

Maoists Link in Odisha: Case of the Chasi Mulia Adivasi Sangh

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Summary

The mass surrender of Chasi Mulia Adivasi Sangh (CMAS) (Association of Peasants, Bonded Labours and the Tribal) members, in Koraput district in Odisha virtually every week has been making headlines in both the local as well as national news papers for the last several months. The important reason being, according to media reports, more than 1600 members of the CMAS (all of them from different villages of Narayanpatna Block of Koraput district) have surrendered since January 2013. Earlier the CMAS, led by Nachika Linga, was in news when the Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-Maoist), Maoist-in short, demanded the release of some 25 members of the CMAS as a condition to release Jhina Hikoka, (Member of Legislative Assembly), who was abducted by them on March 24, 2012 from Toyaaput village of Koraput district. This time around, while the police are taking all credits for these surrenders, there is a general feeling that the mass surrender is because the Maoists are losing ground in one of their strong holds in the state.

The issue of surrenders as well as arrests of CMAS members is perplexing given the fact that the CMAS is not a banned organisation in Odisha. The Police maintain that the CMAS is a frontal organisation of the Maoists and it is through the CMAS that the Maoists are carrying out their activities in Koraput, Malkanagiri and some parts of Rayagada districts. The president of the CMAS, Nachika Linga, who is absconding, refutes Police allegation and claims that they do not have any links with the Maoists.¹

Against these backdrops it is important to explore whether the CMAS is an independent organisation working for the betterment of the tribal, peasants and bonded laborers or does it has some links with the Maoists.

CMAS: Genesis

The origin of the CMAS goes to the Rythu Coolie Sangham (RCS), an Andhra Pradesh based peasants organisation which was founded by pro-Maoist peasant leaders in the Vizianagaram district of Andhra Pradesh. A branch of the RCS was opened in Odisha by Bhaskar Rao alias Basa in Almonda of Bandhugaon block of Koraput district in 1995. The RCS, once established in Koraput, was successful in garnering support of the local tribal, peasants and the bonded laborers, mainly from Bandhugaon and Narayanpatna blocks of Koraput. There has been a close association between the RCS branch of Odhisha and its parent organisation in Andhra Pradesh. Some of the important leaders of Communist Party of India-Marxist Leninist (CPI-ML) such as Gananatha Patra were actively involved in the activities of the RCS (both in Andhra Pradesh and Koraput). Some members of the RCS-Koraput had also participated during the Anti-Arak (local liquor) movement² of 1990s in Andhra Pradesh. The Anti-Arak movement influenced the activities of the RCS in Koraput as well. Kondagiri Paidamma from Bada Bankidi village spearheaded an anti-liquor movement in Koraput in 1995. She was arrested by the police as she was alleged to be involved in violent activities through the mass movements but later released in 1997 due to lack of evidence.

The RCS-Koraput with active support of the CPI-ML leaders such as Gananath Patra, Brahmananda Muli, Srikanta Mohanty and Bhaskar Rao, organised mass rallies demanding land to the tribal, peasants and landless; ban on consumption and selling of liquor; and effective administration in their areas. By 2001, Kondagiri Paidamma had emerged as the

¹ See G Vishnu, "The Maoists Support Us, But we haven't joined them", The Tehlka, June 7, 2013, available at <http://tehelka.com/the-maoists-support-us-but-we-havent-joined-them/#>, accessed on June 12, 2013.

² A spontaneous anti-liquor consumption and selling movement led by the women in Nellore district of Andhra Pradesh in the 1990s

leader of the RCS-Koraput with some active members such as Nachika Linga, Arjun Kendruka, Nachika Chamara, Wadeka Singana and Gananath Patra as their advisor. The RCS-Koraput intensified its activities arguing that *Jal, Jamin and Jungle* (Water, Land and Forest) belong to the tribal and the peasants.

The RCS was banned in Andhra Pradesh on August 17, 2005 following a ban on the CPI-Maoist and its frontal organisations.³ In anticipation of a similar ban by the Odisha government, the RCS-Koraput changed its name to Chasi Mulia Adivasi Sangh in 2006. The first ever rally under the banner of the CMAS was organised on October 10, 2006 demanding registration of land in names of the tribal and release of 'their members' (some of the tribal and local individuals) arrested by the police. The activities of the CMAS, however, were not all that altruistic and peaceful. There had been reports that the CMAS activists were engaging in violent activities during the rally. From 2006 to 2008 the members of the CMAS were allegedly involved in grabbing lands from non-tribal owners; organising rallies against liquor consumption; giving veiled threat to the 'corrupt government officers'; and mobilizing people to join the CMAS. The activities of the CMAS were mainly limited to Narayanpatna and Bandhugaon blocks of Koraput.

Faction in CMAS:

By 2008, the CMAS acquired substantial presence in both Narayanpatna and Bandhugaon blocks. Kondagiri Paidama, once the leader of the CMAS was sidelined by Arjun Kendruka of Bandhugaon and Nachika Linga of Narayan patna. Incidentally the elevation of Arjun Kendruka and Nachika Linga as top leaders also resulted in formation of two groups within the CMAS. Overtime, serious differences started emerging between these two groups over a number of issues. For instance, while Arjun Kendruka believed in requesting donation of land from the big land owners, Nachika Linga went on to forcibly grab land from the landlords, locally known as the *sahukars*. Nachika Linga tried to mobilize people in an extremist manner with the slogan *Jami Mukti, Mada Mukti and Goti Mukti*, which means capturing land from the land lords, freedom from liquor and freedom from bonded labor. Difference of opinion between the two leaders also cropped up over the utilization of the CMAS funds. Major differences in opinion between the two leaders emerged when Arjun Kendruka preferred the parliamentary democracy and expressed his willingness to participate in the Assembly election of Odisha in April 2009. Nachika Linga, however, opposed Kendruka's decision because of two reasons. One, as many believe, he was influenced by the Maoist ideas against Indian democracy. Two, he was aspiring for a ticket from the CPI-ML to contest from Laxmipur constituency of Koraput. Instead, Arjun

³ The frontal organisations of the CPI-Maoist banned by the Government of Andhra Pradesh were Radical Youth League, Rythu Coolie Sangham, Radical Students Union, Singareni Karmika Samakhya, Viplava Karmika Samakhya and All India Revolutionary Students Federation.

Kendruka was given the ticket from the CPI-ML. According to the local sources⁴ Nachika Linga campaigned against Arjun Kendruka and supported Jhina Hikoka, a candidate contesting from Biju Janata Dal (BJD) ticket. Arjun Kendruka lost to Jhina Hikoka in the election. The post Assembly election witnessed increasing violent activities by the CMAS-N activists against the *Sahukars* and the non-tribal.

Feud between the two leaders resulted in the split in the CMAS. One faction was led by Arjun Kendruka and the other by Nachika Linga. Incidentally, senior leaders of the Sangh (organisation) also took sides. For example, while Kondagiri Paidama chose to be with Arjun Kendruka, Gananath Patra supported the Nachika Linga faction. These difference of opinions also resulted in hardening of positions which culminated into clashes between the two groups. As both the groups clashed with each other, Gopinath Kardasia from Narayanpatna set up the Nagarik Suraksha Committee, which demanded a ban on the CMAS led by Nachika Linga. However, the committee failed to make an impact as its members also got involved in violent clashes with the CMAS-N. The CMAS-N members went on blocking roads, grabbing lands, felling trees in order to check the movement of the Police, targeting non CMAS-N members.

Penetration of the Maoists into CMAS-N

Many of the members of the CMAS-N members were arrested by the Narayanpatna police in response to increasing violent activities of the organisation. Meanwhile, the Maoists, who were trying to get a foothold in Koraput and its neighboring districts of Malkanagiri and Rayagada, started visiting the villages and mobilizing the people in general and CMAS-N members in particular against the arrest of their 'fellow villagers' and the presence of security forces in their area. The Maoists were successful in spreading rumors about the security forces' 'atrocities' against the innocent individuals. Agitated by alleged atrocities by the security forces (Both the para-military forces and the state police), Nachika Linga, along with Kendruka Singanna (leader of the *Ghinua Bahini*⁵), Andru Nachika, Kumudini Behera (leader of the women front of the organisation) and several villagers picketed the Narayanpatna Police station on November 20, 2009. During this protest violent clashes erupted between the Police and the members of the CMAS (N). Two important leaders of the CMAS-N, Kendruka Singanna (close aide of Nachika Linga) and Andru Nachika (nephew of Nachika Linga) were killed in police firing. Many persons were injured and police arrested 37 members of the organisation. Nachika Linga escaped from the scene and continues to be at large since then. The police have issued a non-

⁴ The author interviewed the displaced villagers from Narayanpatna block on April 6, 2013.

⁵ Ghinua Bahina a.k.a Ghinua Brigade is believed to be the military wing of the CMAS-N. Ghinua Bahini recruits young individuals among the supporters of the CMAS-N and trains them. The Maoists are suspected to be training the members of this brigade.

bailable warrant against him. While the police are of the opinion that the whole incident was a planned attack, the CMAS-N members and its sympathizers claim that the protest against the police atrocity was spontaneous.⁶

As mentioned above, the Maoists were looking for an opportunity to penetrate into a mass organisation like the CMAS-N and the incident of November 2009 provided them with that opportunity. By providing shelter to Nachika Linga, who was trying to escape from the police operations, the Maoists brought the members of the CMAS-N under their fold.

While Nachika Linga would claim that he or his faction does not have any link with the Maoists, there have been number of incidents that prove otherwise. One such incident was killing of his arch rival Arjun Kendruka. Arjun Kendruka, though lost the election, had acquired some legitimacy from the state establishment as well as from the security forces after contesting the elections. He also continued to get peoples' support from both Bandhugaon and Narayanpatna. In short, Arjun Kendruka posed a major challenge not only to the leadership of Nachika Linga but also to the penetration of the Maoists into Koraput and adjoining areas. As a result of which he was killed by the Srikakulam Division of the CPI-Maoist on August 9, 2010. The Maoists also eliminated some of the rivals of the CMAS-N, who were perceived to be acting against Nachika Linga and the Maoists. Some of them were, Ghasi Kendruka, a teacher, Anand Kisani of Semiliguda and Nrusinghanath Panda of Ramgiri, both Shanti Committee members, and Sikunu Meleka.

CMAS-N Activities

Once Arjun Kendruka was eliminated by the Maoists, the CMAS-Bandhugaon became inactive. Fear of the Maoist guerillas did not allow them to surface and work against the Maoist. On the other hand, the members of the CMAS-N with active support from the Maoist captured more than 6000 acres of land in Bandhugaon and Narayanpatna. They also chased away more than 6000 people from their village as they were termed as 'class enemy' by the Maoists. The CMAS-N has been cultivating the land grabbed by them in name of 'community firming'. Villagers have been regularly threatened with dire consequences if they work against the Party (Maoist) or the Sangh (CMAS). Through the CMAS, the Maoists have been successful in consolidating their presence not only in Koraput, but also in parts of Rayagada and Malkanagiri districts. CMAS, a movement originally started with local causes has now been integrated with the larger cause of People's War as preached by the Maoists. The Maoists and the CMAS-N members are

⁶ See "Flames of Narayanpatna", a document released by Chasi Mulia Adivasi Sangh-Narayanpatna, December 22, 2010.

trying to win back the displaced dalit families into their folds by asking them to unite against the exploitative Sahukars and other 'class enemies'.

Why the Surrender Drama?

The mass surrender of the members of the CMAS raises a number of questions such as: Does the surrender foretell returning of normalcy in Bandhugaon and Narayanpatna areas of Koraput? Are the Maoists loosing ground in these areas? Will these surrenders force Nachika Linga to surrender as well which will bring an end to the activities of the CMAS?

There could be a number of reasons for such mass surrender. One such widely believed reason is that Nachika Linga is thinking of surrendering⁷, but he is asking his supporters to surrender first to examine the response of the State government. Another reason could be the fact that since Nachika Linga is having difference of opinion with the Maoists on escalating violence in Koraput and because of which the Maoists are allegedly trying to replace him with Mino Hikoka, Nachika Linga could have directed his followers to surrender so that he could show the Maoists that in his absence it would be difficult for the later to mobilize the people. These surrenders could also be tactical moves by the Maoists and the CMAS leadership for garner support from the people. As very few who have surrendered have cases against them, it would, rather help the Maoists in mobilizing people against the Police and security forces. The security forces, especially the State Police are of the opinion that increasing deployment of security forces, both the Central Para-military Forces and the Special Operation Group (SOG) of the state has generated a sense of security among the people, hence the surrenders.

Conclusion

Even though a section of media and the security forces, especially the police have described the surrenders as 'weakening of the Red Bastion in Naraynpatna', it is too early to hold such views. In the recent past, Nachika Linga has emphatically denied that he would surrender.⁸ Since the Maoists have strong control over Naraynpatna-Bandhugaon area, it would be difficult for any one to engineer a plan against the Maoists and mobilize people to surrender against the Maoists' will. And therefore, these surrenders should be seen as a tactics of the Maoists through which the security forces could be lured into a sense of complacency. Even if Nachika Linga joins the mainstream politics, his move would not have any impact the Maoists movement in these areas. As mentioned above the Maoists would set up Mino Hikoka or some similar individual at the helm of the CMAS and take

⁷ Author's interaction with the local people of Koraput.

⁸ See G Vishnu, n.2

full control of the organisation. Moreover, with the recent success in Chhattisgarh, where the Maoists killed 30 persons including the discredited Salwa Judum founder Mahendra Karma on May 25, 2013, the Maoists are charged up with much more vigor. The state government, the police and the other security forces should not believe that such mass surrender signifies failure of the Maoist movement; rather they must see this as a tactical move of the Maoists and the CMAS to energise them.
