

Targeting Human Rights Groups

Raman Kirpal

RAJINDER SACHAR is one of India's renowned civil rights activists. A former Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court, Sachar has done pioneering work in enabling a legal framework to assist hundreds who stand accused by the police across India for waging war against the State, many of them with little or dubious evidence. Though 87 years old, Sachar continues to work tirelessly with one of India's key rights groups, the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), which he has headed in the past and continues to steer.

In 2005, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh appointed Sachar to head a committee to investigate the social, economic and education status of India's Muslims. The Sachar report, which was tabled in Parliament in 2006, is a benchmark document on India's largest minority. Imagine Sachar's consternation then that the government now labels PUCL as a frontal organisation of the outlawed Communist Party of India (Maoist), which is leading an armed insurrection in central India that Manmohan Singh calls the "gravest internal security threat".

According to information available with TEHELKA, the Intelligence Bureau—the government's prime sleuthing agency on internal security—has said that the PUCL is among 57 organisations nationwide that are working "for the cause of the Maoists". The IB's communiqué was sent recently to paramilitary forces and the director-generals of police (DGPs) of the various states affected by the Maoist insurgency. As per protocol, the advisory has been routed through the Union Home Ministry.

Claims the communiqué: "The outfit (CPI Maoist) has 57 front bodies working among the peasants, labourers, women, students, tribals, backward castes, etc., which supplement the activities of the armed cadres and mobilise the masses ostensibly for the cause of the people, but primarily for the cause of the party (release of arrested leaders, declaring them as political prisoners, etc).

This list includes virtually the who's who of not just India's human rights community but also trade union and other struggles that have been long engaged in legitimate over-ground activity to secure the rights of the poor, the disadvantaged and the downtrodden.

On March 10, 2010, a reply from the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in the Rajya Sabha confirmed its move against such organisations. Last week, Union Home Minister P Chidambaram warned that his ministry would not spare those found "supporting" the cause of the Maoists.

"Available inputs indicate that organisations such as People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR), PUCL and Association for Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR) take up issues of the CPI (Maoist). Both the central

and state governments keep a close watch on the activities of these organisations," he said.

Less than amused, Sachar has written to Chidambaram asking that the label of "front organisation" be withdrawn or the PUCL will move court. "Chidambaram's statement is highly scandalous in a democratic state," Sachar told TEHELKA. "We, as a human rights body, do not support violence, but it is my constitutional right to raise my voice for human rights." Rubbishing the charge that the PUCL is providing legal aid to Maoist leader Kobad Ghandy, arrested in New Delhi in September 2009, Sachar says : "I don't even recognise Kobad Ghandy. But I maintain that Ghandy like any other accused is entitled to legal aid."

(P Sebastian, president of Committee for Protection of Democratic Rights, which is fighting Ghandy's case but is not named in the IB list, echoes the view. "To fight the case against him is Ghandy's right. The police tap my phones and harass me, but I will continue fighting his case." CPDR is not named in the IB list but works closely with the other human rights organisations, named in it.)

PUCL General Secretary Kavita Srivastava, who has been providing legal help to many Muslims accused in terrorism cases in Rajasthan, slams Chidambaram's statement saying his "fatwa" is "inconsequential". "They are trying to create an Emergency-like situation so they can arrest people," she told TEHELKA. "It is not the first time that the IB and the police are following our activities."

The IB communiqué specifically mentions about 30 of the 57 organisations. These outfits, it says, "are actively preparing the grounds for the spread of party ideology in Naxal-affected states and other states, where armed acts of the CPI (Maoist) are not manifest." The list includes West Bengal's *Bandi Mukti Morcha*, an organisation that is iconic in the human rights community especially because of its leader: legendary author and activist Mahasweta Devi.

"Chidambaram is welcome to arrest me but he has to prove my Maoist connections first," Devi, 85, told TEHELKA. The Naxal movement—as the Maoist insurrection is known after the West Bengal village of Naxalbari—began in the late 1960s, primarily to protest the atrocities on tea garden labourers.

"Then it spread like wildfire. It took many lives, including those of bright young students. There are many who still sympathise with them," she says, adding: "Do not forget that it was I who wrote Hazaar Chaurasi ki Ma. I will continue to do what I have always done in my life —stand by the poor, fight for them and protest state atrocities. Let them arrest me. I couldn't care less."

But the police pressure is already increasing. Close associates of Mahasweta Devi have been arrested as suspected Maoists. These include Bhanu Sarkar and Ramesh Das, who are accused of possessing "objectionable" posters.

Indeed, the IB says that the Morcha and the PUCL are among the "legal pro-Left Wing Extremists (LWE) groups". It also includes yet another legendary people's movement in this list: the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha. Speaking to TEHELKA, Director-Generals of Police (DGPs) of Maharashtra, AN Roy, and

Gujarat, SS Khandwawala, confirmed that they have instructions to keep tabs on the “Maoists sympathisers”.

Maharashtra’s Roy alleges that human rights organisations provide covert support to the Maoists in its eastern districts of Gadchiroli and Gondia. “We are keeping a watch on these organisations. Although I cannot pinpoint specific advisories issued to us but there has been an active exchange of information between our state police and the MHA over the involvement of these frontal organisations,” Roy says.

Like the PUCL, the APDR too slams the government and its intelligence network for targeting it. “The government sees corporate interest in forest land, while we see it as a struggle for resources,” says its president, Sujato Bhadra, from Kolkata. “I am branded a Maoist because I don’t tow the government’s line.”

MARKED OUT...

- Delhi City Committee
- Delhi General Mazdoor Front
- ULFA, Assam
- People's Liberation Army, Manipur
- Hurriyat Conference, Kashmir
- Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)
- Coordination Committee of Maoist Parties and Organisations of South Asia
- CPML-Naxalbari, Kerala
- CPI-ML, Kerala
- Radical Students Union, Tamil Nadu
- Radical Youth League, Tamil Nadu
- Shahid Bhagat Singh Krantikar, Haryana
- Naujawan Bharat Sabha, Gujarat
- Progressive Students Forum, Uttaranchal
- Mahila Mukti Manch, Uttaranchal
- Koriya-Sidhi Sub-Zonal Committee
- Jagrook Chhatra Manch, Haryana
- Shahid Bhagat Singh Krantikari Mahasangh, Haryana
- Naujawan Dasta, Haryana
- Jan Chetna Manch, Haryana
- Mahila Morcha, Haryana

Four of the organisations on the IB list are from Kerala : the CPIML Naxalbari, CPIML-Red Flag, CPI-ML and CPIML-Liberation and Viplava Janadhipatyaya Munnani, also known as the Revolutionary People’s Front (RPF). The IB communiqué says these four are “minor LWE outfits... spreading Maoists propaganda in the districts of Palghat, Idduki, Trichur, Kannur [and] Kasargode, parts of Trivandrum, Kottayam and Calicut”. Saying that his government is tracking them, Kerala Home Minister Kodiyeri Balakrishnan told TEHELKA: “The government will take legal action against them.”

BUT THESE groups say they have nothing to do with the Maoists. According to P C Unnicekkan, the state secretary of CPI-ML Red Flag, which was formed

in 1988, his party does not agree with the Maoists. “But we strongly oppose the way the government is using force against them. This is a profound political issue that demands a political solution. The operation against the Maoists is nothing but a conspiracy to facilitate multinational corporations to loot the mineral wealth of the region.”

CPI (ML-Liberation), a registered political party since 1980 that has been contesting elections, says it doesn’t make common ground ideologically with the Maoists, but vehemently rejects government action against the tribal people. “The states where the Maoists have a mass base have enormous quantities of natural resources,” says their state unit secretary John K Erumeli. “In the name of hunting down the Maoists, the government is actually waging a war against its own people.”

But RPF self-admittedly believes in the Maoist ideology. It says it is a mass-based movement against, among others, displacement by the “development” projects, such as the National Highway 17 that is being built in Kerala and that is estimated to displace 35,000 families. “The ongoing action by the oppressive Indian State is nothing new to us,” says RPF state secretary Ajay Kumar. “It is beyond doubt that the Maoist ideology is gaining momentum in the country. The Maoists have a mass base among the downtrodden classes.”

SEVERAL STUDENTS, youth and cultural bodies too are named in the list. These include Radical Students Union and Radical Youth League in Tamil Nadu; Jagrook Chatra Morcha, Shahid Bhagat Singh Krantikar, Naujwan Dasta, Jan Chetna Manch, Disha Sanskriti Manch in Haryana; Naujawan Bharat Sabha, Krantikari Sanghatana, Gujarat Working Class Union and Jan Sangharsh Natya Manch in Gujarat. The list dubs two organisations based around New Delhi — Revolutionary Democratic Front (RDF) and Delhi General Mazdoor Front — as front outfits of the Maoists for mobilising mass opinion in the National Capital Region (NCR) through “protest actions, posters and pamphleteering.”

Claims the IB communiqué: “It is after [the] front bodies have done the groundwork that the armed activity would start”. Its “mass organisations” supplement the “war effort” of the party. The communiqué further claims that the Maoists are likely to launch “increasingly wellplanned and focussed” attacks outside the “guerilla zones” with the help of these “front” groups.

Says Supreme Court lawyer and activist Prashant Bhushan, “It is clearly an attempt to choke dissent. They are proceeding in a calibrated manner to bring a state of emergency without having to declare it, where anybody who questions the actions or motives of the government can be branded a Maoist supporter and be booked under draconian laws.”

Adds Amit Bhadhuri, Professor Emeritus at JNU, “This is a classic case of McCarthyism and an assault on democracy. Political radicalism means you press the cause of the poor, not the cause of the corporations who have the money, the media and the politicians on their side. We can only know what the Maoists are doing when we have sufficient information. Now, the people who

can give us some information, like Himanshu Kumar and Arundhati Roy, the intellectuals going to meet them or living there, are being threatened.”

The following are some of the key allegations in the IB communiqué:

- The Maoists have raised level of their tactical warfare. The recent actions are indicative of its graduation from ‘guerilla warfare’ to ‘mobile warfare’ with the aim of looting weapons and killing policemen.
- The outfit has formed underground associations, legal associations and front bodies and has also made progress in ‘fraction’ work, that is, infiltrating different mass organisations covertly. The implications of the dialectical relations between the ‘legal work’ of the outfit through its front bodies and the secret underground work are indeed ominous.
- The Maoists have picked up Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts to spread violence through [a] mobilisation of tea garden workers.
- In Maharashtra, they formed a new Maharashtra State Committee for the better supervision of activities in the districts of Chandrapur, Bhandara and Gondia, Nasik, Thane, Nandurbar, Ahmednagar and Dhule.
- In Madhya Pradesh, the Maoists had restricted their activities to Balaghat district. They have now formed Koriya- Sidhi Sub-Zonal Committee to spread to districts of Sidhi, Mandla, Dindori, Seoni and Shahdot.
- In Uttar Pradesh, Ghazipur and Ballia, which is close to Bihar, are top on the Maoist agenda.
- In Kerala, the Maoists are making efforts through some pro-LWE outfits to establish its base by taking up local issues.
- The Maoists have formed a Delhi City Committee operating in Faridabad and Ghaziabad.
- In Gujarat, the Maoists are mobilising industrial workers in Surat, mainly among large Telugu-speaking population. The Maoists have engaged CPMLJS/ KR to mobilise local tribals in south district of Valsad.
- In Haryana, Jagrook Chatra Manch is working as the front to mobilise people on caste and labour identities in the districts of Kaithal, Panipat, Yamuna Nagar, Kurukshetra and Jind.
- The Maoists are targeting to extend their armed struggles through religious and ethnic groupings in rest of the country. They are corresponding with groups like ULFA, PLA and the Hurriyat Conference, but “current intelligence does not indicate any strategic alliance”.

The list also claims that the CPI (Maoist) has extended “fraternal ties and symbiotic relationship” with the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). The IB alleges that both parties are members of the “Coordination Committee of Maoist Parties and Organisations of South Asia (CCOMPOSA)” and that Indian Maoists use Nepali territory for their meetings.

Civil rights activists and intellectuals are outraged over the attempt to outlaw legitimate human rights groups. Said professor Yash Pal, Chancellor of JNU and former UGC chairman, “This is unfortunate. I hope they don’t mean it seriously. There can be thinking of all kinds. You can charge anybody with sympathy, this is going a bit far. What does sympathy mean? If someone wants to find out why people are doing this—that is not the same thing as condoning it.”

YASH PAL was part of a recent citizens' peace initiative. A group of 50 eminent citizens, including Yash Pal, noted Gandhian Narayan Desai, Chancellor of Gujarat Vidyapeeth, and Radha Bhatt, President of Gandhi Peace Foundation, had undertaken a peace march into the heart of Dantewada. Their public meeting in Raipur on March 5 was disrupted when a gang of Congress and BJP workers barged in, chanting slogans, asking the "Naxal sympathisers" to return. On March 6, in Jagdalpur, when the group emerged from a press conference, their cars had been damaged and the tyres punctured.

Says professor Imtiaz Ahmed of JNU, "The government has created a state of over-security consciousness to silence dissent and disagreement. It is doing this in collaboration with the middle class for whom Maoism is the greatest threat to the nation. The government is exploiting that popular feeling to target those who believe in peaceful solutions by labelling them as Maoist sympathisers."

New Delhi-based lawyer-activist ND Pancholi recalls how PUCL was outlawed during the Emergency in 1977 and the government created false income-tax cases against it. During terrorism in Punjab during the 1980s, when PUCL came out with a report highlighting utter violation of human rights, "we were dubbed as sympathisers of terrorists". When PUCL brought out a report on State-sponsored atrocities in the Kashmir valley, "we were called the sympathisers of the enemy state Pakistan". "Today we are dubbed as a frontal organisation for the Maoists. This is just to mislead people. We only present the truth."

Indeed, the IB list is of a piece with the recent government action towards human and civil rights groups that are not named on the list but could just as easily be included in it. Shoma Sen, General Secretary for the Committee for Violence Against Women, recalls how the police tried to implicate her when her husband, journalist Tushar Bhattacharya, was arrested on charges of being a Maoist sympathiser in West Bengal three years ago. "The police charged me for helping my husband," says Sen, who teaches English Literature at Nagpur University.

Says former socialist MP Surendra Mohan, "The government has lost all respect for disagreement. Labelling human rights organisations as frontal bodies of the Maoists is a blatant attack on our freedom to express and to rightfully assemble guaranteed by Article 19 of the Constitution." Seems unlikely that the government will pay attention to such views. □□□

[source : Tehelka Magazine, vol 7, issue 20, May 22, 2010]