

Army: A Prescription for Civil War

[EN Rammohan, former Director General of the BSF, has fought insurgencies in Kashmir and the Northeast. Recently, Home Minister P Chidambaram picked him to probe the Dantewada massacre of CRPF jawans by Naxals. Yet, crucially, in a forthright interview with SHOMA CHAUDHURY, he says the Centre's strategy for fighting Naxals is a recipe for civil war.]

Q. After the train tragedy in Bengal, there is renewed talk of bringing on the army and air force in the fight against the Maoists. What is your view on this?

A. I think it would be a terrible mistake. The more you try to deal with this issue through military options, the more it will spread and grow in strength.

Q. You were asked by the Home Ministry to investigate the recent Maoist ambush of CRPF jawans in Dantewada. The government obviously thinks well of your judgement, track record and integrity. So how do you read the Maoist crisis facing the country today?

A. I think it is first and foremost an issue of social justice. I first came across the problem when I was posted in Hyderabad in the 1980s as DIG, CBI. My batchmate Ajay Deora was DG, Intelligence and he was struggling to control things. I am from the Assam cadre and have handled insurgencies before. I was in the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, which was set up with the objective of fighting behind enemy lines, so we have all been trained in guerrilla warfare. Insurgencies are my abiding interest.

Q. Most of the Maoist leadership comes from Andhra. Why do you think this is the case?

A. From what I saw in Andhra the primary problem is land. The upper castes have been exploiting tribals and Scheduled Castes (SCs) for generations. Before Independence there was no land ceiling, so the upper castes had huge land holdings that often ran into over a 1,000 acres, while the SCs and tribals had no land, or very small holdings. Yet even these small holdings were taken over forcibly by the upper castes who would buy their produce, then fudge the accounts, to keep them indebted. The tribals were turned into tenant farmers who had to till the land but give 2/3rd of the produce to the upper castes. It is against this backdrop in 1946 that the CPI first started working in the Telangana areas. They would collect a group of tribals with bows and arrows, surround an upper caste granary and distribute the grain. Then they would tell the landowner that from now on 2/3rds would go to the tillers, 1/3rd to the landowner. Of course the landowners would complain to the police who would round up the locals and arrest and beat them.

After Independence, land ceiling laws were legislated but they were never implemented in Andhra. In 1989, when the government changed, I told my friend Deora, let's meet the Revenue Minister. I told the minister, you'll never be able to solve this problem. He was very unhappy with the way I spoke and said, why not? I told him if you want to stub out this movement, impose land ceiling. He said, that's impossible, we can never do that. He gave the example of Sudhakar Rao, one of his colleagues from Adilabad. That fellow has got 1,100 acres, he said, and he won't be willing to part with even one.

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So the caste structure in Andhra Pradesh is such. There are many police stations even today where a Scheduled Caste will not dare to file an FIR—it just won't be registered or investigated. Then of course, the women were being misused. Labourers on a farm had to

offer their bride on the first night to the landlord. This is reflected even in the folk songs of the Adivasis. There is no hope for women in this country, they sing. So unless these wrongs are righted, how are you expecting a solution to this problem? There can be no military solution to this problem.

Q. The media has gone hoarse speaking of them as terrorists. Are you comfortable with this description?

A. You see everyone talks about the Naxalites but very few people understand there are two parts to this. There are the Adivasis and Scheduled Castes at the lowest strata. Then there are the leaders from the CPI, CPI Marxist-Leninist and now CPI-Maoist. These are all communists and 99 percent of them are upper caste. But because of their political philosophy they have no caste and are lending a hand to the poor. Now they have a political agenda and their objective is to come to power in this country. I don't want to live in a Maoist State but if we continue with our current arrogance, that's exactly what will happen. There will be a great upheaval in society. Go to communist countries like Russia or China. If you look at all the top class people there now—men like Krushchev—you'll see everyone in power today were all peasants once, and the upper class people have all disappeared somewhere. In India also, there will be a complete upheaval in society. So I don't see why we are so hesitant to rectify our course and address issues of social justice.

Q. You have spoken of Andhra. How do you read Chhattisgarh?

A. In Chhattisgarh, it's mostly to do with rights over forests. The Adivasis have been pushed into the forests over thousands of years by caste domination, and are now almost entirely confined to it. They have no land and can only collect forest produce. But they still have to sell it and when they come out of the forest to the market place, they have to find a buyer. And who's the buyer? The Vaishya trader. At the root of this trouble, I say, is this trio—the wily Brahmin, the arrogant Kshatriya, the avaricious Vaishya. Chidambaram, incidentally, is a Vaishya. These three social groups have been trampling on these people for centuries, so why blame them if the CPI (Maoist) has lent a hand? They help the poor by inspecting the Vaishya's books and ensuring tribals get a correct price. You should investigate the tendu leaf trade—I am told the money from that reaches politicians in Delhi, while the poor man who picks the leaf gets nothing.

The point is, in any insurgency, people take to guns because they feel they have no choice. In this case, the tribals are being taught by the Maoists to fight for their rights. And in Marxist teaching, guerrilla warfare is one of the subjects. All these escalating incidents, the ambushes etc, is designed to get hold of weapons. But the risk of a counter-action now is that our forces can go berserk. They will say we've lost 76 people and they will just shoot anyone, they'll kill everybody, even innocent people, unless there is a very strong leadership to keep them in control. And I am afraid that leadership does not exist. This is something the government must understand.

Q. So what do you see as solutions? And what do you think is holding up those solutions?

A. There are two acts pending in Parliament—one is to do with land acquisition, the other is to do with forest rights. But the interesting thing is, minerals have been found in these forests and for the party in power, this is a big bonanza. If you sign a MoU worth millions of dollars for excavating minerals, a percentage of it will go to your Swiss Bank account. The poor man in the forest is conveniently forgotten. In Bihar, the Bhumihars openly say, "Hamare patte hum billi aur kutte ke naam pe lagate hain (We list our land titles in the names of our cats and dogs)". How long can such a situation continue without protest? And you say you want to bring in the army? Why don't you look inwards and rectify this? If the government has any sense in its head, it will, otherwise it will be a terrible situation. It will be a disaster.

Q. TEHELKA has doggedly tracked stories of atrocities by the police and paramilitary. Rapes, killings, beatings, stealing of hens and goats. If one raises these issues with the government, they see it as a betrayal, as “intellectual support” for the Maoists. What is your view of the conduct of the SPOs, police and paramilitary?

A. The Salwa Judum was the government’s creation and it has compounded the situation badly. What the landlords were doing earlier, the police and SPOs are doing now. So is the CRPF. I believe counter-insurgencies must be fought legally. This is something most people don’t talk of. But the bible on fighting counter-insurgencies, Robert Thompson’s *Defeating Communist Insurgencies* starts with one line : *A counter insurgency must be scrupulously legal.* I was lucky because I was trained in guerrilla warfare by instructors who were trained by people like Robert Thompson. I’ve quoted this in many places and letters to the government. The quality of leadership is the most crucial thing in such conflicts. Set aside the bigger accusations of rape and killings, the Adivasis often even complain about the forces stealing their chickens and goats. This is terrible. If the company commander is good, they would not dare to do it. If ever any boys in uniform are caught doing anything wrong, they should be punished and word should go out to the villagers that such behaviour will not be tolerated. That is the only way you can get the upper hand.

Q. Is Delhi ready to give ownership of minerals to tribals, when each MoU is attached to a Swiss Bank account?

A. I have worked in all these forces— the CRPF, ITBP, BSF. The CRPF used to be a law-and-order force, good at lathi charge. Now they are not even that. You must have seen what’s happening in Kashmir—they are throwing stones back at the crowd. That should never happen. Otherwise you just have two mobs on either side—one mob is in uniform, the other is not. The main problem with the CRPF is that they are handed over to the state police when they arrive anywhere, and the SHO uses them for clearing a crowd or for controlling a communal situation. This business of handing them to police has bereft them of leadership. They have functioned better in places like Mizoram and Nagaland because there they have been under army leadership which is more disciplined. But I am impressed with the training Brigadier Powar is giving in the jungle warfare school that’s been set up in Kanker.

Q. You have said bringing the army in against the Naxals will be a disaster. Can you spell out the reasons why.

A. The first problem the army will face is that the Bihar regiment has a very strong component of Adivasis. What do you think will happen when such a battalion is facing Adivasis on the other side? His home may be there, he may have relatives on the other side, his tribe could be involved. It’s a recipe for disaster. The army should never ever come in to this conflict. The point is very clear, there are root causes. The government has to address them. In any case, who are you going to attack? Who are you going to catch? You will not find anyone there. The moment they know such an operation is going on, they will vanish in a 100 different directions. Their weapons will disappear. You’ll find innocent people living there and our forces will go and shoot 30 of them and say we have shot so many Naxalites. Every child born in the area then will become an insurgent after that.

Q. Do you believe there can be a lasting ceasefire?

A. I can guarantee there will not be any ceasefire—because the Maoists organising or leading this are on the run. If they stop, it will be very difficult to start again. I don’t think they are going to give up their guns. We have to convince the cadres that the government has changed its policy on land and forest rights and mining. Wean away the support base. Make Indian democracy more attractive than Maoist revolution.

It is not about development. It is about rights. This government has to understand—how is it that land ceiling was implemented in Kerala? Why is there no Maoist movement there? You know what happened there? Under EMS Namboodiripad, the law was so strong that anyone who was a tenant farmer for 12 years, the ownership of the land passed to him without compensation to the owner. We are now in 2010, but in most parts of the country, we are behaving as though we are in 1610 or something. Do you know in Australia and the US now, they say that if any minerals or oil is found in the Reservation areas, that resource belongs to the Aborigines and Native Americans. In India also, the first thing that should be declared is that if minerals are found in the forest, it belongs to the people of that forest. The MoUs should be signed by all the people of that village with that company. After that, give them legal guidance and see that the profit comes to their accounts.

Q. Is the government in Delhi prepared to do that? Why should they? Every MoU has a Swiss Bank account attached. You say you don't want to live in a Maoist State. One cannot evade the fact that they have a highly efficient and armed wing, or that 200-odd districts are in their control. So to ask a question many people might have in their heads—do you think the use of paramilitary or other forces has any role at all to play in containing the Maoists, even as one incorporates the issues of justice they have raised?

A. Let's take a model area. I would say put about 10 battalions in that area. Have good leaders so that the jawans don't go and steal chickens and rape women and burn houses. When I was IG, BSF in Kashmir, I had 50 BSF battalions under me. I used to go around the city everyday, visiting one or two of the battalions by turn. Then I would talk to the local people and get feedback, especially if any of my battalions had done an operation. If the public there would tell me, "Sahib sab theek gaya, aapke ladke koi galti nahi kiya", I'd feel things were under control. That is leadership. My commanders knew that if they did anything wrong, they were going to get punished and punished hard. So they behaved. This is what you need — a strong IG or DG. And men highly trained in field craft. One mistake this government has been making is that it wants yes-men. You said army leadership is better than the paramilitary, but the army's record in handling internal insurgencies in the Northeast or Kashmir hasn't exactly been sterling.

Yes, the army has done wrong things in the Northeast, very wrong things. I've worked in Nagaland, I've worked in Manipur. Because it is in a remote corner, people here don't know what's happening there. No wonder they don't like to be with us. But still, generally speaking, the army leadership is better because their general is not appointed by a politician. He comes on merit, on courage, on fitness, and how much he looks after his men. In the paramilitary, you get to the top by the amount of bootlicking you do. The system is different. □□□

[source : Tehelka Magazine, Vol 7, Issue 23, Dated June 12, 2010]