

BOOK REVIEW

*Countering
Naxalism with
Development
A Collection of
Essays and Reports*

by
Santosh Mehrotra

Published by Sage, New
Delhi

Pages: 191

Price: Rs. 795/-

Year of Publication 2014

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The country is facing the ultra-left movement, that had originated in April-May in 1967 in one state i.e. West Bengal and one region Naxalbari. As per reports, by November 2009, Naxalism or Left-

wing Extremism (LWE) as the authors would like to call it, had spread to 23 states, 250 districts and over 2000 police station areas. The general view of the contributors in the collection under review is that Maoist violence is the manifestation of a deeper social malaise, that is to say, the collapse of good governance and intrusion of commercial interests of corporate bodies into the tribal domain, treating the tribals, "the victims of development, as irrelevant." The book is about human development in tribal areas of India (outside of north-eastern state) and root causes of the challenges posed by left wing extremism.(LWE).

The first chapter written by the editor, Mr. Santosh Mehrotra gives an overview of the development challenges in extremism affected areas of India and summarizes specific actions, which if taken, offer a real prospect of resolution of the conflict.

Mr. Santosh Mehrotra cites significant data to show that five of the nine states that are mostly

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affected by LWE are Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha, which form a contiguous territory in an arc running from Indian border near Nepal in North Bihar to far South of Andhra Pradesh. The second important fact is that these states have a high concentration of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) within the borders. These poor states of India constitute a high proportion of marginalized SCs and STs. The third point is that STs in these states usually live in highly forested, relatively hilly, rugged terrain. The fourth point is that these forested districts with high concentration of STs also have major reserves of minerals. The writer says that these states present some of the worst development indicators. The absence of basic services may be combined with a long period of social injustice arising from the erosion of forest dwellers' rights, the displacement of rural population by irrigation, mining and industrial projects and depletion of common property resources. Thus the sense of social injustice among Adivasis and rural population could easily be exploited by Maoist groups. The dilemma before the state is profound- peace is necessary for development but if meaning of 'development' is interpreted differently by states, the prospect of peace is undermined. Mehrotra

writes that a major source of support of LWE is the dispossession suffered by forest dwelling STs (Adivasis), who were dispossessed by the state, declaring forests to be reserved forests, without recognizing the rights of pre-existing communities. Since the Forest Conservation Act, 1980, came into existence, 'forest conservation' became a strange companion to industrial forestry-conservation which came to mean restrictions upon the rights of Adivasis, but at the same time industrial needs were accommodated. Again, the focus of left wing extremism has been the slogan *land to tiller*. The LWExtremists have tried to provide land that is Surplus of ceiling (established land) to landless in situations where government has failed to distribute surplus land. But the state government resented the effort, and result is that thousands of acres are lying vacant in many districts, while the number of landless poor grows. The situation could be addressed through a number of land related measures.

Mr. Ajit K. Doval, former Director, IB and presently NSA, and Mr. Prakash Singh former DGP, UP Police, in their joint essay have gone into the causes of the discontent, unrest and extremism. They have examined the conflict from the angle

BOOK REVIEW

of security and given suggestions for resolution of the conflict and tackling of extremism. They point out that there exists a high degree of disconnect in India's vast hinterland, which is inhabited by the people who for long have been economically deprived, socially discriminated and politically exploited. The prolonged exploitation and neglect, besides poor governance, have created conditions for 'left extremist' groups to promote their violent agenda. The basic reality of the LWE is that it is motivated by ambition to seize power, through violence. The fact is that people have little ideological commitment, but join the movement because of alienation, anger, fear or greed. They are the hapless people, mostly Dalits, tribals and other weak sections. The socio-economic problems are related to poverty, land reforms, unemployment, corruption, tribal rights, and governance. The authors have provided detailed information about these issues. There are serious security concerns, because of the spatial expansion of LWE in 11 states, sharp increase of combatants in Naxal cadres and regular upgrading of weapons and the fact that they are collecting money in sufficient quantities by various methods of forcible levy on contractors, brick kiln owners, private transporters, forest and tendu leaf contractors and industrial houses. The

writers suggest a multi-pronged approach to tackle LWE, which has four components, strengthening law-enforcing agencies, mobilizing support of the people, addressing the grievances of people and developing the areas affected by Naxal activities. However, they stress that talks with Naxals can't be avoided, as there is no alternative to dialogue.

Mr. K B. Saxena, a former bureaucrat, has also made an analysis and presented what may be called security – centric view. The analysis recommends to tackle it with quick, immediate and decisive application of force and is critical of those who oppose the strong methods used by security forces. But the other view is that security-centric approach suffers from questionable assumptions, untenable logic and disturbing implications for public policy. In another essay Mr. K B Saxena discusses the importance of access to Common Property Resources (CPR's) for SC and ST. The globalization of economy, with the entry of foreign capital for the exploitation of natural resources accentuates the situation as it is driven by privatisation of property and marketisation of common goods for the profit of a few. It results in the decline of poor peoples' entitlement for such resources. This is only an antique of development policy and

BOOK REVIEW

rural development and how that diversion of CPRs had deprived the poor of their use and also led to environmental degradation.

The final essay on this Extremism calls it a case of chronic poverty, denial of equal opportunity, and violence among the socially disadvantaged groups. The essay authored by two academics, Mr. Sukhadeo Thorat and Mr. Sandeep Sharma, suggests the steps that need to be taken, which include reducing poverty and deprivation, so as to minimize conditions for discontent. This would entail improvement in access of SC's to agricultural land and non-farm capital assets, improvement in agricultural wages, education and skill development. The second step is to combat violence and atrocities against SCs/STs. The working of institutions engaged in delivery of justice need to be improved.

The book is a must-read because it gives us a clear idea of the seriousness of the problem of Naxalims or LWE, and identifies the path for tackling the menace. The overall impression is that

it is not a problem of ideology or an ideological war, but a genuine struggle of the deprived and dispersed people for getting their rights, though the flag may be red. The essays point out some inadequacies and defects of the development plans of the country that have resulted in social injustice. Ironically, instead of dispensing social justice and ensuring an equitable development of all, it has created more underprivileged groups and deprived certain sections of population of their genuine rights. The reviewer can't help to comment that development plans or projects have been lop-sided, which did not benefit all sections of society equally and rather deprived some sections from their genuine rights. Though the title is about 'Countering Naxalism with Development', yet it is clear that the concept of development needs to undergo a thorough change. As the sub title says -Challenges of Social Justice and State Security - the inference is clear that development programmes have not catered to social justice, and that has created problems for state security. The whole development programme needs to be revisited, so as to ensure social justice.

