

# Analysis#30

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## Women Cadres of India's Left-wing Extremist Movement



Rhea Maheshwari

## Abstract

*India's Maoist extremism draws its women cadres from the impoverished tribal population. Although the state highlights the employment of coercion as a tactic for recruitment, Maoists use variety of instruments to fill in the ranks of fighters, support staff, and those who propagate the ideology of extremism. Only on rare occasions have educated women joined the organisation and moved to its upper echelons of leadership. And yet to label the CPI-Maoist a mere patriarchal movement would be incorrect, as women fighters have matched the strength and agility of their male counterparts to take part in number of ambushes and attacks. This article focuses on the reasons behind women joining the outfit and their essential role within it. The objective is to enable policy makers develop a critical understanding of the phenomenon, rather than merely focusing on the narrative of coercion and sexual exploitation.*

## Introduction

In August 2014, three months after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government assumed power in New Delhi, Minister of State for Home Affairs, Kiren Rijiju made a series of revelations regarding the state of women cadres within the left-wing extremism movement, the Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-Maoist). In a written reply to a question raised in the Parliament, the Minister informed, "Many instances of exploitation of tribals by the Naxalites / Maoists have come to the notice of the government. Such atrocities primarily include sexual exploitation of tribal women cadres in the Maoist camps, which have been disclosed in statements of several surrendered women CPI-Maoist cadres of Odisha, Maharashtra, Bihar, Jharkhand, and other states. Such instances of sexual exploitation include rape, forced marriage and molestation by senior male CPI-Maoist cadres."<sup>[1]</sup>

## Victims or Warriors?

Similar charges against the Maoists have periodically appeared in the media reports, which quote security force personnel and some surrendered Maoist cadres. For instance, these charges have also been made by Shobha Mandi, a Maoist woman cadre who surrendered in 2010 in West Bengal. Shobha, alias Shikha, who had spent seven years in the organisation, had risen to the rank of a commander, and had 25-30 armed Maoist cadres under her, was allegedly sexually exploited by senior Maoist cadres. Interestingly, the alleged abuse she suffered had little to do with her decision to surrender. A senior police official said that Shobha had five criminal cases against her and had to be convinced for surrendering.<sup>[2]</sup> Shobha, however, went on to author a book titled, "Ek Maowadi ki Diary" (*Diary of a Maoist cadre*), three years after her surrender where she alleged that the Maoist movement is nothing but a den of vice, "where adultery, rape, wife-swapping and violence against women, including torture, are the norm rather than the exception"<sup>[3]</sup>.

Given the pro-state bias that most surrendered extremist cadres tend to demonstrate, Sobha's book could have been a product of the state's perception management strategy. Highlighting the alleged exploitation and subjugation as the only truth regarding the left-wing extremism movement in India has remained one of the key instruments of strategic communication of the state vis-à-vis the CPI-Maoist, prior to and after Minister Rijiju's statement in the parliament. A survey of such official statements indicates that the government has tried to project the CPI-Maoist as an essentially male-

led extremist movement, where coerced women conscription is essentially directed at making women available mostly for support functions, including providing pleasure to the male cadres. The truth in such an evaluation of the outfit needs to be further probed.

## **Contested Narratives**

Pitted against the official narrative is the CPI-Maoist's own description of the contribution and sacrifices made by women cadres to the movement and to the 'causes of revolution'. Publications of the organisation detail the valour of the women cadres in armed campaign against the state and also, the contribution made by women to shaping the ideology of the movement. Similar to the state's narrative, the extremist side of the story too is lopsided and indulges in exaggerating the position of women in the organisation. What the state does admit, however, through scattered statements by security force officials, is that significant number of women constitute the cadre strength of the CPI-Maoist. In a way, this admission burns a hole in the official theories that tend to highlight exploitation of women in the Maoist organization.

Estimates regarding the actual numbers of women cadres of the CPI-Maoist, however, vary significantly. A former district superintendent of police in Chhattisgarh estimated in 2013 that half of the Maoist fighters are women<sup>[4]</sup>. In another statement B K Ponwar, former director of Counter Terrorism and Jungle Warfare College in Chhattisgarh, once asserted that in Maoist affected zones around 45 percent women are in different positions and many of them fight ferociously from the front.<sup>[5]</sup> Arun Srivastava, author of the book 'Maoism in India'<sup>[6]</sup> wrote that women constituted 25 percent of Maoist cadres in 2008 which was later increased to 40 percent in 2010 and may have risen to 60 percent by the beginning of 2013, with Chhattisgarh leading among the top. Pratibha Singh of the Willy Brandt School of Public Policy<sup>[7]</sup> states in her article published in 2015 that 60 to 70 percent of the lower Maoist cadres comprise of women. Singh's estimate appears to have been influenced by the claims of arrested Maoist leader Chambala Ravinder who during his interrogation in 2015 had said that in India more and more women are getting attracted to the organisation and about 60-70 percent of those recruited in the year 2013-14 were from the fair sex. He also stated that more than fifty percent of the PLGA cadre currently in central regional bureau of CPI-Maoist are also women.<sup>[8]</sup>

## **The Motive**

In 2016, a politburo member of the CPI-Maoist explained to the police why the organisation needs more women. He said that woman are "more focused" and "dedicated" to the movement.<sup>[9]</sup> According to an account of a police officer, women in the CPI-Maoist not only wage war, but also keep an eye on the male cadres who may harass the villagers.<sup>[10]</sup>

However, from the woman cadres' perspective, survey of several profiles of cadres reveals, that the motivation to join the extremist movement may range from an objective of revenge seeking, escaping from poverty, to the yearning for a purpose in life. A number of cadres women joined the movement after being sexually harassed at work places or in the hands of the security forces. In the words of Rampati Ganjhu, a former rebel commander from Bihar who surrendered after 15 years of rebel life, "These women joined us to seek revenge".

Mita Baskeyalias Salboni, a young school going girl had to join the Maoist in order to keep her family safe. Rashmi Mahli who surrendered in 2011 after a long career in the CPI-Maoist in Jharkhand was driven by poverty to join the extremists. "We were seven siblings. We lived on meagre land produce and on days we were just able to eat just one meal. The Maoists would visit our village to recruit cadres. They promised a steady income for my family. There was no other way but to join them."<sup>[11]</sup>

## The Roles

Anuradha Ghandy, a university lecturer in Sociology, illustrate the rare example of women climbing up the hierarchical ladder to reach the decision making organ of the CPI-Maoist. She was the wife of Kobad Ghandy, chief of the Central Propaganda Bureau and member of the Central Committee, who was arrested in Delhi in September 2009. At the time of her death due to cerebral malaria, she was the lone woman member of the CPI-Maoist's Central Committee. Ghandy was educated and came from the upper middle class, which is a reason why she enjoyed a better status than lower middle class women in the extremist organisation. The wife of the leader, for example, was automatically granted a higher status than most other women cadres.

Most women who join the CPI-Maoist start with performing basic duties such as being a cook or a porter. This pattern goes back to the days of the Naxalbari when the sole motive behind recruiting women was to provide men with assistants and get the ordinary tasks done. This is in contrast with the male members who are picked up as fighting cadres and undergo training for the purpose. Jaya for instance, joined the CPI-Maoist in her teens to find that she is only the second woman in the entire Eturanagaram *dalam* (in Warangal district of Andhra Pradesh), she had been assigned to. She was used as a porter and made to carry a heavy sack that contained kitchen ware to uniforms, arms, ammunition, provisions etc on her back."<sup>[12]</sup>

At the same time, Maoists appear to keep looking out for special talents among girls and women to join the organisation. Accordingly, such cadres are attached either to the cultural or the fighting wings. Eighteen-years-old Ankita joined the CPI-Maoist in 2014 by performing in street plays and later was recruited into a *dalam* for her agility. She was made to undergo intense training.<sup>[13]</sup> Female cadres were trained to use sophisticated arms and explosives and other physical tasks like ambushing patrol parties, guarding camps, collecting information on troop movement from villages etc.

Having the knowledge of medicine Chitren Pangi served as a part time doctor in the outfit.<sup>[14]</sup> She was an active member of the Guma Area Committee of Chitrakonda and Machkund division of Andhra-Odisha Border Special Zonal Committee of the CPI-Maoist. Apart from this, she helped in gathering local intelligence about the presence of security forces in the Guma area. Kovvasi Devamma alias Kirsi alias Deve, also became a *dalam* member in 2017 and served as a sentry to provide security to Maoist cadres and also to pass on information.<sup>[15]</sup>

Allegations of sexual exploitation by male cadres have been made by several women who have surrendered. In 2016, two women cadres who spent three years with the outfit told police that they were sexually exploited by the Maoists Katekalyan Local Organisation Squad commander on a daily basis. They also said in their complaints that they used to be given anti-pregnancy injections and

other tablets for preventing pregnancy.<sup>[16]</sup> Another cadre, Sumita Kujur, told police that while the Maoists are initially well-behaved and respect women, this changes once the women join the movement. Palo, a resident of Baliba village in West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand joined the CPI- Maoist in 2012 and became an armed cadre the very next year. She surrendered in 2016 alleging that the top leadership exploits women in the name of the struggle.”<sup>[17]</sup>

## The Fighting Cadres

Such narratives of lowly roles and exploitation coexist with several accounts of women who rose in the ranks of the CPI-Maoist as armed cadres. First woman commander of ‘Central Reorganization Committee’ Kudabala Laxmi alias Sarita, aged 29, joined the People’s War Group (PWG) in 2000 as a Jana Natya Mandal cadre. By 2008, she had been promoted as the central military instructor of Chamagedda village in GK Veedhi mandal of Andhra Pradesh. Bonangi Ramulamma alias Bharati alias Bharatakka alias Saroja was the senior most woman of the CPI-Maoist and ‘Area Committee Member’ of Labadampalli village in GK Veedhi mandal of Andhra Pradesh. Tambelu Tummu alias Vljaya alias Kumari worked as a ‘Area Committee Member’ in Andhra Odisha Border (AOB).<sup>[18]</sup>

Jyoti Gawade alias Sagobai Narsingh had risen to the position of the ‘deputy commander’ of Kasansur *dalam* of the CPI-Maoist before being killed in an encounter with Maharashtra police’ C-60 commandos at Boteyjhari and Badhgaon forests in Gadchiroli district on 5 January 2017.<sup>[19]</sup> Zareena joined the CPI- Maoist in 2005 as a ‘member of National Park area committee’. She was elevated as a *dalam* commander and accompanied senior Maoist leader, Ramanna. Subsequently, she was shifted to the regional company. Later, she was sent to Malagir area committee of Darbha. She was killed in an encounter with the police in Bijapur district of Chhattisgarh on 22 January 2016.<sup>[20]</sup> Suna Wadeka, at the age of 12, joined the Jana Natya Mandali (JNM), the cultural wing of the CPI-Maoist. She rose in the organizational hierarchy of the outfit to become the personal bodyguard of the Maoist commander, Chelluri Narayan Rao alias Suresh, belonging to the third company of Central Regional Committee (CRC), active on the Andhra Pradesh-Odisha border.

Pramila, a member of ‘vistaar platoon no. 2’ was killed in an encounter with security forces in Kabirdham, Chhattisgarh on 29 August 2018.<sup>[21]</sup> Gemmeli Bando alias Kamala alias Rasso joined CPI-Maoist in 2007 as an armed militia member of Galikonda *dalam* in Visakha agency.<sup>[22]</sup> 27-year-old Ungi Madavi was the deputy commander of the Maoist squad that attacked a convoy of Congress Party leaders in Chhattisgarh’s Sukma district on 25 May 2013. She also led some of the attacks carried out by the Maoists, including one in which a vehicle carrying CRPF personnel was blown up in Bastar.<sup>[23]</sup> Suna Wadeka was involved in various attacks on security forces including an explosion targeting a vehicle which was carrying Border Security Force (BSF) personnel on 27 August 2013.<sup>[24]</sup>

## Reintegration and Rehabilitation Strategies

Large number of women within the CPI-Maoist underlines the vital role they play for the outfit. The roles assigned to them emphasize their contribution as fighting cadres as well as support staff. While allegations of sexual exploitation could have been true on some occasions, there is little evidence that this is a wide-spread practice within the CPI-Maoist. On the other hand, continued recruitment



of women cadres, points at a larger problem of the state's inability to provide the tribal women a sense of safety and justice. The CPI-Maoist is being able to channelize such anger, sense of injustice, alienation, and yearning for a purpose in life to recruit women into its ranks. The state's policy to reintegrate and rehabilitate women Maoist cadres into the mainstream must factor this truism. Policies for providing education, skill-based training, extending micro credit, and creating employment opportunities must go hand in hand with a system that works effectively to provide justice for violators of women's rights in the extremism affected areas. Given that more than half of CPI-Maoist's fighting cadres are women, such a policy, if implemented well, may lead to weakening of the outfit significantly.

## End Notes

<sup>[1]</sup> Written Statement of Kiren Rijju, Minister of State for Home Affairs, Government of India, in the Lok Sabha (lower house of the Indian Parliament), 5 August 2014, <https://mha.gov.in/MHA1/Par2017/pdfs/par2014-pdfs/ls-050814/LS%20393.pdf>. Accessed on 23 October 2018.

<sup>[2]</sup> "West Bengal: Woman Maoist commander surrenders", NDTV, 28 August 2010, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/west-bengal-woman-maoist-commander-surrenders-429050>. Accessed on 28 October 2018.

<sup>[3]</sup> Saiful Haque, "Wife-swapping, adultery, rapes. Former woman Maoist's shocking revelations on the ultras", *India Today*, 8 July 2013, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/east/story/former-woman-maoist-lays-bare-the-full-of-adultery-naxal-culture-166080-2013-06-08>. Accessed on 28 October 2018.

<sup>[4]</sup> "Why women join India's Maoist Groups", *BBC news*, 20 November 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-24456634>. Accessed on 9 September 2018.

<sup>[5]</sup> "Women Cadres form spine of Reds in Bastar", *The Indian Express*, 29 July 2018, <http://www.newindianexpress.com/thesundaystandard/2018/jul/29/women-cadres-form-spine-of-reds-in-bastar-1849963.html>. Accessed on 30 August 2018.

<sup>[6]</sup> Arun Srivastava, *Maoism in India*, (New Delhi: Prabhat Prakashan, 2015), p.29.

<sup>[7]</sup> Pratibha Singh, *Women in the Maoist War in India: Two Sides of the Spectrum*, (Gender and the State in the Contemporary India), <https://ecpr.eu/Events/PaperDetails.aspx?PaperID=23283&EventID=100>. Accessed on 2 September 2018.

<sup>[8]</sup> Hakeem Irfan, "More than 50% of guerrillas women, says senior Maoist leader", *DNA*, 18 May 2015, <https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-more-than-50-of-guerrillas-women-says-senior-maoist-leader-2069726>. Accessed on 3 September 2018.

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[13] Nazia Sayed, “Women cadres reveal life of abuse, servitude” , *Mumbai Mirrors*, 16 August 2016, <https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/mumbai/other/women-cadres-reveal-life-of-abuse-servitude/articleshow/53716352.cms>. Accessed on 10 September 2018.

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