

Naxalism in India : Framework for Conflict Resolution

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The Naxalite peasant movement which started from the unknown non-descript village of Naxalbari in North Bengal in the late 1960s, has now become a powerful militant movement engulfing 170 districts in 15 States. In over 55 districts, naxalites and the People's War Group (PWG) or Maoists or Left Wing Extremists (LWE) as they may be called, run parallel governments. While the LWEs have assumed a Robin Hood mantle, they often behave more like hoodlums resorting to extortion, kidnappings for ransom and dastardly acts of violence. The philosophy of upliftment of the poor through a mass movement has more-or-less degenerated into a game of power and money.

Until very recently, this movement did not occupy centre-stage among India's National Security priorities as its power and reach had not been appreciated. Its exponential growth had been ignored and it was generally relegated to a mere localised political and law and order problem best left to the concerned State Governments to resolve. The problem can no longer be brushed under the carpet. The merger of the various maoist groups, its membership of Co-ordination Committee of Maoist Parties and Organisations of South Asia (CCOMPOSA) and some other militant organisations in South Asia, is an indictor of its threat to our national security.

The Centre has finally acknowledged that this is a national problem. The Prime Minister in his last Independence day address, mentioned the grave danger of the growth of naxalism and asked the State Governments to focus on speedy welfare and development of tribals who might otherwise provide the cadres for the naxalites. The first Standing Committee of Chief Ministers of the affected States met in September 2005 to plan coordinated efforts and in March 2006, a Status Paper on the subject was tabled in the Parliament by the Home Minister.

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The first step towards the resolution of any problem is to recognise that there is a problem. The Central Government has, thus, taken the first step by acknowledging that this is a national problem. A 14 point policy has been enunciated to deal with the menace. This includes a promise that they will deal firmly with naxalites who indulge in violence and will not have peace talks unless they give up violence, socio-economic development issues will be addressed, states will coordinate their efforts, local resistance groups will be promoted, mass media will be utilised to publicise the futility and violence of the naxal endeavour, and funds will be provided to State governments to modernise their police, and to provide them with sophisticated weaponry, etc.

The conflict resolution approach as enunciated by the Home Minister appears ideal. However, as we have seen in the past, implementation of such grandiose plans and utopian dreams go awry and remain at best on paper. If we are to succeed in bringing down the levels of activities of LWE in the concerned States to manageable levels, we must deliver what we promise. Areas where we need to focus and ensure implementation with a religious zeal for mission accomplishment are enunciated in succeeding paragraphs.

Dealing with Naxalism

'Naxalism is not the problem; rather it is the symptom of a problem'. Why doesn't naxalism flourish in the markets of Gujarat, the fields of Punjab or in the IT parks of Gurgaon and Hyderabad? Why is Maoism ideology succeeding in Nepal when it is failing in China? The answer is obvious. In the places that LWE succeeds, people are relatively poor, they face oppression by certain segments of society, the government is indifferent to their plight and there are little prospects that things will get better in the future. On the other hand LWE fails when the reverse is true.

To eliminate naxalism, it is not enough to eliminate their leaders, imprison their rank and file or arrange for mass surrenders of men and weapons. You do all of that and you can still fail; new leaders will rise, the cadres will return and weapons are easy enough to get (sometimes from the same ordnance factories that supply the Indian Army, as the recent arms seizure in Bengal indicates).

To truly eliminate naxalism we must undercut their *raison d'être*, their reason for being. Remember while their methods may be

abhorrent, most of their goals (apart from overthrowing the government) are not. Therefore, we must fulfill their goals for them. If they have nothing to fight for, they won't fight.

CENTRALISED CONTROL

Although a centralised control i.e., a unified Headquarters or some such organisation may be ideal in our context, it may not be feasible since law and order is a State subject, as also States have their own political dynamics. Notwithstanding this problem, since coordination is vital, it is essential that a Central agency, say, Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), oversees the operations to ensure that the activity of one State does not jeopardise the operations of the other. A centralised control is essential to:-

- (a) Coordinate intelligence gathering, evaluation and dissemination.
- (b) Allocation of resources, mainly additional funds for modernisation of police forces and development activities in the affected areas, allocation of Central Police Organisation (CPO) resources, training with the Army, and provision of specialised equipment, and so on.
- (c) Coordinate and monitor development activities to include basic infrastructure development in the backward, under developed naxal affected areas.

Developmental Activities

The basic solution to countering LWE is by addressing the grievances of the poor. As we are all aware, the Naxals have flourished mostly in areas where disparities between the rich and poor are high and injustice is rampant. In India, barely 1.3 per cent of land has been redistributed amongst the poor; in China it is about 43 per cent. Land reforms are urgent as also improvement in standards of education, employment, social security and a matching but controlled infrastructure development. Funds allocated for developmental activities should be judiciously spent, not eaten away. Close monitoring and transparency is essential. It all boils down to effective and efficient governance. In West Bengal, the situation was controlled because of the efficient socio-economic programme. In Andhra Pradesh, the Centre's anti poverty programme, is working closely with the State Government's policies. Similarly, there are other examples.

Deployment and Employment of State Police

While socio-economic upliftment is the ultimate cure, one cannot brush aside the importance of an efficient and effective police organisation to put adequate pressure on the LWE organisation to force them either to surrender or approach and adopt the path of a negotiated settlement. If that be so, there is a definite need to vastly enhance the quality of the State police force as also review their deployment and employment. In all cases where the LWE had an upper hand over the police forces, be it in genuine encounters, attack on police posts, jails or ambushes, it was clearly apparent that the police forces were ill equipped, poorly trained, posts were guarded in a most casual manner, personal security was totally wanting and movement of the forces in vintage transport on known and predictable roads and tracks was the cause. In addition, in most of the affected areas, there were very few police posts or none at all.

Therefore, if the State police have to emerge as winners, a revamp is definitely needed. Foremost, States must distinguish between personnel to be employed for protective operations against the LWE and those to be employed for normal law and order duties. The specialised Greyhounds force has already been set up in Andhra Pradesh. Other affected States should also do so. The other suggested measures are as under:-

- (a) Establishment of self sufficient and adequately secure police posts in a grid pattern. Such a deployment will also instill confidence amongst the locals, primarily among those who do not support the movement and the fence sitters.
- (b) Provision of reliable communications, and radio as standby.
- (c) Mobility.
- (d) Modern equipment and clothing.
- (e) Training to imbibe a high standard of discipline and motivation.
- (f) Non partisan attitude among the police force.
- (g) A good logistic support for the police forces, not forgetting a lucrative allowance, and most important a reliable medical back up and terminal benefits for fatal or invalid cases.

Local Resistance Groups

Such groups need to be created since it is the innocent local populace that is bearing the brunt of the atrocities sometimes even from the police and government officials. It is easier said than done, as organisations like the Ranbir Sena and others have not served their purpose. As a matter of fact, they are a liability, have suffered large casualties becoming identified with certain interest groups and deterring the populace from joining the resistance. We need to motivate the locals to get together and form such groups. The state should provide the necessary wherewithal and if feasible appear to be totally non-involved for obvious reasons.

Some form of 'Home and Hearth' concept of Territorial Army (TA) units should be experimented with. It will generate jobs as also provide local defence. We could even use them in special roles like ecological protection, etc. to give impetus to the local economy. Local Resistance Groups will only succeed when developmental measures are fruitful and the locals begin to have confidence in the Government and conversely get dissatisfied with and disown the Naxalites. It may be worth experimenting if some of the Non Government Organisations (NGO) can work with the locals in the tribal areas in developing local skills which give scope for self employment and resource generation.

Psychological Warfare

The crux of psychological warfare is to make the target audience think and act the way you want. In this case, wean away the bulk of the local population including the cadre members, to make them believe in the futility of the movement and the benefits of being part of the accepted democratic system. To start with, I would suggest distribution of mini transistor and TVs to the people, and have local FM broadcasts with adequate healthy entertainment and psychological themes. All this will work best if the propaganda themes match with development activities taking shape. In this aspect, media in all its forms can play a major role. We need to take the media into confidence and brief them to ensure that the Robin Hood image of the extremists is not overplayed.

In order to avoid falling into the trap of believing our own propaganda, let us track the things that matter. In the districts where LWE exists or where it could spread, we should monitor

indicators such as per capita income, literacy rates, percentage of college graduates, as well as, crimes against women, and the underprivileged. Improve the first three indicators, reduce incidents of injustice and soon naxalism will be history.

Surrender Policy

The naxalites should be given a democratic space for self expression and should be encouraged to come over-ground. The Central Government's stated policy in a Status Paper that there will be no peace talks with the naxalites until they give up arms is, therefore, not very fair. After all, the Centre is holding talks with Nagas and other insurgent groups. A year ago, the Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister lifted the ban on the LWEs and held talks with them. The party got a roaring public reception on their way out of the forest to Hyderabad but the talks failed because even reasonable demands of the naxalites about recovering public lands illegally grabbed, were not conceded. If the Government is serious about tackling the naxalites, a proper surrender package for them should be worked out, cases against those who want to join mainstream society should be withdrawn, and villagers should be taken into confidence. A surrender policy should be job oriented and lucrative and the persons who surrender should be protected. The benefit should be directly proportional to the number of years an extremist has put in the organisation.

SUMMATION

The Maoists of Nepal are joining mainstream politics, though some ground has yet to be covered. How did this volte-face take place? Simple; once the King lost his autocratic power, which was one of the main demands of the Maoists, peace more or less, has returned to the Himalayan country. Therefore, to summarise, it is but obvious, that once the basic demands of any organisation indulging in such activities are met, normalcy can be assured. In our context, it is to our advantage that the LWE in India are not seeking secession nor do they have strong links with foreign militant groups. The obvious solution is that elected governments, in the affected states, develop these areas, keeping local sensitivities in mind without indulging in partisan politics. Once this happens, we will soon see the light at the end of the tunnel.