Terrorism and Naxalite Violence in India: The Problem and its Solution

As a people bombarded with news on terror and Naxal Violence, we assume we know all that there is to know about the topic. They are the enemy and must therefore be curbed, contained, defeated.

But to be able to defeat an enemy we must know where to strike. And to know where to strike we must understand how they think, how they work, their motivations and weaknesses, and strike, ideally at the root cause of what makes the enemy. The task then is not to defeat the enemy but to defeat the circumstance that creates the enemy.

This document is an attempt to understand the reason for Naxal Aggression and suggest ways to address the problem at its roots.

A Naxal or Naxalite is a member of the Communist Party of India (Maoist). The term Naxal derives from the name of the village Naxalbari in West Bengal, where the movement had its origin. Naxalites are considered far-left radical communists, supportive of Maoist political sentiment and ideology. Their origin can be traced to the split in 1967 of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), leading to the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist). Initially the movement had its centre in West Bengal. In later years, it spread into less developed areas of rural southern and eastern India, such as Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana through the activities of underground groups like the Communist Party of India (Maoist).

According to Maoist sympathisers, the Indian Constitution "ratified colonial policy and made the state custodian of tribal homelands", turning tribal populations into squatters on their own land and denied them their traditional rights to forest produce. These Naxalite conflicts began in the late 1960s with the prolonged failure of the Indian government to implement constitutional reforms to provide for limited tribal autonomy with respect to natural resources on their lands, e.g. pharmaceutical and mining, as well as pass 'land ceiling laws', limiting the land to be possessed by landlords and distribution of excess land to landless farmers and labourers. In Scheduled Tribes areas, disputes related to illegal alienation of ST land to non-tribal people, still common, gave rise to the Naxalite movement.

Mao Zedong provided ideological leadership for the Naxalbari movement, advocating that Indian peasants and lower class tribals overthrow the government and upper classes by force. A large number of urban elites were also attracted to the ideology, which spread through Charu Majumdar's writings, particularly the 'Historic Eight Documents' which formed the basis of Naxalite ideology. Using People's courts, similar

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4 Pike, John (2 February 2017). "Naxalite", GlobalSecurity.org. Retrieved 27 April 2017. In India today there are many Maoist parties and organisations that either predate the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) or emerged from factions when the CPI-ML split after the death of Charu Majumdar."
5 "History of Naxalism". Hindustan Times. 15 December 2005.
to those established by Mao, Naxalites try opponents and execute with axes or knives, beat, or permanently exile them.⁶

While some parts of the left-wing movement in India are now willing to partly or fully embrace parliamentary politics to address issues of class, inequality, and distribution, hardcore Naxalites remain unwilling to countenance democratic politics and seek the violent overthrow of the state through a variety of tactics. Although conventional accounts describe them as motivated by the broad economic deprivation and absence of the state in much of rural central India, a more specific reason is resentment at the local exploitative power configurations—whether feudal landlords, land-expropriating state governments, or extractive corporations—that continue to dominate and suppress the lower castes and aboriginal tribes that reside in these areas and constitute the Naxalite support base⁷. The Naxalites, however, are a protean movement that has expertly exploited a variety of caste, ethnic, or sectarian cleavages in India.⁸

According to the article⁹ “Guns and Butter? Fighting Violence with the Promise of Development”, published in the Journal of Development Economics in January 2017:

The Indian central and state governments responded to the increased violence after the creation of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) with a variety of measures. Personnel and spending on security forces were increased, and central and state paramilitary forces started operations against the Maoists that came to be referred to as Operation Green Hunt by the media. At the same time, expenditures on development programs were increased as well, with the hope of improving the living conditions of the local population and thereby the traditionally strained relationship between civilians and the government in Maoist-affected areas.

One of the first development programs in Maoist-affected areas in this time period was MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme), rolled out across India between 2006 and 2008.

What role did MGNREGS play in tackling Maoist violence?

Comparing districts that received MGNREGS to very similar districts that did not receive the program until later, in our research we find police attacks on Maoists intensified after MGNREGS came into effect. This is consistent with an improvement in the relationship of civilians with the government as a result of the program. Since civilians may have important information about the location of the Maoists, who rely on them for shelter and information on police movements, MGNREGS seems to have helped win

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⁸ https://ctc.usma.edu/indias-approach-to-counterinsurgency-and-the-naxalite-problem/
⁹ Authors: Gaurav Khanna, assistant professor of Economics at the School of Global Policy and Strategy, University of California – San Diego. His research focusses on conflict and the markets for education and labor in developing countries and Laura Zimmermann, assistant professor in Economics and International Affairs at the University of Georgia. Her research focuses on the labor-market and political economy impacts of government programs in developing countries, and she has worked widely on effects of MGNREGS in India. Extract taken from: https://sustainablesecurity.org/2017/09/28/development-for-peace-the-decline-of-naxalite-violence-in-india/
civilians over and encourage them to share that information with the security forces. The Indian Home Ministry also attributes the increased success of catching Maoists to better intelligence gathering.

In concurrence with the increase in police-initiated attacks, we find that the Maoists started retaliating against civilians. The rebels traditionally concentrated on attacking government forces rather than civilians, which makes this shift an important change in behavior. In leaflets and other documents, Maoists claim that the killed civilians were police informants and threaten to attack other civilians cooperating with the police.

MGNREGS therefore appears to have contributed to the effectiveness of government forces by winning the “hearts and minds” of the local population. While this improved effectiveness lead to a short-run increase in violence as government forces become more pro-active, violence declined over time as security forces won more battles against the insurgents.

This matches the recent substantial decline in Maoist-related violence. Up until around 2010 when MGNREGS was a relatively new program, Maoist fatalities increased substantially, and many top leaders surrendered. Since then, India has seen an impressive decline in Maoist-related deaths and areas under Maoist control. Anti-poverty programs like MGNREGS can therefore support more traditional counter-insurgency strategies if they manage to improve the local population’s relationship with the government. Since civilians take on large risks when choosing to share information on insurgents with government forces, this strategy will only be successful if civilians believe that the benefits from the program are large and long-lasting enough to be worth potential retaliation by the insurgents.

MGNREGS was set up to be a more permanent program than other initiatives because of the legal guarantee and was enacted partly due to pressure from NGOs and social activists, who also played an important role in monitoring implementation quality. This buy-in from government and NGOs makes the program very different from similar programs elsewhere and is likely to have contributed to its success. Lower actual benefits than promised by the government remain a challenge in many developing countries, including India, however, if governments do not ensure a high level of implementation quality, transitory programs and broken promises will sow distrust with citizens, making future investments less effective.

What definite conclusions can we draw from this narrative?

1. That the Naxalite movement is a reactionary movement either fighting or projecting to fight against oppression of the ruling classes and for better opportunities and rights for the vulnerable populations in the affected areas.

2. Even as central and state police and paramilitary forces’ operations have a role to play, working towards increasing the income level of civilians in the area and providing them with better and more sustained economic opportunities will have a far greater and longer-term effect to reduce and eventually completely counter the insurgency.
Providing sustained economic activity to Youth

India today has more than 50% of its population below the age of 25 and more than 65% below the age of 35. This both creates an asset and becomes a responsibility for the country. Unchanneled this demographic can cause large scale unrest that can lead to more and more insurgency like situations. Channeled they can contribute to unforeseen growth and development for themselves and for the nation as whole.

A large part of this youth, and specifically in the insurgency areas being talked about comes from poor and semi-literate backgrounds. Needless to say, each one of them wants to be rich, wants to have income upwards of 10 – 20 – 30 – 40 thousand rupees a month and have very little to back them in terms of skills or education, ideas or institutional support. We are of course not talking about the miniscule percentage who “make it” but the vast majorities who are unable to.

Any number of case studies will prove that the struggle, the uncertainty, fear of the lingering failure leads to depression, anger and hopelessness – making them vulnerable targets to be exploited by powerful groups with vested interests – whether we call them revolutionaries or terrorist organizations, it does not change the fact that they benefit from the vulnerability of this unchanneled and economically poor demographic. Right and wrong, thought processes around should and should not, equality, equanimity, spirituality and human rights are all concepts thought of by people who are not worried about where the next meal for themselves and their families would come from! Lack of education, exposure and avenues, problems around survival coupled with someone preying on their fears, luring them with unrealistic promises that will ‘change their lives’, dramatically and fast becomes a lethal combination drifting them into a bottomless abyss – and of course as they become the face of this unchanneled and economically poor demographic. Right and wrong, thought processes around should and should not, equality, equanimity, spirituality and human rights are all concepts thought of by people who are not worried about where the next meal for themselves and their families would come from! Lack of education, exposure and avenues, problems around survival coupled with someone preying on their fears, luring them with unrealistic promises that will ‘change their lives’, dramatically and fast becomes a lethal combination drifting them into a bottomless abyss – and of course as they become the face of this darkness embracing terror as a tactic to gain what once must have been a harmless dream to be better, to live better – they are no longer victims but enemies of the state. Eventually they will recruit more into their fold and their ‘struggle’ will live on till it destroys one and all.

The solution to the problem is seemingly simple but in practice has a series of steps to be implemented over a course of time. In a single word, the solution is Economic Empowerment. But how does one go about it for an unskilled, uneducated youth when the country in any case is facing largescale unemployment.

The problem has to be dealt with at multiple fronts:

To begin with we need to give a new direction to how we approach education as a whole and skill development in particular in the country.

At any given time it must be understood that assessment of demand is a necessary pre-requisite to the creation of a sellable product.

Our current education system has not been able to

- provide even basic language and mathematics skills to children in a manner that they create a sound foundation for later learning – this gap is felt by the child through the rest of his/her life creating a void in both later learning and understanding.
These skills need to be developed at the primary school level, where even if the child is a first-generation learner, nature ensures that he or she has the maximum retention rate. Language and basic mathematics skills are the foundation stones of anything and everything a child will do in later life.

- **create thinking, questioning minds** at the primary and middle school levels – these skills are what enable ‘out of the box thinkers’ and intelligent leaders – our children, on the contrary, often learn merely to follow blindly and remain unable to take the next step without guidance or coaxing till very late in life, they lack the skills to realistic assess problems and plan for sustainable solutions.

If you visit any middle school and sit through a few classes, you will realize that answers to all questions where “what do you think of this or this” is asked, teachers dictate answers to students on what points will bring them the best marks in the question. Children in India thus learn, not by understanding or discovering the best answer, not by evaluating the pros and cons of their arguments but by being handed down what is appropriate. This system is further worsened by focus on learning functional language rather than literature, and by the advent of everything being marked in multiple choice question form.

Most situations in later life and jobs will not have multiple choice right or wrong answers but a combination of solutions to assess and apply. Moreover, learning through this system geared basically at gaining more marks and not really acquiring more knowledge or skills makes for poor employability in later life. These children grow up with huge expectations on what they will get if they get marks in 80s and 90s but fail to impress the industry due to lack of basic communication skills, lack of creativity and understanding.

A child below the age of 12 does not need vocation training but tools to enhance how s/he understands the world, communicates his or her ideas. Rote learning needs to be discouraged in favour of learning by doing towards enhancing the understanding of concepts. If this base is sound, the child will be able to better utilize any training received in later life.

New methods of teaching educators need to be envisaged and implemented. The idea of education cannot be compromised to make it easier for a teacher to evaluate. Also, teachers, like workers in any other industry must be appraised, evaluated, given time and incentive to improve and be penalized or rewarded – they should be made to feel respected for helping build the nation but also accountable for what they deliver. In this sense, a teacher should be treated no differently than a civil engineer in-charge of building a bridge.

Please note here that we are saying economic empowerment is the key to solving insurgency problems. Economic empowerment is not a standalone activity that can happen by providing subsidies and aids to boost one sector or the other at a later stage. The creation of the base happens in the time frame of less than 2 general elections but ensures an entire generation to have a better chance at becoming more productive and better employable for the rest of their economic lives.

The 2 points mentioned above must happen as a preventive measure, along with the third that is more a curative measure. More curative measures other than in education follow.
We are already sitting with a large population of unskilled, semi-literate youth. The urgent need is to enable them such that they can find meaningful vocations and livelihoods.

A program like Skill India is indeed a step on the right direction, since “The objective of this Skill Certification Scheme is to enable a large number of Indian youth to take up industry-relevant skill training that will help them in securing a better livelihood”.

“A student scoring 60% marks cannot pursue BA-English today but can definitely go in for engineering. My point is simple — are we not creating people for unemployment? ... The Indian IT industry wants skills. For example, Nasscom says 6 million people are required in cybersecurity by 2022. But we have a skills shortage. The point is if I am looking for a robotics person and instead I get a mainframe person, then it creates a skill gap. This comes as a big challenge.”, says tech Mahindra CEO C P Gurnani who is laying the foundation for the next level of growth at his company. While Mr. Gurnani is talking about the IT industry here, the situation is no better in any other sector. We are creating generalists who then must adapt to and learn skills on the job rather than come with expertise.

We must make an effort, conduct market research to understand the demands of the market in an organized sector wise study and provide training that caters to such demand, rather than training the youth once again to be mediocre generalists. Catering to the needs of the market will automatically create jobs and lead to economic empowerment. This in turn will have the spiral to tackle any sort of insurgency in the country.

But one must also balance the market with what our youth have to offer and figure out ways to bridge this gap. It must be understood that Skill India aims to empower first generation learners. It is a known fact that a first-generation learner takes longer to learn than one who has been brought up in an educated family. Add to this the fact that a lot of these students may already be daily wagers of sorts trying to make ends meet in one way or another. Their enrolling for something like Skill India is in the hope of finding a better livelihood. One month of learning computers does not enable you to do anything on a computer. In three months you can learn to introduce yourself in English and mug up sentences such as, “would you like fries with that sir”, but that is about it. We need to answer, “Is the idea to train an entire generation into becoming McDonalds employees of sorts?” If Skill India is an alternative to ITIs of the past, they need to be adding that value to the student, and not merely providing him or her with a less than minimum wage job that he will be thrown out of in 6 months or worse that he may reconcile to, but the added frustration will only make for added discontent and anger.

We need to ask ourselves what we want, not for the nation here, but for each of these starry eyed youth, already defeated and tired - We need to ask ourselves, how? How are we going to equip them? And then, for what – if we have researched well, there is a lucrative job, ‘a long term growth opportunity’ waiting at the end of a course, if not, its just another abyss!

Stories about Skill India going wrong are rampant. Data is being fudged on a large scale, students are being taught things they see no relevance in. For example, how can an entire class, without assessing it’s need or the need of the market be sent to be skilled in learning to cut potato chips
in a machine? There are stories of job fairs where students fill out forms to know about a job, can be placed at 6000/- a month, refuses, but his data is still sent with organizations claiming they have placed x number of students. There is a need to access in a non-corrupt way, what is going wrong in this process, and what is needed exactly to set it right? We might need, better more focused courses, better course material built to cater to the target audience, better educators, longer time frames, on-the-job training periods, realistic expectations, bridge courses, courses that will get them started and courses that will help them grow once predefined milestones are crossed. Education and economic growth are cyclical in nature – one lead to another to one.

THE BANKING SECTOR

Let is finally look at the other major area that can work to economically empower youth – self employment.

Not everybody is meant to work under someone. Many young people would like to start doing something on their own were it not for the severe insecurity that accompanies anyone starting a business without a backup.

Beginning with who will help with financing the business in the initial years to what happens when payments get late or do not come through to how a self employed person will save when all that s/he earns goes back into the business are just the tip of the ice-berg.

Self-employment for youth in low-income groups can become a viable choice provided the government can provide some amount of institutional support to it whereby, it is treated not as a subsidy but as an investment by the government and by financial institutions.

The government along with the industry a social enterprise of sorts that will run career help centers to guide the youth to create sound business plans, on how to become a cog in the overall machinery that may for example supply certain goods and services to the industry. They can also envisage a cash-pooling service for deserving candidates.

Micro-financing can be made available to entrepreneurs on submission on sound business plans that may be vetted by experts. Terms of payment should be made easy and somewhat lenient in the first five years of business. To alleviate the problem of late payments, the government should work with business groups to develop a new social enterprise that pool the finances of small business owners, allowing them to dip into a collective pot of money as they await payments.

Taxation should be easy and encourage such enterprise in the first few years and training mechanisms and mentoring programmes should be put into place to reduce chances of failure.

Further pension, life and health insurance schemes should be put into place accounting for low liquidity in the initial years.

Workshops, exhibitions, seminars to connect people and boost business may also be conducted.

With empowerment will come ambition, the faith and ability to actually do better in life. And with ambition as opposed to day-dreaming, and with institutional support will come hard work to make those dreams come true.