India’s Naxalite conflict: Understanding targeting strategies

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Oliver Vanden Eynde finds that the tax base of India’s Naxalites influences rebel targeting strategies.

Maoist rebels have been in constant struggle with the Indian state for almost 40 years. They are active in an area that covers roughly one-third of India’s total territory. This so-called “Red Corridor” stretches from Bihar and West Bengal in the north to Andhra Pradesh in the south. In spite of its long history, the conflict seems far from being resolved. Naxalite violence claimed at least 4,800 lives between 2005 and 2010. The persistence of this conflict contrasts sharply with India’s fast economic growth. Policy makers acknowledge the scale of India’s Maoist problem. In 2008, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described the Naxalite movement as “the single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by our country”. Yet, the conflict is not just a security challenge; it is also a developmental challenge.

A vast body of research documents the devastating effects of civil war on human development and economic growth. India’s Naxalite conflict is no exception; it submits the affected population to direct violence, displacement, disruptions, and investment insecurity. These concerns are all the more important because the conflict zone includes some of India’s poorest regions. Moreover, the conflict disproportionally hits some of the most disadvantaged groups within those regions (i.e., the tribal population). Understanding the drivers and dynamics of this conflict holds clear policy relevance. In a recent working paper, I use quantitative data to shed more light on the logic of Naxalite violence.

My research focuses on how economic shocks affect the Maoists’ targeting strategies. Because of the reliance of the “Red Corridor” on rain-fed agriculture, I use rainfall as a proxy for rural incomes. I find that in those districts where monsoon rainfall is low, Naxalite violence against civilians intensifies. Moreover, most of the civilians who die in targeted attacks are reported to belong to groups who collaborate with the Indian government against the Naxalites. This finding could reflect the crucial role that collaborators play in many civil conflicts. When agricultural incomes are depressed due to low rainfall, the government will find it relatively easy to attract civilian collaborators. However, the rebels can try to prevent such collaboration by increasing the monitoring and intimidation of the civilian population. In

guerrilla warfare, the rebels are extremely vulnerable to collaboration by the local population, and keeping the local population (as well as their own cadres) on their side is crucial for their survival. Strategic intimidation could explain why lower rainfall leads to higher violence against civilians, and against civilian collaborators in particular.

While civilian casualties increase in response to lower rainfall, I find that violence against the government decreases in districts that see lower rainfall. This drop in violence against the government could reflect a change in the rebels' strategy away from attacking security forces, to enable them to increase their intimidation of civilian collaborators.

Strikingly, this substitution effect is absent in districts that have sufficiently strong mining activity. These districts see more, rather than less, violence against security forces when rainfall is poor. Why would mining districts see a different relationship between economic shocks and violence against the government? Observers of the Naxalite conflict emphasise that the rebels rely very heavily on mining as a source of income. In districts where the rebels do not have access to mineral resource wealth, agricultural income shocks will hurt their tax base. Hence, they cannot easily exploit the bleak agricultural outlook to attract additional recruits. However, if the rebels derive income from mining resources, their funding depends less on agricultural income. Hence, the rebels can easily finance an expansion of their activities when the rural population sees its income decline. This mechanism could explain why the rebels boost violence against the state's security forces in response to low rainfall, but only if the district's mining output is sufficiently high.

My work contributes to a fierce academic debate on the relationship between economic shocks and violence. Over the last decade, statistical analyses of civil conflict have been embraced by a burgeoning literature in political science, sociology, and economics. Economic theories of conflict often rely on an opportunity cost argument to describe the relationship between income shocks and violence. If the economy is doing poorly, we expect the "opportunity cost" of participating in a rebellion to be lower. Hence, we should see more violence if people's income goes down, because the actors in the conflict are able to boost recruitment. However, the empirical evidence on this relationship is far from clear-cut. My work on India's Naxalite conflict contributes to this debate by highlighting how the opportunity cost channel could operate differently, depending on the tax base of the rebel group (independent from local labour market shocks or not) and depending on the type of violence (civilians versus security forces). India's Naxalite conflict offers a particularly interesting test case for these ideas.

Understanding the dynamics of violence in the Naxalite conflict could hold lessons for conflict resolution strategies in India and beyond. First, my research indicates that conflict resolution strategies should be tailored to local economic conditions. In particular, policy makers should carefully consider how military, political and economic interventions interact with the sources of funding of the actors in the conflict. Second, my research emphasises the pitfalls of interventions that encourage civilian collaboration. Governments that fight insurgencies often offer a wide range of formal and informal incentives for the civilian population to collaborate against the insurgents. This is clearly the case in India's Naxalite conflict.

However, if the insurgents are able match the appeal from collaboration with violent intimidation, collaboration strategies may not win over the civilian population. Rather than changing the course of the conflict, such collaboration strategies could push the civilian population into the line of fire and expose them to increased direct violence. The fight over the affiliation of civilians plays a central role in most civil wars. Therefore, improving our understanding of its dynamics is crucial for the design of effective conflict resolution strategies that limit the exposure of the civilian population.

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