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## Uttarakhand: Inventing Naxal Threat

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*A fact finding team that visited Haldwani to meet a jailed journalist was turned away by muscle flexing state administration that swears to stamp out Maoist threat from Uttarakhand despite no evidence of its existence. **Radhika Menon** from Forum for Democratic Initiatives, who was part of the team, points to a sinister move by the state government to rob the people of the little freedom they may have while wooing the likes of Tatas*

In Uttarakhand today, what does it require for you to be locked up in jail, in solitary confinement with an armed constabulary guarding your every move and watching and tracking those who visit you? You don't need to be a liquor mafia leader, a real estate dodger or a major bungler of infrastructure funds. In fact, if you are any of these you may even find a pride of place in the ruling dispensation's services. But if you are like Prashant Rahi, a journalist, a social activist and a person who has voiced and stood by the struggles of a neglected region and its even further neglected people, the government may dump you in jail with charges so serious and in provisions so unfair that you would have to prove your innocence to those who are determined to prove you otherwise.

As for what has Rahi done, even the police may not be very clear, nevertheless they were eager to declare him a 'big catch' and booked him under various sections of IPC including 121, 121A, 124A, 153B, 120B. Since 21st December, the supposed date of his arrest from the Hasanpur Khata forest, it was leaked to the state's leading newspapers that he was an area commander of Maoist Communist Centre

and that he was also the zonal secretary of CPI-Maoists and that he was conspiring to blow up Haridwar jail and the Haldwani sub jail. Laptops with addresses of police stations and some CDs, a pen drive and Maoist literature were supposed to be accumulating as evidence of his

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crime. In the meantime, with the media turning away from the incompetence of the administration, the bungling of funds, the crack-down on trade unions and giving double page spread to the "seditious" activities of a journalist, the government heaved relief.

The self-styled security experts of Chief Minister BC Khanduri bloated into a big I-told-you-so. They declared after all Uttarakhand does share porous border with Nepal and there is easy movement of people between the two countries and thus presumably also that of Maoists of both countries. Here an incident from Champawat district is tom-tommed, wherein Nepalese Maoists were reported to have planted red flags inside Indian territory. Local persons, harassed by the combing operations in the area have however publicly stated that the red flags in Nanakmata forests were actually the handiwork of a contractor to make logging easier for his workers! But the police aided by a similarly oriented government peddled the view of increasing impact of Maoists in the area.

After all with a Prime Minister declaring that left wing extremism is the biggest internal security threat, state after state has been declaring and demonstrating the presence of a threat aided by sensational reporting and why would Uttarakhand remain behind in this game of me-more-threatened-than-you-are. Chief Minister Khanduri took it as an opportunity to re-emphasise the demand for Rs 208 crores from the central government for bolstering the law and order situation and the Maoist presence was presented as the big reason. It was also leaked to the newspapers that Rahi's interrogation revealed a strong network of 25-30 intellectuals who planned to disturb peace and law and order situation in the State!

Khanduri has gained credence from the activities of the earlier Congress government which had allocated Rs 10 crore for this "threat" and which had also constituted a special task force with 30% more salaries than the regular police. Yet till date the government has had little to show in terms of Maoist activities apart from the arrests of four persons

including a young journalist under Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (ULAPA). No evidence could be garnered to prove them as Maoists apart from the fact that one of the persons was an illiterate worker supposedly carrying a Maoist booklet, another was accused of trying to burn a roof down and yet another one was a young journalist.

As for Prashant Rahi, according to Rahi's daughter who works in the Hindi film industry as an Assistant director, he was arrested on 17 December 2007 from the Dehradun-Rishikesh road, tortured and then posed as a conspirator. Far from a threat, Rahi's credential includes working in close association with the local people's struggles in Uttarakhand for the last 17 years. By birth a Maharashtrian, he had pursued an M Tech. from Banaras Hindu University before switching to journalism and starting his career with the *Himachal Times*, later moving on to *The Statesman*.

Talking about people's issues as a journalist does not indicate the dangerous criminal, that the administration has been eager to prove him as per the repeated declarations of the Sub Divisional Magistrate (SDM) of Haldwani, Pankaj Pandey — even before the trial had started — while preventing Forum for Democratic Initiatives (FDI) Team from meeting Rahi in the Haldwani jail.

While in Haldwani Jail, Rahi was not allowed to meet any human rights activists, representatives of lawyers organisations or the media. The jail superintendent rejected requests to meet Rahi after verifying the identity proof of the FDI members, which included a Delhi University teacher, a Nainital Bar Council member and a well known High Court lawyer, a journalist from Delhi and the general secretary of the Srinagar Researchers association. The SDM, who had the authority to grant permission to meet prisoners held under ULAPA, first remained elusive and when finally confronted declared that the team could meet any prisoner they liked, be it a murderer or a rapist but meeting Rahi was impossible as per strict orders from the police and "above". He suggested we should get files opened in our names with the police so that



Shikha and Prashant Rahi

they could verify our activities before we met Rahi!

Rahi's family subsequently got a court order requesting that he be allowed to meet human rights activist as his daughter, the only family member, stays in Bombay. The administration now has to oblige but he has been shifted to the Dehradun jail for 'security reasons'. In the meantime, those who were trying to visit him were harassed in other ways. There are search operations on and it was reported to the team that the police were also going and harassing the landlords of the local student sympa-

**Rahi's credential includes working in close association with the local people's struggles in Uttarakhand for years. He had pursued an M.Tech before switching to journalism**

thisers of Rahi so that they would turn the boys out on the streets.

The Chief Minister who has been confronted on the Rahi matter by the media in press conferences has gone on to say that he had nothing to say on Maoism in the state but on Rahi he adds, "It's a coincidence that he was a journalist, but Rahi has been involved in activities detrimental to the nation's security." Now what is the basis for such statements and why is the government so desperate to prove dangerous Maoist presence in the state? A share from the central budget for combating Naxalism is one part. The other lies in the developments within the state.

The condition of the Taru and Bauxa people of the terai region has been distressing for decades before statehood and also in the years after statehood. In the Bindukhata region of the 1970s, the condition of the peasants was given a voice and the form of a struggle by an ex-army man, Bahadur Singh Jungi. The struggle to free land beyond the ceiling act assumed massive proportion and spread across the terai region. The industrial development in the state has confined itself to the packing industry and large tracts of land have been captured by the land mafia, in the name of industry, tourism and real estate. Recently there has also been a massive crackdown on trade unions. In the SID-CUL area there is a witch hunting of union leaders, AICCTU leader K K Bora was manhandled on the streets and threatened with an encounter, several workers have also been terminated from services.

When the Tatas faced trouble in Singur in West Bengal, Chief Minister Khanduri had offered trouble free areas within Uttarakhand. His recipe for easy areas for Tatas and other companies includes restricting the labour rights of the workers in these special zones, arresting union leaders, and if required shooting the messenger as in the case of Rahi. The consternation that it has generated amongst the people and the anxiety of the government to drum up Maoist fears indicates that this is not the last we have heard from the state.

— The writer is a social activist



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