

Growing Naxalism: Need for a Unified Command

With the recent arrest of a few Maoists in different urban parts of the country by our police force, it is more than obvious that this menace is no longer confined to the jungles. The Maoists are increasingly penetrating bigger cities, trying to indoctrinate people and collecting funds for their organisation.

If intelligence reports are to be believed, then the Maoists are already ensconced and entrenched in major cities. It is suspected that the Maoists may strike bigger cities before long as the same provides good publicity for their intended 'New Democratic Revolution'. A good cache of sophisticated arms, explosives and detonators have often been recovered following the arrests of many of the suspected Maoists from many of the cities.

According to their new strategy, Maoists plan to target important urban centres in India. They seem to have drawn up detailed guidelines for their urban operations, thereby wishing to mobilise disgruntled elements including urban unemployed in favour of their ultimate 'cause' of eventual seizure of state power by way of a so-called people's war. The Naxals reportedly have plans to strike in the industrial belts of Bhilai-Ranchi-Dhanbad-Calcutta and Mumbai-Pune-Surat-Ahmedabad to take their battle into the heart of India.

There may be no immediate threat, but the fact remains that Maoists have been steadily working their plans of building bases and finding a foothold in bigger cities. For the moment, they seem to have confined their activities to propagating their ideology, setting up secret cells for frontal organisations and recruiting people. The Maoists have been trying to spread their movement among trade and labour unions, poor people and students.

The recent Naxal attack on police stations in Odisha's Nayagarh district is the latest wake-up call for India's security mandarins. The Naxals are said to have looted about 1,100 weapons, including pistols, light machine guns, AK-47s, SLRs and INSAS rifles from the district and police training school armouries in Nayagarh. They struck again on Odisha-Andhra Pradesh border resulting in the death of at least 45 policemen belonging to the elite anti-Naxal force,

‘Greyhounds’. Similar loss of lives in our security and police forces has been reported from various other states including Bihar and Jharkhand.

With every passing day, the Maoist guerrillas seem to be tightening their grip on the country, claiming some 500 lives every year. In some areas, the situation is so alarming that our former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described the menace as a “virus” that threatens the very idea of India. He also termed it as the biggest threat to our national security. He also exhorted the states to pool their resources and crush the leftist rebellion once and for all.

It has been known for long that our police force is definitely not as equipped, trained and motivated as their Naxal counterparts who are increasingly growing in strength in every sense of the term. The Maoists today are better organised, better armed, better trained and better motivated to execute their sinister agenda.

Now, the Union home ministry is planning to tackle this problem by helping the states raise the 35 India Reserve Battalions (IRB) to crush the Maoist rebellion. The Centre is learnt to have decided to take many other serious steps to curb the menace. There are already four layers of monitoring mechanisms. Since these have proved inadequate, the Union government has decided to have a fifth layer—a task force to be chaired by the Cabinet Secretary to promote coordinated efforts across a range of development and security activities so that the Maoist menace can be tackled comprehensively and effectively.

There are some complex issues which need to be resolved before we can expect a better response to the Maoist menace. Since law and order is a state subject, the Centre cannot take direct police action in the wake of an incident unless the situation is deemed to be so alarming as to require its involvement under Article 355 of the Indian Constitution. The article relates to central involvement in extra-ordinary cases of ‘internal disturbances’ making it difficult to run the government there in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution.

Even though the Centre has provided 33 battalions (over 33,000 personnel) of paramilitary forces to states for deployment in Naxal-affected districts, this has proved to be insufficient given the fact that Naxalism today affects almost 40 per cent geographical area of this country in one way or the other. Chhattisgarh, for example, has over 13,000 personnel out of the total deployment of central forces, but it has still reported more than 50 per cent of the total casualties (325 out of 601) in 2007.

Andhra Pradesh has shown the way by creating a specialised force called ‘Grey Hounds’ to fight the Maoists and achieved huge success in minimising casualties since its inception almost two years back. The local police, backed by the armed reserve forces, the Grey Hounds and a well-developed intelligence network, have succeeded in controlling the Maoist menace to a great extent. With Grey Hounds on their heels, the Maoists have been on the run in Andhra Pradesh, but the forces have not been able to take on the might of the Maoist guerrillas effectively in states like Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal where they are still to find an effective antidote to the Maoist threat.

The Maoists easily slip into another state after attacking civilians and security personnel, knowing full well that they can get away with the same. The rebels seem to be taking advantage of the fact that the states still do not have a ‘unified command’ to fight them. Law and order

being a state subject, such a 'unified command' is theoretically not possible. But one feels that there is now an urgent need to come out with a better coordinated action and strategy vis-à-vis the Maoists even if that means having a 'unified command' by somehow getting over the constitutional snag.

Over 1400 persons including civilians, security forces and insurgents have so far been killed since 1996 in the Naxal-related violence. While over 8000 civilians have lost their lives in such violence, around 2700 security forces have lost their lives while defending the country against Naxal violence. Though the number of casualties in Maoist violence has declined in over the years, statistics do not tell the entire story. Incidents like the recent jail-break in Chhattisgarh or Jehanabad in Bihar where rebels attacked a jail and escaped with hundreds of their comrades reveal that the Maoists are only getting bolder. The Nayagarh incident only corroborates this assumption.

It is difficult to say if the new strategy by the Centre will be able to check the growth of Naxals in the countryside and their growing influence in the urban centres. In the past, states have failed to coordinate police operations to tackle such issues. But this time, as the Maoists increase their influence, the states have no choice but to join hands. Hence, one feels that the Centre and the various state governments need to immediately coordinate their activities to put in place a 'unified command' to better face up to the Naxal challenge to the internal security of our beloved country.

Salient Points

- Naxalites affecting 40% of India's geographical area are no longer confined to the jungles. They may strike bigger cities for good publicity for their intended 'New Democratic Revolution'.
- Former PM termed Naxalism as the biggest threat to our national security.
- Our police force is not as equipped and motivated as their Naxal counterparts.
- The local police, the Grey Hounds and a well-developed intelligence network helped A.P. in minimising the Maoism.
- Law and order being a state subject, the Centre cannot take direct police action in the wake of an incident.
- Centre and the various state governments need to immediately set up a 'unified command' to better face up to the Naxal challenge to the internal security.
- A task force has been proposed to be chaired by the Cabinet Secretary to promote coordinated efforts across a range of development and security activities.

Glossary

Mandarin: (in the Chinese Empire) a member of any of the nine ranks of distinguished by a particular kind of button worn on the cap.