

The sociological category of naxalism in India: An analysis

Archana Kumari

Central University of Kashmir, Srinagar

Abstract: Social movements are collective ventures. They are large informal groupings of individuals or organizations carrying out or resisting a social change while revolutions are a process which bring out a complete social or political transformation, usually by violent means. There are some similar other terms also like protest, agitation etc. In this paper I have tried to define all these terms and by listing their characteristics, I have tried to examine whether naxalism is a movement, revolution, protest or anything else. It is purely a theoretical paper with insights from renowned sociologists and contemporary political scientists.

Introduction

The word 'naxalism' emerges from a small remote village in West Bengal called Naxalbari. Naxalites operate in a vacuum created by inadequacy of administrative and political institutions, espouse local demands and take advantage of the prevalent disaffection and injustice among the exploited segments of population and seek to offer an alternative system of governance which promises emancipation of these segments from the clutches of 'exploiter' classes through the barrel of gun (Singh, 2007).

According to this definition, it appears that naxalism wants a complete transformation in social and political set up. But it has been unable to involve all segments of societies of various regions in the process, so it is limited to some groups of people who are carrying out violent activities in various parts of India. Thus overall it looks like it possesses the characteristics of both a

movement and revolution. But in this paper I have tried to closely examine what exactly it is. To understand and discuss the topic properly, I have divided this paper into following topics:

- Social movements
- Revolutions
- Protest, agitation, social change, social transformation
- Naxalite movement in India
- Analysis of category of 'naxalism'
- Conclusion

Social movements

Social movements have traditionally been included in that subfield of sociology known as collective behaviour. Thus we can distinguish a movement from a non movement on the basis of collective action. However, only when the collective action is somewhat sustained, as distinct from a sporadic occurrence, does it take the form

Archana Kumari (archanaaiimc@gmail.com) is Assistant Professor in the Department of Convergent Journalism, Central University of Kashmir, Srinagar (J&K).

of a movement (Rao, 1984). These collective actions should be able to inspire and mobilize other people also. It should mobilize a large number of people sufficient enough to call it a movement. Hence a social movement essentially involves sustained collective mobilization through either informal or formal organisation (Rao, 1984).

Thus three important components of social movements emerge – sustained collective actions, mobilization of people and organisation. But collective actions are of several types: panic responses, hostile outbursts and organised social action. The first two in the list could not be labeled as movements, because they are relatively short term, unorganized outbursts and are not necessarily inspired by an ideology or prompted by an issue.

Thus only when an elementary collective action acquires organization and form, a body of customs and traditions, established leadership, an enduring division of labour, social rules and social values, in short – a culture, a social organisation and a new scheme of life, it becomes a social movement (Oommen, 2010). By this definition of social movements, two more components emerge – ideology and leadership. A broad definition of social movement was given by Paul Wilkinson (1971):

A social movement is a deliberate collective endeavour to promote change in any direction and by any means, not excluding violence, illegality, revolution or withdrawal into utopian community. A social movement must evince a minimal degree of organisation, though it may range

from a loose, informal or partial level of organization to the highly institutionalized and bureaucratized movement and the corporate group. (as cited in Shah 1990:16-17)

This definition also emphasizes upon presence of organisation in a social movement. With organisation, it also relates social movement to social change. A social movement is generally oriented towards bringing about change, either partial or total, in the existing system of relationships, values and norms, although there are efforts which are oriented towards resisting change and maintaining the status quo (Rao, 1984). Thus from all above definitions of social movement, we see that social change is an essential characteristic of social movement. According to one more definition by Wilson John (1973):

A social movement is a conscious, collective, organised attempt to bring about or resist large-scale change in the social order by uninstitutionalized means¹.

By means of this definition, social movements can be distinguished from related phenomenon. In this definition, uninstitutionalised means for social movement is added. Thus considering all the above definitions of social movements, we can list five components of social movement – objectives, ideology, programmes, leadership and organisation. All these five components are interdependent and influencing each other. Besides these components, we can list some characteristics of social movement.

1. Social movements are organised

collectivities. The extent and sophistication may vary but there is some division of labour and some recognized hierarchy of rights and responsibilities which participants have evolved.

2. Social movements are large in potential scope. Not all small groups collectively oriented to the achievement of common objectives are social movement. Political parties, interest groups and trade unions are examples of large scale collectivities.

3. Social movements are not necessarily limited to the achievement of the self interested objectives of their members.

4. Social movements are conscious, purposive attempts to bring about change.

5. Without objective, a social movement converts into an agitation or protest. Objectives are evolved as an ongoing process in a movement.

6. Ideology also undergoes change. If objective and ideology are not in sync with each other, they conflict. The ideologies provide direction for evolving strategies and programmes and connect the participants by a common thread of idea.

7. Various strategies and programmes are evolved to mobilize the people. They sustain the movement for a long time.

8. Leadership is need based in the movement and it evolves in the course of the movement. It plays a crucial role in articulating ideologies and objectives.

There are also some limits to the social movements i.e. when the social movements cease to be movement. When

a movement becomes routinized with an established institutional procedure of recruitment and commitment and a code of conduct, it becomes part of the institutionalized system losing its innovative features. Thus when a movement with a defined ideology becomes a well established political party, it ceases to be a movement (Rao, 1984).

Revolution

Revolution is the word, which itself refers to radical, transformative change. It describes phenomena from the industrial revolution to ethnic revolution. Revolution is a movement often violent to overthrow an old regime and effect complete change in the fundamental institutions of society. After French Revolution of the 18th century which overthrew monarchy and recreated society from top to bottom, revolution became synonymous to the radical overcoming of past. Many believe that modernity of society could only be achieved through such violent and total transformations. So, the basic characteristic of revolution is that they are rare and distinctive. They fundamentally transform states and societies (Steve, 2009). The political scientist Samuel Huntington suggests (In Steve, 2009):

A revolution is a rapid, fundamental and violent domestic change in the dominant values and myths of a society, in its political institutions, social structure, leadership and government activity and policies.

True revolution unfolds quickly, bringing about “sudden and radical change” (Tim, 2005). Revolutions are very long processes which take place in years or even decades,

not in months. So, revolutions are processes not event. Processes are recurring while events are not. Event is pre-constructed, manageable while processes are not. This implies that revolutions are processes which span many years. Revolutions too possess a common ideological element: a self conscious commitment to epochal change (Steve, 2009). This self conscious commitment could be said to be spirit of revolution which keeps it alive and active for a long time. The revolutionaries generally strive for a fundamental temporal break from the past. Revolutions thus constitute a structural and ideological break from the previous regime. They entail changes to both the political and socioeconomic structures of a polity. They involve an often violent popular movement to overturn the previous regime (Steve, 2009).

Revolutions generally take place when there is a relaxation of the ruling class or loosening of the authority. As long as state is functional, firm or intact, revolution is not possible. A common pattern we see that before every revolution, there is a reform. So, revolutions generally take place in modernization phase. Most of the revolutions we see have a programme, objective or vision. So, revolution requires at least two things – idea and process. We can say that revolution is basically a rationalization process. Every revolution is producing the rationalization of resources. The end product of revolution is also change. A successful revolution should - (i) provide for individual liberty, (ii) result in a flexible and open political system that can deal with economic, social and cultural changes, (iii) generate improvement in the well being of those it affects (Michael, 2004). Revolution therefore is a sudden

and radical transformation of society, affecting individual character, destroying social evil and promoting mastership in the art of life, without being preceded by confusion or diminishing the need for social imagination and intelligence (Delisle, 1920). So, the characteristics of revolution are –

1. Revolution happens at a very large scale.
2. It is a rare process which usually happens once in a lifetime means it takes a long time to happen.
3. It too has goal or objective and people committed for that.
4. It takes place to bring about change in the life of people involved.
5. Not necessarily but generally revolutions are violent and they take place against the state or authority.

There are some revolutions which started long back and they seem to be never ending processes as they are still evolving with some newness like industrial revolution.

Protest, agitation, social change, social transformation

An agitation or a protest is spontaneous. A series of protests may lead to movement. Protest is executed by an external group of people against any organisation while agitation is by insiders of any organisation. Protest is a restricted, limited form of agitation. It must be focused and it is against any existing structure. Protest and agitation are the forms of non-institutionalised collective actions. These are not strictly social movements. But

more often, a social movement develops in the course of time and it begins with protest or agitation which may not have an 'organization' or an 'ideology' for change (Shah, 2002). For instance, when students of the engineering college in Gujarat protested against the mess bill, it was a relatively spontaneous act. But that protest led to the Nav Nirman Andolan of 1974 in Gujarat (Shah, 1977).

The analysis of a particular action determines whether it is a protest or an agitation. A particular collective action may be agitation for some scholars, movement for some others or protest for some. For example, the collective action of a section of society demanding the formation of a linguistic states in the 1950s was viewed as an 'agitation' by some and a movement by others, or the same scholars at a later stage saw 'agitations' transforming into 'movements' (Shah, 2002).

The forms of collective actions, agitations, protests, strikes are said to be the tools of social movement. Both 'social change' and 'social transformation' are long time processes. If society undergoes social transformation, the resulted change is permanent and it can not be undo. For example discontinuity in some traditional social practices can be said to be social transformation. It is not a direct process and it can not be planned. Social change is an outcome of various economic, social, political practices and it also cannot be undone. The relationship between movement and social change is incontrovertible. Social movements are essentially related to social change and

therefore to the social structure. This does not mean that social movement is a necessary condition of social change; on the contrary social change can take place independently of social movements (Rao, 1984).

A roadmap of naxalism in India

According to Kujur (2008):

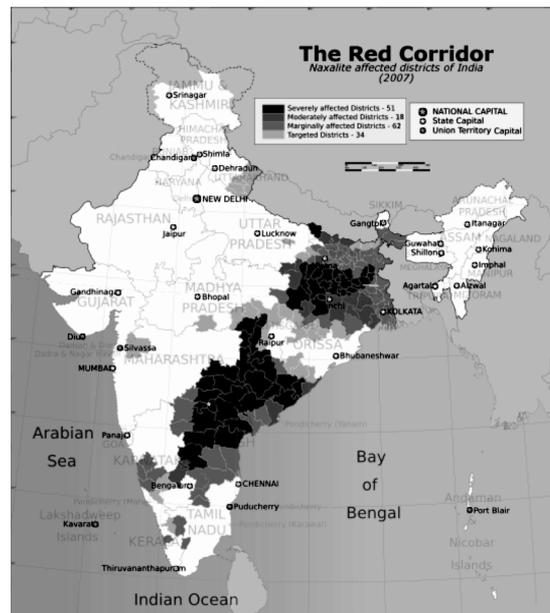
To understand the genesis of Naxal movement, we will have to locate it within the framework of the Communist movement in India. To be more specific, any study on the Naxal movement can not over look the importance of the rise and fall of the Telangana movement (1946-51), since Telangana will always remain the glorious chapter in the history of peasant struggles for Indian communists. So, the roots of the naxalite movement in India can be traced back to the rise and demise of the Telangana movement. It was the first peasant struggle organized by the Indian communists. In fact, it was the first serious effort by sections of communist party leadership to learn from the experiences of the Chinese revolution and to develop a comprehensive line for India's democratic revolution.

The present ideological and organizational split in the Communist Party of India can be traced back to the differences in the thinking of the Party's leadership during the last phase of the Telangana uprising (Ranga Rao, 1984). The second attempt in this regard started in a remote village called

Naxalbari in West Bengal. A tribal youth named Bimal Kissan, having obtained a judicial order, went to plough his land which was usurped by a landlord on March 2, 1967. The local landlords attacked him with the help of their goons. Tribal people of the area retaliated and started force fully recapturing their lands. Then on 18 March, 1967 – 16 days after the formation of the United Front government – a peasants’ conference was held under the auspices of the Siliguri subdivision of the CPI (M) leadership in the Darjeeling district. The conference gave a call for the ending of monopoly ownership of land by the landlords, redistribution of land through peasants’ committees and organizations and arming of the peasants to destroy the resistance of landlords and rural reactionaries (Banerjee, 2002). What followed was a rebellion which is still continuing and has since spread to almost 13 states and 246 districts of the country, which effectively constitutes almost one-third of the whole country. So, naxalism remains an area of serious concern.

In 2005, naxalite violence claimed over 660 lives as against 556 casualties in 2004. While the quantum of naxal violence registered a marginal increase of 3.8 per cent in 2005 over 2004, resultant casualties went up by 18.1 per cent (“Naxalism...,” 2007). In 2005, the states of Bihar and Jharkhand witnessed a few high profile incidents like looting of weapons from the Giridih Home Guard training centre (Jharkhand) and the Jehanabad jail break. However the overall naxal violence increased mainly in Andhra Pradesh due to stepped up violence by naxalites following their unilateral withdrawal from the peace talks and in Chhattisgarh mainly owing to greater offensive by naxalites to derail

Salva Judum, an anti-naxalite movement by local people which some people claim as vigilante groups set by government. In a recent address, the Prime Minister termed Naxalism as the single most dangerous internal security threat for the country. It is the most neglected areas of the country that Left Wing extremism thrives today. These are also the main recruiting grounds for naxalite outfits. While Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh are in the forefront of naxal related activities today, many other states remain vulnerable (Singh, 2007). The following map displays the total amount of area affected by the naxalites movement in India. From Bihar to Andhra Pradesh to West Bengal, it forms a red corridor.



Source: Retrieved 2013, August 31 from Wikipedia.

From the onset of this movement, the official approach of the government has been to subjugate the movement through security centric means by deploying the central forces. What government has failed to grasp is the reality of the mass support

which the naxalites enjoy among the tribals and dalits of these areas. The official apathy, lack of economic opportunities and poor living conditions has turned this populace towards the revolutionary ideas which these naxalites claim to propagate. Instead of fully implementing land reforms to alleviate their grievances—as suggested by many impartial observers as well as its own previously mentioned committee of 1969 – the Indian government chose the simplistic path of military suppression of peasant grievances. It unleashed a reign of terror on the naxalite bases and the villagers who supported them. Apart from the state repression, several splits within the naxalite movement in the 1970s weakened its capacity to resist the police and army offensive. By 1972, the Indian state had succeeded in defeating the naxalite rebellion to some extent. It was only after the lifting of the Emergency and the coming to power of the Janata Party at the Centre in New Delhi after the 1977 elections and following a wide scale movement organized by various human rights groups in India and abroad, that the naxalites were released from jails. The different naxalite factions and their leaders found an opportunity to meet and chart out their new path of action in the light of their past experiences. Although committed to the original strategy of eliminating the feudal order in rural India, they parted ways on the question of tactics – one group of followers deciding to lay stress on the parliamentary path of elections (e.g. the Liberation group of the CPI-M-L, concentrated in Bihar), and the others preferring to go back to the path of guerilla warfare, like the People's War Group (PWG) in Andhra Pradesh and Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) in Bihar. During the last two decades since the

1980s, these two different streams of Naxalite movement drifted along with their respective tactics – often fighting among themselves. It was after this period that the naxalites emerged as a serious challenge to the Indian state. They have also expanded their area of operations from their old pockets in West Bengal, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh in the 1970s to new guerilla zones in other states like Orissa, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh in the new millennium.

Analysis of category of naxalism

Social movement is a collective action by a group of people to bring about some social change. Social movements must have an agenda or aim. It should have some ideology. It is a large scale process. On the basis of these criteria if we will examine naxalism, we find that it has objective to achieve an egalitarian society. It is quite a large scale pervasive collective action as we have described in the previous section. But social movements must bring about some social change.

Social changes can be broadly classified in terms of changes occurring within structures and of changes of the structures themselves with or without replacement or by their qualitative change on account of the emergence of additional structures (Mukherjee, 1984). Such types of changes are not witnessed in naxalism. Naxalism has not brought about any change in the structure though they are intended to do so. But they have been successful in mobilizing people and mobilization is an essential part of movement. This social mobilization is directed towards a social change. What is peculiar to naxalism is not

the physical occupation of and administrative control over land by its leaders and followers, but its lasting popularity among the economically impoverished and socially oppressed rural people. Their pitiable living conditions nourish the soil for the rejuvenation of naxalism. Thus it fulfills the conditions of large scale mobilization of people, required to qualify it for social movement. It also has an ideology – the Marxist-Leninist ideology. As it is also described in the previous section, the ‘left’ movement in this country has been characterized by periodic splits. These splits have closely paralleled ideological rifts between dominant centres of international communism. The emergence of China as a major communist power in the East brought into existence a rival centre of Marxist-Leninist ideology which refused to accept the ideological hegemony of Soviet Russia in the world communist movement. Although this development had its reverberations in the Indian communist movement – first within the Communist Party of India (CPI) and then subsequent to the Sino-Indian armed confrontation, in the form of the birth of the Communist Party of India – Marxists (CPI-M) in 1964 – the movement, has to be examined in the context of the structural realities of our society and its propensities for change in the direction of a more egalitarian system (Sen Gupta, 1972). But it is still struggling to bring about some change in the lives of the people affected; neither has it changed their social status which is basic requirement to qualify for a social movement. Though naxalism has used unconventional methods to make them heard, it should not be considered a social movement unless it becomes able to make some kind of social change.

Revolutions call for total transformation. It requires a complete change from the past and it should involve a majority of people. Naxalism has the goal of total transformation in the existing system and it has been able to involve a majority of rural poor people in the struggle. But by far it has not been able to bring about a complete change in the system or complete structural or ideological transformation. It has the idea and the ongoing process which are essential for revolution. The naxalites have revolutionary spirit; they have required commitment towards the ideology, but they are still struggling. Naxalism has not generated well being for those whom it affects. But it fulfills the criteria of struggle against state or authority as it is continuously struggling against the state since its genesis. It is also violent in nature and called armed struggle by sociologists. Generally but not necessarily, revolutions are violent processes. So naxalism can be said to be revolutionary to some extent, but it still have to be successful to be qualified to become a revolution.

When the collective mobilization aims at effecting wide-ranging and far-reaching changes in the major institutional systems comprising the whole society, we can rightly term it a ‘revolutionary movement’. Collective mobilizations aimed at changes within a system are ‘quasi movement’ (Sen Gupta, 1972). When we examine naxalism on these parameters, we find that it has aim for complete transformation of the society and institution, but it can not be said to be a revolutionary movement as it is still in a nascent state to be a revolution. Before maturing into a revolutionary movement, it will have to pass through the phases of quasi-movement and social movement.

What we find common in all the above examinations that the basic element of 'change' is missing in naxalism. It is successful in mobilizing poor people, but it has been unsuccessful in bringing any positive change in their lives. They are struggling with state violently but unable to resist the suppression of the state. It is teaching people to fight for them against the authority which is considered illegal till the time they overtake the power. It is not self sustaining and sporadic in nature. This mobilization of people is not homogeneous, rather concentrated in some remote parts of country. It is programmed and planned by organisations involved. Thus we see that it has some characteristics of movement and some characteristics of revolution. Since movement is also an ongoing process, we can consider naxalism as a movement in process till the time it brings about some social change.

Conclusion

From the above discussion and analysis of the definitions of movement, revolutions, revolutionary change, social change and social transformation, we can say that naxalism is in the nascent stage. It contains some characteristics of movement and some characteristics of revolution, but it is moving towards a revolutionary movement. It can be converted into a revolutionary movement if it becomes able to more organise itself, mobilize a large number of people to transform the existing structure. We have Nazi and Bolshevik movements as good examples of revolutionary movements, since they transformed the structures of their systems. So naxalism has the potential to be converted into revolutionary movement

considering its large scale violent agitations. In spite of strong and brutal suppression of government, it is successful in surviving and thriving in many other parts of the country. It is said sometimes that even if naxalism declines and suppressed, its ideology will continue to threaten the Indian ruling powers as long as they fail to put an end to the grinding poverty and social oppression that crush the Indian poor. Though seeing the continuing violent activities of naxalism, it does not seem to be suppressed easily in near future.

References

- Benerjee, Sumanta. (2002). Naxalbari: Between past and future. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 37 (22).
- Burns, C. Delisle. (1920). *The principles of revolution: A study in ideals*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.
- Kujur, Rajat. (2008). *Naxal movement in India: A profile*. IPCS Research Paper. Retrieved from http://www.ipcs.org/pdf_file/issue/848082154R/P15-Kujur-Naxal.pdf.
- Mc Neese, Tim. (2005). *Revolutions: An Introduction*. Political Revolutions. Newyork: Infobase.
- Mukherjee, Partha. (1984). Naxalbari movement and the peasant revolt in North Bengal. In M.S.A. Rao (Ed.), *In Social movements in India*. Delhi: Manohar.
- Naxalism: The problem. (2007, February). *Yojana*, Vol. 51.
- Oomen, T. K. (2010). Introduction on the analysis of social movements. *Social movements I: Issues of identity*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

- Shah, Ghanshyam. (1990). *Social movements in India: A review of the literature*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Pincus, Steve. (2009). *Rethinking Revolutions. 1688: The First Modern Revolution*. London: Yale University Press.
- Ranga Rao, K. (1984). Peasant movements in Telangana. In M.S.A. Rao (Eds.) *Social movements in India*. Delhi: Manohar.
- Rao, M.S.A. (1984). Conceptual problems in the study of social movements. *Social movements in India*. Delhi: Manohar.
- Sengupta, Arjun. (2009). *Let us take a deep study on this Naxalite movement*. Retrieved from http://creative.sulekha.com/let-us-take-a-deep-study-on-this-naxalite-movement_412588_blog.
- Shah, Ghanshyam. (2002). Introduction. *Social movements and the State*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Singh, Manmohan. (2007 February). Issues and concerns. *Yojana*, Vol. 51.
- Wilson, John. (1973). *The nature and variety of social movements. Introduction to social movements*. New York: Basic Books.