

Campaign for Showdown

India's share of the world's poorest people has increased to 39 percent from 25 percent in 1980. In comparison, the Below Poverty Line population worldwide has decreased from 1,470 million to 970 million. There are reportedly 301 million Indians below the poverty line, just 19 million less than in 1983. The Human Development Report by the UN has been ranking India among the lowest 60 or 65 countries in the list of 193 nations that are part of the annual study. India's poor performance on this score was in spite of the around nine percent growth rate in its GDP.

India's poor and marginalised groups have on occasions showed their anger through the power of the ballot. This happened in the 2004 and also in the 2009 national elections. The Hindu nationalist BJP tried to seek votes by coining the slogan, *India Shining*, in the 2004 Lok Sabha elections as part of its claim that its coalition government had brought prosperity during its five-year rule. But the electorate thought otherwise as the majority, particularly the poor and rural voters, the lower castes and minorities hadn't benefited from the progress that had mostly made the rich richer. Their verdict in the polls was against the BJP-led NDA alliance and in support of the Congress and its allies. The Congress won again in 2009 despite the incumbency factor because it was largely seen as the party that cared more for the rights of the poor and the rural voters and was conscious of the concerns of the minorities, particularly Muslims.

However, it is the ruling Congress now that is confronted with the challenge of responding to the needs of India's restless rural poor and tribal communities. Rahul Gandhi, son of Congress head Sonia Gandhi and the rising star of Indian politics, has been focusing on the vast Indian hinterland, visiting the under-developed rural villages and spending nights at the homes of Dalits, often termed the poorest and most oppressed people in the country. This cannot be enough to calm down the Naxalites, who are convinced that only force could win the Indian people their rights.

A showdown between the Indian government and the Naxalites is now imminent. The Congress-led government is mobilising hundreds of thousands of security personnel, mostly police and paramilitary forces, to launch an offensive against the Maoists. It has ruled out the use of the military, but the operation will be coordinated from New Delhi as part of a central government initiative.

Such is the hatred of the Naxalites for the ruling elite that their leader Ganapathi, a former schoolteacher, branded Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Home Minister P Chidambaram as "terrorists."

By threatening to unleash a "tornado" of violence if the Indian government went ahead with its planned large-scale offensive against his insurgent forces, Ganapathi has made the intentions of the Maoists obvious. Already, his men, and even some women cadres, have carried out actions that are now normally associated with the Taliban. They have kidnapped and beheaded government officials, blown up electricity and telephone towers, destroyed roads and railway tracks, killed political opponents and attacked police stations and other official installations. The offensive against the Naxalites will certainly weaken and

deprive them of some of their bases and hideouts, but the issue cannot be resolved by the use of force alone. Many members of the Indian intelligentsia sympathise with the cause of the Maoists and objective analysts see it as an economic issue and one concerning lack of justice. It is better for the Indian ruling elite to tackle the root-cause of the insurgency instead of applying force through the state apparatus to crush the rebels.□

[contributed]