

Horizontal Inequality and the Naxalite Conflict in India

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Introduction

India is essentially one of the best representations of cultural, religious, ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity. As one of the most diverse nations in the world, these cultures play a definitive role in the everyday lives of the people. They derive a sense of identity from these cultures that have been historically engendered along with the various civilizations. This strong sense of identity across varying cultures and ethnic groups leads to the clash of interests and often develops into conflicts and civil wars within the country. Every individual group is guided by their beliefs and demands and sets out to establish their prominence in the country with the fundamental motivation to derive the benefits of economic development.

Lately, the relationship between economic performance and civil conflicts has generated a considerable amount of interest among economists. As mentioned above, these civil conflicts are localized in nature and occur primarily due to unequal distribution of resources within a country. India as a nation has had and continues to have several localized conflicts owing to a number of reasons such as the fact that it is a young democracy. As a young democracy, that plans and acts on a national level and not on localized fronts, often tend to treat the country as being homogenous, is contentious in nature.

The Naxalbari Movement or the Naxalite conflict, like a lot of other conflicts in India started as a result of land conflicts, in the Naxalbari Village of West Bengal in the year 1967, where the peasants resorted to armed struggle to redistribute land to the landless. It was identified as the “single biggest security challenge to the Indian state” by Dr Manmohan Singh, the former Prime Minister of India. This paper aims to analyze the causes behind the Naxalbari Movement conflict. The primary cause behind this conflict is that of horizontal inequality, that is ethnic/caste element to the conflict. The absence of proper representation of the tribal population of the country, resulting in the lack of proper income distribution and economic resources has resulted in the majority of the economic unrests in the country, as it has been historically too. This inequality is one of the primary causes that this paper focuses to examine by breaking it down to various sub-parts. The subparts being some important factors like land inequality, the historical exclusion of tribal in India owing to the deep-rooted caste system etc.

In the next section, the Naxalite Conflict in India has been discussed, followed by section 3 that looks at horizontal inequality and its explanations for the Naxalite Movement and section 4 which concludes the paper.

The Naxalite Conflict in India

A Naxal or Naxalite is a member of any political organization that claims the legacy of the Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist). The Naxalite movement engendered out of a peasant uprising in the year 1967, in Naxalbari, a small village in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. The primary cause which turned out to be the Arab Spring for the Naxalite movement was the brutal assault on a young farmer by the local landlords and goons. This ruthless act of suppression by the landlords to subjugate the farmers in the area was met with armed retaliation by the local tribal people of the area. The tribals then reacted by forcefully recapturing their land and hence started one of the fiercest acts of rebellion in Indian history. The rebellion left nine tribals and one police personnel dead. This rebellion, however, was controlled, contained and suppressed by the government within a period of 72 days with the use of force, but not before it had gathered huge visibility from Communist Revolutionaries. The movement spread across various parts of India including Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Karnataka. However, it was the formation of the People's War Group (PWG) in 1980 that marked the revival of the movement in Andhra Pradesh, post the Naxalbari Uprising. Statistical data shows that more than 5000 lives have been lost and more than 1200 incidents of violence have occurred, more than 4300 people were displaced in Chattisgarh alone (Sundar 2008) within a span of 6 years between 2004-2010 due to the Naxalite Conflict. "While it is difficult to put an exact figure to the number of rebels, there is an estimated 10000 to 20000 full-time fighters with countless thousands of village militias controlling particularly remote jungle areas where the state is hardly present." (The Economist) The whole Naxalbari Movement and the Naxalite Conflict stems out of horizontal inequalities. That is the unequal treatment towards the marginalized sections of the society, such as the tribals and the peasants. These are the groups that take up the lowest position in the distribution of income and other economic resources. Dr Frances Stewart reinstates the fact that horizontal inequalities occur along a number of dimensions, including:

- Economic dimension, where it is not just income, but land ownership and employment, among other aspects, that are relevant to people's wellbeing and grievances;
- Social dimensions, such as access to health and education;
- Political dimensions, encompassing participation and control in central and local government, the bureaucracy and the army, as well as other sources of power; and
- Cultural dimensions, including societal respect for a group's religious practices, languages, or dressing.

The essence of a civil war or conflict is primarily guided by subjective interests or grievances that every group demands or needs, just like the situation in the Naxalite Conflict. The ever-widening abyss of inequalities in accessing the socio-economic resources between the major groups such as the tribal people and peasants and the landlords often leads to conflict. Every party tries to improve their position. The low-income groups, like those of the peasants and the tribals, will readily unify and

mobilise to improve their privileges while the richer groups such as the landlords, will try to protect their privileges. These contradictory ideologies and interests lead to violent conflict. (See Stewart, F).

Horizontal Inequality and the Naxalite Conflict

Schedule Tribes, farmers and peasants are economically one of the worst performing groups in India, and exclusion of the tribes from the growth of the Indian mainstream is seen as one of the key driving forces of the Naxalite movement.

The key reasons for the Naxalite Conflict spring out of not just the exclusion of the tribes from the growth mainstream of the country, although that is the key driving force, it is also due to inequality of land, underdevelopment of the areas that house the majority of the tribal population of the country, unequal distribution of income and subjugation of the tribal people and ill-treatment due to an overwhelming Caste system. India is the home to a large number of cultural and ethnic groups, the Scheduled Castes and the Schedule Tribes being a part of them. However, historically the worst sufferers are the Schedule Tribes. (The Hindu) Most of the States that were a victim to the Naxalite Conflict, such as the state of Odisha, Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand etc, are ranked as the underdeveloped states in the country with high rates of regional imbalances. These states form the lowest strata at the receiving end of economic resources and income distribution.

Underdevelopment and Land Inequality

Underdevelopment is another key reason behind the rebellion. The movement was concentrated in some of the most impoverished regions of the country. “Even if there was no truth behind the accusations that poor tribes are being exploited and are being illegally disposed of their lands, it is fairly certain that Naxalites are feeding on the festering discontent of the impoverished and marginalized tribal communities.

According to 2001 census, for example, about three-quarter, of Dantewada’s, 1220 villages are almost wholly tribal; 1161 have no medical facilities; 214 have no primary school; the literacy rate is 29% for men and 14% for women.” (The Economist 2012)

India is an agrarian economy, with the majority of its population depending heavily on their lands and farms to maintain a livelihood for themselves. Therefore, land distribution is very crucial to maintain the overall growth and development of the rural economy, which will directly lead to poverty reductions in the rural parts of India. Post-independence, the Nehru-Mahalanobis economic planning, sought to improve the access of land to these poor households. However, the shift in focus from the agricultural sector to the heavy-goods industrial sector left the plans unimplemented, in the hands of greedy landlords. This started to create an imbalance in the growth and development of the low-income groups because the agricultural and industrial sectors are complementary in nature. So, focus on one sector and neglect of the other, slowly culminated to various conflicts and revolts within the country by the working class; Naxalbari Movement just happened to be one of them. Disadvantaged groups and levels of income

As mentioned before, the main support and recruits for the conflicts are supposed to be mostly from the lower caste and tribal populations⁶. The people from the lower castes and tribal populations have been historically disadvantaged and find themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy⁷. In spite of the population being exposed to a lot of positive entitlement in the form of reservation of seats in educational institutions and in various governmental jobs and other services, they are still not economically and socially at par with the others.

Low per capita levels of income to specific groups within a society leads to conflict. Unjust allocation and distribution of income towards the poorer sections of the society create political and economic unrest which culminates into rebellion. The high rates of injustice in income is due to the inefficiency of the government, rampant corruption or discrimination and exploitation towards the working class or in most cases, the mixture of all the aforementioned reasons.

Conclusion

Due to methodological individualism of economic theory and analysis, economists have contributed relatively little to enhance our understanding of why horizontal inequalities are so persistent. Yet, quite often, horizontal inequalities appear to persist not because of conscious decisions by political actors or because of an unequal distribution of power, but because they are the outcome of economic forces and mechanisms. (See Graham K. Brown and Arnim Langer)

Although horizontal inequalities are more of a historically innate phenomenon in India, the lack of focus on this aspect of inequality escalates the inequality towards the marginalized sections of the society. Clearly, the salience of ethnic distinctions varies over time and from case to case, however, once group entities become salient, members of the involved groups are prone to make social comparisons that hinge on the distinction between the in-group and out-group category. (Turner 1981). Petersen explains that “resentment is the feeling of being politically dominated by a group that has no right in a superior position.” This is exactly what sparked the Naxalite Conflict in 1967. The tribes that reacted to the brutal assault of the farmer in the form of an armed retaliation had been inflicted with undue political, economic and social subjugations by the landlords. The forceful claim over their lands, low-income distribution and poor working conditions led to the beginning of a conflict which later on gained momentum influenced by the Communist Party of India (CPI). Regardless of the ideologies of the different Maoist factions, in practice land redistribution has remained one of the main goals of the movement.

This paper has primarily focused on the causes for the rise of the Naxalite Conflict in India arising out of exclusion of the tribal people, peasants, farmers and the other working class from the economic

⁶The main support for the Naxalite movement comes from the Dalits and Adivasis. (Government of India(2008))

⁷ “Historically disadvantaged groups are commonly defined as groups which have been systematically excluded from institutions and cultural practices that provide skills and resources.” Pande (2003)

mainstream that goes on to increase the ever-widening gap in the inequality quotient. We see how the Naxalite Movement originated and spread mostly in the underdeveloped belts across the country. This happened because the communities that felt left-behind in the growth process mobilised for one common cause: that is the equal redistribution of land and the proper structuring of the social hierarchy and dynamism.

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