

## **Maoist movement: As a form of tribal resistance in India (An ethnographic case study from Odisha)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Indian people are confronted today with an extremely complex situation. On the one hand, the country boasts of rapidly achieving rates of growth and standard of living that will make both its leaders and its citizen proud. On the other hand, the homelands of the tribal people, close to one third of the nation, stand as mute witnesses to an increasingly violent confrontation between the state and its people, albeit a highly distorted configuration. This situation has not come upon us suddenly, nor will it go away so easily. The attempts of the colonial rulers to subjugate them met with formidable resistance. Right from 1798 to 1947, tribes fought the British valiantly; countless tribal groups never surrendered, but forced the British to reckon with their spirit of freedom. Revolts rose with unflinching regularity and were suppressed with treachery, brute force, tact, co-option and some reforms. But the uprisings forced the British to recognize the over-arching power of the traditional forms of governance and decided to recognize them by special arrangements, a fine example of which is the Wilkinson Rules which recognize the *Munda-Manki* system of governance in the Kolhan region of Jharkhand. The studies therefore try to cover the trials of Narayanpur block, Koraput district of Orissa. The study villages are located in the forest area and the majority of the population is Dongria Kandha tribe and large immigrant from the Seleru area of Andhra Pradesh. One can find the mixed ethnicity of *Telugu-Oriya* in these villages.

**Key Words :** Development, Confrontation, People Perception, Maoist, Scenario

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper is focused on in-depth study of actual conditions pertaining in the villages and the people's perceptions on a development related issues and resistance with the Maoist towards the government. Though, a considerable amount of data has been collected from the villages with applied standard historical and anthropological method. Since, the study covers most sensitive areas; participatory field investigation has done by the author with the help of people's organization. The study has given the picture of the existing scenario of villages now and then to the development made by the 'State' and 'Maoist' as a form of

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resistance. Thus, the ethnographic approach has proved to be of the greatest importance of the virtue of its contribution to our understanding of the people towards the tribal life.

### **Ethnic Resistance and Colonial Intrusion:**

The East India Company, a trading firm, paved the way for India's colonization by the British up to 1887. The main aim of the colonial rulers was conquest with a strong military thrust into resistance areas including the forest depths, the hillsides and hill tops. In the name of good governance tribal areas were opened up and contractors, civil and military officials, traders, alcohol vendors and timber merchants entered these areas and under the Nelson's eye of the rulers forced the tribal into indebtedness, alienated lands, looted the environment and pushed the tribal into slavery, while reservation of the forests made them intruders in their own home. It is not that the tribe took the intrusion quietly. Confrontation was the quintessence of the situation in tribal areas after the rise of 'state' as a formal political and administrative authority. While the people in the rest of the country living under the aegis of the erstwhile, feudal states quickly adjusted to the rule of the 'conquerors' and found their survival spaces under the new regime, the tribe, living in relative isolation from the rest, in a political economy and system of governance that was integrally and uniquely their own, rightly saw the imposition of the formal state an act of subjugation<sup>1</sup>.

The attempts of the colonial rulers to subjugate them met with formidable resistance. Right from 1798 to 1947, tribes fought the British valiantly; countless tribal groups never surrendered, but forced the British to reckon with their spirit of freedom. The edge of the confrontation was somewhat blunted, no doubt, but the seeds of discord remained as a slow and crafty intrusion in their habit continued and spirit of self rule was really not honored, in spite of endless pronouncements and regulations galore.

The British were forced to opt for "Leave them alone" (policy of exclusion) in the North-East and light administration by the Agent of the Crown (policy of partial exclusion) elsewhere<sup>2</sup>. As early as 1874, the British administration promulgated the Scheduled Districts Act in 1919 and 1921 delineated the tribal areas as scheduled areas, which were also known as backward tracts, agency areas and the like. The practices of the colonial administration were subsequently formalized in the provisions of the Government of India Act 1935, which classified these areas in two categories. The North East was considered very backward and 'wholly excluded' from the scope of normal laws. The Governor in Council alone was authorized to legislate in these areas. By wholly excluding these areas from the operation of central or provincial laws and keeping the administration to virtually zero, the British inadvertently allowed the tribes in the 'backward' North East to continue their traditional forms of self governance. The more accessible Central Indian tracts were classified as 'partly excluded' agency areas and the Governor was vested with power to enforce or restrain any law made by the Central or Provincial Legislatures<sup>3</sup>.

The Act also provided for the establishment of Tribes Advisory Councils and empowered the Governor to modify laws applicable to the hill people, particularly in (a) social matters (b) occupation of land (c) village management. By and large the Constitution of India incorporated the provisions created by the British with a minor change in nomenclature; the "wholly excluded areas" were governed by the VIth Schedule and the 'partially excluded areas' by

the Vth Schedule<sup>4</sup>. However the failure of the British to schedule several tribal majority areas in 1874 was not rectified by the Presidential Order on the Scheduled Areas in 1950, hence tribal areas in West Bengal and the southern states of Karnataka, Tamilnadu and Kerala remain unscheduled to date. To rectify this irregularity, the Parliament amended the Vth Schedule in 1976 to allow rescheduling of tribal majority areas. The states, who was instructed to send in their proposals remained were sadly inactive. Rescheduling never took place till date.

**Present Day Resistance to Capitalist rule:**

The tribal resistance began as an armed struggle by the landless against the big farmers and soon after against the government, who were forced to intervene to maintain ‘law and order’ in 1976 at Naxalbari village<sup>5</sup>. In Andhra Pradesh, though Naxal movement traces its roots to pre-independence days and the Telangana armed uprising against the landlords. In case of Orissa as pointed out by the innocent villagers, they do not know the term “Naxal” and the “Maoist.” These idioms recognize with *Anna* or *Badabhai* in the tribal areas, but people know the ideas behind the Maoist activities and their viewpoint. Amongst the Adivasi communities, the Maoist movement did not emerge from within. Instead, it was brought to the forest highland of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand by committing other revolutionary with the invitation of radical youth tribal. The primacy of local power dynamics can be clearly seen from the tribal youths in this region<sup>6</sup>.

While Naxalbari remain a distinct memory, it spurred the West Bengal government to undertake land reforms with a greater political will. In most other states, radical land reform has remained weak and the Naxalites are able to take root. The main characteristics of these areas are: (i) Areas covered under the Fifth Schedule of the constitution, with an express ‘protectionist’ mandate, (ii) A predominantly tribal population with a long history of uprising against the colonial government, (iii) Region richly endowed with natural resources being the homeland of the poorest people, (iv) Weak administrative presence, (v) A serious lack of governance, particularly in welfare and development.

In the present study, the selection of the villages is based on four criteria and four villages have been selected for the study out of hundred villages. The criteria are (i) a village currently with the presence of Maoist, (ii) a village where there was Maoist influence, but now only has contact, (iii) a village where Maoist were present but now no contact, (iv) a village still have no Maoist influence. The study correlates and compares the development issues amongst the above villages. Due to sensitive area study the village name has been identified with criteria.

Sr. No.	Village	SC	ST	OBC	Others	Total members
1.	Criteria I	75	228	102	02	407
2.	Criteria II	08	160	10	02	180
3.	Criteria III	05	230	Nil	Nil	235
4.	Criteria IV	Nil	185	29	Nil	214
	Total	88	803	141	04	1036

If we peep into the scenario of criteria I, II and III villages, the villagers narrated the reason behind the entrance of Maoist in their villages. According to them, some poor families of this village invited Maoist to the village to solve their problems. There was an upper caste person in the region named “Babru” who was politically very much influenced by the political party who used to sexually exploit young tribal girls and took them to a city for providing jobs in factories. Whoever refused to come with him was being killed and this happened with a poor girl who was brutally killed. Poor Villagers complained about this in the police station, but police became a silent spectator in this and no strong action was taken. The villager being unable to handle this, anymore invited Maoist to solve their problems.

When Maoist came to the village, the leadership of the village was put in the hands of *gang-macho* also called as *jury* and disagrees but all the responsibility was under the guidance of youth. The problems which were discussed in the meeting where land alienation, collection of forest product, trafficking of young innocent girl to the city, labor payment problem and so on. Sooner, with the help of the Maoist, the villagers went to the police station, block office and wrote letters to *Tahasildar*, but this time also no strong steps were taken. The police officials could not arrest the culprit due to his strong political influence. The innocent and uneducated tribal who could be easily misled by others could not succeed in this matter again.

The first encounter of the Maoist was with poor tribal people which took place in the forest. The tribal met Maoist when they used to go to the forest for collecting (MFP) *tendu Patta*. Next, they started inviting Maoist to the village to have food. The first meeting was held in the forest near by village and one member from each family participated in that meeting. Also, huge participation was made by the poor youth and the females. At the first meeting, they discussed about the labor payment and road construction work carried out by contractors. There were also disputes on land acquiring by the wood mafia from outside. There were some other disputes also among the villages which were solved in the *Gaon-Sabha* meeting in concern with the Maoist. The villagers complained against the contractor in block office, but government never took any step to solve their problem.

In their meetings, they also discussed about problems in the forest. Firstly, they warned forest officials not to torture people for collecting minor forest products. Again the problem of corruption of contractors was also discussed in the meeting. When Maoist came to this area, all such problems were solved due to fear of violence. Before, the villagers were not getting the exact amounts what the government has specified for them. But now, with the presence of Maoist, there were very less disputes in *Gram Panchayat*. Now the school teachers, health workers, development official and the *Panchayat* members are not creating more problems for poor tribal because of the fear of Maoist. The contractors and money lenders staying nearby village used to exploit poor tribal but now they have changed their idea towards the tribal. They cooperate with tribal in day to day matters.

The Maoists do not interfere in family matters. The villagers need not go to either police or Maoist, now they solve their problem in their *Gaon-Sabha* meeting with mutual understanding. If they go to police it is harassing, if they go to Maoist the police will harass the people. The villagers are satisfied with the decision and judgments of Maoist. Those who disobey the decision of Maoist, they are punished in front of the village meeting democratically.

The kind of punishments includes cash payment, cutting one hand or sometimes they are killed. The villagers indirectly help the Maoist and cooperate with their movement.

After the incoming of Maoists in this area, people are living peacefully. All the government officials fear to do corruption and the forest officials fear to enter the forest. The villagers are protecting the forest on their own. Thus, there are fewer disturbances from the side of government officials. The Maoists are not against development, they oppose the huge corruption of government officials in all aspects.

Now the development programs like MNREGS are going on smoothly and the villagers are participating in huge numbers. The government officials are cooperating with people. In all such development programs, first they consult with the villagers and the matter is discussed in the *gram Sabha* meeting. This is possible only due to the presence of Maoist in this region. Each village has an organization know as CPI (Maoist) and *cheese-male*, but this committee is not active openly due to the presence of CRPF. Generally, the educated young person of the village is taking leadership which is revised every six months.

The first preference of the organization is to make people understand their rights. The other subjects are road construction, corruption, establishment of the primary health center, schools and so on. Those who are staying in the city, but belong to these villages oppose the Maoist activities. They oppose because they are part of government officials and engaged of corruption. In village meeting, the Maoist call the government office and instruct them not to do corruption and not to harass people. They never take violent action towards the government official at first. The Maoist killed an ex-sarpanch of the village in 2010 because they doubted him as the informer of the police. They believe that only government can do the development work. Maoists are only the pressurizing group and check the corruption in the development work. On the other hand, they are the alternate to Government. According to villagers, the Maoist cannot do development work what the government has been doing. People are totally influenced by the Maoist in this area. Their judgment not based on violence, but they think rationally towards the offender. Before taking the path of violence, they give three chances to the offender to restrain from bad activities.

However, Indian State sees only two ways- development and military action (as a form of *salva-Judam* 2005 etc.) as panacea to end violence. Ironically, the same government, which accepts doing historical injustices to the Adivasis through the Forest Rights Act 2006, does not talk about justice, peace and prosperity but politicizing and making the vote bank. The issue of violence cannot be countered only through development approach and military action precisely because the injustice, discrimination and denial are the foundation of violence now and then.

### **Conclusion:**

Adivasis (tribal) are the indigenous people of India, who have a unique culture, identity and autonomy. However, Indian State as well as the colonial government did not recognize their indigenous status, neglected them in terms of development and denied their rights and justice. Development should not be the only way to re-establish the dignity. Adivasis not only depend on natural resources for their livelihood, but their entire socioeconomic and political systems, including identity, autonomy and distinct culture are based on natural resources.

They have their century-old comprehensive methods, rules and policies for preservation, protection and conservation of the forests. The Adivasi territory is being called today as the “red corridor.” Adivasis are accused of waging war against the Indian State. But the fact of the matter is that Adivasis did not adopt the path of violence by choice. The State has grabbed their livelihood resources through various policies, laws and with the use of force. They were not only neglected in terms of development but are also described as people who oppose development.

Their identity, culture, autonomy, and self-rule have been destroyed. They are labeled as separatists, anti-national and enemy of the Indian State. They have been socially discriminated, economically exploited and dispossessed from their resources. Corruption in politics and bureaucracy always impeded development in the Adivasi regions. Police atrocities on Adivasis continue unabated. Consequently, they feel most vulnerable and have lost their hope in the Indian democratic system. Therefore, some of them have adopted the path of violence with Maoist to counter the state violence.

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