

## India's Unknown Revolution

By William R. Polk

Despite Mahatma Gandhi's emphasis on non-violence India is one of the most violent countries in the world. The daily press is filled with accounts of attacks on police posts, murders of political figures and a steady flow of more personal violence. Typical was the headline in the Indian *Sunday Times* of October 28 "Ex-Chief Minister's son shot dead by Maoists."

Behind that brief notice lies a long tradition of violence against the Indian government. As the foremost social critic of the Indian government, Patwant Singh, has written, "Passive acceptance, hopelessness and despair are giving way to rage."

Rage has exploded in half a dozen major attacks on police and army installations and officials over the last six months in eastern India which, *The Sunday Times* wrote, is "reeling under abject poverty." While it is the subject of frequent articles in the Indian press, this insurgency is almost totally unknown outside of India. With India embarked upon a program of accelerated economic growth, what has triggered these attacks?

The answer, according to government studies, is not just the abject poverty of rural India where the vast majority of Indians live on less than 1 Euro a day. Arguably misery itself would not cause revolution since near starvation has long been the lot of the Indian peasantry, and periodic famines killed millions throughout the Nineteenth century. A major famine took the lives of about a million and a half Indians in the last years of British rule in 1943. What is different now is that through television and the cinema, as well as the proclamations of aspiring politicians, impoverished farmers have discovered the affluence of the urban middle class. The contrast between their "abject poverty" and what they see of the lives of the privileged is powerful revolutionary propaganda.

It is that contrast that apparently motivates the vast and growing insurgency of deprived peasants in the eastern and southern parts of the Indian subcontinent. There in the village of Naxalbari a revolutionary movement began in 1967. Like the better known insurgencies of Vietnam, Algeria and Cuba, the beginnings were so small as to attract little attention.

In Naxalbari, rich landowners set their private army on starving sharecroppers. Driven to despair, the peasants counterattacked. Violence escalated and was given a vague political form by a local man who had read about Mao Zedong's revolution in China. It is on this basis that the Hindu peasants who comprise the "Naxalite" movement are described as Maoists. In "Naxalism" is neither a unified movement nor an ideological party: what Naxalites share is anger against the authorities they believe are exploiting and starving them.

Like other insurgencies, the Naxalites have taken up arms and have glorified their small forces by calling them the "People's Liberation Guerrilla Army." Despite the title,

there is no central command. Attacks are sporadic and aim mainly to disrupt government, particularly the police whom they regard as the armed fist of landowners, and to terrorize their enemies.

Faced with this unrest, the government has reacted primarily with force, seeking to destroy the movement and to kill its leaders. Although the police managed to capture the movement's founder and hundreds of his adherents, suppression has not succeeded. Naxalite "incidents" have grown in number and ferocity in recent years. With armed guerrillas estimated today at about 15,000, the Naxalites have carried out hundreds of attacks. The last complete figures, provided to the Parliament in 2006, listed 509 attacks on police stations, in which 153 police officers were killed.

More important for the long run, the Naxalites have moved to create a united organization – the "Revolutionary Democratic Front. This new coordination enabled them to spread their activities throughout eastern India. Their "Red Corridor" now comprises roughly a quarter of India.

Even more impressive, they have begun a new phase of activity in which they are seeking to replace government both by levying taxes and even by helping to construct irrigation projects to alleviate the hunger and poverty of their followers.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh told the chief ministers of his government that "the problem of Naxalism is the single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by our country." While the Naxalite movement is perhaps India's most impressive opponent of the government's drive toward economic development, which is taking place largely at the expense of the poor, it is by no means unique. In fact, the Indian government has designated at least 23 other groups as "terrorist." To date, despite some attempts to wean away the supporters, the government has fallen back on a policy of force against the Naxalites which, in India as elsewhere, is spreading rather than curtailing unrest.