

Playing into the Naxalites' hands

Even well-intentioned people can become pawns in the Naxalites' insidious propaganda war

Nitin Pai

SUDEEP CHAKRAVARTI'S *Red Sun: Travels in Naxalite country* is a very important book, for it offers an excellent account of the nature of the Naxalite threat. The Naxalite movement thrives on disillusionment and disaffection. It collects unaddressed grievances and unredressed complaints and channelises them into anger against the "Indian State". It tells rape victims, dispossessed tribals and bullied villagers that the appropriate target of their ire is not the local landlord, policeman or politician but that abstraction called the "State". But beyond seductive dogma and the logic of the inevitable armed struggle to upturn the status quo, it offers no positive solutions. The fact both Communism and Socialism failed doesn't matter to the Naxalite leadership, ideologues and sympathisers: people in remote, backward districts of India don't know 20th century history.

If Naxalite leaders rally support for themselves through mobilising local grouses into a movement against the State and its symbols, their ideologues and sympathisers provide covering fire in the broader strategic psychological war. By dissing India's economic achievements, by spreading canards about the 'failure of neoliberal reforms', by an incessant, exclusive focus on the negative side (in the fashionable name of 'dissent'), by playing up the myth of 'two Indias' and even by openly championing violence, these opinion makers create a context that leads the the average Indian citizen into thinking that there might be something legitimate about the Naxalite movement. There isn't.

But the left-leaning and left-wing commentariat has succeeded where the pseudo-secularists have failed. The average Indian believes that the Naxalites are not quite as serious a threat as the *jihadis*—although Naxalites actually hold a broad swathe of territory. Little wonder then that Indian politicians feel no serious pressure to do anything about the Naxalite threat.

Even where there was significant public outcry, the UPA government decided that its perceived vote-banks were more important than national security: it is not half as serious about the *jihadi* threat as it should be. But where public attention was lower, it

literally abdicated its responsibility. The presence of the incompetent Shivraj Patil at the home ministry didn't help. So while the Naxalites consolidated into a nation-wide movement a few years ago, the central government continues to claim that this is essentially a matter for the states, and it would only play a co-ordinating role.

In the absence of a coherent national anti-insurgency strategy states were left to their own devices. Y S R Reddy's government in Andhra Pradesh, got into bed with the Naxalites in order to win the election. It was a mutually beneficial bargain: the Naxalites took a breather (after being pummelled by the previous government led by Chandrababu Naidu) and regrouped. It ended predictably, when the negotiations failed and the Naxalites went back to their armed struggle. Why predictably? Well, because "armed struggle" is an inseparable part of the Naxalite dogma: Comrade Prachanda, the leader of Nepal's Maoists, is being criticised for relenting on this even *after* they joined the government.

If this was the situation in Andhra Pradesh, with its relatively higher state capacity, what of places like Jharkhand and Chattisgarh, where state capacity is extremely weak? Faced with fighting a war with what they had, they engaged in some extremely flawed strategies. Setting up *Salwa Judum*, an extra-constitutional counter-insurgency militia, was a big mistake. So is the draconian law which suspends the freedom of the press. The Chattisgarh authorities identified the problems correctly. But the tools they used to solve these problems were ill-considered, ham-fisted and ultimately counterproductive.

Chattisgarh's government and political leaders cannot escape responsibility for these bad moves—but in the absence of cohesion, determination and resources from New Delhi, it is not surprising that they chose that course. Understandable, but still not acceptable. But it's no use criticising the Chattisgarh authorities for their dubious strategies. The anti-insurgency war against Naxalites is a national one. The Union home ministry should be held to account for its sins of omission that directly caused Chattisgarh's sins of commission. The next government in New Delhi has its job cut out—and

parties would do well to put their anti-Naxalite war strategy in their manifestos.

If Left-leaning commentators and Naxalite sympathisers are battling for the Naxalites, what should one make of genuine liberal human rights activists? It is possible to construct a reasonable argument that violations of human rights by the government must be criticised every time they occur. The danger with this, though, is that well-meaning individuals and groups can inadvertently end up battling for the Naxalites. Compared with their usual backers, the Naxalites derive greater benefit when reputed individuals and organisations criticise the government. On the war's psychological front, NGOs and human rights groups end up strengthening the Naxalite movement to the extent they add fuel to the fire of disillusionment and disaffection. Rights activists and do-gooders would do well to heed the old injunction *primum non nocere*—first, do no harm.

There are bound to be some who evaluate this trade-off and argue that holding the government's feet to the fire is important in the even larger context of democratic accountability and good governance. Well, to be taken as *bona fide*, such individuals and organisations must unequivocally condemn Maoism and violent armed struggle. They must also unambiguously accept that only the state has the normative legitimacy to use violence. In other words, there is no room for moral equivalence: it is fair to criticise the government and government officials for their failings. But it is necessary to make the distinction between the State's legitimate right to the use of violence and the Naxalites' armed struggle.

Now there has been a controversy brewing for several months over the arrest of Dr Binayak Sen.

The Supreme Court has turned down his bail application, yet sections of the media have been projecting him as an innocent being victimised by the state. Quizzed about the affair, Chakravarti contends that Dr Sen is a soft target for the state. "Having him in jail" he argues "allows the state government and police a victory in the face of organisational and security disasters on the ground. But this is a pyrrhic victory. It stifles a moderate voice, and has done nothing whatsoever to curtail or solve in any way either the raging Maoist rebellion in Chattisgarh or issues of development"

Innocent or guilty, only the courts can tell (and Dr Sen has unfettered access to them). But the media coverage of the affair is playing into the hands of the Naxalites. In the absence of a nation-wide anti-insurgency strategy, will critical media coverage compel Chattisgarh and other weak states to take a more enlightened, sophisticated route? Given the situation on the ground, that's unlikely. The interests of freedom and rights will be better served if the central government is compelled to really fight and defeat the Naxalites.

And then there is the non-security aspect of the anti-Naxalite strategy, wrongly characterised as the need for "development". It misses the point because people don't resort to violence because they lack development. They do so when there is a lack of governance.

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