

Maoism—Challenges and Prospects

T G Jacob

The Maoist Political stream in India and South Asia is more than four decades old and within the forty odd years of its history it has undergone many ups and downs, but all through marked by turbulence and violence of two opposing kinds—Maoist violence and state violence. To put the record straight, it is a mistaken conception that the Maoist politics, which for the first time erupted into the open in the North Bengal village of Naxalbari and surrounding villages in 1967, was a spontaneous one. It was planned by the Maoists inside the CPI (M) for at least more than two years before the actual launching of the armed peasant uprising. The radicals within the newly formed CPI (M) were all through pinning their hopes on radical overhauling of the land relations, they felt grossly betrayed when their political party became part of a coalition government in West Bengal that started soft pedaling when it came to the restructuring of land relations. Elements of spontaneity occasionally seeped into the Maoist movement from time to time especially after the movement took an urban turn during the early 1970s. The very fact that almost the entire gamut of theoretical writings by the foremost ideologue, Charu Mazumdar, came out well before the actual rebellion commenced is testimony to the planned nature of the uprising. What subsequently came to be known as the *Eight Documents* were all written and widely circulated during the period 1965-67. These documents created a serious polarization within the CPI(M) between the parliamentary revisionists and radicals which was precisely their main objective. There was also a remarkable degree of political centralization during the initial phase of the uprising with Charu Majumdar, Kanu Sanyal and Jangal Santhal constituting the core leadership.

Right from the beginning there was no ambiguity at all about the goals and means of the Maoists. The declared objective was capture of political power through a protracted armed struggle concentrating in the countryside with the peasantry and landless agricultural workers as the main force, and guerilla warfare as the principal form of struggle. The development of the struggle envisaged the situation of the countryside encircling the urban centers and creation of liberated areas and the establishment of effective parallel centers of political power. Such a course necessarily warranted driving out or neutralizing the feudal lords and governmental law and order, bureaucratic and judicial authorities. Cutting out the semantic cliches the Maoist project was straight forward and simple enough. It was a declaration of war to capture political power beginning at the local level and thus bringing in democratic revolution, which will proceed to the socialist stage under the leadership of the working class. Any sort of short-cuts was not entertained. The Maoists were much influenced by the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of China, thus clearly upholding that revolutionary transformation of society has to be a continuous process and multi-stage.

Socialist revolution by no means invalidates class struggle and in fact class struggle in a socialist system is the rule rather than the exception. In other words, the programme of democratic revolution was based on the Chinese model of New Democratic Revolution, while it further incorporated the Chinese model of Cultural Revolution, which

was upheld as the means to beat back the restoration of capitalism in post-revolutionary societies, which has its origin and development within the communist parties themselves. Hence Mao's call "bombard the headquarters" was to a large extent integrated by the Maoists in India in the pre-revolutionary stage itself, at least, at a theoretical level as a precautionary measure to ward off the possible capitalist restoration in a post-revolutionary society. In this context also there was nothing startlingly original with the Maoists in India because Mao and the Chinese Communist Party under his leadership had already experimented on such parallel centers of political power at the local level in what came to be known as the Yen-an model.

A SKETCHY HISTORY

Looking back at the history of the Maoist movement one can see that the first phase of this movement virtually came to an end by 1975. This phase was marked by unprecedented violence and the number of those killed and incarcerated came to tens of thousands. State violence as well as Maoist violence were especially virulent in West Bengal, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Punjab. In spite of all the repression by the state forces the Maoists made their appearance in almost every part of the country including Jammu and Kashmir, Delhi and the North Eastern States. It is often pointed out that the movement collapsed due to severe state repression and the inability to withstand it. But this military explanation is only part of the story. The movement also collapsed from within and the numerous splits and splits within splits are proof to it. Political-ideological unclarity and the embracing of straightjacket simplistic analytical solutions to the complexities of the given social system played no small role in the disintegration process. But it has to be noted that this disintegration was relative and not absolute. Whether inside or outside jails they remained. In fact, the single biggest bloc of political prisoners in the Indian jails during the period of internal emergency was the Maoists.

The second phase of the Maoist movement started with the repeal of internal emergency and the trouncing of Indira Gandhi's autocratic rule. Even after the internal emergency was no more it was with great reluctance that the Maoists were released from the jails and they were the last to be released. At the same time the political situation was such that the democratic tendencies and undercurrents in Indian society got a temporary but significant boost. The immediate post-Emergency agenda of most of the Maoist groups was one of efforts at uniting the hopelessly fractured movement, and in this process several groups took up social democratic, parliamentary programmes and economic struggles. But the more powerful and ideologically determined groups like the People's War and Maoist Communist Centre which had its origin outside the original CPI (ML) even without having any fundamental ideological differences with the basic Maoist programme stuck to the path of protracted armed struggle, i.e., the cardinal aspect of the original CPI(ML) party programme based on the evaluation of India as a semi-colonial, semi-feudal social, political and economic system. These two groups programmatically and organizationally united to form one single party called Communist Party of India (Maoist), and it is this party that is currently known as the Maoist party. Their activities are mainly concentrated in the tribal Dandakaranya belt comprising the mineral rich areas of five central and eastern Indian States. At the same time it is widely believed that they do enjoy a support network in other States including in their urban centers. It is this support network that enables the Maoists to highlight the underlying issues to the wider public -both nationally and internationally. The arrest of Kobad Gandhi, one of the principal ideologues of the party, happened in Delhi, not in the Dandakaranya.

The original inhabitants of this vast landmass had been at the receiving end ever since Mauryan emperor Ashoka waged the Kalinga war, which was preceded by numerous other wars, and created a pan Indian kingdom. Over centuries the original inhabitants known under various nomenclatures as Adivasis, Scheduled Tribes, or Vanavasis, were always considered as disposable people who can safely be pushed more and more to the margins according to the needs of the dominant classes/castes. The Adivasis themselves are divided into hundreds of small and big tribes with their own dialects/languages and distinct ways of life and social customs. The colonial and post-colonial economic policies directly affected them, mostly in a negative manner. The colonial forest and mineral policy of this marginalizing process resulted in numerous small and big armed rebellions, which were all drowned in blood but never received their due mentioning in Indian historiography due to the caste/class bias of the historians themselves. Dispossession and alienation of the Adivasis continued without any let up in post colonial India too, and it is no accident that more than 70 per cent of the total number of dispossessed people in the whole country are the Adivasis, though they constitute only less than 10 percent of the population. It is to be kept in mind that the present grabbing of enormous land as well as all the previous land grabs, which dispossessed millions, is also done under the legal cover of one of the most atrocious colonial acts, the Land Acquisition Act 1894, a very archaic law of predatory nature. Whether in the name of minerals extraction or the construction of big dams or factories it is they who are victimized and it is this political space created through incessant victimization and marginalization that is now sought to be filled by the Maoists. And they are doing it fairly efficiently by means of applying their doctrine of armed struggle.

Ever since the process of aggressive globalization/neo-colonization, i.e., opening up of every sector of the economy to big corporations, was adopted as central and State governmental policy of development and economic growth from the early 1990s onwards, when Manmohan Singh was the finance minister, numerous big businesses, both Indian and international, have entered into opaque deals with the concerned governments to extract the rich mineral deposits and commission big processing factories in the tribal belt of the country. The biggest land grab in modern Indian history is on in full swing. What it means is the further dispossession of millions of already marginalized original inhabitants who will be pushed into the ghettos of the urban and semi-urban hell holes. It is this inhuman process that is being resisted by the Adivasis and Maoists. The governmental level response is one of indiscriminate suppression by using all means of terror. If the governments are not able to sanitize these vast areas the multi-nationals are threatening to go back on the contracts entered into for wholesale looting of the common heritage of the people. Some of them have already started speaking in such words of blackmailing.

Initially, when the Adivasis and Maoists started resisting the arbitrary grabbing of their means of livelihood the first reaction of the state was brutal suppression by using the paramilitary, police forces, hoodlums as it happened in Kalinganagar, Singur and Nandigram and numerous other places. In one such repressive action more than 12 Adivasis were shot dead in Kalinganagar. Both Kalinganagar and Nandigram became turning points in the Maoist strategy of a limited offensive. All this while the big corporations were stepping up pressure on the governments to make "their" areas safe for large-scale operations. But the Maoists were also making serious preparations to meet the offensive of the state. In 2008 they announced the launching of the People's Liberation Guerilla Army, which is now estimated to comprise more than 10,000 fully armed well trained full time guerillas. Also, they were and are steadily accumulating

sophisticated fire power mostly by means of confiscating from the police and paramilitary. Currently this is an ongoing process.

In West Bengal it was the armed ruling party hoodlums that went into action along with the police force to neutralize the people struggling to protect their sole means of livelihood from the clutches of rapacious corporations like the Tatas and the Salim group. In Chhattisgarh things went much further. There the State government armed lumpen elements from among the tribals themselves and formed a new paramilitary force known by the infamous name of *Salwa Judum*. This was by no means a new strategy to break the people. On the face of it it was only a more obnoxious form of the old colonial strategy of divide and rule. But more than that what the *Salwa Judum* is doing in Chhattisgarh became a repeat of the “hamletisation” process implemented in Vietnam by the US imperialists. The purpose was clearly to isolate the guerillas and other political activists from the mass of people by herding them forcibly into concentration camps. To facilitate this process of herding the method was simple. The vigilante squads escorted by the police force raid the villages, loot, rape, and kill and burn down whole villages so that the people have no choice but to flee to the forests or to be herded to the so-called camps. The looting and raping are explicitly recognized by the government as incentives for joining the *Salwa Judum*. Those who are unwilling to join are threatened, beaten and killed with all impunity. This had been going on for the last many years without any let-up. The agenda was a single point one-to sanitize the areas completely so that the corporations can move in without any sort of hindrance.

But this strategy could not become an unqualified success mainly because the Maoist guerillas retaliated with force and wiped out many *Salwa Judum* camps as well as carried out selective assassinations which demoralized them while strengthening the Maoist ranks of fighters. There is not much point in saying that the poor Adivasis are caught between the devil and deep sea etc because for the Adivasis it is clearly a question of life and death and their sympathies are self-evident. This sort of point of view is often aired in the media which is nothing but gross ignorance of the ground level realities and self-satisfied sympathy for the Adivasis laced with a smirk; very clearly a product of sub-standard populist journalism, which will ultimately serve the interests of the big corporations, who also own the mainstream media and pay these hacks fairly well. It was from the recognition that pitting tribals against tribals was not delivering the goods that the governments planned out what was code-named as “Operation Green Hunt”, which is nothing but an all out offensive against the guerillas to completely wipe them out. The strategy rests on the presumption that once the guerillas are neutralized the masses of people can be driven out without much effort. Hundreds of thousands of central reserve police force and the State police forces are currently involved in this task. It was in this process that incidents like Dantewada occurred sending an unpleasant message to the central and State governments that it is not going to be a cakewalk for them. Encounters have since then become routine. So is the selective annihilation of anti-socials and police agents. The situation is bound to escalate unless the civil society organs are miraculously able to exert enough pressure on the central government to reverse the present policy of confrontation and all out offensive which is quite unlikely given its commitments to big businesses. When the situation escalates the Army and Air Force are bound to enter the scene (big business bosses are keen on such a solution) as is often threatened by the central government in veiled terms.

The Indian government had proved earlier that it is not averse to using the military and air force to tackle internal problems. It was the army that was deployed in Telengana

and the air force was used by the Nehru government in Nagaland during the early 1960s. Why the government is vacillating now is not because of any moral compulsions but fear of the consequences in a situation where political and economic instability is steamrolling into major crisis proportions. Talks about ameliorative measures in the form of economic sops for the tribals are only shameless hypocrisy because a reversal of the neo-liberal economic regime is not at all on the agenda of the Indian ruling classes. In fact, it is the strengthening of the neo-colonial economic path that is the agenda. And it is this economic path that is threatening the very existence of the Adivasis and all other common people of the country. Also it is same path that is promising unprecedented environmental devastation.

THE WEAK LEGS OF THE MAOISTS

There is little doubt that the Maoists are with the dispossessed and oppressed. But is this enough to fight and win a war against heavy odds? If this much is enough, then it automatically follows that justice will always triumph. Unfortunately, history tells people all too clearly that justice always does not triumph, however committed and selfless be those who are fighting for it.

The two giant revolutions of the last century, the Russian and the Chinese ones, were by and large guided by correct understandings of the concrete conditions existing in their historical contexts. This understanding was not only national but international also. Though to a lesser extent, so was the case with the Cuban revolution and the Vietnamese war of liberation and even the Islamic Revolution of Iran. Can one say the same about the Maoist movement in India, or for that matter about the Communist movement in the country, since its origins in 1920. Unfortunately, this is an important question which fails historical objectivity in the case of the Communists and Maoists in the country.

In the late 1960s, “when the spring thunder burst over India”, the political programme adopted by the Maoists was not really based on a serious objective analysis of the Indian reality, but on the reality of pre-revolutionary China. The thesis of semi-colonialism and semi-feudalism was basically the analysis of the Chinese countryside made by Mao during the early 1930s. Could the India of the early 1970s be equated with the China of early 1930s? Charu Mazumdar, without the backing of any substantial studies, simply asserted that the level of industrialization of India during the early 70s was not different in degree and quality from that of the China of 1930s. Thus, right at the beginning of the Maoist movement itself a fatal error had been made and persisted on. Now there is no Mao, and China itself has gone far from socialism, but this serious error committed by the Indian Maoists persists dogmatically. If that is not crass dogmatism then what is it?

During the late '60s and first half of the '70s a lively debate had come up in India on the mode of production. It was the political formulation expounded by the Maoists that triggered this debate. Political economists in the country were divided into broadly two camps and *Economic and Political Weekly*, *Frontier*, *Social Scientist*, and *Society and Change* within India and many leftist journals abroad like *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* (now *Critical Asian Studies*) and *New Left Review* became the arenas for this debate. But the collapse of the Maoist movement also effectively put an end to this positive debate, which could have led to very fruitful results. It is true that this debate was confined to left-leaning academics and intellectuals and did

not encompass higher political levels. But even then the further fruitful development of this debate, which died out prematurely, could have thrown the much needed clarity on the real nature of the operations of imperialist capital in India, which would have gone a long way in correctly deciphering the correct nature of the anti-imperialist character of the Indian revolution. For the Maoists of today, too, this remains a non issue. They are yet to understand that power does not grow out of the barrel of the gun only but in the first place through the correct understanding of the social reality and balance of forces. The former in the absence of the latter can easily be suicidal or, to say the least, counter productive.

The most ridiculous illustration of this dogmatism that got entrenched in the Maoist movement right at the beginning is the announcement of Charu Majumdar that "China's chairman is our chairman". When an Indian Maoist delegation visited China for fraternal consultations the Chinese leadership—Chou En-lai and Kang Shen—raised very serious criticism on many aspects of the Indian movement and especially on this infantile slogan. It was after this meeting and discussion that the Chinese Communist Party stopped promoting the Maoists of India through their media and subsequently stopped mentioning it altogether. The report on this meeting submitted by Souren Bose to Mazumdar was never discussed even at the leadership level, but instead a small coterie around Majumdar intensified efforts to enthrone him as the "revolutionary authority". Such blatantly undemocratic activities were always an intrinsic feature of the Maoist movement in this country. The formulation "democratic centralism" contains the words democracy and centralism, but in practice it was always centralism sans democracy. Such an organizational approach denotes a top down command structure which is antithetical to people's participation in decision making which primarily concerns them. Moreover, communist leaderships had always been notorious for their intolerance of dissent within the organization both before and after revolution. It is doubtful whether the full Central Committee of the CPI (Maoist) met even once after its formation in 2004.

One of the ostensible reasons cited for lack of discussions even within the party is the ever projected utmost need for absolute secrecy because of the constant state of vigilance necessitated by the fact that it is a fighting organization. But what happens in reality is that this reason is a convenient excuse for imposing arbitrary decisions by the dominant leadership, which can sometimes be reduced to a single individual with a group of hangers-on surrounding him. Dissenters can easily be labeled as "right deviationists" or "left deviationists", and thus declared as enemies of revolution. It is a historical fact that outright murders happened on this count during the first phase of the Maoist movement. Maoists are not just fighting for democracy, but for "new" democracy which is a stepping stone or the first stage of socialism. If they are not able to practice the minimum level of democracy within their own organization and in their relations with the common people then it is something that seriously affects present and future credibility.

The challenges facing the Maoists are programmatic and organizational in nature. Programmatically, they should make serious efforts to come to terms with the complex reality and organizationally they should practice what they are preaching. Democracy and democratic revolution are not only for repetition in party documents but also for practicing during all time. □