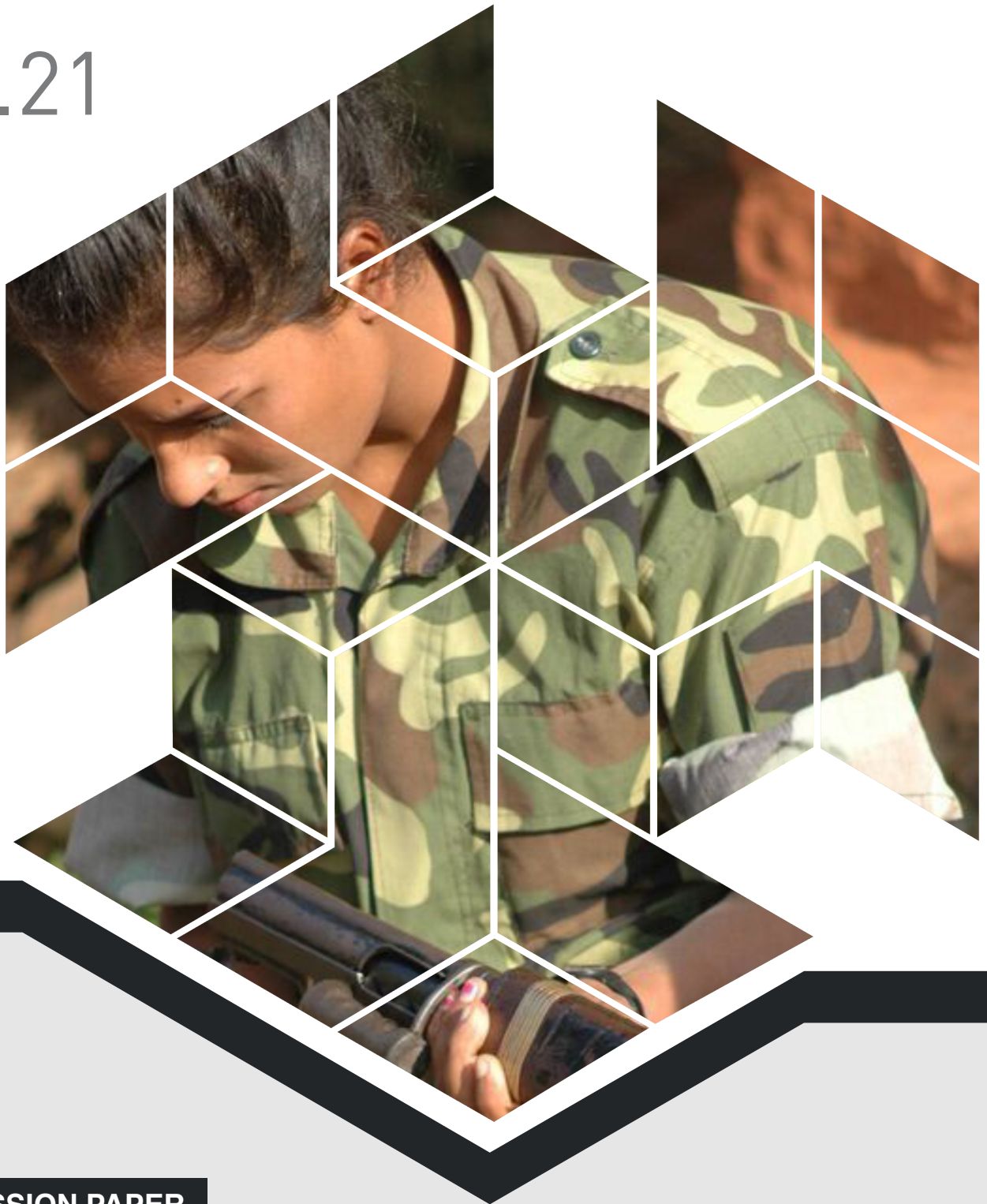


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DISCUSSION PAPER

Gender Equality As a Counter-Terrorism Measure: The Case of Female Maoists

Riya Singh Rathore

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Riya Singh Rathore

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ABSTRACT

Female Maoists constitute a substantial 60% of the total cadres and occupy almost all operational and tactical positions responsible for sustaining the rebellion.

This paper details the gendered motivators that have driven women in India's red corridor to join the Maoist ranks. It also sheds light on the state's current discourse around women's participation and how welfare policies offer people in the red corridor a chance at long-term peace by closing the divide between the state and female Maoists. It concludes that the state should incorporate gender equality as a counter-terrorism measure for a comprehensive response to the protracted issue.

INTRODUCTION

On Women's Day 2020, Odisha's Malkangiri district police honoured Debe Sodi, a former female Maoist, along with fifteen other surrenderers. The police particularly commended the women for leaving the cadres and choosing a non-violent path. Following this, Sodi was offered financial assistance, rehabilitation under a state government scheme, and a free medical check-up (The Hindu 2020). This also marked one of the first acknowledgements by the security apparatus that female Maoists are a sizable group to gratify with incentives that recognise their socio-economic grievances.

For a security threat, especially one with a sizable number of female combatants, embracing the woman question should be central to reaching the stage of conflict transformation in Maoist-affected areas. However, most of the state's¹ traditional counter-terrorism measures fall short since they view Maoist motivations from a solely masculinist perspective. This is second nature in a society that perceives men as the human default, thereby also modelling its security responses without accounting for female combatants and their varying motivators and actions.

Perez (2019) calls this the 'male-unless-indicated-otherwise' approach. This approach creates a chasm between policy and data responses of the state because it renders motivations of both genders the same, despite indications that it might not be so. In line with this, this paper asserts that the government response to violence in the red corridor misses the mark since it overlooks the role of gender inequality which pushes women in and out of the Maoist forces.

FEMALE MAOISTS: BACKBONE OF THE REBELLION

Female Maoists constitute a substantial 60% of the total cadres (Parashar 2016), and of these, 40% come from rural, particularly tribal areas (Ramana 2020). Many cadres solely constitute women, such as the Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sangathan (KAMS) — a revolutionary tribal women's organisation with nearly 90,000 enrolled members. Female participation has steadily risen since the 1990s, with some women even going on to become part of the Central Committee of the Maoists, such as Sheela Marandi.

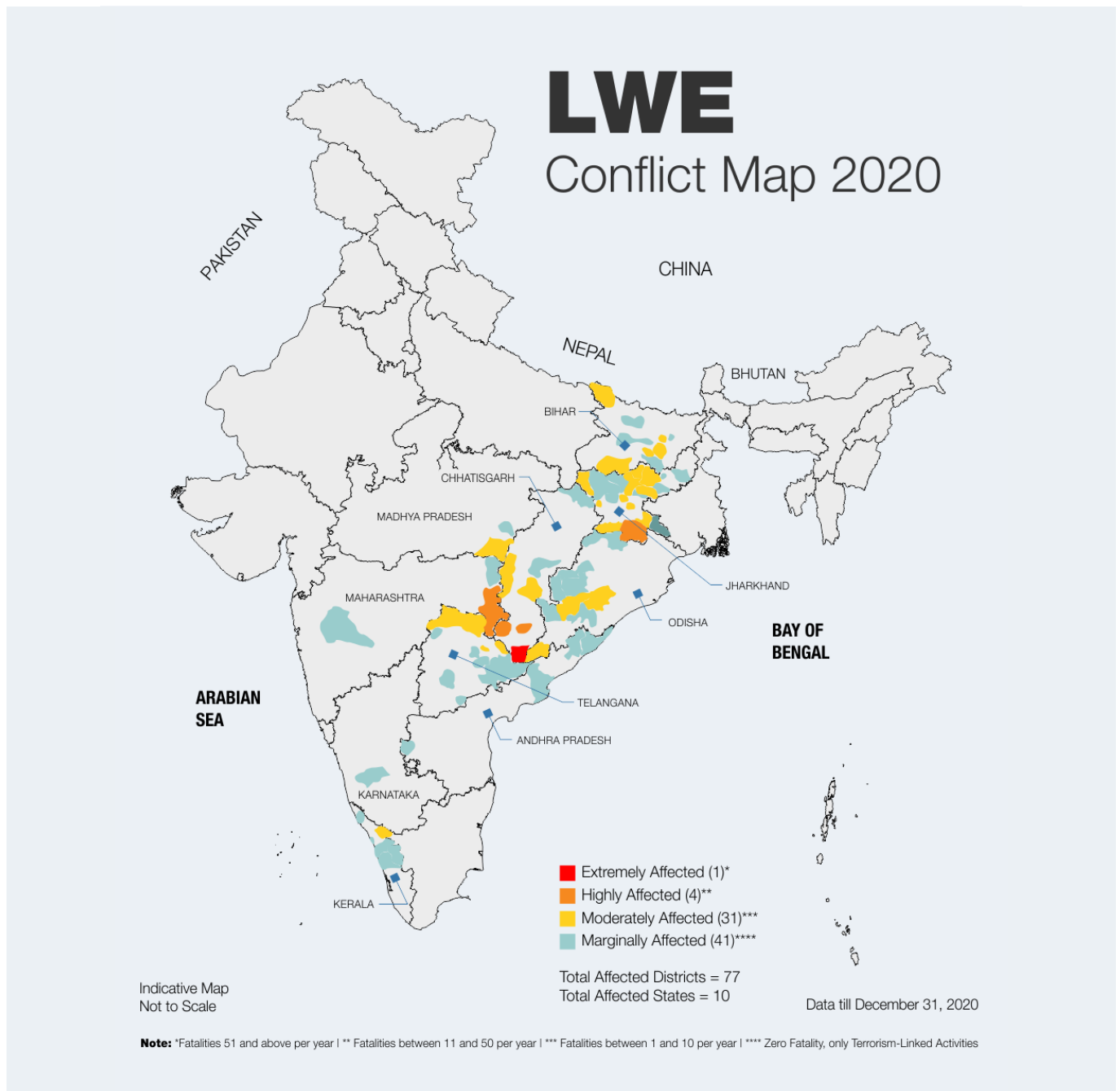
Women occupy almost all operational and tactical positions responsible for sustaining the rebellion. In addition to being a threat on the frontlines, female Maoists are also intelligence operatives on the back end. Police personnel admit that aside from women constituting half the combat forces, they also perform critical strategic roles (Bhattacharjee 2013). In a "martyrs" list published by CPI (Maoist), one finds that women take up a wide range of functions such as commander, deputy commander, squad member, militia leader, committee member, technical mechanist, doctor, and so on (CPI Maoist 2011).

Since gender norms dictate that women are nurturing and demure, it becomes easy for female Maoists to gather data and carry out operations without raising

¹ This article refers to the central government, state government, and security apparatus collectively as the state.

much suspicion. Kulkarni (2018) finds that it is easier for female combatants to enter villages and gain fellow women's trust for intelligence collection. This battle waged from the back channels by gathering information and carrying out small scale tasks such as providing logistical support, seizing ammunition, finding police informers, disrupting schools and hospitals make females the backbone of all operations. Aside from waging shadow warfare, women also carry out domestic work from cooking to cleaning, further sustaining the cadres and their survival in the hidden camps. Therefore, it becomes necessary for counter-terrorism measures to incorporate a female perspective if there is to be any progress in resolving the conflict in the red corridor (Figure 1).

Figure 1: India's Red Corridor



Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal 2020

DRIVING FACTORS

Countless studies and anecdotal evidence allude to resistance to patriarchy as being one of the driving factors behind why women take up arms (Bhattacharjee 2013; Kamra 2013; Kulkarni 2018; Narain 2017; Parashar 2016; Planning Commission of India 2008; Ramana 2020; Roy 2010; Shankar 2016).

Systemic and structural negligence impacts all genders but not equally. Issues of sexual exploitation of labouring women, patriarchal subordination to men, police brutality, domestic violence, property rights, less educational opportunities, negligible political representation, and other issues affect women's lives disproportionately. According to the Planning Commission of India (2008), herein lies the allure of organised rebellion: it extends acknowledgement and offers retribution to the marginalised who feel historically disregarded by the state. Therefore, these driving factors should not only be understood as the incentives behind violence but potential solutions if managed effectively.

Gender Equality

An analysis of the motivators behind women taking up arms reveals that gender equality is a driving factor that can prove useful in conflict resolution if accepted by the state. The ideological pull women feel towards Maoism is not just about the Maoist doctrine but also its commitment to women's rights (Bandyopadhyay 2008; Kamra 2013). This implies that many women in the region prefer the Maoist approach to gender inequality to the state's, suggesting an apparent policy failure when it comes to tackling the issue.

The Maoist recruitment strategy clearly works by filling up the vacuum left by ineffective and gender-blind state policies. For instance, Roy (2010) reported that all women's cadres such as KAMS lead extensive campaigns against tribal rituals like forced marriage, abduction, out-casting menstruating women, bigamy, domestic violence, and police brutality. Such initiatives encourage many younger females to join the armed wings. Even after recruitment, female and male cadres' equal employment during training and combat creates a sense of freedom that women lack otherwise.

The demand for gender equality is so potent that the Maoists themselves cannot escape it. In one instance, female combatants succeeded in pressurising the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)² to admit to its own patriarchal failings within the party and the overall rebellion (Kamra 2013:4). Gradual reforms like these led to the first woman's election in the Central Committee of CPI (Maoist), Anuradha Ghandy.

Radical movements also exist within the zeitgeist of their time. Despite performing all the same duties as their male counterparts, women still take up supporting roles considered more 'feminine' such as cooking, nursing, cleaning, liaising with female villagers, and so forth. However, women have rarely been at the table during peace talks and ceasefire negotiations with the authorities (Narain 2017). Even middle-class ex-combatants like K. Ajitha and Krishna Bandyopadhyay express in their memoirs a sense that in moving from their middle-class lives to join the Maoist forces, they had only moved from one

² Specifically, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (People's War) CPI-ML (PW).

patriarchal set-up to another (Kamra 2013). That is to say, Maoists are not exempt from practising patriarchy.

Female Maoists have to exist between double standards, as they strive to live up to their male peers' masculine expectations of ruthlessness while also undertaking feminine roles within the cadres. Kulkarni (2018) points out that male ex-combatants' memoirs often discuss females as 'nurturer, lover, and glorious mother'. But their experience wholly overlooks the reality of female combatants having to be brutal in battle so that they are not perceived as faint-hearted, face restrictions on reproduction to not sabotage their fighting capability, and even undergo forced abortions. Such examples lay bare the gross violation of women's rights both within and outside of the rebellion. Such accounts suggest that there is scope for the state to re-enter the discourse through effective gender-sensitive policies, which offer women of the region a better enabling environment than the perceived freedom of the Maoist cadres.

Sexual Assault

Any effort to develop effective gender policies will fall short without acknowledging the rampant sexual assault in the red corridor. Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and Odisha alone registered 84,938 crimes against women in 2019 (National Crimes Record Bureau [NCRB] 2019: 195). Deterioration of women's security is often justified as collateral damage in the conflict zone. This is especially evident in the strong undercurrent of sexual assault across literature on Maoist women. Research on Maoists details how sexual assault acts as both a cause that makes women join the movement (Bandyopadhyay 2008; Bhattacharjee 2013; Kulkarni 2018; Mahaprashasta 2017; Narain 2017; Parashar 2016; Parashar 2016a; Roy 2010; Shankar 2016) and one that makes them flee it (Bhattacharjee 2013; Roy 2010; The Hindu 2020).

A study found that crimes against women are more rampant in Maoist-affected areas than in other districts (Borooah 2009). Body searches, casual molestation, custodial rapes, torture as an extraction mechanism, threatening harm upon loved ones etc., are used as warfare tactics against women in the region (Bhattacharjee 2013; Kamra 2013; Mahaprashasta 2017; Narain 2017; Parashar 2016). For instance, reports indicate that security forces³ often coerce women into lactating to determine if they are Maoist or not (Shankar 2016), the implication being that non-Maoist women are mothers and Maoist ones are not.

However, there is no aggregated empirical data on sexual assaults in the region other than anecdotal evidence. This could be due to multiple reasons, one of which is that women probably do not have avenues to seek justice. To incriminate Maoist leaders, they would have to reveal their status as a combatant. On the other hand, if the accused belongs to the police, it would be near impossible to register even an FIR. This is best demonstrated by a 2016 case where policemen allegedly sexually assaulted more than thirteen Adivasi women in Nendra village, Chhattisgarh. Despite having a high-level fact-finding team behind them, the local women underwent immense hardships to seek justice (Shankar 2016). Later, the National Human Rights Commission took suo moto cognisance of the case and stated that the state government was 'vicariously liable' for the gross violation of human rights (Mahaprashasta 2017).

³ Specifically, CoBRA, CRPF, the District Reserve Guard, and local police in the villages.

Furthermore, there is no universal structure that adequately addresses sexual assault. According to the Status of Policing in India report 2019, one-fourth of policewomen expressed that there was no sexual harassment committee available in their police station/jurisdiction (Common Cause and Centre for the Study Developing Societies [CSDS] 2019: 100). The same report found that 57% of all police personnel view complaints of gender violence as false and motivated from a medium to a high degree (ibid: 107).

Police Brutality

Apart from sexual abuse by the security forces, police brutality in itself serves as an instigator for women to join the movement. The antagonist relationship between the police and the Maoists took root at the conception of the movement itself when the police first confronted the peasant rebellion in West Bengal's Naxalbari in 1967 (Kamra 2013).

Various sources identify the state's excesses through security forces as one of the driving factors for more recruitment, creating a feedback loop (Bandyopadhyay, 2008; Bhattacharjee, 2013; Garda 2011; Ghatak and Eynde 2017; Kamra 2013; Kulkarni 2018; Narain 2017; Parashar 2016; Planning Commission of India 2008; Roy, 2010). In a general sense, police brutality has long been an unaddressed issue in the country, with a total of 60 cases of custodial rapes, 7 cases of torture, and 2 deaths resulting from police brutality against women in 2019 alone (National Campaign Against Torture [NCAT] 2019: 108).

In the red corridor, repeated instances of resistance to filing FIRs, investigating reported crimes, illegally arresting and detaining people, extrajudicial ill-treatment, torture, and killings have been reported (Human Rights Watch 2009) that lead to further radicalisation in the region. A female Maoist from Odisha affirms this in recalling that her sister's custodial gang-rape by the police and later, her brother's illegal arrest and extrajudicial killing under "mysterious circumstances" by the same force left her "no choice but to join the revolution" (Bhattacharjee 2013).

There are comprehensive accounts of security forces partaking in unlawful raids, descending from helicopters to set villages on fire, coercing innocent citizens into 'camps', staging fake encounters, and so forth (Human Rights Watch 2008). Aside from facing the myriad of violations themselves, many women face the hardship of seeking justice for their loved ones caught by police. In one instance, the security forces brutally beat a group of women in a police station because they sought their family members' release (ibid: 53).

Of the 500 cases registered against police persons for the deaths or disappearances of persons in custody between 2005 to 2018, not one was convicted, despite there being 982 custodial deaths between 2009 and 2018 alone (NCAT 2019: 172). This illustrates the degree of impunity granted to police personnel in general across the country. The personnel have also been found blocking civil society and social workers from reporting from the ground by deeming them Maoist sympathisers (Human Rights Watch 2012; Shankar 2016).

In cases where police officers are not actively committing crimes, their failure to appropriately prevent or investigate gendered ones only adds to female Maoists' resentment. For instance, in 2019, there were 1,18,677 pending investigations of

Crime against Women within Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and Odisha (NCRB 2019: 222).

The role of police as a perpetrator of violence against women and also the obstacle in proper access to justice is one of the region's biggest policy failures.

Atrocities Against SC/ST Communities

The experiences of tribal and Dalit women of the region are the most complex and vital to understand as they endure layers of subjugation in terms of gender, caste, and class. NCRB (2019:13) data reveals that within 2019, atrocities against SC/ST persons showed an uptick of 1.6% in a year. Of the total number of cases, 1,990 (24%) constituted assaults of tribal women with intent to outrage modesty. This figure jumps to 3,486 cases (7.6%) of the rape of scheduled caste women. Grievances of SC/ST women are deeply entrenched in the societal structure, and hence they have much to gain from a radical transformation of the state. In light of this, why upward of 90% of martyred female Maoists belonged to oppressed groups (Kulkarni 2018: 3) becomes coherent.

Additionally, a recent report on gendered violence by the state in India's conflict states⁴ revealed that of the 224 reported cases of violence against women in the last decade, a staggering 69.6% were against tribal women⁵ (NCAT 2020). Conversely, reporting these caste/tribe-driven crimes remains difficult as ever despite mounting evidence. It's found that one in every five police personnel believe that complaints under the SC & ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act are 'very much' false and motivated (Common Cause and CSDS 2019: 121). In light of the state's inability to adequately address problems of SC/ST communities in the corridor, the Maoist claims of rebuilding a system that promises redressal of scheduled castes and tribes may appear appealing to some, however "misguided" they may be.

Some scholars found that the best predictor of Maoist activity in a district was the presence of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (SC/ST) (Hoelscher et al. 2012; Ghatak and Eynde 2017). This blends seamlessly with the history of the insurgency, which began through a series of social agitations that sought to address India's caste, class, and tribal structures. Many local tribes joined together to regain lands "stolen" from the disadvantaged SC/ST communities (Kulkarni 2018).

It is not merely the general discrimination but also the mass displacement of said communities in the name of development and mining. According to the Indian Bureau of Mines (2020) report, 75.8% of mineral production in February 2020 came solely from Maoist-affected states⁶. Women in these states, especially tribal women, depend heavily on the land for sustenance and livelihood. Hoelscher et al. (2012) conclude that the conflict may see an uptick as horizontal inequality becomes more extreme. In cases where communities are coerced to abandon their ancestral land, which holds great socio-religious relevance, without any promise of adequate rehabilitation, many may choose to join the Maoists.

⁴ Conflict states studied were Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Jammu & Kashmir, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Manipur, Meghalaya, Odisha, and Tripura.

⁵ 156 out of the 224 total victims constituted women from scheduled tribes.

⁶ breakdown Andhra Pradesh (1.3%), Maharashtra (1.8%), Madhya Pradesh (3.3%), Jharkhand (3.7%), Chhattisgarh (18.2%), Odisha (47.5%).

Economic Inequality

NITI Aayog (2018) reports that the average female wage is only 70% of the average male one. Yet, this figure only considers the salaried labour force participants, of which women constitute a mere 27.2% (International Labour Organisation 2017). This implies that most rural women's labour is not recorded as work, much less one with payments that can be logged. Female Maoists predominantly belong to this category.

The patriarchal structure of the rural economy marginalises women more than it does their male counterparts. Even within the same families, women are likely to fare worse than the men in the house. Roy (2010) quotes a female combatant as saying, "women are controlled in every way, in our village. If a man hits a woman and she hits him back she has to give the village a goat. [...] the best part of the meat goes to men. Women are not allowed to eat eggs. Good reason to join a guerrilla army?".

Previously discussed grievances combined with poor economic circumstances make organised rebellion more feasible (Hoelscher et al. 2012) for women facing layers of marginalisation. The Planning Commission of India (2008) acknowledged that the chasm between the government's socio-economic promises and their implementation pushes many towards radicalisation. This is attested by multiple studies (Ghatak and Eynde 2017; Vadlamannati 2012), which reveal a direct link between states affected by most Maoist activity and lower state GDP per capita and greater underdevelopment (Figure 2 and 3).

Some perceive the Maoist movement to offer a respite from poverty and unemployment. Rashmi Mahli, an ex-combatant from Jharkhand, confirmed this to Bhattacharjee (2013), explaining that Maoists promised regular pay for her low-income family in exchange for her joining the cadres.

THE SHORTCOMINGS IN THE STATE'S RESPONSE

Traditionally, the state's role and policies bridge the chasm between social disparities, such as gender inequality, through public infrastructure and services. While the government's current approach acknowledges the necessity of "development, ensuring rights and entitlements of local communities" (Ministry of Home Affairs 2020a), reports show its ever-expanding security apparatus in the red corridor⁷. Out of the eleven initiatives listed by the MHA, most of the schemes such as Modernisation of Police Forces Umbrella scheme, Security Related Expenditure (SRE) Scheme, Scheme of Fortified Police stations, Assistance to Central Agencies for Left Wing Extremism Management Scheme, and so forth seem to address the requirement of the forces stationed to combat Maoists and not the welfare demands of the populace.

The Planning Commission of India's (2008: 44) report recognised that Maoist violence arose in response to 'the gathering of unresolved social and economic issues for long durations'. Despite its comprehensive research on land rights,

⁷ MHA reports increase in Central Armed Police Forces, sanctioning more India Reserve battalions, modernising the State Police and their Intelligence apparatus, providing helicopters for anti-LWE operations, reimbursing any security-related expenditure as so forth (ibid).

displacement, forced evictions, loss of livelihood, social oppression, non- or mal-governance, and police cruelty as instigators of violence, the state response remains unchanged. It skews more towards a traditional security response, deploying more troops than effective development policies.

A big part of the current state tactic is to counter Maoist rhetoric, as outlined in its Media Plan scheme. The scheme decrees that Maoists have been “misguiding and luring the innocent tribals/local population in LWE [Left-Wing Extremism] affected areas by their so-called poor friendly revolution through petty incentives or by following their coercive strategy” (Ministry of Home Affairs 2020a).

On the contrary, it has been well-documented that Maoist leaders adopt a grievance-based approach that addresses difficulties faced by women, tribals, scheduled castes, and labourers during the recruitment process. However, the strategy is a symptom of a larger cause. Since many groups experience severe marginalisation, they are easily mobilised into action to fight for what they believe would lead to a better future.

It is here that the state’s counter-propaganda misses the mark. Undermining the ideological sway of Maoists and not engaging with them denies the state a more effective and sustainable counter-terrorist response. The government’s preference for a hard power approach persists even while addressing women’s swelling numbers within the cadres. The Planning Commission of India (2008: 54) recognised women’s dominant numbers in the Maoist ranks acknowledging that the rebellion offered women protection, security, and justice to those further socially marginalised.

Contrarily, in an FAQ asking why Maoists held such a high number of women cadres, the Ministry of Home Affairs (2020) responded with:

“In States like Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, the Maoists have formed Bal Dastas comprising young children. The idea is to brain-wash and indoctrinate young children to Maoist ideology. Most parents do not want to part with their children. But faced with coercion and threats, many poor Adivasi parents prefer to part with the girl child. This inhuman practice by the Maoists is the reason behind the large number of young girls/women being present among the Maoist cadres.” (ibid: 4).

The response perpetuates the notion that more than half of Maoist cadres had no consent in being inducted, dismissing women’s agency by belittling them as victims of male recruiters. Additionally, even if Adivasi parents were solely to blame for the swelling numbers of female Maoists, it fails to explain the remaining 60% of female Maoists who are not from SC/ST backgrounds.

Furthermore, the response also dismisses patriarchy as a reality in the lives of recruited women by stating that “in spite of the Maoists professing disapproval of “patriarchy”, the number of women in decision making bodies like the Politburo & Core Committee are negligible” (Ministry of Home Affairs 2020: 4). The MHA accurately states that there is no representation for women in the high places of power within the Naxal cadres. However, the same argument can be applied to any state institution and women’s representation in it. Simply because the cadres have a patriarchal set up doesn’t excuse the state’s own failings regarding gender equality. Female Maoists still outnumber the men, and failing to address their grievances around patriarchy makes the state’s counter-terrorism response inadequate.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above discussion, one can conclude that incorporating a gender perspective in counter-terrorism policies is a much-needed counter-terrorism response and a transformative measure for the future. Formulating a counter-rebellion response that acknowledges that female Maoists are driven by legitimate socio-economic issues and are entities separate from their male counterparts would be more successful than the current strategy, which portrays male and female combatants as the same.

Research shows that among many other signifiers of progress, communities in Maoist-affected districts have a lower literacy rate, access to electricity, and road connectivity (Ghatak and Eynde 2017: 72) than the national average. The surest way to transform the conflict would be to diminish the incentives driving it. Multiple studies confirm the notion that effective social policies would lead to a decline in extremism (Burgoon 2006; Hoelscher et al. 2012; Wolfensohn 2002). This occurs because effective social strategies directly correlate with a decline in gender inequality, poverty, marginalisation etc., which then diminish incentives for rebellion. A study finds that the larger a country's welfare efforts, the smaller becomes its chances of facing transnational or total terrorist incidents on its soil (Burgoon 2006), pointing to a more holistic approach to battling domestic extremism.

In line with the NHRC statement quoted previously, the state must adopt effective policies explicitly addressing the region's sexual assault grievances. Developing a robust legal regime committed to delivering justice and implementing the rule of law must be the primary goal. Especially as a signatory of the United Nations Security Council [UNSC] Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women [CEDAW] that expressly protect women's rights, the state should work to revoke the absolute impunity accorded to the police and security personnel in the red corridor.

Additionally, the form of policing needs transformation. Mehrotra (2014) asserts that security personnel training needs to embrace an attitudinal change expressly regarding their treatment of women, Dalits, tribals, and other marginalised groups. This could be carried out through gender-sensitive training programmes. Another step would be the employment of more women in the security forces and judiciary. Currently, women form over 60% of the Maoist forces and only 8% of Indian police personnel (Common Cause and CSDS 2019). Studies indicate a direct decline in corruption and sexual assault when more female personnel are involved (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNDOC] 2020: 59). Besides, female security personnel offer a tactical advantage. Kulkarni (2018) asserts that women commandos would neutralise the advantages female Maoists have over male commandos.

Finally, government institutions and civil society must commit themselves to collate gender-disaggregated data indicating the ground reality of women's lives in the red corridor. Admittedly, gender equality as a counter-terrorism measure may take years of proper implementation to work. However, as Wolfensohn (2002) points out, the other alternative would be a never-ending cycle of violence.

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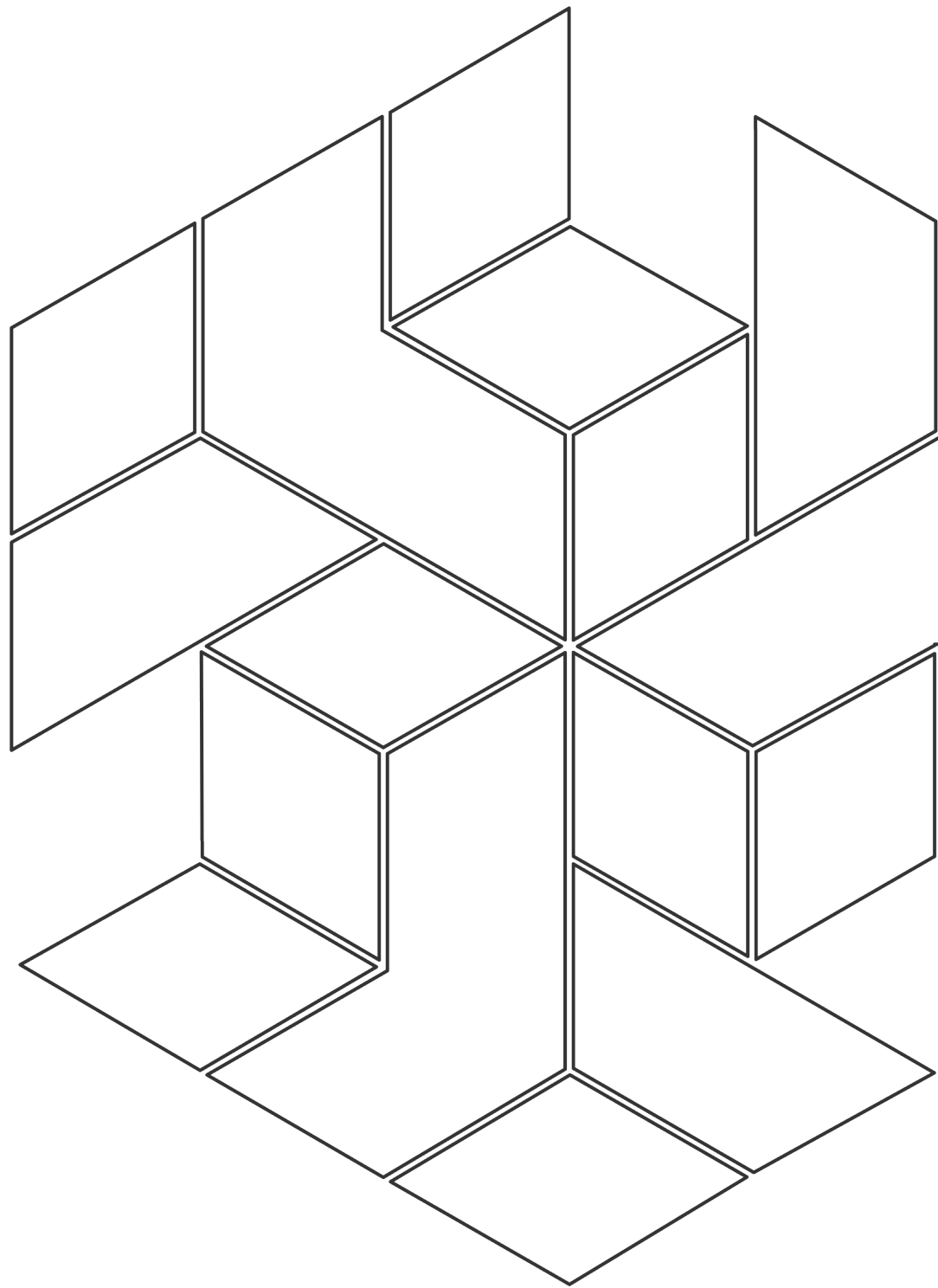
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