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The Saga of Revolutionary Violence in India

Introduction

A parsimonious definition of violence enables us to understand the distinctiveness of political violence, as intentional acts that involve coercion and force and lead to harm. More importantly, this genre of violence is targeted towards effecting changes in the state and in its policies. Revolutionary violence is distinct from other form of political violence in so far as revolutionaries deny the legitimacy of the state, seek the overthrow of state power through armed struggle and attempt to put in place a state that is less unjust than the one we live in at present. The state tries to suppress or, at least, contain the armed struggle through all the means at its command: imposition of draconian legislation, suspension of civil liberties, torture of suspects, relocation of villagers, destruction of Maoist hideouts and indiscriminate killings.

State violence causes harm on an unprecedented scale. Revolutionary violence causes harm on an unprecedented scale. Caught between the state and revolutionaries are innocent people, oft the very people on whose behalf the gun was picked up in the first place, as well as officials who are in the business of performing their allotted roles. In this section, I chart out a brief biography of Maoism in India, to highlight this very point.

The outbreak of revolutionary violence in India

In India, the saga of revolutionary violence that was initiated in 1967 sent tremors of shock and awe through the country and abroad. In some quarters, both domestic and international, the armed uprising was enthusiastically hailed. On 5 July 1967, an editorial in the *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, triumphantly proclaimed that 'A peal of spring thunder has crashed over the land of India.' The reference was to a peasant uprising in the Naxalbari area in Darjeeling district in March of that year, when sharecroppers and landless labour, raising the slogan of 'land to the tiller' revolted against local landlords. The editorial went on to predict that 'a great storm of revolutionary armed struggle will eventually sweep over the length and the breadth of India.' In a fairly short time, what came to be known as the Naxalbari uprising spread over parts of West Bengal and spilled over into Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Kerala. Some of these states, or rather regions within these states, continue to be wracked by armed struggle waged by Maoist guerrillas.

A number of observers have traced the armed uprising to the deep ideological divide in the international communist movement of the time. Relations between the communist parties of the Soviet Union and the Peoples' Republic of China had soured on the twin issue of strategy and objectives. The hail of epithets hurled by one side of the divide at the other, ranged from 'left-wing adventurism' (for the CPC) to the dreaded term 'revisionist' (for the CPSU), escalated into a diplomatic crisis and ruptured relations between the two countries. In 1969, the two armies were to clash on the border between the Soviet Union and China.

The deep divide in the international communist movement led to a split in the Communist Party in India (CPI) in 1964 and generated a second left formation, the Communist Party Marxist (CPIM). Despite superficial divisions on the political line, each party wanted to pursue: the one established by the CPSU, or the one mandated by

the CPC, both parties remained committed to the electoral route to parliamentary democracy and to the paraphernalia that comes along with competitive party politics. In a short span of time, another split within the CPIM generated a third communist formation.

The split was catalysed by a group led by Charu Majumdar, who had challenged the leadership on every front, from its analysis of Indian society to the strategy it espoused for dealing with the manifold problems of an impoverished peasantry. In a series of eight essays published between 1965 and 1967, Majumdar attacked the CPIM for rescinding on Maoist ideology and for opting for a strategy that was practically irrelevant to the needs of Indian society. Following the Maoist line, the breakaway faction declared that the chief contradiction in a semi-feudal and semi-colonial India is between the peasantry and the landlords. This seemingly irreconcilable divide can be resolved, it was declared, only through armed struggle, the overthrow of the state and the establishment of a People's Democracy. Power, Charu Majumdar insisted, following to the last alphabet the signature script of Mao Ze Dong, flows from the barrel of the gun. Expectedly, Majumdar was expelled from the CPIM in 1967.

Charu Majumdar had cut his teeth on revolutionary politics when he took part in a violent peasant uprising in 1946 in Bengal. The Tebhaga uprising was firmly anchored in the demand for redistributive justice, more specifically in the claim that the share of the landlord in the produce should be reduced from a half to one-third. Spearheaded by a rising Communist Party of India, Tebhaga catapulted an issue of crucial significance onto the political agenda, the right of the worker over the product of her labour. The entrenched power of the landlord over the bodies and the labour of the peasant was sought to be ruptured through violent clashes and looting of granaries. The movement was repressed and collapsed, but it left a legacy that was to inspire other peasant movements against exploitative landlords, usurious moneylenders and corrupt forest and revenue officials.

One such movement took place in West Bengal. In the 1950s, communist activists led by Kanu Sanyal and Khokhan Majumdar had begun to organize peasants and workers into Kisan Sabhas in the Jalpaiguri district of Bengal. Charu Majumdar and Jangal Santhal joined the movement a little later and began to mobilize landless labour, sharecroppers, small peasants and tea-garden workers to confront the untrammelled power of landowners and carry out redistribution of appropriated land.

Political mobilization bore fruit and armed struggle broke out in Naxalbari, Phansidewa and Kharibari villages in 1967. Landless workers, sharecroppers, small peasants, and tea-garden workers rose in revolt on the plank of land to the tiller. Naxalbari, which lies in the Terai region of Darjeeling district, was known for tea plantations established by British and Indian companies. Labour from the tribal areas of Jharkand and Madhya Pradesh had been rounded up to work in these large tea gardens which had been exempted from the scope of land reform legislation and ceiling acts implemented by the Government of India shortly after independence. It was this region that became the epicentre of the armed uprising that popularly came to be known as Naxalbari.

It is a moot point that practically every decade of post-independence India has been wracked by some crisis or the other. In retrospect, the decade of the 1960s proved especially momentous. All hopes that the post-independence political elite had, either the inclination or the will, to implement promises made by the first-generation leadership of independent India dramatically collapsed. The post-colonial elite had failed to live up to its own commitments, the Congress party which had led the mass movement against colonialism degenerated into a party of courtiers striving for proximity to the leader, the left had been tamed by the exigencies of parliamentary politics and millions of Indians continued to suffer from conceivably every ill of the human condition. In 1947, the great poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz had written the obituary of independence, the other side of which was the partition of the country. 'This stained

dawn, this shadowed morn, this is not the morn we struggled for,' he wrote in utmost desolation. The anguish epitomized in the poem was a damning indictment of partition politics. Twenty years later he could have written the same stanza as an epitaph, mourning the failure of the post-colonial elite to deliver justice to its own people in country after country in the post-colonial world.

Amidst this rampant discontent and generalized hopelessness, an ideologically grounded armed struggle of the dispossessed and the rural poor took on the might of the Indian state. It is not as if tribals, the landless and the small peasant had not revolted against injustice in India earlier. In 1967, these isolated and often random outbursts of violence were consolidated and strengthened by the ideology and strategy of guerrilla war fashioned by Mao Ze Dong. The strategy and the vision of Mao had been vindicated by the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 and the defeat of French forces by the Vietnamese at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

Majorly inspired by Maoism, Naxalism presented to the youth a new political imaginary, that of a society free of exploitation and injustice in which the self could fashion itself in freedom from social, economic and political constraints. As news about the peasant uprising spread to towns and cities, young people, deeply disillusioned by hopes belied and optimism betrayed, were charged with new sense of excitement and anticipation. Students, belonging to elite schools and universities, and professionals, in rewarding jobs, left their privileged niches and joined the Naxalite movement in various parts of the country. Posters supporting Naxalbari and Chairman Mao were pasted on the walls of buildings and parks in Calcutta and, in particular, in College Street. On the lawns of the elite Presidency College, famous for having produced intellectuals of extraordinary merit and ability, students from the college and elsewhere congregated to discuss violent revolution, a theme that was till then confined to the pages of the spectacularly written *The Wretched of the Earth* and to tales of revolutionary movements in rural areas of Vietnam and China. In St Stephens College in Delhi University, one of the premier colleges in

the country, slogans acclaiming the important role of Chairman Mao in shaping revolutionary imaginaries blazoned from the main tower.

Fired by the hope that India could replicate revolutionary peasant rebellions in other developing countries, students joined the exodus to the rural areas. Fairly soon however, a section of the youth that had left families, universities and well-paid jobs came to be disillusioned with the call to annihilate class enemies and with Charu Majumdar's injunction that their hands should be stained with the blood of the class enemy. The ritual of bloodletting marked the transition from the pre-revolutionary to the revolutionary. Staining of one's hands with the blood of others was nothing short than a rite of passage, baptism into politics in the revolutionary mode.

To date, Charu Majumdar is slammed for his insistence that the annihilation of class enemies is a higher form of class struggle and for his emphasis on the need to physically liquidate feudal classes in the countryside, along with landowners, moneylenders and other agents of a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society. This many could not stomach. The gifted director Sudhir Mishra in his 2003 film *Hazaron Khawaishen Aisi* forcefully captured the dilemma of students belonging to the elite strata of society, trapped between the requirement to commit violent acts and police torture if they did so, or even if they did not do so. Some opted out of the struggle, left for foreign universities and became established academics, others joined the civil service and yet others the corporate sector.

But others stayed behind to fight. Red Guard squads formed in schools and colleges served as a precursor of the People's Liberation Army. The period of discontent saw quixotic revolutionaries instigating workers to rise against capitalists, denouncement of class enemies, desecration of statues of revered leaders, raids on government offices, gheraos, strikes, attacks on police personnel and damage to public property. In rural areas, peasant militias armed often with only bows and arrows seized grain from the kulaks. The escalation of violence led to deaths in police firing, abduction and killing of landlords and snatching of arms.

In retrospect, the revolution was premature and definitely more romantic than revolutionary in its programme and its objectives. Manoranjan Mohanty argues that the movement was pre-organizational, it mechanically applied formulations of the Chinese revolution in India and that it concentrated more on violence and less on politicization of the constituency it spoke on behalf of.¹ More significantly, the struggle sparked off state repression and catapulted the expansion of paramilitary forces. Thus was the rather sad epigraph of a movement, which strongly gripped the political imagination of many a young person fired by the ambition to liberate India from the ills the post-independence leadership had consigned the country to, written.

The global context

Discontent with the establishment was not confined to the youth in India. Revolutionary romanticism and a passionate desire for a new order that could deliver justice and eliminate injustice exploded across the globe at the decade of the 1970s, firing minds and sparking off imaginations. Campus revolts broke out in the 1960s in the US, Germany, France, Italy, Japan, Mexico and other countries of the west. Young people rejected the ideas, the institutions and the visions of a liberal capitalist order that had been forged in the aftermath of the Second World War. In France, in May/June 1968, a crisis of unprecedented magnitude overpowered the country as students revolted against poor educational conditions and authoritarian administrations. Young people demanded free access to universities and more personal and political freedoms, and workers demanded power. The police crackdown resulted in injuries and arrests of scores of students. Demonstrations in Paris and other cities against police brutality swelled, and a general strike paralysed the country as labour joined students in solidarity. In May 1968, 10 million French workers went on strike and occupied

factories. The French government headed by Charles de Gaulle was forced to capitulate and resign.

In the United States, campus revolts against US involvement in the Vietnam War articulated a generalized ethos of rebellion against the established order. The civil liberties movements, gender struggles for equality, the struggle for the right to sexual preferences and rebellions in ghettos of American cities dissipated expectations that the American way of life would provide a luminous model for the rest of the world to follow. Hundreds of thousands of Afro-Americans participating in urban protests mounted a formidable challenge to practices of discrimination and racism, as well as poor housing, dismal schooling, unemployment and police brutality.

Revolts and popular discontent across the world challenged the precepts of not only liberal democracy and the market order, but also statist communism that had been institutionalized in the Soviet Union. The old Soviet style left was denounced and dismissed as moribund, as unable to offer any solution whatsoever, and indeed as part of the problem. It was Mao with his emphasis on the autonomy of politics who became the inspiration for youth in rebellion.

Many of these protests, opting as they did for piecemeal strategies of violence, and lacking as they did sustained leadership and a coherent and focussed ideology, quickly dissipated or were sternly repressed. In India, the state cracked down on the Naxalites in West Bengal. The Indian army and the police launched project 'Operation Steeplechase' and constructed an outer corridor to cordon off areas affected by the uprising in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. The paramilitary force, the Central Reserve Police Force rapidly mopped up cadres of the political formation within the enclosure.

The idea of revolution in post-independence India had spread like the proverbial bushfire across the country, but the revolution itself lasted not too long, hardly fifty-two days. Within two years, the armed struggle in West Bengal and in Andhra Pradesh where it had spread was suppressed ruthlessly by the state. Top leaders and cadres

were detained, tortured and killed. Charu Majumdar was arrested on 16 July 1972 and died twelve days later in police custody. The police did not hand over his body to his family, and he was given a quiet burial. His comrade Jangal Santhal turned into an alcoholic and headed towards a disgraceful end in 1981. Kanu Sanyal was to disown violence and opt for parliamentary democracy. In 2010 he committed suicide.

The legacy of Naxalism

With the benefit of hindsight, what are we to make of the Naxalite revolt against institutionalized injustice inflicted upon the tribals and the dalits, and its wider objective of taking over state power? For the Naxalite leadership, a semi-feudal, semi-colonial order had been constructed upon the backs of an exploited peasantry. There was no alternative but the demolition of the old order and the establishment of a new one. The cadres of the party could help the peasants to secure some redress for immediate problems, through violent appropriation of land for instance. But the fuller realization of justice had to await a new order. It was a project for the future, and it was precisely this project that the Indian state was determined to extinguish.

Classical Marxist theories of revolution emphasize not only the role of the vanguard party in developing revolutionary consciousness among the people, but also objective conditions such as an economic crisis of great magnitude and a pervasive crisis of state legitimacy. The Maoists focussed on the subjective dimension; that is the primacy of politics, without gauging accurately the strengths of the democratic state in India. Nor did they think of linking up with other radical struggles, for example trade union and peasant movement, or movements of the tribals. The Naxalites waged an isolated war, and they continue to do so to date, despite all the rhetoric about forming coalitions with struggles of the dispossessed.

Allegations of adventurism, of fostering of an ill thought-out experiment, of fomenting a culture of bloodlust, of reducing ideology to dogma and of giving preference to polemics over argument continue to be made against the Naxalite movement. But, it would also be foolhardy to denounce Naxalism as so much hyper-adventurism. The Naxalites did not achieve their end: that of smashing state power or even the power of local power elites that held tribals and landless peasants in their deadly thrall. What Naxalism did was to catapult into the limelight the complete failure of the Indian government to look after the interests and the needs of the most vulnerable and those who are at risk. The Naxals spoke for those who lacked voice in Indian politics, gave them voice and focussed upon dispossession, exploitation and injustice. Voices from the margins resounded in the public sphere of politics, simply because peasants had reached for the gun or backed gun-holders who spoke for them. For the dispossessed, violence was the weapon of the last resort; the ideology of the triply disadvantaged, and the ultimate mode of protest politics.

Naxalbari failed, but it highlighted the urgent need to complete the unfinished business of securing the livelihood of the most marginal of the Indian people. Ironically, it was the armed revolt that compelled the state to take urgent cognizance of the dismal conditions in which tribals and poor dalit peasants lived out what passed for a life. Today, the region of Naxalbari has seen economic development. It is far removed from the poverty-stricken areas in which a group of armed revolutionaries had sought to wage a guerrilla struggle against the post-colonial state that had failed on all fronts, especially that of social justice, or of securing to all citizens basic rights, dignity, freedom, equality and justice, in short all the staples of our constitutional morality. Ironically, the economic development of the region also inaugurated the end of the revolutionary imaginary in the very space in which it had taken birth and acquired shape. The movement died out in the area where it had originated.

Post-Naxalbari

Remarkably, the defeat of the Naxalite movement did not herald the end of the story. The armed struggle had collapsed in Naxalbari, but the *idea* of Naxalbari continued to inspire those who fight for the dispossessed. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, bases for radical armed struggle were created in the hills and forests of the country in Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar and in West Bengal. Regions which saw the eruption of armed struggle are today part of Naxal folklore. Leaders who spoke for the marginalized have become symbols of a politics of the impossible, giants who carried the fight for a more just society on their shoulders. Under the protection of armed Naxal groups, peasants seized land that had been unjustly appropriated from them and harvested the produce. Poor and landless peasants led by guerrilla squads drove out landlords from villages, set up liberated zones and established people's courts to redistribute land and mete out justice through annihilation of class enemies.

But the struggle was not only about material gain. Tribals and dalits rose in a massive struggle for dignity that had been denied to them by inhuman caste practices and for control over means of subsistence that had been appropriated through exploitation, fraud and violence not only by upper but also by the intermediate castes. The latter had benefited from the limited land reforms that had been implemented, for the most part half-heartedly and reluctantly, in parts of India.

Some of these struggles have gone down in history as turning points in our collective life. When people who have been socially and economically dominated and exploited stand up and speak back to those who have taken away their land and the product of their labour, stripped them of their self-respect and denied them the status due to human beings, we see the enlargement of the political space. We witness the awesome phenomenon of the voiceless acquiring agency and speaking back to history. The method by which they acquire political agency, violence, might not meet with our approval, but that

they acquire political agency is itself remarkable in our accursed caste-ridden, exclusionary and hierarchical society.

Yet, the story of Naxalism post-Naxalbari was not only one of giving to the dispossessed agency. The second phase of the Naxal struggle was marked by a great deal of fragmentation along personal rather than ideological lines, with groups professing copyright over the ideology, the strategy and the objectives of Naxalism, and locked into deadly battles with each other. The phase was marked by the degeneration of the revolutionary struggle, and consequent descent into mindless acts of violence. Immense violence scarred not only the bodies of landlords, but also those of small farmers, petty government employees, members of rival political parties and anyone suspected of being a police informer, including former comrades who had dissented from the line of the Naxal leadership.

Sumanta Bannerjee concludes that the history of the last four decades of the Naxalite movement in India is a painful record of attempts, both heroic and loutish, to bring about revolutionary changes in the benighted economic and social living conditions of the poor. Courageous battles against vicious state machinery, followed by self-sacrifice by thousands of guerrillas, and patient efforts by dedicated cadres to initiate land reform, and bring about changes in their areas of control, were marred by lumpen acts of extortions from petty traders and contractors and ruthless killings of people suspected to be police informers. The second phase in effect saw both the degeneration of revolutionary ideology and the fragmentation of the movement.²

The third phase

In September 2004, a new and a qualitatively different phase of the Maoist armed struggle, distinguished both by a transformation of the agent and of the political and economic context, was sparked off by the unification of two of the most significant groups in the movement. The first group, Peoples War, was the outcome of the 1998 merger

between Peoples War Group and CPI (ML) Party Unity (PU). The second component, the Maoist Communist Centre, had formed an alliance with Revolutionary Communist Centre of India-Maoists in 2003. The upshot of the merger was the constitution of the Communist Party of India (Maoist).

The armed wings of the two groups merged and generated the Peoples Liberation Guerrilla Army. According to reports, membership of the armed militia of the Maoists ranges from 9,000 to 10,000 armed fighters. The militia has the backing of about 40,000 full-time cadres of the party. A majority of these are in the Bastar region alone. The PLGA reportedly possesses sophisticated weapons such as rocket launchers, AK 47s rifles, grenades and land mines. Notably, the leadership of the Maoists is non-tribal hailing mainly from Bihar and Andhra Pradesh. This raises, as we shall see, an important political issue that is taken up later in this work, in chapter five, the relationship between cadres of the party and the constituency on whose behalf arms have been raised.

The stated objective of the formation of the CPI Maoist, an event that was publicized through rallies, public meetings and the Internet, is to take over state power through armed struggle. The armed struggle or the people's democratic revolution and a peoples' democracy will function in the interests of the poor. This is textbook Maoism, familiar not only to those who follow Mao or condemn him and his ideology, but also to all newspaper readers. What is more interesting is the reason given for the guerrilla war, and the manner in which the Maoist leadership justifies armed struggle.

Renouncing the parliamentary path to democracy, a form of government that has been dismissed as corrupt and as corrupting, the party has declared war on the Indian state. There is in Maoist ideology no other way to establish peoples power. Neither elections, nor participation, neither representation, nor accountability of the rulers to the ruled will do. Faithful to the strategy of guerrilla war, the leadership holds that liberated zones in the rural hinterland have to be expanded to encircle the cities and overwhelm them.

The objectives of the Maoists are in the main two. The first objective is to launch a struggle in regions that experience extreme deprivation. The second objective is to overthrow the state in India and establish a people's democracy through armed struggle. Towards this end, the party cadres have been assigned the task of explaining to constituencies the need for enormous sacrifices, particularly since the army has launched an all-out offensive. The cadres are expected to initiate measures to unite with other struggling organizations and forces, to forge strong united fronts in various parts of the country and to gain the support of the masses in fighting and defeating superior enemy forces. Notably, the agent of revolutionary struggle has been transformed in so far as we see the consolidation of hitherto disparate forces, and the formation of an impressive political formation determined to defy the might of the Indian state.

The context of the new phase of Maoism has also been transformed. In order to understand the scale of this transformation, let us briefly visit some regions in the Maoist heartland. These can best be characterized in John Bunyan's words as a veritable 'slough of despond'. Here little babies die of malnutrition and preventable diseases like dysentery and malaria; women suffer from life-threatening diseases such as anaemia and malnutrition; poverty relentlessly stalks lives of people; and disease, illiteracy and hunger are their constant companions. It is precisely these regions that the Maoists have made their base. Newer forms of exploitation in the form of leasing or sale of resource rich land to private companies have worsened the situation.

Contextualizing revolutionary violence

Disagreements on how many Indians belong to the category of the absolute poor is an enduring and even a constitutive aspect of the Great Indian Poverty Debate. The debate structured in the main around methodological disputes on how to measure poverty and

the poor has acquired highly technical overtones, and most of these subtleties escape non-economists, or more precisely non-statisticians. But even a non-economist can figure out that there is something very specific about poverty in India.

The Institute of Applied Manpower Research of the Planning Commission, Government of India, has constructed a state-wise Human Development Index. The index is based on three indices, health (life expectancy at birth), education (adjusted mean years of schooling and literacy rate for population aged 7 years and above) and income (standard of living determined by people's command over resources necessary to access food, shelter and clothing).³ On the basis of these indices, the Human Development Report issued by the Institute has graded states in India. Poverty, according to the report, is concentrated in eight states in the central and the eastern parts of the country: Bihar, Chattisgarh, Jharkand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan and West Bengal, along with some parts of Uttar Pradesh. These states, with the exception of West Bengal, have been at the bottom of human development ranking list since 1999–2000. A majority of these states form part of the 'Red Corridor', which is marked by armed struggle.

More significantly, poverty is concentrated in mainly two communities: the Scheduled Tribes and the Scheduled Castes, and some groups in the Backward Castes. The 2010 UNDP Human Development Report affirms that 81 per cent of the STs, 66 per cent of the SCs and 58 per cent of OBCs belong to the category of multi-dimensionally poor.⁴ (I concentrate on the plight of the SC and the ST population in these regions, because they suffer from double disadvantage, that of material deprivation as well as social discrimination.)

According to the latest statistics issued by the Institute of Applied Manpower Research, 48 per cent of all the Scheduled Castes and 52 per cent of the Scheduled Tribe population of the entire country lives in Bihar, Chattisgarh, Jharkand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. A break-up of HDI statistics state wise presents a starker picture of the overlap between poor regions

and poverty/low human development indicators among SC and ST communities. Chattisgarh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkand and Odisha are the worst performers on this front.

The overlap between absolute poverty and birth into a community that occupies a lowly position in the caste hierarchy is not happenstance. People are not poor because they lack basic skills to participate in profitable transactions; they are poor because they have been born into a community that has been historically stigmatized by the caste system as the (former) 'untouchable', the 'polluting' or the 'outsider'. Children born into these two social categories have been for centuries handed down nothing but deprivation, social discrimination, rank indignities and performance of menial tasks as their patrimony. Thomas Gray's (1716–1771) haunting and poignant words on penury in his 'Elegy written in a Country Churchyard' sums up the life many Indians are forced to lead in regions of eastern and central India. 'Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid some heart once pregnant with celestial fire/ Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed, or worked to ecstasy the living lyre/But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page/Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll/Chill penury repress'd their noble rage/And froze the genial current of the soul'.

The link that the Indian state has tried to forge between group representation, redistribution and recognition through affirmative action policies has proved tenuous, and whatever benefits these policies have fetched are unevenly distributed. Both redistribution and recognition continue to elude persons in the poorest regions that have now been overrun by the Maoists. If we look at the regions in which the armed guerrilla squads of the Maoists operate, these dovetail neatly into areas in which the poorest of the poor and the most deprived of the doubly disadvantaged live and work.

The eminent author Mahashweta Devi, known for her evocative and powerful prose, her political commitment to marginal tribal communities in West Bengal and Jharkand and her castigation of various processes that create and recreate dispossession and homelessness in India, has sternly reprimanded the Maoists for killing

Figure 3.1 Conflict Zones

innocent citizens and declared herself against such violence. Yet in an interview to the magazine *Caravan* on 1 June 2010, she stated that those who have closely watched Maoists are clear that violence is the result of continuous injustice meted out to the common man, especially to the tribal people. Maoists have influence in the forests and tribal belts as in Lalgarh in West Midnapore district of West Bengal. This is a region, she said, which is inhabited by Dalits, Muslims and tribals, and in which the entire populace is below the poverty line. Nobody in Lalgarh possesses a ration card. States like Jharkhand, Chattisgarh and Orissa, which provide bases for Maoism, are regions that sixty-five years after independence remain cut off from the development radar. People have been denied food, education, electricity, health facilities and basic amenities in these spaces. ‘Yes, the middle class has appropriated these benefits, but not those who fall below the poverty line’ she remarked.⁵

Into this political vacuum created by systemic social injustice, and shocking absence of remedial justice, have stepped the Maoists with their ideology of a new world geared towards the interests of the poor and the oppressed, their strategy of Peoples War, their long-term objective of taking over state power and their immediate objective of representing the needs of the disadvantaged through armed struggle. Though tribal communities throughout history have revolted against sundry people in positions of petty power, the Maoist struggle marks a new phase in the fight *of*, or more precisely the fight *for* the poor and the most disadvantaged. Isolated and often sporadic or random struggles have been welded together through the ideology and the strategy of revolutionary war.

Multiple disadvantages and revolution

The outbreak of armed struggle in these areas can best be explained as a response to a threefold failure: the failure of the central and the local state to deliver justice to territorially concentrated communities, the failure of the representatives of these communities to represent the plight of their constituents in various deliberative and decision-making forums and the failure of civil society organizations, campaigns and movements, particularly the dalit movement, to make the well-being of their own people who suffer from triple injustice their prime concern. The consequences of this triple failure to ensure redistribution, recognition and voice have been serious as we can see from the grim statistics on malnutrition, infant mortality, starvation and death.

That there is a link between multiple disadvantages and the outbreak of armed struggle was made clear by the 2009 draft report by Sub Group IV of the 'Committee on State Agrarian Relations and Unfinished Task of Land Reforms' set up by the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. The presence of the Naxalites in central India, continued the report, is a response both to past and to future land alienation, the failure of the government to live up to

its constitutional mandate and the withdrawal of the state from its responsibility to protect the tribal realm.⁶

A year earlier, the 2008 report of the Expert Group set up by the Planning Commission, Government of India – ‘Development Challenges in Extremist Affected Areas’ – provided an even more stinging critique of policies and administration of tribal areas. Despite the plethora of development plans, programmes and activities, the majority of the STs live in conditions of serious deprivation and poverty, and they have remained backward in all aspects of human development including education, health and nutrition. Apart from social and economic deprivation, there has been a steady erosion of traditional tribal rights and their command over resources.⁷ This is the belt most affected by Naxalite violence.⁸

At first glance, nothing seems to have changed since the Naxal movement broke out in 1967. A closer look, however, makes it clear that matters have worsened because of increasing commercial and industrial over exploitation of forestland and land alienation. Large tracts of land have been earmarked for industry or for Special Economic Zones. Above all, state governments have allowed the entry of mining companies into protected tribal lands. For the region termed the ‘Red Corridor’, which runs across Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Chattisgarh, Bihar, Jharkand, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal, possesses huge deposits of coal reserves, iron ore, bauxite and chromite. Entire communities have been stripped of their traditional rights, and escalating demands for these resources has displaced tribals in thousands. The Dandakaranya region, a forest area which borders four states Andhra Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Maharashtra and Orissa, and which covers three districts, Bastar, Kanker and Dantewada, has become one of the main sites for the seizure of land by state governments acting on behalf of the corporates.⁹ The conclusion to chapter four (Alienation of Tribal and Dalit’s Land) of the 2009 draft report by the government committee on State Agrarian Relations summed up the situation pithily, as the ‘biggest grab of tribal lands after Columbus in the making’.¹⁰ The script of the grab, continued

the report, has been authored by corporates such as Tata Steel and Essar Steel, which wanted to mine the richest load of iron ore available in India.

In the first phase, the Naxalite movement had launched an armed struggle against usurious and exploitative landlords, corrupt officials and middlemen. In the current phase, the struggle is against dispossession and displacement, against appropriation of land that is the mainstay of livelihoods and against all sorts of agents from mining barons to middlemen intent on depriving tribals of their rights. The intrusion of mining companies into spaces held sacred by local communities such as the Niyamgiri hills, the destruction of the already fragile ecological balance of the region and forced and violent evictions from land have given rise to rampant discontent. It is this unrest that has been tapped by the Maoists.

Notably, earlier displacement of tribals and poor peasants was carried through in the name of some or the other public good, for instance the building of large irrigation projects to provide irrigation and power. Today, land is acquired by state governments and sold to corporates for private gain and profit. Nothing illustrates more the changing face of the Indian state and its participation in what has been called crony capitalism. In the process, the tribal community, which has a close and sustaining relationship with the forests, the land and water, has been dispossessed of the traditional resource base that enabled it to maintain bare life.

The Marxist geographer David Harvey has aptly termed this process 'accumulation by dispossession'. The Indian experience has overturned Marx's stage theories of capitalist growth. Primitive accumulation in which the producer is removed from her land and means of subsistence is no longer the pre-history of capitalism; it is an integral part of the process. Capitalism in its relentless search for profit searches for new sites for the exploitation of resources, even if these sites fall within protected zones.

And those who have been displaced will find no place in the organized working class, and they will find no place in a service

economy that demands a different sort of skills. At the most, our displaced tribals and peasants might find uncertain daily jobs in the swelling construction industry, as exploited domestic labour, or as parking lot attendants. Far removed from their habitats, India's most neglected have been condemned to live in spaces that are far more desolate than their homelands. It is this sense of hopelessness and impending doom that the Maoists fight in today's India.

Conclusion

Each of the three stages of Naxalism possessed distinctive characteristics, romantic revolution in the first stage, dissipation of organization and energies in the second and a coming together of disparate organizations to fight massive land grabs for a capitalism that relentlessly preys on the lives of its people in the third. 'Accumulation, Accumulation' wrote Marx scathingly of acquisitive capitalists, 'this is their Moses and their Prophet'. How long do citizens of India have to lose their land, their livelihoods and their living spaces for the sake of a capitalism unbound? How long do we expect people to bear the combined weight of multiple injustices – economic deprivation, social discrimination and lack of voice – in democratic India? Even patience would climb down from her perch on the proverbial monument in rank frustration and sheer despair, even if she does not quite hasten to gather up the nearest AK47.

Considering the extent of ill-being that stalks the lives of the poor, considering that both the state and civil society groups have done little about ensuring well-being of the poorest of the poor, and considering that among the SCs and the STs living in central and east India there is more denial of self-respect, more infant mortality, more malnourishment, more ill health, more illiteracy and more premature deaths than the rest of the population, it is well-nigh impossible to definitively pronounce that violence is illegitimate. Premature deaths and ill-being could have been prevented, and it was within the power

of the state to change their future. But nothing has been done and things worsened till the point the Maoists took up the cudgels. We have few defences against the revolutionary violence argument of the Maoists. Empirical facts prohibit the taking of uncompromising stands on political violence. But violence carries heavy costs, so we still ask – is revolutionary violence justified and if so why? It is to this that I now turn.