



**THE NAXALITES OF INDIA – CAUSATIVE FACTORS AND
REQUIRED ACTIONS NECESSARY TO REDRESS SOCIETAL
GRIEVANCES**

Robert E. Crowley

Halcyon Group International, LLC

Halcyon@halcyongroupinternational.com

www.halcyongroupinternational.com



“You will find that the State is the kind of organization which, though it does big things badly, does small things badly, too.” - John Kenneth Galbraith

In the Darjeeling district of West Bengal in 1967, landlord-tenant tensions erupted in the community of Naxalbari. Frustrated by legal inequities in the distribution of wealth and property that favored landowners and forced the lower castes into the meager existence of sharecroppers, a small group of peasant farmers revolted against the landowners and the state.¹ Along with supporters from the India Communist Party (CPI), a “handful of sharecroppers armed with sticks, bows, and arrows seized the entire stock of grain from a landlord’s granary”.² This event gave birth to the Maoist organizations that took the name of the village and now form a loose confederation of insurgent organizations collectively referred to as Naxalites. Affecting 160 districts in sixteen of Indian states, the Naxalites number approximately 10,000 fighters.³ Rooted in impoverished rural areas that lack strong governmental presence, rule of law, and the benefits of an ever-growing economy, the Naxalite rebellion is the manifestation of governance, economic, and security gaps in Eastern and Central India. These gaps, which enable the continued growth of the Naxalite insurgency, are a growing threat to India. The national government must close them by improving governmental presence and the rule of law, providing an adequate security apparatus to protect the population, and addressing the legitimate economic grievances that together have bred a

¹ Author’s note: When referring to any of the political subdivisions of India, I refer to them as states (no capitalization). The nation is referred to at times as the State (capitalized).

² “The Fire Within: Naxalite Insurgency Violence in India”, Pratul Ahuja, Small Wars and Insurgencies, Vol 18, No.2, June 2007, p.257

³ “The Maoist Movement in India”, P.V. Ramana, Defense and Security Analysis, Vol 22, No. 4, Dec 2006, p 436



rebellion that threatens the further splintering of Indian society and potential spillover into neighboring nations.

The above mentioned gaps have created conditions that, coupled with resulting poverty and the despair that serves as poverty's constant companion, are the causative factors of the Naxalite rebellion. These causative factors – weak governing institutions, inadequate security, and lack of economic development – are inter-related, and any solution must be approached with an enduring and holistic multi-pronged strategy that employs short, medium, and long term objectives designed to simultaneously correct the root causes of societal discontent.

“If the economy is weak, the state is also likely to be weak, and rebellion is not difficult”, wrote Collier.⁴ He might well have written those words for the states most affected by Naxalites. The seven states most affected have rural poverty rates that range from 41% (Madhya Pradesh) to 52% (Bihar) of the population.⁵ This is indicative of a number of factors relating to India's political economy and their internal allocation of resources. In the 59 years since gaining independence, India's economic growth has not followed a traditional development pattern that transitions from agriculture through heavy industry toward light, clean industry, and finally services. Rather, it never favored widespread agriculture reform, and quickly became a service and knowledge based industries economy. Industry receives numerous state subsidies that were largely unavailable in the agriculture sector, leading to unequal economic opportunities. Additionally, the agriculture base was hampered by the lack of state investment in an infrastructure adequate to move crops from farm to market while

⁴ Collier, Paul, The Bottom Billion, Oxford University Press, NY, 2007, p.21

⁵ Ahuja, p.258



maintaining a cold-chain to preserve the products. The result was localized farming with a lack of available markets, and a subsequent lack of economic viability in rural areas.

Despite the neo-liberal restructuring experienced during the Green Revolution and the benefit of two growing seasons that enable India to feed its own population, the Naxalite regions do not benefit from this or the secondary economies that are birthed by a strong agricultural base. Indeed, as a food exporter, an unanticipated consequence of the Green Revolution has been increased rural poverty and food insecurity, and incentivising the cultivation of cash crops over food grains threatens food security in many rural areas.⁶

The plight of the rural poor is exacerbated by property ownership laws that disadvantage small farmers. Forced to borrow at excessive interest rates, unable to own plots of land that provide an advantageous economy of scale, and existing on a rentier land/lease system, more than 3,000 farmers in the state of Andhra Pradesh alone committed suicide between 1998 and 2004.⁷

The rural poor have not benefited from what they believed would be a system of government that would institute economic policies that would result in a better standard of living and a more equitable distribution of wealth and social justice throughout society. Improved economic prospects and opportunities for the rural poor are a necessary condition that must be advanced to counter the spread (and in some areas the choke-hold) of the Naxalites. This is especially critical as the gap continues to widen with India's growing economy. Best stated by Bremer, "If there is any force in Indian politics that poses a threat to

⁶ Ibid, p.261

⁷ "Till Debt do us Apart", Outlook, June 2004, Choudhury, S 2004



the nation's long term position on the right side of the J-curve, it is the possible unrest produced by the widening gap between rich and poor that comes with economic growth in an emerging market.”⁸

Along with addressing the issue of abject and wide scale poverty, there must be increased governmental presence in many geographic regions and governance sectors, to include rule of law, education, and essential services. While the Failed States Index⁹ gives India an overall rating of 70.8 (between Albania and Namibia), if disaggregated and analyzed by state rather than the country of India, all 12 indicators would have a poorer ranking in those states where the Naxalites operate than reflected in the consolidated ranking.

The five core state institutions of leadership, police, military, judiciary, and civil service are all weak or even non-existent in some of the rural Indian areas, particularly but not solely in the state of Bihar. The lack of governance in these areas allows the Naxalites to flourish, and in some cases assume roles and functions that state institutions would normally fulfill. This phenomenon strengthens Naxalite legitimacy while further de-legitimizing the Indian government and weakening any existing sense of community identity with the State amongst the underprivileged and poorly served population. “By effectively replacing the State from areas under its control, the movement has begun to challenge the States very legitimacy”, argues Ahuja.¹⁰

⁸ Bremmer, Ian, *The J Curve*, Simon&Schuster, NY, 2006 p.231

⁹ Failed States Index, “The Fund for Peace”, URL

http://www.fundforpeace.org/web/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=229&Itemid=366

¹⁰ Ahuja, p.268



The path of the Naxalites in many areas seems to be the only reasonable alternative to lack of governance.¹¹ With a relatively wide swath of support, the Naxalites have widened and deepened that support through the provision of services that are normally a governmental responsibility. Using a model that has been successful by Hezbollah in Lebanon and the FARC in Colombia, the Naxalite movement consists not only of armed fighters, but also of civil administrators, educators, and health care workers. The resulting effect is a population base that is indebted to the rebels, and relies on them for the provision of some very basic governmental functions.

A significant difference between Hezbollah or the FARC and the Naxalites is that in some areas the Naxalites are filling a pre-existing governance void, rather than overthrowing the existing government and taking over. This is an important nuance, for it demonstrates the Indian government's lack of cohesive presence and an inability to vertically penetrate into all of Indian society. This lack of governance, merged with social and economic policies that alienated rural segments of the population, provided the Naxalites with a perceived comparative advantage in the eyes of the population despite their relatively small numbers.

The very democratic foundation of rule of law serves as a fitting example of this favorable climate in which the Naxalites thrive and receive enough popular support to survive. The justice system in rural India is extremely slow and cumbersome, and many cases are held up in court for long periods. Communications are slow, road networks are inadequate, and transportation is problematic for the rural poor. To overcome these obstacles and maintain a system of justice, there are many documented instances in which the Naxalites form a

¹¹ Guha, Ramachandra, India After Gandhi, Harper Collins, NY 2007, p.444



“People’s Court” in order to settle civil and criminal disputes in a timely fashion.¹² The People’s Courts are an extra-judicial, yet commonly accepted manner of resolving grievances. As such, the foundations of State controlled legal institutions are non-existent, and the populace turns to the only alternative available, again deepening the Naxalite support base.

The relative levels of governance and governmental effectiveness and efficiency vary from state to state. This variety of governmental penetration has a number of variables, to include geography and demographics, among others. Possibly the most significant variable however is the nature and capability of the state governments themselves. Unlike the United States in which all powers not expressly reserved for the federal government belong to the states, India’s constitution is the opposite. In India, all powers not expressly given to the states are reserved for the federal government. Among the powers belonging to the state governments are public health, communications, roads and bridges, and public order.¹³ This results in an uneven ‘whole of government’ approach to the challenges posed by the Naxalites and the ability to address the underling causes. The most notable of the state’s powers is that of security within the state’s borders – public order.

Public order is a responsibility of the state rather than the federal government. This constitutional construct hampers governmental effectiveness at all levels to fight the Naxalites. The 16 separate states experiencing the Naxalite rebellion all have varying security capabilities, and cannot conduct effective and coordinated operations. This structural weakness results in a situation in which the Naxalites have greater freedom of maneuver than

¹² Ahua, p. 265

¹³ Seventh Schedule (Article 246), List II (State’s List), Constitution of India



they would if a centralized security apparatus were to coordinate counter-insurgency operations. The security construct enables Naxalite safe havens in weaker states, and their inter-state movement to avoid security forces.

While the federal government can assist, they are powerless to do so unless the individual states feel incapable of maintaining public order, and formally request federal assistance. In those cases, the Indian Army deploys armed militia's from other areas of the country to assist. These paramilitaries have the disadvantage of lack of familiarity with the terrain and the populace, and have also been accused periodically of atrocities and human rights violations – further distancing the population from the government.

This situation may ripen and complicate further as the Naxalites coordinate with sympathetic elements outside of India for support. The regional and even potential global implications are significant. We became keenly aware after September 11, 2001 that the operational reach and capabilities of small, well organized groups can extend across the globe. While the Naxalites have not stated an intention to conduct operations outside of India, they do coordinate with other organizations in South Asia and beyond.¹⁴ (In an interview with an Indian Army General Officer, he stated that he is sure the Naxalites are getting some level of support, though not necessarily arms and equipment, from actors in other nations).¹⁵

The challenges facing India in countering the Naxalite threat must be countered with a coordinated national level effort to wholly succeed. The root causes of the insurrection are poverty, weak governance institutions, and lack of security. Many of these can be addressed

¹⁴ Ramana, p.441

¹⁵ Off the record interview by author 3 April 2008

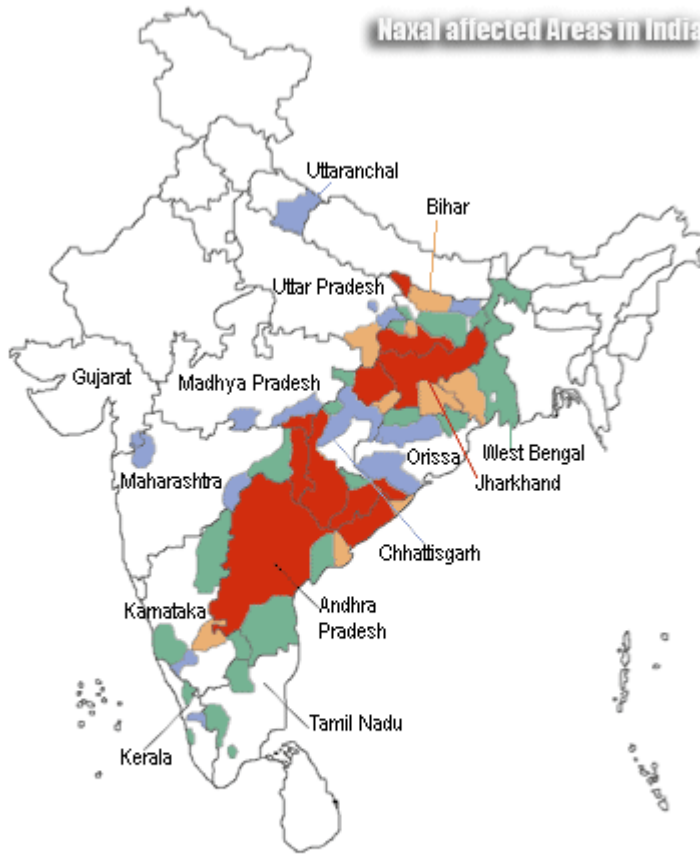






through structural changes. Adjustments must be made to India's economic priorities to ensure a better distribution of wealth and opportunity to the rural poor. The state and federal governments need to both deepen and widen their governance presence in the rural areas – provide health care, improve infrastructure and farm-to-market roads, and establish an effective rule of law capacity at the municipal level in order to rapidly and justly punish crimes and redress civil grievances.

Security forces alone are not the answer, although a strong security presence is a requirement to provide adequate time and space for appropriate economic and governance initiatives to take root. The required security force should be a federal force that is interoperable with the state security capabilities, possibly requiring a constitutional amendment or exercising exceptional State powers under existing constitutional provisions.

The challenge posed to India by the Naxalites is a not unexpected popular response to a State with weak governing institutions, inadequate security, and lack of economic development. India has the capability to change the existing landscape, however it will require significant social, economic, and military expenditures, along with the concomitant political will to match. For the time being, India's sheer size may provide her with the absorptive capacity to withstand the shock of this growing insurgency for some time to come. Similarly, India may choose to maintain the status quo until this boils over into a national crises of governance – a shock that will be very difficult to absorb – indeed a shock that will question exactly where on the J-curve India truly is.

Naxal affected Areas in India



	Highly affected (51)		Marginally affected (62)
	Moderately affected (18)		Targeted (34)
Total affected districts - 170		States - 15	