

## A reality check

Anshuman Behera, Jun 28 2017, 0:46 IST

On June 4, 2017 Maoists attacked a convoy of the Special Operation Group (SOG), an elite force deployed in counter insurgency operations, killing one and injuring several others in Kandhamal district of Odisha. Almost in similar fashion, the Maoists had carried out at least two stunning attacks on the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) on April 24 and March 12 killing 25 and 12 jawans, respectively, in Sukma district of Chhattisgarh.

The attacks on the security convoys by the Maoists are neither a new phenomenon nor are the scale of violence in terms of loss of life and injury in these cases unprecedented. Yet, these attacks raise a serious question whether the Maoists regaining lost strength and their regrouping.

Considering the virtual absence of Maoist activities in Kandhamal, especially post Hindu-Christian riot following the killing of a Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) leader in 2008, and the involvement of more than a hundred Maoists in Kandhamal attack, the concern over the Maoists' regrouping calls for serious examination.

A striking feature in these three attacks is the sheer number of the Maoists engaged during the ambush. According to various sources, about a hundred and more than 300 Maoists were involved in Kandhamal and Sukma attacks, respectively. Arguably, the sheer number of the Maoists engaging in attacking the security forces could be a sign of Maoist regrouping.

The issue of Maoists regrouping comes against a backdrop of a narrative of the state and the security establishments which claims that the Maoists are losing ground. There exists a body of literature both explaining how the Maoist movement is gradually losing its appeal and grip. Successive governments also do not lag behind staking high claims of success in their fight against the Maoists. Such a narrative, mostly a post 2010 construction, is primarily premised on three important developments.

A major development in this regard is the constant de-escalation of Maoist related violent activities. Statistics provided by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) corroborates a decline of Maoist related activities since 2010. Security centric approach, as claimed by the state, played a major role in neutralising, arresting and surrendering of a critical number of Maoists.

Such a claim appears to have substantial basis on the ground as the Maoists have suffered major setbacks by losing many of their top ranking leaders including Cherukuri Rajkumar alias Azad and Mallojula Koteswara Rao alias Kishanji, both politburo members. Along with the top leaders, the security forces have also been able to eliminate more than 2,000 armed Maoists.

The elimination of top leadership, in many ways, was instrumental in divisions within the Maoists. The split of Sabyasachi Panda and subsequent formation of Odisha Maobadi Party (OMP) under his leadership was considered to be a major setback to the Maoists. The presence of OMP, at least till the arrest of Panda in 2014, was a major deterrent against the Maoist. Similarly, new factions like Revolutionary People's Front (RPF) and People's Liberation Front of India (PLFI) in Jharkhand have caused substantial damage to the Maoists.

Secondly, the development measures initiated by the state were claimed to have resulted in both containing the Maoists and winning away the support of the masses from the Maoists.

The state claimed to have brought in development in multiple sectors in terms of laying roads, providing electricity and telecommunications, creating income generation avenues through programmes like Integrated Action Plan (IAP) and others. Construction of road network in the Maoist affected areas enabled the security forces' mobility and securitised the people and development works to a large extent.

Reducing the Maoists to an organised armed band is a third factor to discount the gravity of the issue. The state has been in a denial mode to recognise the Maoists as a movement; rather, it considers the problem as a 'set of demands', thereby reducing it to an armed band. Such a narrative delegitimises the very existence of the Maoists. The state has consistently highlighted the 'criminal' nature of the Maoist. The rationale in this regard is to undermine the threat emanating from the Maoists against the legitimacy of the state.

### **Diminishing threat?**

While the state and the security experts are of the opinion that the Maoists are a diminishing threat, the attacks mentioned above compel one to believe otherwise. The Maoists at local levels seem to be more active than what is believed. There are reports saying regular Maoist activities in areas of Andhra-Odisha border, Nalamalla forest in AP, Bargarh, Kandhamal, Rayagada and Malkangiri in Odisha.

Though the last couple of years have witnessed minimum number of activities, there appears to be changes in tactics of the Maoists during this period. The Maoists have shifted to limited major attacks with high impact than more number of smaller attacks.

Involvement of a large number of cadres during attacks is a testimony to their regained strength. The Maoists are believed to have utilised this period for fresh recruitments. It is also suspected that the Andhra-Odisha Border Special Zonal Committee (AOBSZC) under new leadership of Gajarla Ravi alias Uday has been known to recruit more cadres.

Regrouping of the Maoists is certainly not good news for the state. At the same time, it needs to be understood that unlike the state, the Maoists are not in a hurry to take their movement to a logical conclusion; they call it a protracted people's war. The Maoist movement should not be understood merely through the number of lives lost and incidents that take place.

The issue involves more critical questions relating to multiple contradictions ranging from (mis)governance to land alienation to identity. The counter narrative of the Maoist against the state — good or bad — appeals to a substantial portion of the Indian population. The challenge before the state is not merely to crackdown on the Maoists militarily but to defeat the narrative they offer. Elimination of few Maoists may offer temporary relief but their regrouping will continue as a permanent feature unless the ideas are defeated.

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