

DownToEarth

Rs 20.00

DECEMBER 31, 2001

As many as 20 of the 23 districts are listed as Naxalite affected. Like any military organisation it conducts periodic military training including guerilla warfare skills for its cadres.

Now, even women are enthusiastically joining the Left extremists ranks. Use of women cadres to stall police action and raids have been a favourite ploy of Naxalite groups. But their use as armed, trained combatants and decoys began in earnest only after the Peoples Guerilla Army (PGA) was deployed by the PWG in Bihar after December 2, 2001.

One major reason why the Naxalite movement has grown is lack of will to meet the challenge politically. All the political parties have become redundant in the affected districts, thanks to PWG intimidation and other violent tactics. As many as 800 VIPs in Andhra Pradesh today provide round the clock security of PWG.

Successful governments have, unfortunately, treated this as merely a law and order problem. This flawed diagnosis has compounded the ailment. Political leaders of all hues including many leaders from ruling Telugu Desam Party say that the problem can not be solved unless the socio-economic problems are taken care of.

"Poverty, unemployment and exploitation are breeding grounds for Naxals. How do you tackle that by arming the police with more powers and more weapons?" asks

rage and reason

Naxalites profit from people's anger against forest laws. With 15 per cent of India's forests under their control, Naxalites wage a war using a simple weapon: forest mismanagement

Is cancer data an official secret?

Sharks: caught in the net

Moral dilemma over human cloning



FORESTWAR

Naxalism started as a movement against land alienation. Today it has become a popular movement against natural resource alienation, particularly forests. Large areas of densely forested regions in the country are controlled by Naxalites. In these forested areas, the state and forest administration dare not enter. Naxalites use the growing alienation of tribal people against forest laws to gain ground. They build check dams where governments cannot because of restrictive forest conservation laws. They secure tribal rights over non-timber forest produce and dispense quick justice — at gun point. There are also massive financial gains for the Naxals in looting state forests. Poachers to timber mafia and protection money from paper industry, all contribute to their “revolution”. In short, they run a parallel government in our forests. All this has major ramifications for the country’s forest policy, which has always considered forests as wilderness areas to be managed for conservation or for timber extraction by the state. Instead, what is needed is to see forests as the developmental priority for millions of forest dwellers and to seek their involvement in its protection and management. Sadly, the victims of Naxal violence are invariably the custodians of our forests — forest guards. What is even more unfortunate is that they lose their lives defending laws that are so anti-people. This will have to change if we want to protect our forest wealth. *Down To Earth* reporters travel to these densely forested areas to discover what the Naxal rule means for forest management.





RICHARD MAHAPATRA ANDHRA PRADESH, BINAYAK DAS JHARKHAND
AND PRABHANJAN VERMA CHATTISGARH

AS PRIME minister A B Vajpayee was reminding the nation about threats from across the border in his Independence Day speech from Delhi's Red Fort this year, a group of extreme Leftist outfits, popularly known as Naxalites, were redrawing the internal map of the country. At a secret meeting held in West Bengal's Siliguri, they declared sovereignty over India's forests. The meeting was significant as it brought the two dominant Naxalite groups — Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) and the People's War Group (PWG) — together for the first time to form a death ring in 10 states. A new era of terror was about to be unleashed and India's forests were to become the next battlefield for the war of hegemony.

It is showing up: 827 incidents and 423 deaths in the last nine months. In October, a little known Naxalite group abducted a relative of the Union minister of state for home affairs. Factories owned by the Union minister of state for defence and the Andhra Pradesh (AP) chief minister were blasted by PWG. In Orissa, a minister's house was burnt down. Each day in the first week of December saw police and government officials clash with Naxalites in AP, Jharkhand and Orissa. The renewed attacks have prompted the Union government to ban the PWG and the MCC under the recently-promulgated Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance (POTO).

Genesis of a conflict

Naxalites, the extreme leftist movement tracing their origin to a radical peasant uprising against landlords in West Bengal in

1967, today rule India's best forests. Some 40 groups control a region that stretches from the Indo-Nepal border to coastal AP — an area two-and-half times the size of Bangladesh. And they are spreading faster than forest fires: from a small village to 10 states in just 35 years. Since then, more people have been killed by Naxalites-related violence than in the 10-year-old militancy in Kashmir. Despite the massive police operations, they have continued to spread to new areas. And there is a reason.

By ensuring people's access to forest and distributing forestlands for cultivation, Naxalites have established parallel governments. Willingly or hesitantly, the people too have begun to trust them instead of the government — more for livelihood than for Marx or Mao. The denser the forest, the more is the alienation — tribal people are refused entry into forests; they cannot cultivate lands they believe is theirs. It is simple. People want livelihood, government wants control over forests and Naxalites want 'revolution' against this. "Naxalites have put their weapons at people's service in face of such dilemma," says K Balgopal, a civil rights activist in Hyderabad who recently wrote a book on the movement. On one side is the elected government, which with its misplaced regulations has never addressed people's needs. On the other, is a band of armed people knocking on people's doors to solve their problems instantly — at gun point. Caught between the warring groups, the people prefer the latter. "The parallel government is fast, accessible and gives people access to their livelihood sources," admits a senior police official from Chattisgarh who did not want to be named. For example, courts in the Naxalite-affected areas of Jharkhand have witnessed a drop in the number of cases — from 2,400 in 1996 to 1,600 in 1997.

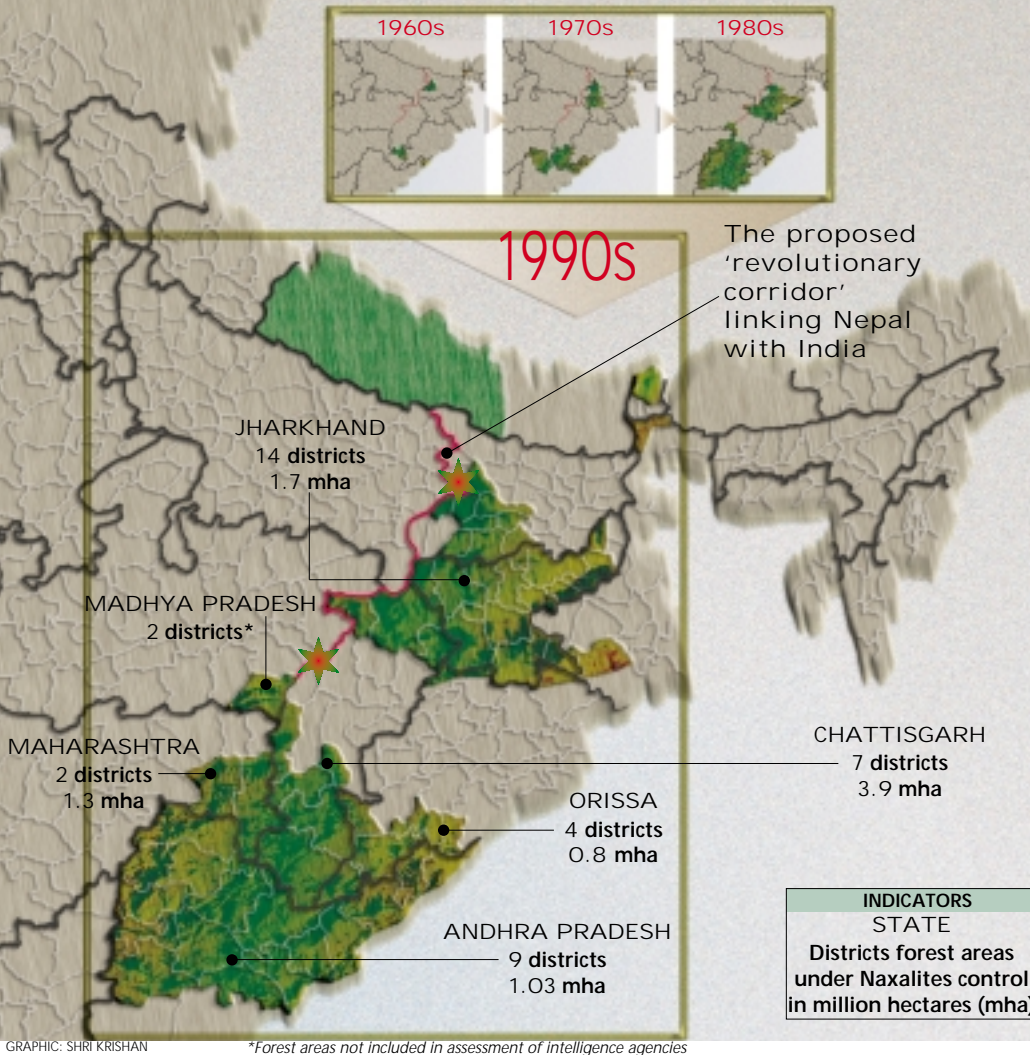
War of the woods: there are more landmine craters in Naxalite-affected forests than pug marks



MAHADEO SEN

RAPID RED SPREAD

Naxalites control 15 per cent of India's forests and are spreading faster than forest fires



According to intelligence reports and forest departments' assessments, Naxalite groups have presence in 10 states. But in five states (see map) it has influence over almost all forest areas: 35 districts covering an area of 10.03 million hectares (mha). This estimate is based on *Forest Survey Report, 1999*. This excludes the non-forest areas. This amounts to as much as 15 per cent of India's total forest area 63.73 mha. Going by the geographical areas of these districts, the Naxalites have control over an area in these five states that is more than one and half times the area of Bangladesh. If their control in all the 10 states is considered, it will be an area two and half times that of Bangladesh. Now these groups are working towards opening a 'revolutionary' corridor to Nepal to establish a 'parallel sub-continental' government. This will have major ramifications for the management of our forests.

Wrath of an 'unborn' revolution

In the Naxalite-infested areas, the government ceases to exist. An oral diktat from a Naxalite leader is enough to make government officials shiver. In AP's Telengana region, more than 50 local elected leaders of the ruling Telugu Desam Party (TDP) had to quit the party due to threats from the PWG during the last five years. And those who refuse to listen are killed. Around 2,077 people have been killed in AP by the PWG in the past decade — politicians comprise 30 per cent of the victims. Governments too are at the mercy of the Naxalites.

In Orissa, the government had to withdraw its police force in Malkangiri district when nine police officials were killed by the PWG in August this year. Ironically, over 60 per cent of the state's forces were deployed in this district alone to fight Naxalites. "It was a humiliating defeat," admits a senior state police officer involved anti-Naxal operations for the past 10 years.

In Chattisgarh's Bijapur village, one can't spot a police personnel — they do not wear uniforms out of fear. "The police never come to our village. Naxalites solve our problems," says Sukaru Ram, an 18-year-old boy from Pengunda

village, some 90 km from Bijapur.

Of Jharkhand's 18 districts, 12 are under the control of the MCC and the PWG. On November 2, the MCC gunned down 13 police personnel in Topchanchi block of Dhanbad district. Recent reports in the media suggest that Naxalites are planning to field candidates for the forthcoming *panchayat* elections. Out of 81 assembly constituencies in the state, the Naxalites could decide the winning candidates in 31 of them. The administration fears a 'total takeover' by the MCC.

In Bihar, the MCC and PWG are known to 'tax' even government programmes like Operation Siddharth, Jawahar Rojgar Yojna and Minimum Needs Programme. Government officials siphon off the funds as "protection money". An estimate by the Palamu Commissioner three years ago found MCC and the Party Unity (now merged with the PWG) had collected Rs 30 crore per month as levy.

Caught between the government and the Naxalites, the common people are the worst affected. Both doubt them as informers and this often results in blind deaths. For the police such deaths are the regular fake encounters and for the Naxalites 'execution of the people's enemy'.

resource distribution." — DIPANKAR BHATTACHARYA, general secretary, CPI (ML) Liberation

Kings of forests

The control of Naxalites over forests is total and overwhelming

IN WARANGAL, Andhra Pradesh, there is only one black Ambassador car in the official circle and it belongs to the conservator of forests. Painting the car black some 15 years ago was a conscious decision to evade attacks. The black Ambassador drives home the fear psychosis that has gripped the forest officials. "There is always a risk of an attack," says P Raghuveer, the conservator of forests.

Nearly 10.03 million hectares (mha) of forests in the country are under the control of Naxalites (see map: *Rapid red spread*). Being primarily a tribal dominated areas, the presence of the armed cadres and the police have affected people's lives. Government officials hardly venture into villages inside the forests. The result: little signs of governance. Exploiting this vacuum, poachers are on a rampage and the timber mafia is eating into the forests. Besides, the Naxalites' campaign to grab forestland and clear them for cultivation has become a new problem for state forest departments. Says a deputy inspector-general of forests in the Union ministry of environment and forests (MEF), "The encroachment has become so widespread that we had to shelve a plan to regularise encroachments prior to 1980. If we do so there will be pressures from these groups to regularise all the forests under their control."

According to MEF data, over 0.4 mha of forests in the country are under encroachment — 60 per cent of which are in the Naxalite-affected areas. During a case in the Supreme Court regarding encounter killings of Naxalites, even the AP government admitted that around 0.2 mha of forestlands are controlled by the Naxalites. According to the 1999 *Forest Survey Report*, in almost all the Naxalite-affected districts, forest loss has been attributed to encroachment due to 'local disturbances'.

"The forest department is not needed. We will take care to protect the forests," says Dilip, a young member of the MCC speaking to *Down To Earth*. The forest officials are more than willing. "They tell us not to disturb land use. And we just adhere to that," says a senior forest official in Visakhapatnam district. "Large forest areas remain out of bounds as they virtually control those as liberated zones," says K D R Jayakumar, Visakhapatnam's conservator of forest.

Even the PWG in its report titled *Political and Organisational Overview* prepared after its conclave in February 1995 has admitted that its land grabbing campaigns have contributed to forest loss. "Our nationalised treasury is being emptied," wrote wildlife expert Valmik Thapar in a recent Planning Commission paper. "The MEF informed the Planning Commission that an estimated Rs 50,000 crore is being stolen from India's poorly protected forests. The real fear is not from the Naxalites who have agreed for conservation, but from smugglers and poachers who enter these forest exploiting the Naxals presence."



NILMAHAY PANDA

Forest guardian: a PWG cadre in Palamu, Jharkhand

'Remote' control

The PWG controls the entire Dandakaryanya region comprising Khammam, Nizamabad and Warangal in Andhra Pradesh, Bastar, Dantewada and Rajnandgaon in Chattisgarh, some parts of western Orissa, Gadchiroli and Bhandara of Maharashtra and Balaghat district of Madhya Pradesh. Once believed to be no more than a hideout, the southwest part of Bastar region is now a bastion. Most parts of the Bastar and Sarguja regions are now under the control of the Naxalites.

Even forest areas in Jharkhand, especially in the districts of Palamu, Gumla, Latehar, Chatra, Garwa, Lohardaga, Koderma, Hazaribagh, Giridih, Santhal Pargana and Dhanbad are under the grip of the Naxalites. An Intelligence Bureau report has marked some of these districts as 'obliterated'. This has resulted in the loss of revenue for the forest department. Admits a divisional forest officer, "One cannot deny that there is loss of revenue." "The price bidding in Warangal and Adilabad districts is the lowest in the state as very few contractors come forward because they have to not only pay an additional price to the people and also give money to the Naxalites." This is reflected in the forest department's revenue collection. Out of 90 units of *beedi* leaf collection centres, only 58 could be sold in Warangal district. In Jharkhand's Naxalite-affected districts, revenue from forests has gone down by 60 per cent, according to top forest officials.

In Chattisgarh, more than 40 forest employees have been killed in the last seven years. Vajpayee's first tour to Bastar was called off after PWG blasted a police convoy killing 16 policepersons on October 16, 1998. In the Indravati Tiger Reserve, forest officials hardly enter the deep forest. Says superintendent of the reserve, D N Netam, "We cannot go deep inside the forest." As a result, poachers have killed half of the tigers in the

" Naxal areas are virtually inaccessible. "

— RAMCHANDRA SINGH DEO, Finance Minister, Chattisgarh



CHANGING

On March 2, 1967, Bimal Kesan, a tribal peasant of Naxalbari in West Bengal did something unimaginable: he obtained a judicial order to plough his own land. The landlords who were occupying his land attacked him. That was the birth of the Naxalite movement. A lot has changed over the years: the movement started with land alienation issue and subsequently took up forest and other related issues. The traditional bow and arrow has been replaced with AK-47s. Now, the guns are directed against the forest department officials and police, instead of the landlords.

Dipankar Bhattacharya, general secretary of the CPI (ML) (Liberation), the first party of the Naxalites, says that there are two groups emerging from the Naxalites movement: the People's War Group (PWG) which still adopt the old strategy of enemy annihilation. And the second group like the CPI (ML) Liberation that participates in elections. Barring some places, Naxalites are taking up more and more forest-related issues in their campaign. "The movement is a people's movement and issues of natural resources are of prime importance to the people. So the movement can't ignore it," says Bhattacharya.

The predominance of violence in the movement is also working against the groups' people mobilisation efforts. "Continuance of violence will derail the movement," says Bhattacharya. "It is also becoming less participatory as top leaders are losing contact with the cadres," says Kodandaram Reddy, a professor at Nizam College, Hyderabad. In a confidential circular in 1998, the PWG admitted the possible alienation of people from the movement by 'unwarranted violence'. "This alienation may go against the movement," warned Reddy.

LOOKING BACK

As the Naxalite movement faces an ideological dilemma, instances reveal the way it can be contained

reserve in the past six years. For forest officials, there is no estimate as to how many groups of poachers and smugglers are in operation as they are yet to make any serious foray into the forest in the last five years. The last tiger census indicates that while there are some tigers on the southeast bank of the Krishna river, there are virtually none left in the Nallamalla Range. It is said that villagers poisoned tigers at the behest of Naxalites groups.

After a sustained battle in the Supreme Court, the MEF, in 1997, agreed to give separate security forces for counter insurgency operation in six of the 23 project tiger reserves — Manas, Palamu, Valmiki, Nagarjunasagar, Indravati and Bandipur. All these reserves are affected by armed struggles. But the move backfired after some organisations operating in these areas protested against such forces alleging harassment of local people.

"Only 30 per cent of forest reserves in the country are monitored by forest officials," says a forest department official wishing to remain anonymous. The movement of officials has been restricted to such an extent that no official dares to leave the tarred road. "In the 1980s, they could travel without arms for 10-12 km, but now only 3-5 km is possible," he adds. This has had its impact on the people too. On June 15, some MCC activists burnt a few houses in the village of Pahar Panari in the Gumla district in Jharkhand. But the police could not reach there even by June 20, in spite of a police station located within a radius of 10 km. "Even ministers cannot go into the forest," says Ramesh Sharan, an economist with the Ranchi University.

It is alleged that MCC and PWG cadres with support from the *Katha* mafia are threatening the tiger population. The PWG

in north Telengana have killed many tigers between 1990-95 to demonstrate that "wildlife is not as important as people".

Deadly nexus

Slowly, the Naxalites are stepping into the forest department's shoes. There is a growing nexus between them and the timber mafia and traders. The contractors used to earlier bribe the forest department officials for trading in forest produce like timber. Now they pay a levy to the Naxalites. In Jharkhand, police sources say that about Rs 1.20 crore has been deposited by the Naxalites in various banks using fake names. The contractors are happy. Earlier they had to bribe forest officials, police and local criminals. Now they pay only to Naxalites. In AP, a leading paper mill company reportedly pays Rs 50 lakh per month as "protection money" to Naxalite groups.

The presence of Naxalites has also discouraged many NGOs working with tribal people. The Jharkhand government's World Bank-aided India Eco-Development Project (IEDP) to generate employment had to be abandoned. Similarly in AP, two NGOs were driven out (see box: *Looking back*). The Naxalites are against NGOs as they tend to 'eat away funds'. Says sociologist Jaya Roy, says, "They don't want NGOs to organise people."

Although the history of Bastar is punctuated with strong rebellions for land, water and forest rights, the gains have been limited for people. Some experts feel that the support to Naxalites in the rural Bastar may be seen as the extension of the fight for land and forest. "Large tracts are virtually under their control where they run a parallel government," reports a finding of the Delhi-based Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. The reasons: poor implementation of land reforms, bad governance and ineffective police forces.



PREETI SINGH / CSE

RAVI REBBAPRAGADA

THREATENED

Ravi Rebbapragada's experience in Andhra Pradesh shows how the Naxalites can be tamed. As director of Samata, a Hyderabad-based NGO, Ravi was working in a small village on land and forest issues. He was also mobilising people for their rights in the Fifth Schedule areas. But his activities were monitored by the PWG. NGOs are always viewed with suspicion in the Naxalite-dominated areas, particularly those with foreign funding. "We were told not to work on mobilising people, but to concentrate on health and education," he remembers. When Ravi decided not to leave the village, he got the shocking news: two of his colleagues had been killed by Naxalites.

He shifted to Visakhapatnam to convey the message that he didn't want confrontation. But once again leaflets began appearing in villages issuing threats, particularly around the time when Samata held a huge rally to celebrate its victory in the Supreme Court over land rights. The threats continued. Finally on October 2, 1997, he left the village. "I think the Naxalites got threatened by Samata's popularity on the basis of land and forest issues, two crucial issues for the Naxalites," says a member of an NGO based in Visakhapatnam. Interestingly, a confidential PWG circular issued in 1998 admitted its mistake in asking Samata to leave and supported the Supreme Court's verdict (now known as the Samata case) that gives exclusive rights tribal people over lands in scheduled areas. His colleagues are now back in the village.

UPRISING

Mannapuram, surrounded by forested hills in Srikakulam, is one of the first villages where the Naxalite movement started in Andhra Pradesh. It began as an uprising against the forest department's curbs on the villagers' access to forest and soon spread to several districts.

It is a peaceful village now and no Naxalite group has visited this village in the past five years. "Our fight gave us our legitimate rights over forests. We no longer bribe forest guards for getting wood from the forests," says Biddiki Manglu, a former Naxalite leader who spent a year in jail during the 1967 uprising. In 1994, the youth in the village got together to protect the forests under the joint forest management programme (JFM) of the state government. "It is a major change in the village's history," says Bidiki Adi Narayana, Manglu's son and a member of the JFM committee. Villagers believe that the youth kept the Naxalites away.



PREETI SINGH / CSE

BIDDIKI MANGLU

However, as JFM enters its eighth year and bamboo cultivation reaches the harvesting season, a conflict is emerging. "The forest department wants more than the agreed revenue from the regenerated forests," says Bidiki Ram Murthy, the vice-president of the JFM committee. The village is tempted to remember the 1967 uprising: "If they don't listen we may go back to them (Naxalites)," warns Murthy.

Law of no returns

As people lose hold over forests, Naxalites gain ground

"NAXALITE vs state is a contest of claims over natural resources," says Jannardan Rao, a professor at Kakatiya University, Warangal. Take the case of the Nallamalai range in AP's east Goodavari district. The 40,000-strong Chenchu tribes, who neither cultivate nor construct houses, are being evicted from the forests as the government has declared the range a national park. So Nallamalai is now the new battleground for Naxalites and the police.

The forest regulations are such that they do not allow developmental work inside forests. This is alienating a large chunk of the tribal population. Naxalites exploit this. In Chattisgarh, people have been demanding renovation of their traditional ponds for the past three decades. "Naxalites construct *talabs* in forest areas where the government can't even attempt due to the Forest Conservation Act (FCA)," says Ramchandra Singh Deo, finance minister, Chattisgarh. Naxalites have seized the initiative to renovate old ponds in several villages in AP and Chattisgarh. Under the FCA, the state government has to secure the permission of the Union government before diverting forestland to non-forest areas. While large projects are passed by the state with MEF, permission for small projects like pond renovation are not taken up. This fuels people's anger. According to a PWG report, in the face of the second consecutive

drought, extensive water tanks renovation in forests was taken up. This strategy has swayed people's support towards them.

Left helpless, the affected states have started demanding amendments to the FCA. About a year ago, Madhya Pradesh chief minister Digvijay Singh wrote to the prime minister requesting changes in the act. When the coordination committee of the Union home ministry met in April 2000, one of the main issues discussed was the amendment. Former Union minister of state for environment and forests and Jharkhand CM Babulal Marandi, supported this. However, the Union home minister has referred the matter to the MEF. Except an informal acknowledgement, nothing has happened.

Inside Chattisgarh's Indravati Tiger Reserve, 56 villages were served an eviction notice when the reserve was proposed as a national park. Protests from villagers didn't make much difference until the Naxalites intervened. "We had to change the map of the tiger reserve to exclude the villages from the reserve," says a forest official. "Naxalites have always used people's movement as a strategic way to mobilise people," says Kodandaram Reddy, a professor of political science in Nizam College, Hyderabad who has written a book on 30 years of Naxalite movement.

Growing chasm

The Naxalite movement has also gained ground due to protests against discrimination over non-timber forest produce (NTFP) and land rights. There are many ways tribal people are exploited: forest officials deny them access to forest areas, non-tribal people take over their lands through a torturous money lending process and traders cheat them while buying NTFP. This has left a large section of forest dwellers without

forests to the people. Peace will follow." — VEMULAPALLI VENKATARAMAIAH, CPI (ML) New Democracy



“Give forests to the people”

Popular singer-poet and former member of the People's War Group, GADDAR, speaks about Naxalites and forests

“The more dense is the forest the more is the exploitation of the tribal people. The forest department (FD) is everything inside the forest; there is no MP, MLA or any other system that can overthrow the FD. The movement entered the Telengana region sailing over dried *tendu* leaves. We entered the tribal villages as *beedi* sellers to convince people about exploitation.

By nature, peace is inherent to human existence. But there is a limit to tolerance. The government listens to people only when there is an audible expression to your protest. Before the struggle, there were several instances of peaceful protests. But government just did not listen. Now when the tolerance level has come to the end, they come out with a solution to police nature. This misplaced strategy will breed more violence. Ask Chandrababu Naidu how much has he spent on production side? We are an agrarian and forest-based economy; you can't spend all your money on technology for export and roads.

While the Chipko movement remains the epicentre of all environmental movements, the Naxalites' armed struggle shows how acute is the problem in the Telengana areas. Armed struggle is one of the struggles that these tribal residents are waging against a system that has not addressed people's problems. Give back the forests to the people and will settle down peacefully in the forests.

Yes, weapons can commit mistakes. I believe that ideology should control the struggle. But the mistakes of few Naxalites are negligible when compared to that of the government.”

any livelihood sources. “There is a deadly chasm between people and government. The Naxalites are cleverly exploiting this chasm,” says Reddy. “While trade in NTFP is limited, timber remains a government source of revenue. This has led to an imbalance of power at the grassroots.”

Tendu leaf is a major source of income for the tribal residents for six months of the year. But curbs imposed by forest officials have spawned resentment. The Srikakulam uprising in the 1960s, which laid the foundation for the movement in the AP, was based on the rights of the local hill tribes over forests (see box: *Looking back*).

In Maharashtra too, the movement owes its origin to NTFP. Before 1980, the tribal people got as little as Rs 5 for 100 bundles of *tendu* leaf. But threats from Naxalites forced the government to increase the price — it is now Rs 90. This made Naxalites popular: they made their way into Chandrapur and Gadchiroli. Now forest committees set up by Naxalites monitor the forest and its produce in these two districts.

Likewise in AP Orissa and Chattisgarh, *tendu* leaf is used as an instrument for popular mobilisation. Two years ago in Chattisgarh, Naxalites set fire to the forest department's depot containing *tendu* leaf. ‘Trials’ were held and the ‘guilty’ officers were punished in the *Jan Adalats* (people's court). Now, the villagers get 60 paise per *gaddi* (pack of 50 leaves) as against the minimum support price of 45 paise fixed by the government. Villagers believe that the Naxalites ensured this. “Often the presence of Naxalites works as a social audit,” says K Subba Rao, principal chief conservators of forests, AP.

In AP, with the onset of the *tendu* season, a representative of the *tendu* leaf contractors enters the forest for ‘talks’ to bargain for the minimum price for *tendu* leaf. The bargain is always dic-

tated by the Naxalites. It is no wonder that the price of the *tendu* leaf has increased from 7.5 paise for 50 leaves in 1986 to Rs 1 in 2001. Officially in AP it is 54 paise for 50 leaves, but in Naxalite-affected areas contractors give the ‘additional’ 46 paise.

In Orissa's Koraput and Ganjam districts, Naxalites have spread due to stringent NTFP regulations. The case of bamboo is a fine example. Bamboo forests in these districts were leased to the paper mills and local residents became daily wage earners. Even then they end up earning just 50 per cent of the official minimum wage as forest officials collect a heavy booty from the contractors. “Naxalites now not only ensure the minimum wage, but also that it is paid regularly,” says Anadi Sahu, Ganjam's representative in Lok Sabha. The PWC, in turn, collects Rs 5 everyday from the labourers to ensure a minimum wage. “The people earn more money and are spared of the hassles of government machinery,” he says. “Wherever governance fails, Naxalites step in,” says Sahu, also a member of the Union home ministry's parliamentary consultative committee. “In Bihar, the Naxalite movement entered in the wake of the 1967 famine. As governance collapsed, the people had less access to livelihood sources,” says Bela Bhatia who has done a study on the movement for Cambridge University. Agrees Ram Prasad, director, Indian Institute of Forest Management, Bhopal: “The problem is to do with people's alienation from resources.”

A land too far

Taking away tribal land just makes alienation complete and intense. In all the affected states, land alienation among the tribal population is a major issue. In states like Chattisgarh, Jharkhand and AP, this has caused many rebellions starting from late 19th century to mid-20th century. After Independence also

“It depends on the government's performance. If it works for the welfare of the poor

there has been a consistent effort to take away tribal lands even though the constitution guarantees rights over it. Starting from giving tribal lands for industries in Andhra Pradesh to the recent move to amend the Fifth Schedule provisions. These provisions give total control to the tribal people on their lands. Exploiting this situation, Naxalite groups like PWG recently started a campaign to pressurise the government for adhering to the Fifth Schedule. Eastern Ghats, a hot bed of Naxalites spreading over nine districts of Andhra Pradesh, for example, is no longer a safe haven for nearly 33 tribal communities, including seven primitive tribes, inhabiting these highlands.

Since Independence, tribal people have steadily lost their hold over much of this area. While many have lost their sources of livelihood, others have sought refuge in deep forests. According to the 1991 census, the region's tribal-non-tribal ratio had dropped from 6:1 in 1950 to 2:1 in 2000. Due to various amendments made to the land transfer regulations in the tribal belt by the government, the non-tribal people are holding almost 55 per cent of tribal lands either *benami* or



Fight over lands: a protest against Ranvir Sena in Bihar

through clandestine means.

In Bihar, upper caste landlords had snatched lands of poor farmers and monopolised common property resources like ponds and fisheries. "The alienation of land was so high that when the Naxalite movement started, there was never a single protest against violent attacks on the landlords," says Bhatia. Even now groups like MCC and PWG distribute lands to the poor and have ensured that dalits get fishing rights in village ponds. This has sustained the popularity of these groups despite massive retaliatory attacks from private armies of the landlords like the Ranvir Sena.

Retaliatory attacks by Naxalites may have stopped landlords for occupying tribal lands, but now governments have taken the initiative. In 1989, the N T Rama Rao government had passed a resolution to denotify 314 villages from the list of areas earmarked for tribal people to legalise the *benami* holding of the non-tribal people. The resolution — the third such attempt since 1965 — was, however, rejected by the then state governor, Kumudben Joshi.

In 1976 too, the then Congress chief minister, P V Narasimha Rao, moved a cabinet resolution to delete 123 villages in Warangal, Karimnagar and Khammam from the list.

When environmentalists and NGOs opposed such attempts, tribal people were harassed by the administration on the grounds that they were hand-in-glove with Naxalites belonging to the PWG. In its earlier stint (1985-89), the NTR Government had burnt down nearly 1,200 Khoya, Khond and Kondadora hamlets in the eastern Ghats for their suspected links with the PWG. The operation conducted by the then director general of police, P S Mohan Rao, affected nearly 60,000 tribal families. The displaced, resettled in plains, had to eke a living by working as farm labourers and many women were forced into prostitution to augment earnings.

BYLAWS: AMENDMENTS FOR RESPITE

Is there a way to reverse the trend of the spread of Naxalites? The experience of 46 villages in east Goodavari district and a stronghold of PWG may have an answer. These villages managed to stop the Naxalites from entering their areas. Their weapon: a movement based on minor forest produces co-operatives. In 1998, when the Naxalites blasted the storehouse of the state's Girijan Cooperative Society that buys NTFPs from the village cooperatives in Peddamallapuram village, the women came forward and spearheaded the anti-Naxalite movement. "Women are the worst sufferers of deforestation and all the curbs on access to forests as they collect these NTFP," says Bodeti Lakshmi, a resident of the village.

"Forest rights must be used as a weapon for tackling the problem," says Ravi Rebbapragada of Samata, a Hyderabad-based NGO, who has been a victim of Naxalite threats. History has taught us that Naxalites wouldn't have spread had successive governments learnt from their mistakes: in all the worst affected states, there were massive people's movements for asserting their rights over forest and lands. Governments, instead of addressing the real issue, crushed these movements. As a result, when Naxalites stepped in, they faced little opposition from the people.

Even when governments reacted positively to such an uprising, their commitment never lasted beyond a few years. In the Fourth Plan, area specific development schemes like small farmer's development agency, tribal development projects, forestry schemes were launched for the first time. But in the Ninth Plan, corruption and bureaucracy made such programmes ineffective. Forestry still remains a state monopoly. The Planning Commission in its observation of the Naxalites problem noted: "The forest departments in Naxalites-affected states do not seem to have any coherent policy." It cites the example of Bastar district where 55 per cent area has been declared as a forest. This has led to the spread of Naxalites.

A meeting called by the Union home ministry on April 4, 2000 debated the possible causes of the spread and it was realised that the socio-economic factors were primarily alienating the people from the government and thus there was a need to go for major tribal welfare programmes. Though state governments were given financial assistance for police jobs, no real tribal welfare works have been taken up. Arvind Kumar, chief forest conservator of Jharkhand, warns, "An in-depth study of the forest policy and acts with corrective steps should be undertaken or there is a high risk of the movement spreading further." ■

people, Naxalism will lose momentum." — MADHU SINGH, land and revenue minister and former Naxalite, Jharkhand