

The Naxalite conflict in India: what role for humanitarian organisations?

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An interminable conflict has been shaking the Indian Union since the 1960s. Often overlooked in international discussions and by the media, the “Naxalite–Maoist insurgency” sheds light on the particularities of Indian society and the social inequalities that run through it.

Yet the Naxalite movement, driven by communist (and more specifically Maoist) ideology, is worthy of interest, if only because of its resilience within the world’s fifth largest economy,¹ in a country beset by intensified Hindu sovereignty. As in all modern-day conflicts, the first victims are civilians and since 1967, the estimates are around 15,000 dead². Humanitarian organisations continue to attempt to relieve their suffering in the conflict zones while also trying to find middle ground between the belligerents.

The federal government and the Maoist insurgency: two irreconcilable positions

With its 3.28 million km² expanse and significant economic and demographic growth, India is a heavyweight on the international stage. Indeed, the Indian government has taken systemic, economic measures to guarantee its national security. In India, national security protection translates into the protection of direct foreign investments and economic opportunities. This has been the Indian authorities’ credo since the 1980s. Yet economic development has created glaring disparities between social classes and these inequalities have favoured the emergence of an armed rebellion bearing another vision of what the country and nation of India should be. To understand the series of tragic events that led to this head-on opposition between the federal State and the Naxalite-Maoist insurgency (which at one point in time spread to 30% of India),³ we must look back to the mid-1960s.

At this time, India had only been independent since 1947, and the Communist Party of India (CPI) was gripped by debates between two currents: a parliamentary current and a revolutionary current inspired by what was happening in China. It was following the death of India’s first post-Independence Prime Minister Nehru in 1964 that the scission between these two currents came about, caused by the revolutionary-current bearers creating a new party: the Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-M), sole

¹ *Le Point.fr*, « Le PIB de l’Inde dépasse celui du Royaume-Uni », *Le Point*, 7 septembre 2022, <https://amp.lepoint.fr/2488928>

² Guillaume Gandelin, « Inde : le naxalisme, aux origines du maoïsme indien », *Asialyst*, 3 mai 2016, <https://asialyst.com/fr/2016/05/03/inde-le-naxalisme-aux-origines-du-maoisme-indien>

³ The Naxalite-Maoist insurgency spread to 231 of India’s 626 districts. Alpa Shah, « La lutte révolutionnaire des Maoïstes continue en Inde », *Mouvements*, vol. 1, n°77, 2014, p. 71. (Article translated by Samira Ouardi and adapted by Jean-Paul Gaudillière and Stéphanie Tawa Lama-Rewal).

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supporter of a pro-Chinese Maoist line in the Indian political landscape.⁴ However, most CPI-M cadres permanently rejected Chinese support after China sided with Pakistan against India in the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War. Worse still, as early as 1967, CPI-M cadres joined forces with the half-hearted, bourgeois CPI in order to win over and govern West Bengal.

In India in the 1960s, conditions were conducive to the explosion of a mass revolution: 80% of the population was rural and a great many rural areas had been neglected by the Nehruvian economic development model, based on coerced, Soviet-style industrialisation.⁵ Two consecutive years of drought (1965-1966) further aggravated the agricultural situation in North India which, without the assistance of the US food assistance program, might have collapsed into famine. The Maoist cadres seized upon the situation, engineering their proletarian revolution, which was born in Naxalbari, a West Bengali village, on 3 March 1967. The same year, on 25 May, a violent revolt erupted in which peasants, labourers and Adivasi⁶ assaulted the granaries of feudal landlords owning land in the village of Naxalbari. From its inception in Naxalbari, the insurgency spread very fast to other villages,⁷ hence its widely used designation of the “Naxalite movement”. China took the opportunity to support the movement via the Communist Party of China’s mouthpiece, *People’s Daily*, which in its 5 July 1967 edition called the movement a “peal of spring thunder crashing over the land of India”.⁸

The movement grew quickly in other Indian states, spreading to major cities such as Calcutta. However, the New Delhi government’s response under Indira Gandhi was merciless. In the summer of 1971, Operation Steeplechase obliterated the CPI-ML’s (L for Leninist) organisational resources. Leaders such as Charu Mazumbar were incarcerated, and several jailed leaders died in prison. The Naxalite movement subsequently exploded into approximately forty smaller groups lacking any true political leverage. The Naxalite factions retreated to the forests of the present-day States of Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, from where they led guerrilla actions.

These factions then evolved, taking advantage of India’s social make-up and speaking in the name of the tribal populations of Central and East India, which had been abandoned by the State.⁹ In some places, the Naxalite movements created true administrations, complete with people’s courts, taxes

⁴ Guillaume Gandelin, « Inde : le naxalisme, aux origines... », art. cit.

⁵ *Idem*.

⁶ “Adivasis (or Ādivāsīs) and Aborigines of India are collective terms that designate the tribes of the Indian subcontinent, considered indigenous to the regions (forests) of India in which they live, either as foragers or as sedentary tribal communities. These tribes constitute a significant minority of the country’s population. In 2018, they represented 8.6% of the country’s population, *i.e.* over 100 million people.” [source: Wikipedia]. However, the sociological contours of these communities remain complex to define: see Bertrand Lefebvre, « Les minorités tribales dans les territoires de l’Union indienne », *Géococonfluences*, mars 2015, <http://geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr/informations-scientifiques/dossiers-regionaux/le-monde-indien-populations-et-espaces/corpus-documentaire/les-minorites-tribales-dans-le-territoire-indien>

⁷ Niranjana Sahoo, “Half a century of India’s Maoist insurgency: An appraisal of State response”, *ORF Occasional Paper*, No. 198, June 2019, Observer Research Foundation, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/half-a-century-of-indias-maoist-insurgency-an-appraisal-of-state-response-51933>

⁸ It should be noted that in 1962 there was a war between China and India and that since 1959 India has been hosting the Dalai Lama and his companions in exile from Tibet, a Chinese region. Indeed, according to Thomas Lynch, China led no large-scale campaign to support the Naxalites. Thomas F. Lynch III, “India’s naxalite insurgency: history, trajectory, and implications for U.S-India security cooperation on domestic counterinsurgency”, *Strategic Perspectives*, no. 22, October 2016, p. 10.

⁹ The objective of the 2005 Special Economic Zones Act was to create private industrial zones spanning thousands of hectares in tribal areas. Areas in which hundreds of public-private partnerships have since been concluded. These areas were designated by the Naxalites as occupation targets in their 12 June 2009 circular. Valérie Fernando, « La politique de développement indiennes aux prises avec le naxalisme », *dph (dialogues, propositions, histoires pour une citoyenneté mondiale)* 2009, <https://base.d-p-h.info/fr/fiches/dph/fiche-dph-8008.html>

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and fair redistribution of land within communities. According to Ghazala Wahab, an Indian security issues specialist, in conditions of poverty, and a context of ongoing debate over land ownership and access to the region’s mineral resources, official authorities failed to convince the indigenous populations of the soundness of their policy.¹⁰ It should be noted, however, that the violent methods of the Naxalites do not always convince the local population either, who are caught in the crossfire.

Faced with this threat, the Indian government qualified the movement as “the single biggest internal-security challenge”, *de facto* typecasting the movement as a terrorist group. In September 2009, the government mobilised 75,000 soldiers and paramilitaries (Operation Green Hunt) – as well as the federal police, Indo-Tibetan border police, border security police and India Reserve Battalion – in order to oust the movement from five states, in particular its Jharkhand strongholds. This was the largest internal military offensive in the country’s history¹¹ and can be largely explained by the fact that Jharkhand harbours some of India’s most important reserves of mineral raw materials. Indeed, Jharkhand produces 40% of India’s coal, 40% of its iron, 45% of its mica, 48% of its bauxite, 90% of its apatite and 100% of its kyanite. A windfall attracting multinationals such as AcelorMittal, Rio Tinto, Vedanta Ltd, and Posco.¹² Indeed, the Naxalite Maoists specifically targeted Mittal with on-site attacks and the dissemination of 20,000 CDs of songs calling Mittal “the plunderer of Jharkhand”. Since Operation Green Hunt, clashes between Indian law enforcement and defence forces and Maoist militants have continued incessantly, largely as a result of brutal repression by Indian armed forces, which just swells Maoist ranks with volunteers.

Picture – Number of confrontations and clashes between Indian defence forces and Maoist rebels between 2010 and 2022.

YEAR	NUMBER OF “INCIDENTS”
2010	58
2011	69
2012	66
2013	75
2014	140
2015	110
2016	143
2017	92
2018	85
2019	81
2020	75
2021	113
2022	74

Source:

<https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/surrender/india-maoistinsurgency>

¹⁰ Fabrice Deprez, « En Inde, la guérilla maoïste frappe à nouveau », *La Croix*, 7 avril 2021, <https://www.la-croix.com/Monde/En-Inde-guerilla-maoïste-frappe-nouveau-2021-04-07-1201149794>

¹¹ Alpa Shah, « La lutte révolutionnaire des Maoïstes..... », art. cit., p. 58-59.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 69-70.

A tricky path to peaceful resolution

It is no easy feat to raise awareness of the repression endured by the Naxalite movement in India. On the one hand, the majority of the Indian population – and in particular the higher social classes whose priorities lie elsewhere – hold in contempt the tribal populations whom they regard as “primitive”. On the other hand, the Indian government thwarts and controls the operations of activists involved in the cause. A case in point: in 2007, the distinguished doctor Binayak Sen, member of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Rupantar (specialised in agriculture and community health in the State of Chhattisgarh) was arrested in 2007 for allegedly transmitting messages to an imprisoned Naxalite activist whom he had visited in the course of his activities. The government instrumentalised a 2005 counterterrorism law facilitating the incarceration of suspects. Binayak Sen was released on bail two years later on 25 May 2009, under pressure from twenty-two Nobel laureates and following a Supreme Court decision.¹³ Another case in point: under the pretext of illegal land occupation, the premises of Himanshu Kumar’s *Vanvasi Chetna Ashram* were bulldozed by the police in the State of Chhattisgarh. The government’s hostility towards this organisation was fuelled by the work that the organisation conducted daily in poor Adivasis communities but above all by the investigations it led into military and paramilitary crimes in Chhattisgarh (e.g. its revelation of the Singavaram village massacre).¹⁴ And, in India as anywhere else, being branded as supporting terrorism (in this case, Naxalite) was enough to considerably discredit the Maoist movement in public opinion. Just as it helps to discredit other opponents of the government.

The Naxalite movement’s political project clearly sets the goal of modifying frameworks of cooperation between individuals, thereby moving away from Indian society’s traditional forms of organisation. The intention of the movement is not solely to bring forth a communist society; the movement seeks to transform – even eradicate – existing hierarchies in India. A project such as this has the potential to build greater than habitual support, in an Indian society aware of the inequalities running through it, inequalities that the government itself knows it must tackle head on. A concern that is perhaps even greater for some other state governments in the country. But is it conceivable that in such a social battle, the Communist Party of India’s vision might be upheld by NGOs which might thus support the government in helping local populations in conflict zones and thereby work towards reconciliation between the different classes?

Nothing could be less certain. However, Indian NGOs can most certainly contribute to the peace process (third priority area of the Nexus promoted by the United Nations Organisation) between the different parties. Most NGO militants are university activists and intellectuals who measure the importance of the Indian vision of a united and proud nation. Both parties should be brought to the negotiation table. In addition, lobbying must play a part in encouraging hitherto recalcitrant chief ministers of state to implement the 1996 law that confirms the ban on non-tribals buying land in areas

¹³ Christine Lutringer, *Gouvernance de l’agriculture et mouvements paysans en Inde*, Institut de hautes études internationales et du développement, Éditions Karthala, 2012, p. 222-223.

¹⁴ Countercurrents.org: “Attack on Vanvasi Chetna Ashram in Chhattisgarh”, 11 June 2009, <https://countercurrents.org/dobhal110609.htm>

classified as tribal.¹⁵ This is an essential prerequisite if the authorities wish to end a conflict which, despite the loss of Naxalite momentum on the ground, has persisted for over half a century.

We would like to believe that trust between the parties can be re-established and that NGOs can act as intermediaries to convince the government and Maoist rebels to enter into an Indo-Indian dialogue inspired by the Colombian example, in which all parties can win. Strengthening local peace capacities in vulnerable areas is essential through development projects that respect local communities and their customs. This requires political will, yet will the central government's pride yield in front of the perseverance of organisations and NGOs to become mediators of peace? Unfortunately, given that India has severed all foreign funding to NGOs without special permission and that the accreditations of over 6,000 organisations have not been renewed in 2022, there is ample reason for doubt.¹⁶

One thing that the Naxalite-Maoist insurgency has demonstrated for over fifty years is that, although India has undergone spectacular development, it still harbours vast, vulnerable pockets which have the potential to jeopardise its future. In the Naxalite conflict, armed struggle can no longer be the only solution envisaged: the longer the Adisavi cause's Maoist militants are muzzled, the longer land will continue to be exploited and the longer the Naxalist movement will persist. It is imperative that the government partner with civil society for the peaceful resolution of this conflict.

Translated from the French by Naomi Walker

Biographies

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Samuel Cédric Ngueda and Nancy Saurelle Ndjomo Kabayene, "The Naxalite conflict in India:

what role for humanitarian organisations?", *Humanitarian Alternatives*, no. 21, November 2022, pp. 76–85.

<https://www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2022/11/21/the-naxalite-conflict-in-india-what-role-for-humanitarian-organisations/>

¹⁵ As pointed out by Abid Ali and Sant Lal in their article, this is a governance issue. Abid Ali and Sant Lal, "Naxalite movement in India: Causes and solutions", *International Journal of Informative and Futuristic Research*, vol. 2, no. 8, April 2015, p. 2977, http://www.rmlnlu.ac.in/pdf/6-NAXALITE_100620.pdf

¹⁶ « Inde : des milliers d'associations interdites de recevoir des fonds de l'étranger », *Rfi*, 2 janvier 2022, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/asi-pacifique/20220102-inde-des-milliers-d-associations-interdites-de-recevoir-des-fonds-de-l-%C3%A9tranger>