

Malkangiri: The Tri-junction under Maoist Fire

Nihar Nayak

January 23, 2014

While the Mao ideology is being regarded in China as ‘irrelevant’, the Indian Maoists continue to dream of achieving their political objectives by killing innocent tribals. Odisha is a case in point.

A compilation of Maoist related incidents indicates that the Maoists had killed **21 civilians in Odisha in 2013 of which 17 tribals** were killed in one single district of Malkangiri in south-western Odisha. In most of the cases, the Maoists had killed the civilians by branding them as police informers. Despite the deployment of five battalions of security forces and specially declared developmental projects in the district, the people continue to suffer. Although, the chief minister of Odisha made a statement in the state assembly in December 2013 that the number of Maoist attacks have come down in 2013 and three districts (Nayagarh, Jajpur and Dhenkanal) are freed from Maoist influence during the review period, the fate of Malkangiri remains unchanged. Out of 30 districts in the state the Maoists have influence over 18 with a strong presence in six districts— Malkangiri, Koraput, Rayagada, Gajapati, Nuapada and Sundargarh.

Interestingly, the governmental data on Maoists-related violence mismatches other sources which put the figures higher. Government figures indicate that the Maoist-related violence in Odisha and the number of fatalities has progressively come down **from 108 fatalities in 2010 to 53 in 2013. In the intervening years 2011 and 2012 a total of 75 and 60 fatalities were reported respectively.** While the Koraput districts witnessed highest

number of fatalities since 2010, the Malkangiri district saw the highest casualties in the year 2013 **including the September 2013 Padia incident in which 14 Maoists were killed.**¹

The level of violence can be assessed by comparing year-wise fatalities and incidents in Odisha with the level of violence in other Maoist affected provinces of India. Compared to Odisha, in the neighbouring states of Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, the level of violence has come down substantially. For example, the number of fatalities in Chhattisgarh has come down to 126 this year from three hundred plus during the previous year. In the case of Odisha, although the level violence is less than other three worst affected states, 53 fatalities in the year 2013 shows that the Maoists influence continues in the south and western districts of Odisha with the presence of 100 plus PLA cadres even in the absence of a full fledged state organising committee. The Malkangiri district received maximum violence because: first, the Maoists are in revenge mode to boost the morale of their cadres by targeting security forces and killing village level political leaders in *Jana Adalats* by branding them as police informers; secondly, as part of the Tactical Counter Offensive Campaign (TCOC), the Maoists believe that the ground they lost in Padia, Kalimela and Motu area of Malkangiri can be regained by terrorising the tribal people, who are caught in the crossfire between them and the state. The free movement of the Maoists are also affected in these districts due to the presence of security forces and therefore they want to strike terror in the security forces and drive them out of the terrain.

Third, from the guerrilla operational point of view, the district has an ideal location because it is situated in a tri-junction where the borders of Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Chhattisgarh meet. Its terrain, forest cover and local socio-economic dynamics suit the Maoists and their guerrilla warfare. Therefore, the CPI-Maoist had shifted some of its arms manufacturing research units from Dandakaranya area to Malkangiri forests way back in 2004-2005. The outfit had tested its first rocket launchers in the Malkangiri forests and planned to develop a base area there. Fourth, the Maoists want to divert the attention of the security forces from their new found shelter zone in the Sunabeda forests, which shares border with Chhattisgarh by intensifying activities in Malkangiri. Last but not least, the

¹ Data taken from South Asia Terrorism Portal.

Maoists would want to prevent human intelligence and police access to that area by unleashing a reign of terror. In the recent attacks in the district it was found that the majority of the PLA cadres were from Chhattisgarh.

Therefore, in the coming years, Malkangiri and other south-western border districts of Odisha will continue to bleed because of the Maoist quest for safe havens in these districts during hot pursuit by the Chhattisgarh police. Apart from this, the year 2014 is a crucial year from the Maoist point of view because they are going to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the CPI-Maoist. They would thus prefer to intensify their movement by targeting government infrastructure, civilians and security forces. Therefore, contrary to the analysis that the Maoist would feel deterred by security presence, they may actually take advantage of security forces deployment during upcoming general elections this year and upscale their activities to recover lost grounds.

Moreover, Odisha has been for long a transit point for Maoists relocating themselves under the threat of security operations in the neighbourhood. In that case, the Odisha government needs to increase its vigilance in the bordering districts by augmenting intelligence and security forces. There is a need to improve intra-state intelligence coordination, which is a major problem due to differences of approach among the states affected by the Maoist problem. Although, the Ministry of Home Affairs has been trying to improve inter-agency coordination by organising meetings of the top police officials of the affected states, a common political understating on the menace could help in addressing the problem in an effective manner.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.