



Situation Report: December 2012

Journalism in India's Maoist Areas Face Multiple Challenges

Introduction

The origins of the Maoist political current in India is conventionally dated to 1969. And the name “Naxalite” that it is commonly applied to it, originates from the district of Naxalbari in West Bengal state, where an uprising of peasant sharecroppers and farm workers, ignited a wave of violent agrarian unrest in India. Within months, the spirit of rebellion had taken hold of youth in several of the urban centres, most so in the eastern metropolis of Calcutta (now Kolkata). The uprising was contained through harsh police techniques to begin with and then brutally put down by a systematic policy of eliminating its main elements, without serious worries about “collateral damage”.

Maoism in India which was heavily invested in violent insurrectionary tactics, then splintered into myriad factions divided by doctrinal differences and the cult of individual leaders in the late-1970s and early-1980s. By the mid-1980s, three key factions had consolidated themselves: Peoples' War, the Maoist Coordination Centre (MCC) and the Unity Front. Their early operations were in the states of Andhra Pradesh in the south and Bihar in the east. Abductions of government officials, targeted attacks on police facilities and personnel and the occasional spectacular bomb attack were the stock in trade of the Maoists through this period. Concurrently, there was an effort to cultivate an urban constituency functioning in the open, engaged in cultural and information strategies. When renewed police repression seemed to be crushing their fresh stirrings, Maoist strategists evolved a strategy of seeking to build rearguard defences by moving into thickly wooded areas in northern Andhra Pradesh, which formed part of a contiguous stretch of dense forests stretching across the states of Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Maharashtra. Though the leadership to begin with, was predominantly drawn from the state of Andhra Pradesh, Maoist cadres began to be recruited from the ranks of the indigenous communities (called *adivasi* or “original dwellers” in most Indian languages and “scheduled tribes” in the bureaucratic language of the Indian state).

By the mid-1990s, the Maoist current in India was strong enough for the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in the Union Government to devote an elaborate discussion to the issue in each of its annual reports placed before Parliament. In 2000, giving into longstanding demands to recognise the ethnic particularities of districts in Madhya Pradesh and Bihar that had a heavy concentration of *adivasi* communities, two new states were created: Jharkhand was carved out of the southern districts of Bihar and Chhattisgarh was constituted as a state from the south-eastern parts of Madhya Pradesh.

India was strongly embarked on the path of integration with the global economy at this time and a new rush of investments into the extractive industries was beginning. It was a time when the states of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, and contiguous areas in Orissa

state – which are rich in iron ore and bauxite, to name only two minerals of special significance in today’s industrialising world – became the focus of special attention from major corporate entities engaged in mining and metallurgy. The state administrations that have since then assumed office in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Orissa have all at various times been found to have dealings with mining companies that have been on the border-line of legality, if not well beyond.

In 2004, the Peoples’ War group, which had already forged a common strategy with the Unity Front, merged with the MCC to form the Communist Party of India (Maoist) – or CPI(Maoist). Around the same time, the MHA set up a Naxal Management Division to coordinate the separate and often strategically unplanned responses of the authorities in the affected states, to the Maoist insurgency. In 2006, in an address to a high-powered policy gathering, India’s Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described the Maoist insurgency as the “single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by our country”.

At a time when public attention was focused both within India and elsewhere on the threats of terrorism inspired by varieties of religious fundamentalism, this remark by the Prime Minister set the stage for a shift in the national media agenda. Maoist actions which had till then been confined to local theatres and did not feature in a significant way in the national media agenda, were soon propelled to greater prominence in the national dialogue.

PATTERNS OF MAOIST VIOLENCE IN INDIAN STATES
(number of incidents; with number of lives lost in brackets)

Name of state	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Andhra Pradesh	461 (180)	346 (96)	575 (139)	310 (74)	532 (206)	183 (47)	138 (45)	92 (46)	66 (18)	100 (24)	54 (9)
Bihar	169 (111)	239 (117)	249 (127)	323 (171)	183 (94)	107 (45)	135 (67)	164 (73)	232 (72)	307 (97)	314 (62)
Chhattisgarh	105 (87)	304 (157)	254 (74)	352 (83)	380 (165)	715 (388)	582 (369)	620 (242)	529 (290)	625 (343)	465 (204)
Jharkhand	355 (200)	353 (157)	341 (117)	379 (169)	308 (118)	310 (124)	482 (157)	484 (207)	742 (208)	501 (157)	517 (182)
Maharashtra	34 (7)	83 (29)	74 (31)	84 (15)	95 (53)	98 (42)	94 (25)	68 (22)	154 (93)	94 (45)	109 (54)
Orissa	30 (11)	68 (11)	49 (15)	35 (8)	42 (14)	44 (9)	67 (17)	103 (101)	266 (67)	218 (79)	192 (53)
West Bengal	9 (4)	17 (7)	6 (1)	11 (15)	14 (7)	23 (17)	32 (6)	35 (26)	255 (158)	350 (258)	90 (41)

SOURCE: MINISTRY OF HOME AFFAIRS, GOVERNMENT OF INDIA, ANNUAL REPORTS (VARIOUS YEARS)

The state of Andhra Pradesh was in the early years of the last decade, the epicentre of Maoist insurgent activity. But following a landslide victory for the Congress party in the 2004 general elections to the state legislative assembly, the new government opened peace talks with the rebels, with well-respected civil liberties advocates playing a mediatory role. The graph of Maoist violence dipped in Andhra Pradesh in 2004, but then again began to ascend in 2005, when the peace talks broke down. In the following years, the graph of Maoist violence in Andhra Pradesh dropped rapidly. Though the full



story behind this is yet to be told, there is evidence that the Andhra Pradesh police had soon after the collapse of peace talks, put together a strategy that was indiscriminating in terms of target, but effective in eliminating – or at least exiling – the main elements of the Maoist leadership within its territory.

This seems to be the time when the strategy of the rear operational bases came into play, with a major escalation of Maoist violence in the states of Chhattisgarh and Orissa. Jharkhand, the third state that is part of this project, was always a state with a serious incidence of Maoist activity. There is a sharp upward spike here between 2007 and 2009, following which the graph seems to settle down. Bihar has had a consistent pattern of violence over the last decade. But clearly, if the current threats from the Maoist insurgency are reckoned as an average of the last five years, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Orissa are the three states with most serious issues.

By about 2005, the strategy to tackle the Maoist insurgency was also beginning to emerge with a fair degree of clarity from the security agencies. This included the promotion of active anti-insurgent groups ostensibly outside the formal control of the civil police and the effort to fragment the Maoist insurgents through aggressive counter-intelligence work. For journalists seeking to report on the security issues at that time, there were serious professional dilemmas involved in how best to respond to this complex mix of strategies.

What follows is an account of the particular challenges that journalists face in the three states of immediate concern. Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh were both formed as states within the Indian union at the same time. But they come from very different backgrounds. Jharkhand's capital Ranchi has been an industrial town for long and the nearby town of Jamshedpur was the site of India's first modern steel plant. Early industrialisation also brought with it a professional class of people who were a potential market for the news media. Jharkhand in this sense, has the oldest press traditions among the three states that are dealt with here.

Jharkhand

There are by journalists' estimates, around fifteen armed groups operating in Jharkhand which claim the mantle of revolutionary Maoism. There are perhaps many more vigilante armies which represent landed interests and the state's powerful mining lobby.

Most operations by the left-wing extremists (LWEs) as they are called in official-speak, alternative to the more familiar term "Naxals", are believed to be undertaken by the erstwhile MCC, which is now part of the CPI(Maoist). On December 3, 2011, Maoist insurgents triggered a landmine under the convoy of member of Parliament Inder Singh Namdhari, killing eleven, mostly police personnel. The MP himself escaped without serious harm. After a general strike called on November 26, to protest the elimination of one of their most senior leaders, Mallojula Koteswara Rao, *alias* Kishanji, in a district of West Bengal state adjoining Jharkhand two days before, this was the most dramatic retaliatory action by the Maoists. Two days later, the Maoists called an all-India strike, which had very little impact in most of the country, but succeeded in bringing much normal activity to a standstill in Jharkhand. The level of retaliatory violence after



Kishanji's killing was indeed, highest in Jharkhand among all the states affected by the Maoist insurgency.

Official statistics record in all states except Jharkhand, a decline in the number of lives lost in the Maoist insurgency in 2011. This may not necessarily suggest a trend, but the pattern of violence over the last decade shows that Jharkhand is a state with a persistent record of violence. And this is a state where the fog of conflict creates a high degree of uncertainty over the quarters from which the worst violence emanates. As an example, in November 2011, Sister Valsa John, who worked with a Catholic mission in Dumka in Jharkhand, was brutally murdered at her home late one night. The immediate public reaction was to put the blame on powerful mining interests which had created a parallel system of administration in the district, operating without any form of official sanction and digging up vast tracts of land that common people depended on. A few days later though, a possible Maoist hand began to be actively talked about, bolstered by a supposed claim of responsibility by an unnamed spokesman for the insurgents. The sister, according to this account, was murdered because she had let down the local *adivasi* communities and was working for the mining companies.

Journalists have necessarily to negotiate this fog of uncertainty in their daily work. They have to do so in a manner that does not endanger them or their sources. Just ahead of the IFJ's two day workshop with journalists in Jharkhand's capital city of Ranchi in February 2012, Maoist rebels called a 24-hour long statewide general strike. The provocation was the killing of a disabled young man a few days before by security forces who mistook him for a Maoist rebel. Maoist strike notices are routinely issued and the press in Jharkhand is obliged to carry them with the full knowledge that even a small news item is sufficient to paralyse the entire state. There is in other words, little time or opportunity to check out on the provenance of these strike notices, since few newspapers are willing to run the risks of disregarding them.

Jharkhand's journalists recall that in the early days of the Maoist rebellion, the press used to provide them generous and fairly uncritical coverage. A turning point may have been the general elections to the Indian parliament in 2004, when an overground left-wing faction, which had contested a few constituencies in Jharkhand, organised an assault on a journalist of the Hindi daily, *Hindustan*. The Jharkhand Union of Journalists declared a boycott of this political party soon afterwards, drawing forth an apology.

If journalists have the luxury of choosing their mode of engagement with left-wing parties that operate in the realm of electoral politics, they enjoy no such freedom in relation to the underground armed groups. The CPI(Maoist) and other left-wing factions frequently organise local assemblies (called *jan adalat*) of people in the areas they operate in. Journalists working in nearby areas are often invited by a summary knock on the door at a late hour of the night to attend. This manner of invitation is more like an order and the option of declining it is not available.

Nagendra Sharma, a veteran writer and journalist based in Palamu district of Jharkhand, had one such summons in May 2002. A central committee member of the MCCI as it was then, was holding an open court and he was required to attend. As he was heading for the location under Maoist escort, the group received word that the meeting had been



postponed since the police had got wind of it and cordoned off the area. Shortly afterwards, they received news of a police raid and a gunfight in which the top Maoist leader had been injured. Sharma's escorts led him away to a safe zone, where they abandoned their battle gear and left. But the district police superintendent, who was overseeing the security operations then, soon arrived at the spot and took Sharma into custody. He was accused of being an accessory of the Maoists and warned of possible action under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PoTA), a law enacted in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the U.S., which permitted preventive detention for extended periods of time.

Nagendra Sharma was taken in and held without charges being formally laid. Journalists in the Jharkhand state capital as well as the national capital launched a campaign for his release. But it took eleven months for him to regain his freedom. Even today, Sharma feels compelled to respond to every summons from the Maoists. He has arrived at an understanding with both sides to the conflict that has since held. Though clearly sceptical about the heavyhanded approach of the police to the insurgency, he has found that the security agencies depend on journalists to an extent to figure out what the Maoist strategic line is at particular points of time. And even if the journalists when they come to know of operational details are under compulsion to not reveal them for fear of reprisal, the Maoists are known not to seriously worry about discussions at the doctrinal and strategic level between them and the law and order agencies. Over a decade of intensifying conflict, Sharma believes, the police have arrived at the realisation that they cannot afford to alienate the media community, which is in vital ways, a major conduit for information.

The continuing hazards for journalists are reflected in the two administrative blocks in Ranchi district, each within less than an hour's drive of the state capital, which have no media persons at all. Indeed, journalists estimate that of the eighty-one legislative constituencies in the Jharkhand state assembly, Maoist concurrence is required to conduct polling in all but eleven.

Pratap Singh is a journalist based in a rural part of Ranchi district who is associated with the daily *Hindustan*. Just by virtue of the position he holds and his location, any story published in the newspaper with a reference to his area of residence, is attributed to him. When one such story appeared in 2003, the MCC local command issued an order that his hand should be cut off. He had to go into hiding for two months after which he went personally to meet the MCC's local leader to argue his case. He was granted a reprieve from the sentence of amputation, but remembers that it was a time when he had little support from his employers, for whom he is obliged to work without a letter of appointment or an official identity card.

More recently, Pratap Singh obtained the record of the police interrogation of a captured militant of one of the smaller insurgent groups, in which he admitted to having set off a number of arson attacks on public facilities. The group concerned is believed to have often been used for strategic advantage by the state security agencies in their operations against the CPI(Maoist). The arrest and interrogation of the militant may have been the outcome of a lack of coordination between different arms of the police force. Pratap Singh's story got him into trouble. In November 2009, he was attacked in a public



spot with bludgeons and suffered serious head injuries. He was hospitalised for three months and incapacitated in all, for six. The JUU and local civil society groups in Ranchi mobilised the funds required for his medical treatment.

The absence of firm employer commitment seriously impairs the effectiveness of journalists covering the Maoist situation. In 2004, Ajit Jaiswal, a freelance writer who contributes to many of the mass circulation Hindi dailies in Jharkhand, was travelling into a Maoist zone when he was taken captive. The leader of the Maoist unit asked him to prove his identity as a journalist. He had no papers but put through a call to the newspaper that he was then on assignment with. The editor reportedly declined to identify him. He finally extricated himself from the situation only by virtue of his own skills of persuasion and negotiation.

Dhyanchand Paswan, a journalist working in Palamu district, was forced to leave his home village in 2004 because he had consistently refused to file news stories based on Maoist statements. He returned after seven years in exile and set up a newspaper agency. He does not engage in journalism any more.

Often a minor deficit in conflict sensitivity in editorial centres, where headlines are decided and pages made up, causes complications for journalists in the field. Ranganath Chaube, a journalist with a number of Hindi language dailies was in 2003 invited to attend a Maoist observance of “martyrs’ day”, customarily held on April 24. He was given a media release on the occasion which declared a large part of Ranchi and adjoining districts as a “liberated zone”. The story duly appeared in the Hindi daily, *Hindustan*. A box item was carried alongside, which was not sourced but obviously drawn from an informant in the police department or some other part of the security apparatus, which spoke of a Maoist leader called Chander Ganjor being spotted and possibly being in the cross-hairs of the anti-insurgency operation.

Though the box item did not carry his credit-line, Chaube was held responsible for it by the Maoist leadership, simply because it was printed in close proximity to his own. A number of hostile telephone calls followed, compelling Chaube had to explain in the interests of self-preservation, that he was not responsible for the box item. A few weeks later, on the strength of the report that did bear his credit-line and the telephone calls that he was compelled to take to explain his plight, Chaube was identified in a memorandum sent by the police to the local member of Parliament, as one among a number of journalists with hard-core Maoist commitments.

Strategic use of the Maoist factions in anti-insurgency operations introduces one element of hazard for journalists. Another arises from the tacit collusion between big industrial houses and the Maoists. In late-2011, the security forces completed a major cordon and search operation in the Saranda forests area at the trijunction of the three states of Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal. A number of Maoist operational bases were discovered and dismantled, though not before valuable documentation was recovered. The security agencies found, indeed, that a number of very important mining companies had been paying regular levies to the Maoist groups to carry on their activities in the Saranda area.

Journalists in Jharkhand also narrate a story of seeming collusion between Maoists and the mining interests in thwarting the inquiries of an official commission of inquiry into allegations of rampant illegality. The evidence is anecdotal, but fits in with a broader pattern of behaviour. Mid-April 2012, the M.B. Shah Commission of Inquiry – headed by a former judge of the Supreme Court of India – visited Jharkhand’s state capital, Ranchi, for a two-day public hearing on illegalities in the mining sector. All formal requirements of issuing public notices were observed. But the turnout at the public hearing was abysmal, with journalists far outnumbering those who had some testimony to offer the Commission. Following this, the Commission was due to visit certain key mining areas in the state over a three-day schedule. Coincidentally or otherwise, just as it prepared for each of these visits, it was informed of Maoist intent to impose a total closure in the relevant area. The Commission was persuaded on security grounds, to cancel their visits following these Maoist announcements.

The mining companies involved control large territories in Jharkhand state. They also have great influence over the media agenda, by virtue of being big advertisers. Aside from this mode of “hidden persuasion”, they have varieties of coercive instruments to ensure that the media discourse does not threaten their basic interests. Jharkhand’s journalists in fact, have a number of stories to narrate about how the rush of mining corporations into the state has deeply influenced the media agenda and made their task additionally complicated.

The nexus between the mining industry, the local government which has the authority to grant approval for opening new mines, and the Maoist insurgency, was best captured in the case of Madhu Koda, chief minister of Jharkhand for a little less than two years between 2006 and 2008. He resigned his position after a change of allegiances within Jharkhand’s legislative assembly deprived him of a clear majority. Koda won the general elections to Parliament in May 2009, but soon afterwards, a number of agreements he had signed with mining companies without following prescribed norms, came to light. Investigations by the revenue authorities identified a probable amount of Rs 4000 crore (or forty billion, equivalent at current exchange rates to roughly USD 700 million) as his illegal aggrandisement through the sale of mining leases. About 30 percent of this illegally earned money was estimated to have been channelled to various Maoist outfits. Koda was arrested in October 2009 amid much media coverage of his illegally earned money, believed to have been secreted in a number of locations, such as real estate in Mumbai and Kolkata and mining assets in Thailand and Liberia. Koda continues to be in detention, though in a zone of media neglect. He is allowed to exercise his rights as a member of Parliament by voting on crucial matters, such as the election of the Indian president in July 2012.

At the lower end of the chain of illegal activities in the extractive industries, journalists Jitendra Kumar in Goala village in Ramgarh district and Mobin Akhtar, both journalists working with mass circulation Hindi dailies, wrote in December 2010 and January 2011 about illegal coal mining activities in the area. Shortly afterwards when they were travelling together in a part of the district on assignment, they were surrounded by coal traders who abused and roughed them up. Kumar and Akhtar went to the local police station to register a complaint but were met with complete indifference. Later, with top editorial staff intervening and the chief of the state police, the Director-General being

informed of this delinquency by lower order personnel, the complaint was registered. But neither Kumar nor Akhtar is aware of any further progress in investigating the case or bringing the guilty to account.

As in other states covered by this study, journalists in Jharkhand, both in the state capital and the districts, face a variety of other difficulties in their effort to pursue their craft with honesty and integrity. The few who are granted credentials from their news organisations are obliged to use these to harvest ads, rather than gather news. National holidays such as Independence Day, Republic Day and Gandhi Jayanti are known to be occasions when authorities in both the state capital and the districts, issue a number of ads in local media. Journalists are under acute pressure on all these occasions to line up before the relevant authorities to gather ads for their news organisations. Failure to do so would be held against them by their employers. And those with the greatest success in this mission are invariably those who are most willing to sacrifice their independence and journalistic autonomy.

There is a potential new hazard for journalists in the security strategies being thought of, to expand the recruitment of “special police officers” (SPOs). This category of official is employed by the state police on a part-time basis and would be, with a few exceptions, unarmed. Given the nature of the Maoist organisation and their widely dispersed presence, the SPOs would be expected to monitor insurgent movements in remote and lightly policed areas. This counter-insurgency strategy has been controversial because it empowers individuals without too much training and expertise, to join the security apparatus. It is also a risky strategy for the individuals concerned. But Jharkhand’s journalists fear that some among them, frustrated by the continuing crisis of livelihoods they face, may be tempted to take up the opportunity. That could be another serious crisis of credibility for the news gathering and dissemination process.

Chhattisgarh

In 2005, the state government in Chhattisgarh introduced a special security law to tackle the Maoist insurgency. The Chhattisgarh Special Public Safety Act, 2005 includes a number of harsh provisions which enable preventive detention on suspicion of Maoist involvement. The clauses moreover, are worded with a great degree of ambiguity, which allow a wide amplitude in their application by the state authorities. This was seen by journalists and civil society actors as an attempt to stifle critical commentary, even on matters of public importance.

The definition of “unlawful activities” in the act is believed to be very broad, and covers acts or written, spoken or visual representations that:

- Pose a danger or fear thereof in relation to public order, peace or tranquillity;
- Pose an obstacle to the maintenance of public order, or which has a tendency to pose such obstacle;
- Pose, or has a tendency to pose an obstacle to the administration of law or to institutions established by law or the administration of their personnel;
- Intimidate any public servant of the state or central government by use of criminal force or display of criminal force or otherwise;

- Involves the participation in, or advocacy of, acts of violence, terrorism or vandalism, or in other acts that have a tendency to instil fear or apprehension among the public or which involves the use, or the spread or encouragement, of fire-arms, explosives or other devices which destroy the means of communication through the railways or roads; or
- Encourage the disobedience of the established law or the institutions set up by law, or which involves such disobedience

The state government is also believed to have created a parallel arm of the security agencies in 2005 called the Salwa Judum or “peace force”, which was portrayed in its early years as a spontaneous uprising of local communities against the Maoist insurgency. Salwa Judum led a number of punitive raids in the first three years of its existence against villages suspected of harbouring Maoist sympathisers. Collective punishment and forced resettlement became the norm. A young freelance journalist, Kamlesh Painkra, who reported on the string of atrocities that the group had committed, was harassed and on one occasion attacked. He had for his own safety, to leave his home in Bijapur. Another journalist, Mohammad Afzal Khan, who wrote a number of reports on Salwa Judum for the daily newspaper *Hindsat*, was brutally assaulted, leaving him with severe injuries and fractured bones. He left journalism for a while after that but is now believed to have returned to filing stories for *Hindsat*. On the other side, the Maoists were also believed to have started issuing regular warnings to journalists for their supposed “misreporting”.

Around September 2009, the Indian Government in partnership with police in the most seriously affected states began an anti-insurgency drive that is still under way and has claimed several lives. This has created a palpable sense of siege among journalists in Chattisgarh. In October 2009, three journalists in Chattisgarh were issued notices by police ordering them to reveal the sources of news reports. Two journalists working for widely circulated Hindi-language dailies were asked to reveal their sources by police in the district of Dantewada in the southern part of the state, for a report suggesting that innocent villagers were killed in an anti-insurgency operation by security forces. In a separate case, a TV news reporter was asked to present himself to police in Kanker district, for broadcasting a Maoist claim of responsibility for the murder of a political figure.

Aggressive countermeasures

A senior police officer in Chattisgarh was also reported to have sanctioned aggressive measures, including firing at journalists who crossed into the state from neighbouring districts of Andhra Pradesh to report on anti-insurgency operations. The local journalists’ union, the Chattisgarh Shramjeevi Patrakar Sangh (CSPS), held a meeting on 12 October 2009 to discuss the threats. It resolved to undertake a campaign to generate public awareness on media freedom in a situation of sharpening conflict. Yet, with levels of violence increasing since then, journalism remains a threatened activity. Media persons crossing into Maoist-controlled hamlets or villages are routinely harassed and detained for questioning on their return. The Maoist influence has spread most rapidly in regions where structures of governance are absent or in serious disrepair. Yet critical reporting on issues of governance is actively discouraged and portrayed by the security forces, as legitimising Maoist violence.



With the escalation of anti-insurgency operations and a heightened level of political rhetoric on the threat posed by the Maoist insurgency to national security, active efforts were under way in Chattisgarh – often through the use of the special security law – to silence critical reporting. Independent journalism came to be viewed as an enemy activity that lends comfort to insurgent groups.

In December 2010, explicit death threats were made against three journalists based in the southern district of Dantewada in Chhattisgarh state, by a vigilante group believed to be part of a covert operation to combat a long-running Maoist insurgency. An unsigned letter issued in the name of the Adivasi Swabhimaani Manch (which loosely translates as “Forum for Advancement of the Indigenous Communities”) was circulated on December 11, which sharply attacked the Maoist insurgents for the havoc they had caused to civic life in Chhattisgarh. The letter warmly commended a police official who had taken charge in the district of Dantewada some months before, for the firmness of his resolve in combating the Maoists. It then proceeded to identify three local journalists by name and warned them that they could not for long live “under the garb of human rights” and would meet a “dog’s death” if they did not leave the region.

The journalists mentioned were N.R.K. Pillay, vice-president of the state-wide union of working journalists, the Chhattisgarh Shramjeevi Patrakar Sangh (CSPS), Anil Mishra, former district correspondent of the Hindi language daily *Nai Duniya*, and Yashwant Yadav of *Deshbandhu*, a widely-read and respected Hindi daily in the state. Initial complaints by the targeted journalists with local police officials were reportedly met with indifference. On December 12, an audio report on the death threats issued against the three journalists was posted by the web-based citizen journalism portal, CGNet *Swara*. Mangal Kunjam, the young reporter who phoned in with the story to the news portal, was reportedly called into the Kirandul police station in Dantewada district subsequently and warned of serious consequences.

The CSPS took up the matter with local authorities and also sent a delegation to the state government to make a case for serious investigations into the death threat. Aside from routine expressions of concern and an assurance that the matter would be investigated, there was little else that they managed to extract from the state government.

In March 2010, journalists seeking to visit the site of a major security operation against Maoist insurgents, to report on its aftermath, were prevented from proceeding towards the spot. According to reports in two major English-language dailies, *The Hindu* and *The Times of India*, journalists travelling to the affected sites in the district of Dantewada in the south of the state were on occasion trailed by policemen and repeatedly blocked and told to turn back. The journalists were assigned to report on allegations that a number of tribal villages in the thickly forested district had been razed, and many inhabitants rendered homeless.

The first report suggesting the possibility of civilian suffering in the anti-insurgency operation, was broadcast over the mobile telephone-based community radio service and internet portal CGNet *Swara*, on March 18, on the basis of eye-witness accounts from the affected villages. Given the difficulties of the terrain, established news media took a

number of days to locate the relevant sites. The active effort by local police to deny access added to the already considerable difficulties that journalists face.

Since then, there was a sequence of incidents in which journalists seeking to travel to the scene of a purported armed encounter between security forces and Maoist insurgents were blocked and assaulted, reportedly with the sanction of the police. Following initial media reports that a number of homes in the tribal village of Tarmedla and its environs had been razed by security forces as reprisal for a Maoist attack on an armed patrol, the district administration in Dantewada constituted a special team to determine the facts and distribute relief supplies. *Bastar Impact* editor Suresh Mahapatra was accompanying the team to Tarmedla on March 25, when it was intercepted *en route* by a group that reportedly included police personnel. The driver of one of the vehicles carrying relief supplies to the displaced families was beaten up, government officials in the team were compelled to turn back and one of the team's cars was damaged in a collision, seemingly deliberate, with a truck. The journalists were allowed to proceed, but were reportedly trailed by police vehicles on their return journey. On reaching the district headquarters town, the journalists learnt of an arrest warrant against them for allegedly ramming their vehicle into a truck.

The journalists were spared further harassment by the intervention of top officials of the civil administration. On March 25, 2010, a team led by the social activist and former member of Parliament, Swami Agnivesh, was intercepted and forced to turn back when on its way to Tarmedla. Journalists travelling with the team had their laptop computers and cameras snatched, though these were later returned. Agnivesh sought yet again to make the trip to Tarmedla the following day, after an assurance of safe passage from the highest elected official of the state, Chief Minister Raman Singh. Though granted police protection on this phase of his mission, the team was met in the Dornapal area, by a large group of local residents who heckled its members and assaulted the journalists. The police reportedly did little to contain the violence after the leader of their party, an officer of the rank of Additional Superintendent, was pushed aside and injured. During the incident Zee TV correspondent Naresh Mishra, a senior member of the local working journalists' union, the Chhattisgarh Shramjeevi Patrakar Sangh, became separated from the media group and suffered a severe beating. Azad Saxena of the ETV news channel had to seek shelter in a village for several hours before returning home much later. The windows of the car that his colleague, cameraman Srinivas was travelling in, were shattered. A journalist who had come across from the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh, Venu Gopal, was also reported missing for several hours, though he since found his way back home.

Little commitment to investigate

On March 27, journalists demonstrated in solidarity of their colleagues in Jagdalpur, the principal town of the Bastar region. An assurance by the state authorities that the entire incident would be probed however, has not yet been fulfilled.

In September 2011, a tribal youth who was actively involved in citizen journalism networks, Lingaram Kodopi, was arrested on charges of raising funds for a banned underground insurgent group. As a journalist from an indigenous community, Kodopi is a rarity in Chhattisgarh. With his unique access to the lives of a very substantial part of the

state's population, he had been seeking to bring these most often unheard voices into the public discourse. Kodopi's reporting through mobile phone and internet-based citizen journalism service [CGNet Swara](#) was instrumental in bringing to light serious civilian casualties inflicted by a major anti-insurgency operation in Tarmedla in March. Observers in Chhattisgarh believe that his arrest was probably in retribution for this and several previous reports that he filed.

Reports also indicated that Kodopi has had a history of victimisation at the hands of the state police force. He was arrested in August 2009 and held for forty days and only released early in October after his family filed a *habeas corpus* petition in the state high court.

In July 2010, he was named by the Superintendent of Police in the southern district of Dantewada in Chhattisgarh state, as the mastermind behind an attack on the residence of a local political leader, in which one person was killed. He was at the time, enrolled in a journalism institute in a suburb of Delhi, undergoing a year-long training programme. Kodopi was then named as the potential successor to a top leadership position in the Maoist hierarchy after its occupant had been killed in a supposed armed encounter with the police in the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh. Several prominent civil rights campaigners in Delhi were named as his accomplices

When Kodopi appeared in court in Dantewada on November 1, he met with members of his family and informed them that he had been forced to sign a number of blank sheets of paper while in custody. His aunt Soni Sori, a schoolteacher, has also been detained along with him and reportedly mistreated in prison. The charges against them, though not formally framed as yet, involves the transfer of a large sum of money from a big mining enterprise with major stakes in Chhattisgarh, to units of the Maoist underground. The corporate official who was also arrested for being the primary source of the funds, has since been released on bail. Kodopi and Sori continue to be held without bail.

The power wielded by the extractive industries in Chhattisgarh was again highlighted in the criminal assault in April 2012 on Kamal Shukla, district bureau chief in Kanker of the Hindi daily *Rajasthan Patrika*. The assault was in retaliation for a series of reports that appeared in the local press under Shukla's name, exposing the illegal clearing of protected forests in the region. Shukla was attacked late on the evening at his office in the district headquarters town of Kanker. His principal assailant, who entered his office and repeatedly hit him with an iron rod, was identified as a local political activist. Two others reportedly stood at the doorway to ensure that nobody could come to Shukla's assistance. Shukla suffered severe bruises on his shoulder and back and had to be hospitalised five days for urgent medical attention. His laptop computer and camera – both uninsured and acquired through his own resources -- were destroyed in the attack.

After his newspaper proved reluctant to publish, Shukla's first report on illegal forest felling in Chhattisgarh was broadcast over the mobile-phone based citizen journalism site CGNet Swara late in March. Following that a number of local newspapers picked up the story, publishing details of the illicit operations carried out by a village council head, who also happens to be a brother of the state's Minister for Forests.

Another category of hazard

An entirely different category of hazard was apparent in the case of the young photojournalist Tarun Sehrawat, who died in June 2012 after contracting multiple infections on assignment in the Abujmarh region of Chhattisgarh. Sehrawat was on assignment with the weekly news and current affairs magazine *Tehelka* and with his colleague, reporter Tusha Mittal, spent a week early in May in the thickly forested area, believed to be among the main operational bases of the Maoist insurgency. Their account of life in an area that remains for the most part beyond the media gaze, was published in the print edition of the magazine dated May 12.

Both Sehrawat and Mittal came down with severe infections and fevers at about the same time. Mittal recovered after two weeks under intensive care but Sehrawat was hit by a combination of jaundice, typhoid and malaria, and slipped into a coma. He regained consciousness early in June, but suffered a severe cerebral haemorrhage on June 10. He died on June 15 aged 22, the cause of death identified as cerebral malaria.

Sehrawat was a young professional who lost his life to the growing trend within the news industry to ignore older values in pursuit of competitive advantage. *Tehelka* is a journal that has invested in getting the real stories out of Chhattisgarh, often at considerable risk of ostracism by advertisers and by state authorities. But as the *Tehelka* editor put it in a piece that first alerted the world to his medical crisis, he and his colleague ventured into the densely forested and sparsely populated region in pursuit of the story, with little else than a day's supply of water and perhaps a few hours' supply of food. The imperatives of care and preparation, when assigning reporters to areas of potential safety risk and health hazard, were in other words, completely ignored.

Random acts of vengeance can also kill in Chhattisgarh, as the case of Umesh Rajput, reporter with the Hindi daily *Nai Duniya* in Raipur district in January 2010 tells us. Rajput was called out of his home on the evening of January 23 by two unidentified men and shot dead as he emerged. Since then, a local doctor and his assistant were taken into custody. Two weeks before his murder Rajput filed a story alleging that the doctor was guilty of negligence in performing eye surgery, which resulted in serious post-operative problems for a patient. He had been threatened by individuals believed to be acting on the doctor's behalf and had filed a complaint with the local police. Since his murder though, the doctor was released on grounds of a lack of evidence. No arrests have been made since.

There are a number of issues that journalists in Chhattisgarh face, which are shared with colleagues in other parts of the country. A lack of professional recognition, indifferent employers who regard them as easily replaceable and do not invest in safety, or in training in the basic norms of the craft, and a governmental apparatus that is eager to exploit them to spread a message of conformity, but quick to disown them at the first hints that they could dissent from the narrative they seek to foster. There are several possible protections against these hazards, but these would need to be pursued in concert with journalists from other regions, and in unity.

Orissa

Many of the elements that have been identified in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh as factors that actively militate against a free press, are manifest also in Orissa. The growing power of the extractive industries in terms of their advertising budgets and their direct ownership of media, the persistent lack of recognition of journalists as a professional category that fulfils a particularly vital role in meeting the public need for information, and the alacrity with which media houses abandon staff who are seen to be on the wrong side of the authorities, and in particular, the security agencies.

In August 2011, the Orissa state government was considerably embarrassed by the leak of a report by the Lok Pal, a watchdog body tasked with overseeing the integrity of the administrative processes, indicating that rules had been flouted in the allotment of land for a university that Vedanta, a mining conglomerate based in London, proposed to set up in the state. This finding came on the heels of earlier revelations that Vedanta had acquired mining rights over a vast tract of land in Orissa, threatening large communities with displacement, and shown little concern over abiding by commitments made on proper rehabilitation.

Curiously, the immediate response of the state government was to threaten legal action against the media that had carried the report of the Lok Pal report, for breach of legislative privilege. That threat passed, but not without observations by the state's journalism unions over the skewed priorities of a government that saw little amiss in keeping a report confidential for months together and effectively denying legislators the right to know about a matter of public importance.

Orissa's journalists have recently organized to produce two important reports on the status of their profession. Media Unity for a Free Press (MUFP), formed to bridge some of the differences in perception between the state's various unions, produced a comprehensive report in 2010, which drew attention to the disproportionate influence of the mining industry over the media agenda, and recorded numerous cases of journalists being attacked, obstructed or rudely rebuffed in the performance of their duties. Following this, the Free Speech Hub, hosted on the website of the Media Foundation, www.thehoot.org, came up with a report of its own, which pointed to a very similar set of problems that the media in Orissa face.

Maoists are not seen to be an active threat to journalists in most of Orissa. There are dangers which could arise from perceived mis-steps by the journalists, as when they wrongly identify elements within the Maoist hierarchy, or err in attributing certain matters of fact and opinion to the insurgents. For journalists in the districts of most active insurgency, such as Koraput, Malkangiri and in recent times, Kandhamal, the difficulty is that the insurgents allow no flexibility. They are obliged to file stories on the basis of statements received from the underground groups and no departure from the dictated text will be tolerated.

A summons that cannot be disregarded

As in Jharkhand, journalists have no options but to accede to every summons that they receive from the Maoists. Several have been called into insurgent camps deeply



embedded in the forests of western Orissa, to be given tutorials on how they should report and to be harangued on the lack of merit of certain journalists.

Journalists who are seen to be receiving frequent summons from the Maoists in turn come under the scrutiny of the intelligence agencies. Several journalists in Orissa report having been called into police stations and intelligence bureaus to be quizzed on the activities of their professional colleagues.

The singular focus on the Maoist insurgency is a source of professional frustration. As a journalist from the district of Koraput puts it, there have been few occasions in the recent past when he and his colleagues have felt free to report on the larger problems facing the people in his area. Poverty is rampant, the social infrastructure creaky, school enrollment is plunging and the health system is in a state of collapse. The insurgency, he says, has created an atmosphere in which professional recognition is only accorded to journalists who show the spirit of adventure to bring out stories from its most remote recesses.

Journalists from the theatres of most active insurgency also are threatened by opinions published in their media on the basis of their primary reports. Conflict between different tiers of the news aggregation process is a constant difficulty. Facts are gathered locally; they are assembled into news stories elsewhere; and an embellishment of opinion is added later. Insurgents and security personnel are never very sensitive to these matters of detail in the news industry. In their perception, the local person who is within their line of sight, has to bear the entire burden of responsibility.

Arbitrary arrest

There is also the ever-present danger of arbitrary arrest. In September 2009, Laxman Choudhary, a journalist for the daily *Sambad* in Orissa, was arrested on charges of “waging war against the state”. The arrest followed the discovery of a parcel containing Maoist literature addressed to Choudhary in the possession of a bus conductor. Journalists in Orissa believe that Choudhary, a popular figure in his home district of Gajapati, was targeted for exposing through a series of reports, a nexus between a local narcotics ring and the police. The Orissa Union of Journalists took a forthright stand on the issue and managed by presenting all the facts of the case to the chief minister of the state, Naveen Patnaik, to draw a sharp reaction from him, criticising the arrest as a violation of basic democratic freedoms.

Choudhary believes that the package that was ostensibly addressed to him was most probably planted by the police. He was charged under some of the most draconian provisions of the Indian Penal Code and kept for seventy-three days in custody, never once produced in court. He was finally released in early December 2009, on bail bond of Rs 25,000. He is now obliged to present himself every week at the nearest police station. The cases lodged against him -- of sedition and waging war against the state -- are yet to be withdrawn.

On July 17, 2008, police personnel conducting a guard of honour for colleagues killed the previous day in a Maoist landmine attack, began an unprovoked attack on journalists gathered to cover the event. Information received from IFJ partners indicated that the



police seemed to specially target journalists from other states. Cameras were snatched and damaged and vehicles ransacked in the course of the fracas. Because Malkangiri lies at a three-way junction of the boundaries between states that are all areas of Maoist insurgency, it is customary for news organisations to assign journalists from neighbouring states for coverage of events in the district.

Anil Reddy, a reporter with the news channel TV9, based in Bhadrachalam in the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh, was seriously injured in the incident. Shaikh Maqbool, a reporter with the Hindi daily *Nai Duniya*, based in Dantewada in the state of Chattisgarh, was also hurt, as was M.V. Chari, a reporter with the Telugu language daily, *Vishal Andhra*.

Journalists in Orissa also often worry about the common police practice to send their personnel into danger zones in the guise of media persons. The most conspicuous recent instance of such practice by the police forces came from the state of West Bengal, which is on the periphery of the Maoist insurgency region. On September 26, 2009, Chhatradhar Mahato, the leader of a political group supposedly aligned with the banned Maoist party was arrested by police masquerading as journalists. Mahato had established a body under the title "People's Committee against Police Atrocities" in the town of Lalgarh in Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal in November the previous year. He had been in hiding in Lalgarh, managing to evade repeated search operations by state police. He was however available to media personnel, who typically faced no hazards in meeting and interviewing him.

In laying a trap for Mahato, West Bengal state police reportedly tapped into the telephone calls of some journalists who had access to Mahato. Around the middle of 2009, police pretending to be reporters for a Singapore-based news channel contacted Mahato asking for an interview. Two such "interviews" were reportedly conducted and the police posing as media were since in touch with Mahato by phone. The arrest was effected by armed police as Mahato presented himself for a purported media interview.

The IFJ had then protested, on behalf of all Indian affiliates, that the police operation compromised the status of journalists and spread a pall of suspicion over the profession. For journalists in India's Maoist belt, the singular message to campaign on is the right to meet and interview individual news-makers, irrespective of their status under the law. This principle, which is grounded in the public right to know, should apply even when the individual concerned is wanted under the law. The West Bengal incident was seen to seriously impede the freedom that journalists in India enjoy to access breaking news stories and to meet and interview all parties in any evolving situation. The surveillance operations carried out on journalists who had met and interviewed Mahato were, of course, another matter of serious concern.

Summation

Hazards for journalists in the Maoist areas have been mounting in recent years, with levels of violence increasing and the demands from the insurgents for favourable and uncritical coverage becoming insistent.



Splits within the Maoist ranks and the tendency for the security agencies to occasionally make strategic use of one faction against another, poses another element of hazard for journalists.

Since Maoist cadres often call them on their cell-phones to provide updates and opinions, there is a widespread suspicion among journalists in these three states that their phones are constantly tapped.

Also, since journalists generally encounter little problem in accessing Maoist operational areas, police personnel have on occasion been known to use media identities to infiltrate these areas for intelligence gathering. This makes journalists liable to acts of retribution by the Maoists.

Maintaining a sense of proportion is a constant challenge since every Maoist action is magnified in its impact by the aura of fear that prevails. A general strike call for instance, could emanate from operationally very weak quarters of the Maoist insurgency, but would paralyse life in large parts of these states, even if featured as a small news story in the local media.

The climate of insurgency has also skewed the system of rewards and incentives for journalists. Recognition is granted to a professional journalist only if he or she is able to bring out seemingly sensational stories from the Maoist operational areas. Reporting on the general state of poverty and deprivation in the region and the poor state of social services, which are the background conditions in which the Maoist rebellion has taken root, fetches few rewards.

Police personnel in these states also are known to use the special powers they have been conferred, to occasionally crack down on critical journalists, often using the most draconian provisions of the law such as those pertaining to sedition.

Apart from these hazards, journalists work in conditions of negligible professional security. Few of them have letters of appointment and they mostly work at salary levels well below the subsistence minimum. Most of them are required to multi-task and perform the function of mobilising advertisements for their media, severely impairing their independence and ability to take a critical stance towards administrative officials and local notables who dispose of substantial ad budgets.

The system of issuing press credentials in these states remains opaque and unprofessional. Media owners are known to dominate the process and to corner available quotas in the issue of official press accreditation cards, which enable quick access to official spaces.

The meeting adopted a campaign plank that put forward a set of specific demands, including insurance cover for all journalists assigned to work in districts of active Maoist insurgency, and special credentials for media personnel, including if necessary district-level accreditation for these individuals.



It was proposed that journalists' unions in these states should launch a campaign to generate public awareness on the need for the media to work in an environment free of fear. To this end, they would seek to secure a public declaration from all sides in the conflict, that media would be granted unfettered access to all sites of news importance.

A safety code suitable to local situations would be evolved and coordination between editorial departments and reporters in the field improved to ensure that news headlines, layouts and presentation do not misrepresent realities and create avoidable risks for the latter.

Finally, unions in all these states have resolved to expand their membership and to provide unrepresented journalists a platform. Till such time that issues of accreditation are resolved, the unions have undertaken to campaign strongly to ensure that the identity cards they issue are accepted by all sides as adequate proof of media credentials.

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