unified structures which can lend a purposeful sense of direction to mass mobilisation. In India, uneven levels of development and differing socio-economic structures have led to differences on the strategies of mobilisation. Therefore, there is no consistent policy or consensus among extreme left groups, on the strategy to carry on the struggle against the State.

The effort to unite the various factions has become a very formidable task due to the differences on the question of tactics. In this context, even Charu Mazumdar's ideology today is a matter of contention between various Naxalite factions. Charu's followers insist that the acknowledgement of his positive role must be a precondition to any unity talks, which is unacceptable to others. Differences exist also on the question of strategy to confront armed attacks from landlords, often with the support of the local administration and police.

At present, there are more than forty Naxalite factions, but the unity moves have basically drawn them into three broad groupings—the Indian people's Front (IPF), Communist Organization of India (Marxist - Leninist) (COI-ML), and All India People's Resistance Forum (AIPRF). There are still some minor groups which remain outside these groupings.

The IPF originated from a feeling that the deep-rooted forces of feudalism could not be effectively fought unless there was a broad unity of communist forces in the county. Efforts were made from the early eighties for such unity, and negotiations began among the revolutionaries and also with the traditional left, the CPI and the CPI (M).

IN 1981, the CPI (ML) Liberation convened a meeting of thirteen organizations representing major Naxalite factions. These efforts finally culminated in the formation of the IPF at a conference in Delhi from 21-26 April 1982. Nagbhusan Patnaik, politburo member and Dipankar Bhattacharya, both of the CPI(ML) Liberation, were elected President and Organizing General Secretary respectively.

The second IPF conference was held in Calcutta in November 1984. It called upon the Indian left to build a national communist alternative uniting all communist groups and parties including the CPI and CPM. It went ahead with its oft-repeated assertion that the left forces could provide a national alternative to which the people were looking forward.

At the third conference of IPF held in Delhi in 1988, a call for functional unity with the mainstream left was made in an attempt to build the broadest possible united front. Despite its effort to create a revolutionary democratic alternative, no understanding has been possible with the two mainstream parties. All these years the IPF has been very critical of the CPI and CPM holding the view that in the name of democracy, revolution has been made subservient to class interests of the bourgeois-feudal combine. They have further criticised the CPM government in Bengal for its hobnobbing with the Congress (I) which it considers as communal as the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP).

In the meantime, the IPF has made a clear stand on the role of violence, the PWG, individual killings and armed operations conducted by CPI(ML) in Bihar. It has realized that annihilation of the oppressor or the collaborator does not end oppression for which sustained mass activity was needed. The IPF also became critical of Charu's leadership; forging of mass organizations was the first break it made with Charu's line.

The strategy of the IPF is to join the political mainstream, while continuing the class struggle through over-ground mass movements, and by mobilizing like-minded forces against feudalism. It has emphasized that participation in elections at all levels was necessary for political campaigns and also to mark its presence politically.

Since 1989, the IPF has been contesting elections. In the 1989 Lok Sabha elections, it won a lone seat from Araha constituency in Bihar where its candidate Rameswar Prasad contested. In the 1991 Lok Sabha elections, it contested twenty three seats—sixteen constituencies in Bihar, two each in Assam and Uttar Pradesh, and one each in West Bengal, Tripura and Himachal Pradesh. Out of this, it could win only one constituency—Karbi Anglong in Assam where the candidate was Dr. Jayanta Rongpi. In the Assembly elections it managed to win six seats. The influence of the IPF is increasing. Though in the initial years the IPF's main base was in Bihar, it has now expanded to W.B., U.P., A.P., Assam and Tripura.

The second grouping was formed on 27 May 1989, at Naxalbari, where Kanu Sanyal announced the formation of the Communist Organisation of India (ML) which comprises of six Naxalite factions—the Organising Committee of Communist

Revolutionaries (OCCR), the Unity Centre of Communist Revolutionaries of India (Marxist-Leninist) (UCCRI-ML) led by Subodh Mitra, the Indian Communist Party led by M. H. Krisnappa, Liberation Front led by Sabuj Sen, the CPI (ML) Kaimur Range led by Rabi Shankar and the Central Organizing Committee (ML) of Umadhar Singh from Bihar.

Kanu Sanyal, the second-in-command of Charu Mazumdar during Naxalbari, has been the most critical of Charu and described the armed struggle of the CPI(ML) under Charu's leadership as "an act of terrorism".⁸ He has rejected the possibility of aligning with Naxalite factions who still believed in Charu's ideology. He makes a clear distinction between the underground armed struggle and those who have decided to work openly. Kanu Sanyal believes that the objective of his new organisation could only be achieved through organized armed struggle.

The third grouping is the All India People's Resistance Forum (AIPRF) which comprises of some fifty front organisations of Naxalite groups. Significantly, the important constituent members are the PWG, the MCC, CPI(ML) Party Unity, and CPI(ML) (Maharashtra).⁹ It was formed sometime around April 1992 during its first convention held in Calcutta. The Second Convention was held as recently as 21 March 94 in Calcutta. The AIPRF is still wedded to the idea of a relentless revolutionary struggle modelled on the peasant uprisings in Naxalbari and to the armed struggle is the only way to resist ruthless feudal oppression.

All the constituent members of AIPRF have armed wings; they believe in armed struggle and denounce parliamentary democracy. The AIPRF's objective is to build a strong national-level mass front to further the struggle amongst the peasantry and tribal people. According to them, the mechanism through which social transformation is to take place is an intense struggle made by the poor and the landless. It talks about starting an agrarian revolutionary movement, as in the present conditions armed struggle is necessary in the face of ruthless feudal oppression and lack of protection from the judiciary. In this regard, they would not condemn annihilation of class enemies so long as it is a part of the people's struggle. It is opposed to the parliamentarism of the CPI and CPM and seeks to confront the ruling classes and to overthrow the political system by revolutionary means. It considers that

Notes

1. Naxalbari is a small village in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal.
2. Cited in N>R. Mohanty, "An Emerging Force", *Times of India*, 25 April 1993.
3. sudheendra Kulkarni, "A Naxal Perestroika", *Observer*, 27 March 1988.
4. See R.J.R. Prasad "Naxalite Challenge: The Spreading Violence in Andhra Pradesh", *Frontline*, 3 January 1992, p. 32 and 34 ; D. Kesava Rao, "On Home Ground: Karimnagar

both the CPI and CPM have strayed from the path of Marxism and become part of the exploitative system by participating in parliamentary democracy. They are also critical of the IPF which has been getting closer to the CPI and CPM and has become a part of the electoral process. Therefore, there was no question of coordinating with them.

Conclusion

The Naxalite movement which was in a state of disarray in the seventies and early eighties due to consistent state onslaught is beginning to show signs of vibrancy. However, it might yet take a long time for them to show any cohesiveness. And what is not clear from some of their ideological postures is whether the democratic approach is merely a matter of tactic or belief.¹⁰ In a recent rally held in Calcutta, the CPI(ML) Liberation group's General Secretary threatened to re-launch a Naxalbari style movement if the CPM government did not end its atrocities on the rural peasantry of Bengal. These statements create doubts about its ideological clarity. Was the earlier stance of the CPI(ML) Liberation to carry out its struggle within the parliamentary framework a ploy and a mere tactic? It reminds one of Wijeweera's reaction to the results of the 1982 Presidential election when he said that bourgeois elections were not meant for a proletarian class organisation like the JVP; that the acceptance of the parliamentary path is nothing but a tactical move was evident from Mishra's assertion that every movement has its phases. "There are times when one goes for direct assault, and there are times indirect struggle best suits the party—we are conserving our energy and in future it may happen that a call to take to arms may again be necessary."¹¹

In spite of these developments, the Naxalite movement is a marginal factor with no decisive influence on the course of national politics. There is no doubt that to challenge the State it needs to build up a disciplined mass movement that would coordinate the different forms of prevailing protests made by various segments of the population all over India and not only in certain pockets. This in itself is an immense task, particularly when the splinter groups still have differing strategies which make the objective of unity almost an impossibility—leave alone the question of bringing the mainstream left under the same common platform.

Diostric Run by Naxalites", *Frontline*, 3 January 1992, p. 37 and Amarnath K. Menon, "People's War Group: on the warpath", *India Today*, 28 February 1993, pp. 63-64.

5. Kalyan Chaudhuri, "The Emerging IPF: A Third Communist Force", *Frontline*, July 20- August 2, pp. 41-43.

6. Quoted from "Comrades Arise, Again!", *Sunday*, 24-30 November 1991.

7. "The Spreading Dagnet of Naxalism", *Times of India*, 8 September 1991; "The Naxalite Challenge", *Hindustan Times*, 6 September 1993; Ajit Kumar Jha, "Naxalism:

Charu's Strategy won't do", *Hindustan Times*, 3 October 1987 and Rajuu Korti, "A Growing Menace: The problem in Maharashtra," *Frontline*, January 3, 1992, p. 38.

8. Praful Bidwai, "Naxalites on the Upswing: Meaning of East Godavari Episode", *Times of India*, 13 January 1988.

9. Venu Menon, "Lure of the Lal Salaam", *Times of India*, 15 December 1991.

10. Sumanta Banerjee, "The System Produces Naxalites", *Hindustan Times*, 29 September 1987.

11. Landlords have formed private armies mostly along caste lines and a few under individual leadership. Some of these are the *Brahmarishi Sena*, *Sunlight Sena*, *Bhumi Sena*, *Lorik Sena*, and *Satyendra Sena*. See "Behind the killing in Bihar: A Report on Patna, Gaya, and Singhum", People's Union for Democratic Rights, pp. 29, 45-47.

12. Charu Mazumdar's formulations on the tactics of annihilation were put forth in a series of articles in the *Liberation*, the (CPI (ML) journal, during 1968-1970. Very briefly, his idea of annihilation was to crush the feudal authority in the village by attacking and annihilating the landlords. Such annihilation would mean liquidating the political, social and economic authority of the class enemy. Further, the annihilation of class enemies would be "the higher form of class struggle while the act of annihilating class enemies through guerrilla actions" would be "the primary stage of the guerrilla struggle". Cited in Biplab Das Gupta, "Naxalite Armed Struggles and the Annihilation campaign in Rural Areas", in V. Grover (ed.), *Political System in India: Politics of Influence, Violence and Pressure Groups*, (New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications 1989), p.233.

13. Andhra Pradesh has a long history of peasant struggles. It was first in Telengana where the concept of armed revolution was tested by the Communist Party in 1946 against the Nizam of Hyderabad state, which was called off in 1951. For details of peasant struggles in the eighties see, G.S. Bhargava, "Naxalites in Andhra Pradesh", *Mainstream*, Annual 1989, pp71-76.

14. Some of its front organisations are the Civil Liberties Committee, Revolutionary Writers' Association and Radical Students' Union.

15. T. Lakshmi pathi, "Fear Again: Naxalite Violence in Andhra Pradesh", *Frontline*, 17 December 1993.

16. For details see, *week*, 15 November 1992, pp. 6-7 R.J. R. Prasad, "End of the Run: The Arrest of Kondapalli Seetharmai", *Frontline*, 23 April 1993, pp.31-32 and M.O. Farewell to arms", *Pioneer*, 10 April 1994.

17. Girish Maathur, "New Turn in Naxalite Politics", *Link*, 3 April 1988, p.9.

18. Sumanata Banerjee, "Naxalite Factions: Futile Unity Efforts", *Deccan Herald*, 12 June 1989.

19. "Naxal Unity", *Hindustan Times*, 2 October 1993.

20. Kuldip Nayar, "The New Face of Naxalism", *Tribune*, 10 August 1989.

21. Cited in Sudhir K. Singh, "Will Blood Flow Again", *Pioneer*, 29 March 1994.

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All You Who Sleep Tonight

All you who sleep tonight
Far from the ones you love,
No hand to left or right,
And emptiness above-

Know that you aren't alone.
The whole world shares your tears,
Some for two nights or one,
And some for all their years.

VIKRAM SETH