

# Economic Inequalities and Discontent: Understanding the Naxal Movement in India

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## ABSTRACT

*To be democratic in the conventional sense of competitive election, limited government, power and public expression of preference is not enough to mitigate conflict. For what is required is not simply a democratic system in the strict sense of the word but a system that incorporates all groups as individuals in such a way that they benefit from it. Thus along with political factors, it is important to focus on economic factor like economic inequality. In democratic societies where these economic inequalities exist, a condition is created in the emergence of discontent that may take various forms like protest, strikes, civil war, revolts and revolutions. This is well seen in the case of India, where inspite of democracy prevailing, the economic deprivation experienced by the economically deprived has posed serious internal security challenge in the form of naxalism. How the economic deprivation has created conditions for the emergence of discontent amongst the naxals can well be understood by focusing on the psychological theories that gained significance during the 1960s.*

**Key words:** Democracy, Economic Inequality, Discontent, Frustration, Aggression, Naxalism

## Introduction

Political systems with high levels of inclusiveness experience less discontent that can take various forms like protest, civil wars, revolts and revolutions. Colomer (2001) for instance has made the point that the key feature in explaining the stability of a political system is its degree of inclusiveness. Democratic governments with multiparty decision makers are more inclusive than democratic governments with just one decision maker. The democratic countries avoid discontent by fostering contentment with the procedures by which opinions are heard and rights are protected and by distributing goods such that the majority of the citizens are content. They are accountable both at and between elections. Individuals and minorities receive a minimum constitutional protection. In the cases where political cleavages are structured by region or ethnic identity, democracies may ensure representation with institutionalized power sharing mechanism. In short, democratic politics use a range of means to keep people happy.

However the empirical evidence on the effect of these devices as preempting civil wars is not clear because countries with high levels of democracy also experience discontent. Clearly to be democratic in the conventional sense of competitive election, limited government, power and public expressions of preference is not enough to mitigate conflict. For what is required is not simply a democratic system in the strict sense of the word but a system that incorporates all groups or individuals in such a way that they benefit from it. Thus along with the political factors, it is important to focus on economic factors.

It is seen that the challenge democratic institutions are facing are large in low income countries. Irrespective of regime type, poor and underdeveloped countries generally have a high level of grievances. A characteristic of poor and underdeveloped countries is that control of resources are concentrated in few hands. Large segments of the population, often distinguished along ethnic lines are deprived of resources and wealth to which they feel entitled. These are grievances due to

inequality or 'relative deprivation' (Gurr, 1970). Under certain circumstances, potential and actual political actors may develop a strong sense that the private and/ or public goods they expect to receive cannot be acquired and/ or safe guarded in the existing distributive regime. Democracy adds its particular hue to this baseline of conflict potential. Since democracy is expected to improve conditions for the majority of the population, poverty and underdevelopment gives rise to strong motivations for change that may drive internal political violence. Such motivations are likely to affect the political elites as well as the general population. Several studies reveal that democratic institutions are particularly unstable under conditions of poverty (Hegre and Nome, 2010, p.10-11).

The economic inequalities prevailing in society therefore provide a fertile ground for emergence of discontent even in a democratic system. To understand the link between economic inequalities and discontent in a democracy, it is pertinent to incorporate the psychological theories. By doing so, one can very well understand the discontents emerging within the democratic system. The present paper therefore directs its efforts towards understanding discontentment experienced by the naxals which has roots in the prevailing economic inequalities that has posed serious challenge before the Indian democratic system. The paper will therefore consist of two sections -Section I which will deal with the conceptual understanding of the term economic inequality and also a focus on the psychological theories that will facilitate in understanding the link between economic inequalities and discontent. Section II will deal with understanding the role economic inequalities have played in generating a discontentment amongst the naxals.

### **Section I: Understanding of Economic Inequality and an Insight to the Psychological Theories**

The concept of economic inequality is a matter of great deal of disagreement amongst scholars. This is further complicated by the

fact that the very concept has undergone change in interpretation over a period of time. According to Amartya Sen, the concept of inequity or economic inequality depends on the tolerance or intolerance of the people of the stratification and differentiation in the society. Thus the Athenian intellectuals did not consider the issue of slavery in the discussion on equity though in present times, the very idea of slavery would be considered obnoxious in any system of economic equal. But he notes that it is important to recognize that the perception of equity is crucial to relate inequality with the "possibilities of actual rebellion" in the society (Sen, 1989: p.1).

To have a perception of inequality, the comment by A.B. Atkinson is very pertinent. According to him, the concept of economic inequality basically refers to inequality that exists in terms of wealth and income (Atkinson, 1983: p.3). Either of these criteria has been used by the theorists. Among the scholars who have understood inequality in terms of wealth are like Aristotle, Euripides, James Madison, Alex de Tocqueville and Karl Marx. There are other scholars who have focused on more concrete form of wealth i.e; land. Thus by using land as a criterion, scholars like S.P. Huntington, Merle Kling, Bruce M. Russett, Edward J. Mitchell and Jack Nagel have studied the relationship between economic inequality and discontent.

On the other hand there are theorists like Raymond Tanter, Manus .I. Midlarsky, M.Parvin and Edward N. Mueller who have studied inequalities in terms of income. According to Simon Kuznets, income inequality basically refers to the "difference in income, without regard to their desirability as a scheme running counter to some ideal of equality" (Atkinson,1983:p.1 and p.2). The existing inequalities further get aggravated by events like economic development, urbanization, modernisation and social change

The inequalities in the form of wealth or income prevailing in the society take different forms of discontent- riots and clashes, coup

d'etat, clandestine and armed attacks, civil war and revolutions. Some scholars like Rudolf J. Rummel and Raymond Tanter have on the basis of their empirical studies put forward a typology of civil strife events. The general categories and "sub-categories" are: a) Turmoil: This includes unstructured mass strikes which are relatively spontaneous events like demonstrations, political strikes, riots, political clashes and localized rebellions b) Conspiracy: This category of civil strife is characterised by high degree of organisation and takes place on a small scale. It includes events like political assassinations, coups, mutinies, plots and purges c) Internal War: This form of civil strife is characterised by high degree of organisation and by its operation on a large scale. Under this category are included events which are accompanied by extensive violence like large scale revolts (Gurr, 1968, p.1107)

However it needs to be brought out that not in all situations that the prevailing economic inequalities in society lead to conflict. It is only in situations where certain conditions exist that the economic inequalities lead to various forms of violence. These conditions are like- a)the political system is unresponsive to the economic inequalities prevailing in society

b) it might respond by undertaking certain measures but these actually do not contribute to the improvement of the conditions of the economically deprived

c)the economically deprived sections may generate a consciousness amongst themselves that they have been marginalized which then enables them to come together and hence put a collective challenge before the political system.

In situations where the above identified conditions exist that the economically unequals express their dissatisfaction by resorting to various forms of political conflicts. To facilitate the understanding of this nexus between economic inequalities and political conflicts one needs to incorporate the psychological theories.

These theories which gained significance during the 1960s laid emphasis on "...the explanation of attitudes and behaviour in terms of the mental processes of individuals" (Taylor,1984, p.52). Some scholars like Rod Aya has put these theories under the category of "volcanic model". Under this model a social psychological tension that arises among human beings has been compared to lava under the earth's crust or to steam in geyser(Aya,1979,p.49). These theories of revolution have borrowed ideas from two different strands of psychology, one which laid emphasis on cognitions and the other which stressed the idea of transformation of frustration into aggression. One very important proponent of this theory is Ted Robert Gurr who has expressed his ideas in his work *Why Men Rebel*. According to Gurr, there are two different kinds of feelings: one which provide men satisfaction, love and elation and the other kind which generates anxiety, terror, depression and rage. This feeling determine men's views regarding the world and energizes their action. According to Gurr, a feeling of frustration develops when men's ability to derive satisfaction from the existing situation undergoes a change. This frustration is released in the form of a conflict when men try to strike the sources of frustration. By doing so, they are in a position to release the tension that has been built by frustration. This principle says Gurr operates to determine a variety of individual behaviour including the action of those who rise in rebellion against the political community, Gurr thus regards aggression as a product of frustration and thus puts forward a viewpoint very different from those who regard aggression either as innate or that it is solely learned. According to Gurr, the necessary precondition for the occurrence of violent civil conflict is "relative deprivation" which implies "actors" perceptions of discrepancy between their value expectations and their value capabilities. The discrepancy between expectation and capabilities can emerge in relation to any collectively sought value, which can be economic, psychological or political and thus giving rise to the feeling of relative

deprivation. This feeling of relative deprivation thus creates ground for the generation of various forms of political conflicts.

The idea of relative deprivation is indeed very significant in understanding the emergence of discontent amongst people. By utilizing this idea, one can very well understand the challenge posed by the naxals before the Indian State.

## **Section II: Role of Economic Inequalities in Generating Discontent amongst the Naxals in India**

After getting liberation in 1947, the era of constitutionalisation promised to give the dream democracy, sovereignty, equality, justice, fraternity and liberty to all irrespective of class, caste, creed, gender, race, language, region to all. The Indian State promised to give socio-political- economic security to all of its citizens and establish socialist state so as to minimize all kinds of inequality prevailing in the society. But where are the promises of democracy promised at the time of independence? The problems of inequality, poverty, exploitation, marginalisation are prominent in the country and especially the Adivasis and Dalits are the victims of such inhuman conditions and practices. These adivasis and Dalits are highest in the central India (Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh. These regions which comprise the “Red Corridor” are the base of the Naxals. Naxals, naxalite are generic terms used to refer various militant communists groups operating in different parts of India under different organization structure. In the eastern states of the mainland India (Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Odisha), they are usually known as or refer to themselves as Maoists while in Southern States like Andhra Pradesh they are known under other titles. The term Naxalite comes from Naxalbari, a small village in West Bengal in 1967. The Naxals are considered far left radical communists supportive of Maoist political sentiment and ideology. Their origin can be traced to the split in 1967 of the

Communist Party of India (Marxist), leading to the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist). Initially the movement had its centre in West Bengal. Later, it spread to other less developed area of rural southern and eastern India such as Chattisgarh, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh through the activities of underground groups like the CPI(M) (Pradhan, 2013, p.2-3). The insurgency therefore has spread like wild fire over 40% of India’s land area. The Maoist wield about 20,000 armed fighters and another 50,000 supporters, About 10,000 people have been killed in the expanding civil war since 1980. In April 2010 in Chattisgarh, 76 paramilitary troops were killed. On May 25, 2013 Maoist insurgents in the same State again wiped out almost the entire leadership of the Congress Party in that State killing 28 of its members in an ambush. Sonia Gandhi, the Congress Party leader was “aghast” at the Maoist assault on her party members and then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has called the insurgents “the single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by our country” (Ismi, 2013, p.1).

The Naxalite revolt has grown in magnitude and strength for many reasons which can be political or economic in nature. Though the primary concern of this paper is to focus on economic factors i.e: economic inequalities in understanding the roots of naxal movement: it is important also to briefly incorporate the political factors which have contributed towards the rise of naxalism. Some of the political factors which can be identified are as- the emergence of the movement has coincided with the formation of the first United Front government in West Bengal (1967) with the Communist Party of India (M) as its main constituent, received increasing official support, attention and press coverage (Misra, 2008 p.63).

The external political factor was the influence of the Chinese Communist Party and Mao Zedong. The naxalites were deeply influenced by the two. Their slogan was- China’s path is our path; China’s Chairman is our Chairman. This summarizes their ideological

inclinations up to at least 1971. Later the image of China in general and that of Communist Party of China faded considerably and at present the various Naxalite groups hold different perceptions of China. Their commitment to Maoism however remains.

Hence the Naxalbari movement became the symbol of armed peasant uprising and of Maoism in India and evolved as a new political movement deriving its name from it. This movement has been further given momentum by the insensitive nature of the political system. It is anti-tribal and non-responsive to the needs of the tribals. The tribals, more than any oppressed category has got nothing out of the Indian state before and after globalization. The Indian state has always taken land alienation of tribals for granted as one of the consequences of 'progress' that must be put up with owing to a skewed pattern of land distribution, tribals and dalits are at the receiving end of the land owing castes.

Besides the political factors, economic factors have also acted as catalyst in giving momentum to the movement.

Social and political movements do not arise in vacuum. They are rooted in the objective conditions of life and respond to the deep seated frustrations of the people with the existing social, economic and political order, its institutions and practices and the notions of development, participation and governance, which they challenge and seek to change.

The tribals and dalits are among the poorest of the poor and the most socially marginalized sections of the society. At the national as well as the state level in the naxalite belt, they are at the bottom of the ladder. The percentage of dalits below poverty line was 36.8(rural) and 40(urban) and of tribals 47.3(rural) and 33.3(urban) compared to 28(rural) and 25.7(urban) for the nation. The incidence of poverty is higher than 50% among the tribals in Orissa(73%), Jharkhand including Bihar(59%), Madhya Pradesh including Chattisgarh (57%) and between 35-50% in West Bengal,

Maharashtra, Assam and Uttar Pradesh including Uttarakhand.

The social conditions of the dalits and the tribes are deeply conditioned by the agrarian and social structure. The agrarian structure is determined by the pattern of land holding, access to land and other productive assets and social relations evolved on that basis. The social structure is embedded in the caste based Hindu social order in the case of Dalits and the hegemonic relations between the culturally distinct tribals and the predominant non-tribal population in the case of tribes which influence all facets of their lives. The two structures combined produce oppressive conditions for these groups and reinforce each other In this process. The landholding pattern is highly skewed and the dalits constitute the largest percentage of landless persons. A significant percentage among them does not even have secure homestead land. The tribals which at one time were privileged to own some land have recorded the fastest pace of landlessness among different social groups in recent times. The dalits in the absence of opportunities for wage employment elsewhere are dependent upon the landowners for providing them avenues of livelihood in the rural areas. These include payment of very low wages, long hours of work, debt-bondage control over produce from owned land, if any, humiliating treatment and physical assault in the case of non-compliance of employer's orders. The other dimension of agrarian structure is reflected in the arrangements for cultivation of land where a landless or a near landless person leases in land from the landowner and undertakes to cultivate it as tenant or sharecropper. With no bargaining power due to unequal status and absence of alternative employment, the landowners take the lion's share of the produce without contributing anything to the production of the crop and do not bear any risk if the crop fails. The tenant has no security and can be evicted at any time. This leaves the poor cultivators with not even sufficient share/ income to subsist.

Economically the problem of poverty and economic inequality can be identified as vital in accelerating the pace of movement. The absolute numbers of the poor have fallen over decades; the statistics being averages do not capture the intensity of distress in certain pockets despite high growth in recent years. To be poor is one thing and to seem condemned to one's fate quite another. Rising incomes in post reform India have created a rapidly growing aspirational class but they have also contributed to an army of socio-economic orphans who have been rejected by all mainstream political parties. In addition, a contractor-politician nexus controls the wealth of the forests and pushes tribals to the margins. A repressive state apparatus, represented by the police and the black laws they use to their advantage helps keep this exploitative system going.

The situation has further being worsened by the opening of the Indian economy to trade and investment, the entry of mining companies in Odisha and Chattisgarh poses a threat to the livelihoods of tribals and their way of life. Thus economic exploitation of the tribals, a problem that is unattended by the political system creates a fertile ground for the Naxals to play an important role.

One can really have a proper grip of the problem by focusing on the psychology of the individuals who are a part of the movement. The psychological factors synthesise well the above mentioned factors –political and economic and facilitate a clear understanding of the roots of the movement.

The indigenous tribal population of the Naxal affected states has been surviving by subsistence farming and by scraping a living from forestry. But even these precarious means of livelihood are threatened by the Indian State's and corporations growing confiscation of Adivasi lands since 1991, so the tribal people risk losing everything they have ever known. They have been uprooted from their traditional source of livelihood. In 2005-06, the Chattisgarh government signed contracts for 1.6 billion dollars with power industries. This move coincided with the start

of the Salwa Judum, when tribals were forcefully evicted from their villages. One hundred Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) have been signed with mostly private parties who will reap huge profits at the cost of the local people and environment (Chenoy and Chenoy,2010,p.119). The government-industry nexus shows up in deals like Vedanta where an MoU was signed with maximum benefits to the company, with the tribals losing out(Chenoy and Chenoy, 2010, p.120). This problem has further increased with the impact of globalization. Several multi-national companies have started making their in roads in the tribal areas owing to their resource richness. These resources are exploited and the benefits occurring are not passed on to the tribals. The tribals are well aware of this. It is because of this that they are not interested in any developmental activity as it facilitates the further exploitation of their areas. This awareness generates frustration which is released in the various forms of violence. They destroy roads and even attack people engaged in those companies. State and various functionaries of the state become also the targets of their attack On Oct 6, 2009; an abducted Jharkhand police inspector was brutally beheaded. Two days later in Gadchiroli,18 police personnel were killed (Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, Oct 10,2009,p.33)Though the Naxal say that they will not target civilians but still in 2007, 460 civilians have been killed and this has increased to 586 in 2009(Ghosh,2010 p.1).

The degree of frustration and deprivation is so strong among the people that it has facilitated the rising influence of Maoist across the country. Dayamani Barla, an Adivasi activist based in Jharkhand points out that "New Delhi's failure to protect the interests of the tribals has led them to lend their support to the Maoists, whom they believe are fighting for their basic rights"(Ismi,2013,p.3).Several human rights activists have also showed their sympathies with the Naxal's cause, condemning the establishment for its prolonged mistreatment of the lower classes. Among these activists is

Arundhati Ro, the prize winning author, who said of the Naxals: "If I was person who is being dispossessed, whose wife has been raped, who is being pushed off their land and who is being faced with this police force, I would say that I am justified in taking up arms, if that is the only way I have to defend myself" (Anti-imperialism. com, 2011, p.4). Dr. Binayak Sen, a widely known and respected pediatrician and civil rights activists has long been an outspoken critic of the Indian government regarding its policy of forced land seizures (Anti-imperialism.com, 2011, p.5). According to G. K. Pillai, Former Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, "Left wing extremists operate in the vacuum created by functional inadequacies of field level go. According to the Home Ministry's own figure, overall Maoist influence has spread from 56 districts in 2001 to 223 districts in 2009 (Ramakrishnan, 2009, p.6).

According to Maoist activists in Jharkhand, more areas are going to come under their influence. This includes north Bengal, the plains of Bihar, the Central districts of Orissa, east Chattisgarh and regions in Maharashtra and Haryana. These are coming under a fresh wave of industrialization through special economic zones (SEZs). Retailers affected by multinational retail companies, people displaced or affected by SEZs and unorganized workers are special targets for recruitment in Maharashtra and Haryana. Besides the rural areas where the poor people provide a strong base for the Maoist; even in the semi-urban centres like Yamunanagar in Haryana where there are number of industries and wine mills, they have started exerting their stronghold (Ramakrishnan, Nov.2009, p.8).

To counter the increasing influence of left wing extremists, the government has decided to undertake stern measures like the deployment of CRPF and its Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (CoBRA) in the naxal dominated areas (Mehra, Oct 2009, p.13) though the deployment of Army and Indian Air Force has been denied by Prime-Minister, Manmohan Singh. But such steps

have not been appreciated by the naxals. This is well reflected in their recent attacks in West Midnapore district where 24 men of West Bengal's Eastern Frontier Rifles were massacred (Ghosh, 2010, p.1).

From the above account one can say that economic deprivation has certainly left an impact on the minds of the poor. The intensity of the naxal movement reflects that they are well aware of their deprivation. This deprivation then provides a fertile ground for the emergence of feeling of frustration. This frustration/discontentment is released in various forms of political conflicts. The outbreaks of these conflicts really become a matter of concern for both the governments-Central and States.

The naxalite threat is the biggest security problem for India's future as its effects are multi-layered. The Maoist movement highlights India's interior weaknesses which makes India also vulnerable to external threats. A nation cannot effectively withstand threats coming from outside its country if there is instability inside it. India's regional neighbors are also external threats. For example in 2004, the Ministry of Home Affairs was wary of the "symbiotic relationship" between the Communist Party of Nepal and Naxal groups in India.

Another reason why the Naxalites are the biggest threat to security is because of the way the issues affects India's economic development. This is apparent in several ways. For example, the more the Maoist concentrate on the poor and marginalized regions of India, the more economic development (which is imperative to improving those region's conditions will be hampered. Furthermore, the Naxalite rebels are no longer just focusing on remote jungles but on urban centres.

To combat the naxal movement by undertaking oppressive steps by the government however is not a remedy to the problem. The repressive tactics of Indian security forces are likely to increase popular support for the Naxals in India's poorest areas. They have begun using heavy weapons

such as rocket launchers which they used for the first time in 2009 against a Border Security Force in Bihar (Anti-imperialism.com,2011,p.4). The governments-Central and States should really direct their efforts towards finding a long term solution to the problem. For this, they have to direct their efforts towards undertaking such measures which will solve the problem of economic deprivation which in turn will prevent the emergence of frustration amongst the indigenous population of various states affected with the problem of naxalism. This will have a long lasting impact for a sense of satisfaction and contentment will prevail. It therefore becomes pertinent for the governments-Central and States to seriously undertake developmental activities whose benefits actually trickle down to the poor local masses. While formulating such developmental plans the local people should be taken into confidence. The participatory developmental activities will generate a sense of satisfaction among the tribals. This feeling of contentment will prevent the emergence of frustration and hence the prevention of any kind of conflict. This certainly is not an easy task. The process indeed is a long drawn one. In May.2006, the Planning Commission appointed an expert committee headed by D. Bandhopadhyay, a retired Indian Administrative Services officer, who had dealt with the naxalites in the 1970s. This government appointed committee for the first time in the history of the Naxal movement put the blame on the State for the growth of the movement. The report recommends rigorous training for the police force, not only on humane tactics of controlling rural violence but also on the constitutional obligation of the State for the protection of fundamental rights. Making a departure from the usual government position, the expert committee concludes that development paradigm pursued since the liberation of the country has aggravated the prevailing discontent among the marginalized sections of society (Pradhan, 2013,p.7-8).According to the former Home Secretary of India's federal government,

V.K.Duggal," Naxal groups have been raising mainly land and livelihood related issues. If land reforms are taken upon priority and the landless and poor in the Naxal areas are allotted surplus land, this would go a long way in tackling the developmental aspects of the Naxal. problem "(Anti- imperialism.com, 2011,p.3).

The onus certainly falls on the government particularly the Central government of whether it has the political will and the administrative acumen to carry socio-developmental activities that will leave the local masses psychologically contented. The government needs to involve the tribal population while formulating developmental policies and it should also ensure that the benefits accruing from such development policies should trickle down to the economically deprived section. The government needs also to ensure that the tribals are not deprived of their sources of livelihood. The entry of various corporations and companies also need some regulation by the government. These various measure that will be benefit the tribals will provide some degree of economic contentment that will prevent the emergence of frustration amongst the tribals. This will go a long way in providing solution to the internal security threat that the country has been experiencing for a long period of time.

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