

Neoliberal Development and Indian Democracy:  
The Politics of Rights, Rebellions and Reforms

*International Workshop at the The Forum for Asian Studies,  
Stockholm University, 10-12 October, 2013*

**Venue:** Aula Magna

In the political landscape of contemporary India, the rise of Naxalism – radical groups inspired by Mao Zedong’s early twentieth century vision of peasant revolution and armed class struggle – is somewhat of a surprise. “A primitive peasant rebellion based on an outmoded ideology,” as the London *Economist* once put it, “is out of keeping with the modern India of soaring growth, Bollywood dreams and call-centres.” Analysts and Indian policy intellectuals disagree on whether the rise of Naxalism is the result of underdevelopment, i.e., certain areas being bypassed by development, or of its inverse: intensive development – the escalating demand for natural resources caused by the economic boom, and the consequent threats to traditional livelihoods of peoples living on lands rich in natural resources and minerals. Another version of the underdevelopment thesis focuses not on rebel grievances, but on weaknesses of the state in peripheral regions that create conditions for armed conflicts.

The mix of ideas and policies associated with ‘neoliberalism’—especially the process of what David Harvey calls ‘accumulation by dispossession’ --may allow us to engage with the paradox of the rise of Naxalism in contemporary India. Democratic politics – intensely competitive elections and the upsurge of lower-caste political mobilization-- has given a particular twist to India’s encounter with neo-liberalism. Thus when in June 2012 the global credit rating agency Standard and Poor’s (S&P) warned that India’s much-touted growth story might come to an end, it blamed “political road-blocks” that risk setbacks or reversals in the neo-liberal economic policy-course. The reference is primarily to the government’s incapacity to continue on the path of neoliberal economic reforms, as highlighted by the impasse (that has since been overcome) over opening the retailing and aviation sectors to foreign investors. But among “political roadblocks” many include also the significant

expansion of entitlement programs over the past decade. Indeed prominent advocates of the neo-liberal model have warned that a wave of populism leading to the expansion of entitlement programs, and the government's incapacity to implement second generation economic reforms, call into question India's ability to sustain high growth rates and to achieve the great power status that many in India covet.

But some of the so-called political roadblocks are viewed quite differently from another perspective. Since 2004, says political scientist Sanjay Ruparelia, India "has enacted a series of groundbreaking legislative acts that enshrine a number of socioeconomic entitlements through legally enforceable rights." Among them are: The Right to Information Act (RTI), The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, and the Food Security Bill currently under consideration by India's parliament. Whether these legislations confer rights in any meaningful sense of the term, or whether they point to an emerging alternative to the neo-liberal agenda however, are open to dispute. These are not universal or justiciable rights. Furthermore new rights legislations hide realities on the ground. For instance, contrary to the promises of the rhetoric of the right to food, the past few years have seen actual reduction in the amount of food-grain made available to families below the poverty line, and in the reach of India's public food distribution programs. Legislations such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act or the Food Security Act, say critics, primarily reflect the Congress party's electoral calculations.

The conference will bring together analysts whose research throws light on aspects of India's encounter with neo-liberalism. There will be political-economic, sociological and ethnographic explorations of the following themes of rights, rebellion, dispossession and the reconceptualization of the state.

## PROGRAM

### October 10

Afternoon: arrival and check-in

18:00                      Reception and dinner at the hotel

### October 11

9:30                        Reception with coffee and sandwiches

10:00                      Welcome note

Henrik Berglund, Stockholm University

10:05                      Introduction

Sanjib Baruah, Bard College and Stockholm University

10:20 – 12:30            Inaugural panel

Kanchan Chandra, New York University, USA

“The New Indian State”

John Echeverri-Gent, University of Virginia, USA

“India's Neoliberal Turn: Do the costs outweigh the benefits?”

Alpa Shah, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

“The Rise and Fall of the Maoist Movement in India”

12:30–13:30 Lunch at the Faculty Club

13:30-15:00 Swedish Experiences

Lars Trägårdh, Ersta Sköndal University College

“Exporting the Nordic Model in an Era of Neo-liberal Hegemony”

Olle Törnquist, University of Oslo, Norway

“Scandinavian Social Democracy and India”

15:00 – 15:30 Coffee

15:45 Screening of the film “Red Ant Dream” by Sanjay Kak

This is a chronicle of those who live the revolutionary ideal in India, a rare encounter with the invisible domain of those whose every-day is a fight for another ideal of the world. **Red Ant Dream** is the third in a cycle of films that interrogate the workings of Indian democracy. The screening will be followed by a discussion with Sanjay Kak

19.30 Dinner

## **October 12**

9.00 Reception with coffee and sandwiches

9:30-11:50 Reforms

Chair: Henrik Berglund, Stockholm University

Reetika Khera, Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi

“Democratic Politics and Legal Rights: Employment guarantee and food security in India”

Shylashri Shankar, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi

“Making Social Audits Accountable: The Case of India's Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme”?

Beppe Karlsson, Stockholm University

“Democracy in the bush?: Taking Stock of the Indian Forest Rights Act of 2006”

Discussant: John Echeverri-Gent, University of Virginia, USA

11:50-12:30

Lunch

12.30-14:30

Rights Claims

Chair: Beppe Karlsson, Stockholm University

Alf Gunvald Nilsen, University of Bergen, Norway

“Vernacular Rights Cultures in the Bhil Heartland: Reflections on Democratic Grassroots Struggles”

Kenneth Bo Nielsen, University of Oslo, Norway

“Law and Larai: (De)judicialization of Subaltern Resistance in West Bengal”

Dolly Kikon, Stockholm University

“Human Rights Exposed: The Political Life of Vernacular Rights Culture in Northeast India”

Discussant: Alpa Shah, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

14:30-17:00

Ambiguities and Opportunities

Chair: Sanjib Baruah, Bard College, New York and Stockholm University

Duncan McDuie-Ra University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

“Neoliberal conjectures in Northeast India”

Uday Chandra, Max Planck Institute, Göttingen, Germany

”Neoliberal Governmentality and Durable Disorder in the Margins: The Anatomy of a Social Conflict in the Forests of Eastern India”

Patrik Oskarsson, University of Gothenburg, Sweden  
“The Paralyzing noise of Indian anti-mining activism”

Åshild Kolås and Jason Miklian, Peace Research Institute Oslo, Norway  
Human Security, Development and the Politics of (Neo)liberal Peacebuilding in India

Discussant: Kanchan Chandra, New York University, USA

15:30-15:50

Coffee

17:00 -17:30 Summing up

19:00 Dinner