

War against the Maoists: But who are they and what do they want?

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The Indian government is launching a full-scale war against the Maoist rebels and the people led by them in different parts of the country. The initial battles, without any formal announcement, have already started. For this purpose, they intend to deploy about 75,000 security personnel in parts of Central and Eastern India, including Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Jharkhand. The government will organize its regular air-force in addition to paramilitary and specially trained COBRA forces. The air-force has begun to extend its logistic support. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Home Minister P. Chidambaram have declared the Maoist rebels to be 'the biggest internal security threat' to India and a hindrance to 'development'. The mainstream media seem to have taken them at their face value. Their publications and television programmes seem to be building a war-hysteria against the Maoist rebels regardless of the fact that this attack by the government will be directed against some of the most deprived of the Indian people. Indeed this is turning into a war of the state against its own people!

While paying lip service at times to the notion that the current people's insurgency led by the Maoist rebels has its root in decades of vicious exploitation of the poor, especially the dalits and tribals, the blare of government propaganda tries to convince us that the Maoist rebels are dangerous, blood-thirsty terrorists determined to establish their areas of influence. The Government is preaching that the Maoists can go to any extent to maintain their influence in these areas – by either preventing the government from undertaking development activities or using the power of their guns, killing disobedient individuals. Their ideology is to terrorise the common people, wrest power from the democratically elected governments and destroy the entire fabric of the society. The government and the media want us to believe that the only people, apart from a few romantic misguided intellectuals, who willingly support Maoists are the poor, ignorant, uneducated, uninformed tribal people. They seem to claim that no sensible, intelligent person living in a society like ours would support them voluntarily. But is this a true picture?

Could it be that the Maoist rebels are supporting and organizing the poor, exploited people to fight oppression, to establish a more egalitarian society where the wealth of our growing economy will be spread among all, not merely among a very small minority? Could it be that in the name of suppressing the Maoists, the state is going all out to break the backbone of these poor peoples' fight? Could it be that the government is planning to wage a war, in our name, against our own sisters and brothers to help line the pockets of the rich?

In this hour of crisis, we must ask those questions that the government seeks to suppress.

What do we really know about the Maoist rebels, their ideology, their plans and programs? Why does the government need to go to war against its own people and inside its own territory? Are the Maoists really blocking development? Who are these Maoists anyway and what do they want?

Let us take one question at a time.

Who are these Maoists?

The Maoists are revolutionaries mainly consisting of the extremely poor people including a large number of dalits and tribals. They come mainly from the toiling masses of India and they are trying to organize the vast population of such masses of this country. They seek to arm and train them so that these masses can resist the onslaught of the rich. In this effort they go beyond the idea that mass movements should focus on some specific issues like increase of wages, better health care, more honesty of public servants and so forth. The view of the Maoist rebels is that the poor and exploited people must first and foremost establish their own democratic political power and their own state power in various places. This is because without controlling state power, the poor and the exploited can at most hope for only limited improvements in their living conditions, i.e., so long as it does not inconvenience the rich who usually control the state power. So, the Maoists mobilize the poor to fight against the existing state, even armed fight if possible, as they consider the existing state to be a set of agents acting for the big multinational corporations, rich landlords and the wealthy in general. The fight is an extremely challenging and unequal one as the rich are aided by the government bureaucrats, the police and even the military. Also, contrary to what the Government and the mainstream media are propagating, the Maoist rebels are actually completely opposed to individual killings, they openly denigrate such stray terrorism-like acts. What they have been attempting to build up is a mass movement, even armed, to take on the violence of the ruling classes and its representative state machinery.

The Maoist movement was born in India in the late 1960s, after a radical section of political workers broke away mainly from the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPIM) because they felt the CPIM and other such parties like CPI, RSP, etc. had discredited themselves with their opportunist politics of placating and compromising with the rich. The movement has a long history of development. The present party, CPI (Maoist), came into being in 2004 by the merger of a number of fraternal organizations.

Is development in India arrested because the Maoist rebels are blocking it?

What is the state of the people of India at present? With its current high rate of growth, this is also a country of abject poverty and extreme inequality. Home to 24 billionaires (second largest in Asia [according to Forbes](#)), India can also boast of 230 million people who go to bed on a half empty stomach (**Source:** *World Hunger Report*).

A country whose economy grows at 9% cannot feed its own population – at least 50% of the people live below the official poverty line and 47% of children below the age of three are

underweight [World Bank report; Undernourished children: A call for reform and action]. In this so called 'hub of knowledge economy', only 11% of the total population can afford higher education and 50% of the students drop out before class eight to start living as casual labourers (**Source:** *Education Statistics, Ministry of Human Resource Development*). This is true of most of India not just the areas where Maoist influence and control is high. Then how can we say that development in India is being blocked by Maoists?

Maoists do not oppose 'development' at all, they only oppose the 'pro-rich development' at the expense of destitution or often total destruction of the poor. For example, in Dandakaranya region of Chhattisgarh they oppose setting up of helipads but there, the poor themselves, led by the Maoist rebels, have built irrigation tanks and wells for help in agriculture something the Indian government did not bother to do. The Indian government routinely blames the Maoist rebels that they blow up schools! But what the Government tries to suppress is that these blown-up school buildings were actually being used or requisitioned to become camps for security personnel!

And what changes do they want? Why do they want these changes?

(1) Overhauling the entire structure of oppression instead of piecemeal reforms

In addition to all the woes described above, India is also a country, where thousands of Muslims can be butchered in broad daylight by fascist Hindu forces (the most widespread and gruesome such pogrom in recent times happened in Gujarat in 2002), while the ministers and police look the other way. And these features are not stray results of the misdeeds of a few villains. The existing socio-political system in India has a built-in mechanism which ensures that the common masses would be oppressed by a rich and powerful few. Widespread systemic violence is required and is routinely applied by the Indian state so that common people remain disciplined and do not revolt in the face of oppression.

(2) Land to the tillers and destruction of the landlord class

About 60% of the Indian population is still dependent on agriculture. However the primary input, land, is predominantly concentrated in the hands of a few landlords and big farmers. Close to 60 percent of rural households are effectively landless [NSS report]. The elite in the villages, by their collusion with the corrupt politicians and bureaucrats have blocked any meaningful land reforms. In the last four decades the proportion of households with little or no land (landless and marginal farmer households) has increased steadily from 66% to 80%. On the other hand the top ten percent rural households own more land now than in 1951 (**Source:** *NSS report*). The Maoist revolutionaries want to change this to ensure equitable distribution of land. They do not deter from collective armed fight of the landless and poor peasants and the poor rural labourers against the existing state power for achieving this goal.

(3) Freedom from moneylenders and traders

Indebtedness in rural India has been increasing by leaps and bounds especially in the recent decades. Public rural banks are closing down due to relaxation of government regulation.

Therefore, instead of securing credits from public institutional sources, rural folk are now being forced to approach the village money lenders (who are often big landlords or rich farmers as well) on a larger and larger scale. Unscrupulous traders are adding to the misery of the poor peasants. They sell spurious inputs to small and marginal peasants at exorbitant prices. They also make huge profits by buying their harvest at throwaway prices and selling them in urban areas at a premium. Not-so-well-off peasants, in this no-win situation, of course end up needing substantial credit. Private moneylenders and various for-profit financial companies take advantage of this situation by extracting enormous sums from peasants. Interest rate could be as high as 5% per month. The BBC News reported that more than 200,000 farmers have committed suicide in India since 1997 under the pressure of such indebtedness. The Maoist rebels want to change this.

(4) End of caste system and eradication of untouchability

It is well known that the caste system is still thriving in India. Economically it keeps the overwhelming majority of the people in dire poverty and politically it suppresses their fundamental democratic rights. Often the lower castes are robbed of their human dignity. They are even denied access to public facilities like some sources of drinking water, schools etc. An expert group of the planning commission reports that in 70% villages lower caste people cannot enter places of worship and in more than 50% villages they don't have access to common water sources ([Expert committee report to the Planning Commission](#)).

According to an NCDHR report, on average, 27 atrocities (including murder, abduction and rape) against dalits take place every day. The well-off landed sections in the villages still come mainly from the upper castes. They use brahminical ideology to try to keep all other sections of the population under domination. The same is true for usurers, merchants, hoarders, quarry owners, contractors—all mainly come from the upper castes. In short, the upper castes are still very much in command in all aspects of rural life. Often with their own private army of goondas they run a parallel raj. The Maoists want to break this stranglehold of the upper castes and ensure equal rights for dalits and adivasis.

(5) Freedom from exploitation by foreign multinationals and its local partners

Since 1991, foreign capital in alliance with big capitalists like Reliance, Tata and state bureaucrats, has penetrated vast sectors of the Indian economy. Every sphere of our life, starting from road construction, electricity generation, communication networks to food retail, health and education are under direct control of this coterie. In the name of 'development' thousands of acres of land are being transferred to big business and multinationals. For example, in Bastar, Chattisgarh, in the name of Bodh Ghat dam, tens of thousands of Adivasis are being forcibly evicted from their "jal-jangal-zameen" (water-forest-land). In Niyamgiri, Orissa the land which is the abode of several Dongria tribes has been handed over to the multinational Vedanta group which will completely destroy the livelihood of these tribes affecting more than 20,000 people. The state government and the mainstream opposition parties of the state are actively supporting such activities. The Maoists, over the years, have been resisting such plunder.

(6) Ensuring people's democratic rights

It is well known that elections are often a sham in India. The parliament, as we have seen several times, is a bazaar where the rich and the super-rich can buy the MPs. According to ADR (Association of Democratic Reform), the average asset of an MP has gone up to 5.12 crore in 2009 from Rs 1.8 crore in 2004. In our democracy the erstwhile rajas and maharajas, like Scindias, are still proliferating and controlling the local economy and polity at many places. And we also know the state of judicial system in our country. Salman Khans and Sanjeev Nandas can kill by running cars over common people and still they can escape the law for very long, perhaps forever. B.N. Kirpal, the judge, who arbitrarily ordered that Indian rivers be interlinked, ignoring the resulting ecological and human calamity, joined the environmental board of Coca-Cola after he retired. The Maoists want to establish people's court where poor people can get true justice. In fact, such courts run in many places where the Maoist movement is strong.

(7) Self-determination for the nationalities

The Indian government ruthlessly suppresses national aspirations of a number of people. These people and their land became part of India by accident – because the British raj annexed their homeland or a despotic king wanted their land to be a part of India. Lakhs of Indian troops have been deployed in Kashmir and north-eastern states to curb such struggles of the people in these states for their national self-determination. Since 1958, AFSPA has been imposed in north-eastern states, which allows armed forces to conduct search and seizure without warrant, to arrest without warrant, to destroy any house without any verification and to shoot to kill with full impunity. In Kashmir, there is 1 military personnel for every 15 civilian. Cold blooded murders, like those of Thangjam Manorama Devi, Chungkham Sanjit, Neelofar and Asiya Jan, are carried out frequently in the name of 'countering terrorism'. The Maoist rebels seek to establish freedom of self determination for all nationalities.

So, to sum up, the new society the Maoists want to establish will have the following components:

Land to the poor and landless. Later on cooperative farming is to be established on voluntary basis.

Forest to the tribal people.

End of rule of the rich and the upper caste in villages and uprooting of caste system.
Uproot all discriminations based on gender and religion.

Seizure of the ill gotten wealth and assets of multinational corporations and their local Indian partners.

Self determination for the nationalities, political autonomy for the tribes.

Establish a state by the poor, for the poor where the present day exploiters would be expropriated.

Participation of people in day to day administrative work and decision making.
Democracy at the true grassroot level with people having the power to recall its democratic representatives.

In summary: ensuring that all types of freedom, rights and democracy for all sections of toiling masses.

What have the Maoists-led people's struggles achieved so far?

Information in this section is taken, purposely, from [the expert group report to the planning commission](#), which is available on the web.

Contrary to what the media try to portray, the government's own report says that the movement led by the Maoist rebels cannot be seen as simply blowing up of police stations and killing individual people. It encompasses mass organization. Mass participation in militant protest has always been a characteristic of such mobilisation.

Although the Maoists by their own admission are engaged in a long term people's struggle against the oppression by the present India state, their movement has already achieved some short term successes in improving the condition of the poor people.

Maoist movement in India was built around the demand of 'land to the tillers'. Numerous struggles, led by the Maoists, have been fought all over the country especially in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, to free land from the big landholding families. In many such cases landlords have been driven away from the villages and their land has been put in the possession of the landless poor. But the police and paramilitary do not allow the poor to cultivate such lands. In Bihar, landless Musahars, the lowest among the Dalits have struggled and have taken possession of fallow Government land. This has had the support of Maoists.

Under the leadership of the Maoists the adivasis have reclaimed forest land on an extensive scale in Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, Orissa and Jharkhand. The adivasis displaced by irrigation projects in Orissa had to migrate to the forests of Visakhapatnam district of Andhra Pradesh in large numbers. The forest department officials harassed and evicted them on a regular basis. The movement led by the Maoists put an end to this.

In rural India the Minimum Wages Act remains an act on paper only. In the forest areas of Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Maharashtra, and Jharkhand, non-payment of the legal wages was a major source of exploitation of adivasi labourer. Maoists-led struggles have put an effective end to it. These struggles have secured increases in the rate of payment for picking tendu leaves (used for rolling beedies), washing clothes, making pots, tending cattle, repairing implements etc. The exploitation previously had been so severe that as a result of the sustained movement led by Maoists the pay rates of tendu leaves collection have over the years increased by fifty times.

The movement has given confidence to the oppressed to assert their rights and demand respect and dignity from the dominant castes and classes. The everyday humiliation and sexual exploitation of labouring women of dalit and tribal communities by upper caste men has been successfully fought. Forced labour, begari, by which the toiling castes had to provide obligatory service for free to the upper castes was also put an end to in many parts of the country.

In rural India, disputes are commonly taken to the rich and powerful of the village (who are generally the landlords) and caste panchayats, where the dispensation of justice is in favour of the rich and powerful. The Maoist movement has provided a mechanism, usually described as the 'People's Court' whereby these disputes are resolved in the interests of the wronged party.

Why then, does the government need to go to war against its own people led by these rebels instead of hailing them as true patriots?

There is a simple answer. Chattisgarh, Orissa are rich in mineral wealth that can be sold to the highest multinational bidder. The only obstacle standing between the corrupt politicians and ALL THIS MONEY are the poor, disenfranchised tribal people (and the Maoists leading them). So, this war. This is not something new in India or for that matter in other parts of the world. Mobutu's corrupt regime selling off the Belgian Congo piece by piece to the US, Belgium and other countries comes to mind. In the sixty years of independence from direct colonial rule, the Indian state has been doing the same. It has systematically impoverished the overwhelming majority to serve the interest of a powerful few and their foreign friends.

The impending war to evict the tribal people from their villages, in the pretext of eliminating the Maoists, will be fought at the behest of big corporations, who want to control and plunder our resources such as mineral, water and forest. It is high time that we recognize this pattern of waging war which will be fought by the poor on both sides, but will benefit only the big capitalists and their cheerleaders in the government.

Note: This is meant to be a simple and brief exposition of the goals and strategies of the Maoist movement in India for people who may not have much awareness about it and are confused by the propaganda in the mainstream media. This does not go into the arcane debates about mode of production in India, the debates among communist revolutionaries over strategy and tactics etc. This aims at people who, for example, are perplexed why the Maoists, instead of trying to ensure safe drinking water like an NGO, rather, often resort to violent activities against the Government. We have deliberately kept references to a minimum in the body of the text. For an interested reader, the webpage: bannedthought.net contains an enormous wealth of information about the Maoist rebels, including their own documents.

<http://radicalnotes.com/journal/2009/11/19/war-against-the-maoists-but-who-are-they-and-what-do-they-want/>