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Maoism in Bangladesh: Past, Present and Future

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'More than Maoism: Rural Dislocation in South Asia' is an ISAS research theme focusing on socio-economic, political and security dimensions of "Maoist movements" in South Asia. The institute conducted a closed-door workshop on the research theme and the presentations are being put together as a series of ISAS Insights and ISAS Working Papers. This is the fifth paper in this series.

Abstract

Bangladesh, or rather the territory now comprising it, which is the eastern part of the British Indian Province of Bengal, has had a strong tradition of Left politics dating back to the Colonial Period (1857-1947). This should have made it a fertile ground for the latter-day Maoist insurgency. Despite the intellectual and political heritage, this has not come to pass. The paper explains and analyses the reasons behind such non-occurrence and also why the expected 'domino-effect' has not taken place despite the situation in the neighbouring India and Nepal. It argues, however, that there is no room for complacency as the potential for danger exists. This includes a new tactical alliance between the Islamist fundamentalists and the Maoist radicals called the 'United Front'. The paper concludes by underscoring the need to address the problem through appropriate policy measures, regional and international cooperation, and eternal vigilance.

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Colonial Backdrop

Bangladesh has had a history of a strong tradition of Left politics. During the colonial period, particularly between 1857 and 1947, the region then constituting the eastern portion of Bengal witnessed a number of peasant uprisings. The common population of eastern Bengal comprised mostly Muslims, and the feudal landlords, or *Zamindars*, who were mostly Hindus.² The umbrage of the peasantry was directed against both the *Zamindars* and the British rulers.³ However, the fact that some of the leaders of the movements were Hindus laid the basis of a secular culture that has been a hallmark of Left politics of East Bengal ever since. Two early instances of such uprisings were the ‘Indigo Riots’ also known as *Nilbidraha*, resulting from the coercion of the peasants by British planters to produce the crop at a loss⁴ and the ‘Pabna Rent Revolt’ of 1873, a protest against absentee landlordism. Initially, the British tended to favour the landlords and their legislations facilitated rent-extraction, but eventually they enacted tenancy protection laws aiming at forestalling peasant agitation.⁵ An example would be the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 that defined the obligations of both *Zamindars* and *Raiyats* (rent paying peasants).⁶

The Partition of 1947 divided the subcontinent into the two Dominions of India and Pakistan. East Bengal became a part of Pakistan and West Bengal of India. While the struggle for the Indian independence was led by the Congress party and that of Pakistan by the Muslim League, the hardcore Communists of both Bengals, all members of the Communist Party of India (CPI) founded in 1920 clung on to the notion that *yeh azadi jhoota hai*, meaning ‘this independence is false’. This was because they did not see this as entailing the economic

² Following the advent of Muslim conquerors in Bengal in the 13th century, there were large conversions among the inhabitants from Hinduism and Buddhism to Islam. This was partly due to the Hobson’s choice before them and partly because of their distaste for ‘a rigid system of caste discipline’ (E.A. Gait, *Census of India, 1909*, Vol.6, Part 1, Report, p.165). This happened largely in the deltaic East Bengal, whereas the western portions, because of better communications and more stable form of cultivation that contributed to social differentiation, was integrated into the Hindu culture of the Upper Gangetic Plains. See Premen Addy and Ibne Azad, ‘Politics and Society in Bengal’, in Robin Blackburn (ed.), *Explosion in a Subcontinent* (Penguin, 1975), pp.80-82.

³ The Permanent Settlement Act of Lord Cornwallis (1793) created the social conditions in East Bengal that were primarily responsible for such sentiments. See Rajat and Ratna Ray, ‘Zamindars and Jotdars: A Study of Rural Politics in Bengal’, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.9 (1975), p.101.

⁴ For studies on the two events, see Kalyan Kumar Sengupta, ‘The Agrarian League of Pabna, 1873’, *The Economic and Social History Review*, Vol.7, no.2, (June 1970), pp.253-270; and Chittabrata Palit, *Tensions in Rural Bengal Society: Landlords, Planters, and Colonial Rule, 1830- 1860* (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1975), pp.140-151. The ‘Indigo Riots’ were the subject of a famous Bengali play called *Nil Durpan* (literally ‘Mirror of Indigo’ written by Dinabandhu Mitra in 1858-1859.

⁵ Dietmar Rothermund, *Government, Landlord and Peasant in India: Agrarian Relations Under British Rule* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1978), p.89.

⁶ ‘Banglapedia: Survey and Settlement Operations’, National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh 2006, www.banglapedia.org/httpdocs/HT/S_0621.HTM. Accessed on 14 May 2010.

emancipation of the working classes.⁷ For now, though, such sentiments were submerged in the waves of euphoria as also the horrendous rioting that accompanied the birth of the two sovereign nations.

Left Politics in East Pakistan

Two developments took the wind out of the sail of left extremism in East Pakistan (called 'East Bengal' till Pakistan became a Republic in 1956 when it formally became known as 'East Pakistan'). One was the migration of nearly two-thirds of the total of 20,000 CPI members in East Bengal to India in the aftermath of the 1950 communal riots since they were Hindus.⁸ The second was the adoption of the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act 1950, by which a conservative Muslim League government in East Bengal was able to pass what was seemingly a progressive piece of legislation. This was vastly facilitated by the fact that most of the affected were Hindu landlords or *Zamindars*, no constituency of the Muslim League in any case, who had by then already moved to Calcutta.

The East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act 1950 had a profound impact in creating a more egalitarian society in that province of Pakistan than what was the case in the Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan or the Frontiers, (Pakistan's other provinces – all located in the western wing of the country) mainly due to two reasons. First, by removing the *Zamindars* from the scene, the Act eliminated what extreme radicals would call *srenishotru* (or 'class-enemy'). Second, the State through the District Collector (also known as District Magistrate) could deliver 'development' or governance goals like law and order more directly to the *raiyyats*. Thus, being perceived as 'benefactors' rather than 'exploiters'. These elements rendered radical slogans much less credible.

For a variety of reasons including the language movement of February 1952, in which the Muslim League was seen to be supporting Urdu as State language as opposed to Bengali in the provincial elections held in East Bengal in 1954, the government was swept out of office by a combination of parties known as the *Jukto Front* or United Front. The United Front was perceived to be more reflective of the basic urges of the common people, a major player in it being the Awami League, later headed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to shepherd the independence struggle for Bangladesh in 1971.⁹ By 1956-57, an Awami Leaguer, H S Suhrawardy was the Prime Minister of Pakistan. It was as a mark of protest against his

⁷ Saurabh Jyoti Sharma, 'Evaluating Jyoti Basu', *Voice of India Features* (7 February 2010), <http://voi.org/07feb2010/saurabhjyotisharma/column-saurabhjyotisharma/evaluatingjyotibasuu.html>. Accessed on 10 May 2010.

⁸ This fact obtained from, Marcus Franda, 'Communism and Regional Politics in East Pakistan', *Asian Survey*, Vol.10, no.7 (July 1970), pp.588-606.

⁹ Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury, 'Pre-history of Bangladeshi Nationalism and a Theory of Tripartite Balance', *Asian Affairs*, Vol.IV, no.IV, December 1982, pp.417-418.

pro-western foreign policy that the socialist-oriented cleric, Mowlana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, left the Awami League and founded his own National Awami Party (NAP).¹⁰ But while the mainstream socialist politics of Bhashani found empathy with the martial law government of President Mohammad Ayub Khan, soon to become a close ally of China, there was a more radical revolution-oriented party slowly burgeoning as heir to the CPI, the Communist Party of East Pakistan (CPEP).

The Communists and the Bangladesh Movement

The international communist movement was dichotomised into two separate camps by 1962 on the question of the adoption of the appropriate Marxist techniques. The CPEP was no exception. It was consequently split into the more moderate pro-Moscow and the more radical pro-Peking factions. The pro-Moscow faction led by Comrade Moni Singh, a former Hindu *Zamindar* and CPI-member, argued for the establishment of socialism through a peaceful parliamentary process – a tactic not very much unlike that of Bhashani (NAP), or that of the pro-Moscow NAP headed by Professor Muzaffar Ahmed. The pro-Peking wing of the CPEP, on the other hand, led by Mohammad Toaha and Sukhendu Dastidar advocated the line of revolutionary class struggle that came to be known as Maoism. Indeed in 1967, a group of young Communists under the leadership of Siraj Sikdar founded the Mao-Thought Research Centre in Dhaka.¹¹ That was the origin of Maoist politics in the region, now Bangladesh. The pro-Peking wing of the CPEP splintered into over a dozen factions during the Bangladesh movement and its aftermath.

The Bangladesh movement in 1971, immensely popular among the masses, threw the CPEP into a theoretical quandary. Apart from Mohammed Toaha, the other person with a significant profile on the issue was Abdul Huq. The break-up of Pakistan generally appeared to them to be giving into the machinations of the Indo-Soviet ‘duet’ of ‘Indian expansionism’ and ‘Soviet hegemonism’. Abdul Huq was stronger in his view that the disintegration of Pakistan would bring aid and comfort to the Soviet ‘hegemonists’ and the Indian ‘expansionists’ than Toaha, who later initiated the concept of a two-way war against the Pakistan Army and the Awami League.¹²

The Huq line appears to have attracted the favour of China. China opposed the break-up of Pakistan but confined itself to making only ‘sympathetic noises,’ without using any kind of

¹⁰ M. Rashiduzzaman, ‘The National Awami Party of Pakistan: Leftist Politics in Crisis’, *Pacific Affairs*, Vol.XLIII, no.3 (Fall 1970), p.395.

¹¹ M. Nurul Amin, ‘Maoism in Bangladesh: The Case of the East Bengal Sarbohara Party’, *Asian Survey*, Vol.26, no.7 (July 1986), pp.759-773.

¹² For a study of the positions of the radical Bengali political parties towards the Bangladesh Movement, see Talukdar Maniruzzaman, *Radical Politics and Emergence of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Books International, 1978), especially pp.51-52.

military force to come to Pakistan's rescue.¹³ Indeed, Huq's views, along with similar ones held by Ashim Chatterjee of CPI (Marxist-Leninist), were broadcast on 'Radio Peking' and its ally 'Radio Tirana'.¹⁴ The fact that the Communists and the ultra-radicals went against the grain of public opinion, which was overwhelmingly supportive on the issue of the independence of Bangladesh, was to cost them and their fellow-travellers like the Maoists dearly in political terms later on. Ironically, the same was true of also those on the other extreme in the political spectrum, the Islamists.

Siraj Sikdar and the 'Sarbaharas'

Siraj Sikdar, who headed the splinter group of the young Communists who established the Mao-Thought Centre in Dhaka in 1967, adopted a line on the Bangladesh struggle that was different from his other pro-Peking comrades. The Sikdar faction opposed both Pakistan and India as colonial powers. Seeking the formation of a Democratic Republic of East Bengal, they set up the '*Purbo Bangla* (East Bengal) *Sarbahara* ('Have-nots', literally 'those who have lost everything') Party (PBSP) in June 1971. After Bangladesh's emergence as a sovereign country, the PBSP carried on their militant struggle against the Mujib government.

Their intellectual propaganda machine was a pamphlet called *Lal Jhanda* or 'Red Flag'. Sikdar was killed in January 1975, and thereafter the PBSP further splintered into various groups; their militancy losing steam. Around this time the extreme left faction of the ruling Awami League, espousing 'scientific socialism' broke off to form the *Jatiya Samajtantri Dal* (JSD, literally the 'Nationalist Socialist Party', but bearing no resemblance whatsoever with the one with a similar name earlier in Germany). The JSD also lost momentum in the late 1970s with the execution of Colonel Abu Taher and the strong measures adopted by then strongman, and later President, Ziaur Rahman.¹⁵

While by the end of the 1970s, the Maoist movement had largely lost its bite in Bangladesh and it struggled to survive intellectually, drawing nourishment from the burgeoning activities of its counterparts in neighbouring India. As we will see later in the essay, it also managed to establish some regional and international linkages. The remnants of the Sikdar-line brought out a pamphlet recently that criticises 'deviationists' and seeks to project the correct path which according to them is as follows:

...We don't believe in empty theory. [Chairman Mao] has shown that the main law of contradiction is the law of unity of opposites. He has explained the transformation of quantity

¹³ Stephen Philip Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), p.73.

¹⁴ Tariq Ali, 'Pakistan and Bangladesh: Results and Prospects', in Robin Blackburn (eds), *op cit*, p.318.

¹⁵ For an interesting account of this period, see Lawrence Lifschultz, *Bangladesh: The Unfinished Revolution* (London: Zed Press, 1979).

into quality by the law of the unity of opposites. And he has said that the negation of negation does not exist as a law. What exists is the unity of the opposite of affirmation and negation. [Mao] established monism by discarding the trip list doctrine of development...He, by correcting Engels' formulation regarding freedom showed that freedom is not only understanding necessity but its transformation too...¹⁶

The problem with this esoteric, heavily-laden philosophical discourse or approach was that it was not possible to use this as a means for generating support among the broad masses. Its appeal could only be confined to a few intellectuals among the universities and civil society. But without mass support militant Maoism would lack potency in Bangladesh to achieve any of its goals.

External Influences

Doubtless, there were external influences. Perhaps, the foremost came from next door, Naxalbari of West Bengal in India. There a section of the CPI (Marxist-Leninist) led by Charu Majumdar, Kanu Sanyal and Jangal Santhal had initiated a bloody uprising in 1967.¹⁷ Today, the Naxalites are seen as the forerunners of the wave of Maoist insurgency sweeping across several Indian states. But, in West Bengal by the 1970s, the government had also managed to crush the Naxalite insurgency with an iron hand, just as it was nipped in the bud by the Bangladesh authorities.

The success of the United Communist Party of Nepal (Marxists) would have been something to emulate for the Bangladeshi Maoists but for several reasons. First, by the time its leader, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, better known as *Prachanda* or 'the fierce one' had successfully organised the 'people's war' on the basis of the Maoist dictum that 'power flows from the barrel of a gun' from the mid-1990s to 2008 when he assumed power, Maoism was already a spent force in Bangladesh. Secondly, unlike in Nepal, there was no major goal of a constitutional change acceptable to the masses such as the change from monarchy to a republic. Finally, there were few takers of the *Prachanda Path* in Bangladesh, his ideology based on his paper 'The Great Leap Forward: An Inevitable Need of History'. So, ironically, even 'the most successful Maoist insurgency in the world in decades', as an analyst described it,¹⁸ had little impact on Bangladesh, which was next door. However, Bangladeshi Maoists interacted with their Nepalese counterparts in regional and international fora, as we shall see.

¹⁶ 'Maoist Party in Bangladesh Reorganizes', *Anubad Sahitya Potro*, (10th issue). <http://southasiarev.wordpress.com/2009/12/13/maoist-party-in-bangladesh-reorganizes/>. Accessed on 7 May 2010.

¹⁷ See Sankar Ghosh, *The Naxalite Movement: A Maoist Experiment* (Calcutta: Firma KL Mukhapadhyay, 1975).

¹⁸ Manish Thapa, 'Evolution of Maoism in Nepal: Understanding Maoist Insurgency from Wider Perspective', *Panorama*, www.tigweb.org/express/panorama/article.html?ContentID=6491. Accessed on 12 May 2010.

Developments within China itself were of little assistance to the Bangladeshi Maoists. The horrors of the ‘Cultural Revolution’, which were to reveal that Maoism had ‘no notion of limits’,¹⁹ were of no help in enhancing the attractiveness of ‘Mao-thought’. Also, China was always more focused on developing close Beijing-Dhaka ties and had no interest in destabilising the Bangladesh state, which it was beginning by then to be seen as an ally, like Pakistan in many ways and unlike India.²⁰ The reforms introduced in China by Deng Xiaoping obviously did not correspond to what was perceived as ‘Mao-thought’ by the Bangladeshi Maoists. However, the Chinese reformers including Deng, were careful to stress that the revolutionary side of Maoism was separate from the governance side, leading to the now famous observation that Mao was ‘70 per cent good and 30 per cent bad’.²¹ Some writers saw Maoism as a third way between capitalism and communism, attempting to combine Confucianism with socialism.²²

There was, however, a school of thought that exerted some influence in shaping the thought-process among the intelligentsia, particularly among the students and scholars of the University of Dhaka, which has always made a major contribution to the politics of the nation. This was the ‘dependencia’ school of neo-Marxist economists from around the developing world, in particular, Latin America. Its proponents powerfully argued that any relationship involving foreign aid deepens structural dependency, exploits the ex-colonial ‘periphery’ for the benefit of the former colonial powers, now the metropolitan ‘centre’ and creates a ‘comprador-elite’ class to do its bidding. The only path to development was to sever the relationship, better still in all forms, if necessary through a revolution.²³ For an aid-dependent country, which Bangladesh was in the 1970s and to a certain extent, though far less, is also today, these thoughts were very relevant. These ideas, thus, should have fed radical thinking. However, in Bangladesh, they ran counter to actual experience, for the country was able to use external assistance very effectively, for among other things, alleviating poverty.²⁴ So these concepts brought no grist to the Maoist mills.

¹⁹ Dayan Jayatilleka, *Fidel's Ethics of Violence: The Moral Dimension of the Political Thought of Fidel Castro* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), p.168.

²⁰ Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, *A Method in the Dragon's Moods*, ISAS Working Paper No.75, p.12.

²¹ This assessment of Mao by Deng is reportedly based on Mao's own earlier assessment of Stalin. See, ‘Interpreting Mao’, *Beijing Review*, No. 40, 5 October 2006, updated 10 December 2006. www.bjreview.com.cn/nation/txt/2006-12/10/content_50364.htm. Accessed on 11 May 2010.

²² Martin Cohen, *Political Philosophy from Plato to Mao* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), p.206.

²³ To cite some examples: Andre Gunder Frank, *The Development of Underdevelopment* (Monthly Review Press, 1970); Samir Amin, *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formation of Peripheral Capitalism*, Trans. Brian Pearce (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976); and Gerard Chaliand, *Revolution in the Third World: Myths and Prospects* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1977).

²⁴ See M.A. Muhith: ‘Is Foreign Aid Essential for Development in Bangladesh?’, Seminar Paper, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka, 10 November 1978. The conclusion of the author, then a senior government official, was that it was. Muhith has been the Finance Minister of Bangladesh since January 2009 in the Awami League-led cabinet of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

A major factor that has been the cause in the spread of Maoism in India was absent in Bangladesh. This was the large number of Memoranda of Understanding entered into by the government for mining and mineral based industries, resisted by the masses of the poorer states, mainly tribals, which is the reason the Indian government launched 'Operation Green Hunt' in the jungles.²⁵ This is a war that the author Arundhati Roy has said that 'India is both proud and shy of'.²⁶ Another is the disaffection among the tribal population. In India, the Maoist insurgency has a resonance among these people. In Bangladesh, the insurgency among the tribals in the Chittagong Hill Tracts was largely ended by the signing of the 1997 Peace Accord between the then Awami League Government and the *Parbatta Chattagram Janasanghati Samity* (PCJSS), the main political platform of the tribal resistance. While there have been complaints about its slow implementation and occasional conflicts between the tribals and settlers from the plains, the government has invested heavily in the area in developmental terms.²⁷ Overall, it appears that the retractors among the tribals are not making efforts for a common cause with Maoist remnants.²⁸

International and Regional Linkages

The fledgling Maoists of Bangladesh, however, do maintain international and regional linkages. In 1984, the Revolutionary International Movement (RIM) was created as an international Communist organisation to uphold the values and principles of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. Its broad purpose was to try and form a Communist International of a new type. It was to rely on the Maoist strategy of a 'people's war' as being the best method of effecting Marxist revolutions in the developing world. Its membership includes several of the Bangladeshi Maoist groups, such as the PBSP, a splinter group formed in 2001 called *Purbo Baglar Sarbahara Party* (Maoist Bolshevik Reorganization Movement) and the Bangladesh *Samyabadi Dal*.²⁹ Again, the last could hardly be said to be revolutionary as its leader, Dilip Barua, sits in the current Bangladesh Cabinet.

At a regional level, there exists the Coordination Committee of Maoist Parties and Organisations of South Asia (CCOMPOSA). The various *Sarbohara* factions and the *Samyabadi Dal* are also its members. The South Asian Maoists meet one another, often in secret gatherings. Some linkages are naturally created at these events, particularly, among the

²⁵ Gautama Navlakha, 'Days and Nights in the Maoist Heartland', *Economic and Political Weekly* (17-23 April 2010), Vol.XLV, no.16, p.47.

²⁶ Arundhati Roy, 'Walking with the Comrades', *Outlook India.com* (29 March 2010), www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?264738. Accessed on 11 May 2010.

²⁷ The author was the Adviser (Minister) to the Bangladesh Government in charge of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs during 2007-2008.

²⁸ Ekramul Kabir, 'Terrorism in Bangladesh: How Long the Denial?', *Daily Star* (19 February 2006).

²⁹ Mohosin Al Abbas, 'Maoism in South Asia: Insurgency or Movement', *Ground Report*, www.groundreport.com/opinion/Maoism-in-South-Asia-Insurgency-or-Movement/2865458. Accessed on 7 May 2010.

Indian Maoists, the *Janata Vimukti Paramuna* (JVP) of Sri Lanka, the communist Party of Ceylon (Maoist) and the Nepalese Marxists and Maoists. In fact, analysts have observed that it would be ironical if the notion of SAARC cooperation was ‘hijacked’ by the Maoists of the region before the governments of these countries substantively profit from the concepts of regionalisation.³⁰

Factors Impeding Maoism

The economy of Bangladesh has sometimes been seen as a ‘paradox’, where despite a myriad challenges, a steady growth rate of around six per cent has been achieved over the last few years with the benefits more equitably distributed than elsewhere in the region. Contrary to initial pessimism, Bangladesh has come to be regarded ‘as a lead performer among the least developed countries and considered as a successful example of graduation of traditional society to modernity at a low level per capita income’, with the United Nations Development Programme ranking it as being among the league of countries having achieved ‘medium human development’.³¹ The absence of abject poverty was a key factor in the prevention of the success of Maoist propaganda.

Another factor is the spread of ideas such as microcredit, for which Professor Mohammed Yunus and his Grameen Bank were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006, and Sir Fazle Hasan Abed and his BRAC won such global plaudits, helped empower women, thereby marginalising all kinds of extremist thought and action, including Maoism. The fact that Bangladesh is also a preponderantly Muslim society, that too of a syncretic *sufistic* tradition, is also an impediment to the Maoists, an alien ideology. True, the Muslim peasantry had in the past participated in radical movements, as in the colonial period, but then their ‘Muslimness’ was also an element in the uprisings directed against the Hindu *Zamindars* and British rulers.

Taking all these into account, an analyst has observed: ‘The Maoist phase in Bangladesh politics is over. Splintered, and surviving in isolated pockets, those who call themselves Maoists in Bangladesh today are more of a law and order problem than a challenge to mainstream politics.’³² Interestingly, Bangladesh’s famously vibrant civil society has also absorbed many ex-Maoists as NGO leaders. An example is Shafiqul Huq Chowdhury, now

³⁰ Rajat Kumar Kujur, ‘CCOMPOSA: A Mirage or Reality?’, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, www.ipcs.org/article/naxalite-violence/ccomposa-a-mirage-or-a-reality-2142.html. Accessed on 7 May 2010.

³¹ Binayek Sen, Mustafa K. Mujeri and Quazi Shahabuddin, ‘Operationalizing Pro-poor Growth: Bangladesh as a Case Study’, 7 November 2004. [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPGI/Resources?342674-111505137044/oppbangladesh\(Nov\).pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPGI/Resources?342674-111505137044/oppbangladesh(Nov).pdf). Accessed on 11 May 2010.

³² Ekramul Kabir, op. cit.

heading the Association for Social Advancement, or ASA, an acronym, which translated into Bengali means 'hope'.³³

Conclusion

A look at the map will show that Bangladesh's neighbouring areas are engulfed in ongoing Maoist insurgencies: several states of India to its east and Nepal to the north. Also, Bangladesh historically presented a fertile ground for extreme Left politics because of a long tradition of peasant uprisings and the existence of an intelligentsia receptive to external intellectual stimuli. Yet, Maoism (or any other form of extreme radicalism) never took off in a significant way in this country.

Several reasons for this can be extrapolated from this essay. First, even in the pre-Bangladesh East Pakistan period (1947-1971), abolition of landlordism or *Zamindaris* and legislations ending the exploitative feudal system robbed such movements of their fodder. Second, the opposition to the independence movement, vastly popular with the masses, cost the extreme Left and later the Maoists considerably in terms of public empathy. Third, in the decade after independence, early police action eliminated potential extremists. Fourth, while the excesses of the 'cultural revolution' in China during Mao's final years set unattractive examples for Bangladeshis, Beijing also desisted from even appearing to display any kind of solidarity with the Maoists and instead focused on building close ties with all governments in Bangladesh, whom like those of Pakistan, they considered allies. Fifth, neo-Marxist concepts and ideas like those of the 'dependencia' school, while finding some resonance among scholars and students, were actually belied by the actual experience of equitable growth achieved through appropriate utilisation of foreign aid and international linkages. Sixth, initiatives like micro-credit and 'non-formal education' for girls leading to women's empowerment created social conditions unlikely to nurture violent insurrections. Last but not the least, there was little encouragement for extremism in a moderate Muslim society whose basic values were mild and generally shorn of ideological mores. While the state may at times appear weak, its 'collapse or failure', as Naureen Fink argues, 'remains a distant and unlikely outcome because of the many social and political forces which continue to promote a peaceful, democratic and inclusive society'.³⁴

All this is not to say threats do not exist. The society, unless vigilant, runs the risk of being destabilised by the Maoists as also by religious extremists. If the Indian Maoists succeed in

³³ Abhoy, 'From Maoism to Micro-finance-Something to read for India's Maoists', *Microfinance Business News* (20 April 2009), <http://indiamicrofinance.com/blog/microfinance/microfinance-articles/maoism-to-microfinance-maobadi-ban-gaye-microfinance-agents.html>. Accessed on 7 may 2010.

³⁴ Naureen Chowdhury Fink, *Bombs and Ballots: Terrorism, Political Violence and Governance in Bangladesh*, (New York: International Peace Institute, 2010), p.19.

any major way, the dangers increase. That will also be the case if the other Muslim country in the subcontinent, where Maoism is not an issue but Islamism is, is overrun by *Taleban*-ite religious extremists, though in this case, the two societies are geographically much further apart (a factor that erodes with globalisation). There is also the ever-present danger that Maoists, though weak, may seek to strengthen themselves by linking up with Islamist fundamentalist extremists, and vice versa, creating something like an old-style classical Leninist 'United Front' for tactical gains.

It will, therefore, be in the interest Bangladesh as also of its neighbours, mainly India to cooperate in bilateral, regional and international initiatives to curb the spread of Maoism and other forms of extremism. The visit of the Bangladeshi Prime Minister Shekh Hasina to India in January 2010 led to a number of agreements designed to fight terror following talks with her counterpart Dr Manmohan Singh. But implementation in letter and spirit will be the key. Also, these agreements are designed to tackle forms of terrorism other than Maoism. There should be regular structured meetings between the Home Secretaries and the intelligence agencies of the two countries with Maoism also on the agenda. Cooperation is also desirable at the regional level, such as in SAARC and the SAARC Ministerial Declaration on Cooperation in Combating Terrorism signed on 28 February 2009, was a step in the right direction. Support provided by the United Nations (UN) should also be fully and appropriately utilised. Currently, Bangladesh and the UN are negotiating the establishment of a Regional Centre for Capacity Building to fight terrorism, which is a positive step. There should absolutely be no room for complacency, only for eternal vigilance, sober reflection, and good governance.

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