

INDIA'S LONG WAR

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The low, flat-topped hills of south Orissa have been home to the Dongria Kondh long before there was a country called India or a state called Orissa. The hills watched over the Kondh. The Kondh watched over the hills and worshipped them as living deities. Now these hills have been sold for the bauxite they contain. For the Kondh it's as though god had been sold. They ask how much god would go for if the god were Ram or Allah or Jesus Christ.

Perhaps the Kondh are supposed to be grateful that their Niyamgiri hill, home to their Niyam Raja, God of Universal Law, has been sold to a company with a name like Vedanta (the branch of Hindu philosophy that teaches the Ultimate Nature of Knowledge). It's one of the biggest mining corporations in the world and is owned by Anil Agarwal, the Indian billionaire who lives in London in a mansion that once belonged to the Shah of Iran. Vedanta is only one of the many multinational corporations closing in on Orissa.

If the flat-topped hills are destroyed, the forests that clothe them will be destroyed, too. So will the rivers and streams that flow out of them and irrigate the plains below. So will the Dongria Kondh. So will the hundreds of thousands of tribal people who live in the forested heart of India, and whose homeland is similarly under attack.

Then some people say, "So what? Someone has to pay the price of progress." Some even say, "Let's face it, these are people whose time has come. Look at any developed country – Europe, the US, Australia – they all have a 'past'." Indeed they do. So why shouldn't "India"?

In keeping with this line of thought, the government has announced Operation Green Hunt, a war purportedly against the "Maoist" rebels headquartered in the jungles of central India. Of course, the Maoists are by no means the only ones rebelling. There is a whole spectrum of struggles all over the country that people are engaged in—the landless, the Dalits, the homeless, workers, peasants, weavers. They're pitted against a juggernaut of injustices, including policies that allow a wholesale corporate takeover of people's land and resources. However, it is the Maoists that the government has singled out as being the biggest threat.

Two years ago, when things were nowhere near as bad as they are now, the prime minister described the Maoists as the "single largest internal security threat" to the country. This will probably go down as the most popular and often repeated thing he ever said. For some reason, the comment he made on 6 January, 2009, at a meeting of state chief ministers, when he described the Maoists as having only "modest capabilities", doesn't seem to have had the same raw appeal. He revealed his government's real concern on 18 June, 2009, when he told parliament: "If left-wing extremism continues to flourish in parts which have natural resources of minerals, the climate for investment would certainly be affected."

Who are the Maoists? They are members of the banned Communist party of India (Maoist) – CPI (Maoist) – one of the several descendants of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), which led the 1969 Naxalite uprising and was subsequently liquidated by the Indian government. The Maoists believe that the

innate, structural inequality of Indian society can only be redressed by the violent overthrow of the Indian state. In its earlier avatars as the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) in Jharkhand and Bihar, and the People's War Group (PWG) in Andhra Pradesh, the Maoists had tremendous popular support. (When the ban on them was briefly lifted in 2004, 1.5 million people attended their rally in Warangal.)

But eventually their intercession in Andhra Pradesh ended badly. They left a violent legacy that turned some of their staunchest supporters into harsh critics. After a paroxysm of killing and counter-killing by the Andhra police as well as the Maoists, the PWG was decimated. Those who managed to survive fled Andhra Pradesh into neighbouring Chhattisgarh. There, deep in the heart of the forest, they joined colleagues who had already been working there for decades.

Not many "outsiders" have any first-hand experience of the real nature of the Maoist movement in the forest. A recent interview with one of its top leaders, Ganapathy, in *Open* magazine, didn't do much to change the minds of those who view the Maoists as a party with an unforgiving, totalitarian vision, which countenances no dissent whatsoever. Ganapathy said nothing that would persuade people that, were the Maoists ever to come to power, they would be equipped to properly address the almost insane diversity of India's caste-ridden society. His casual approval of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) of Sri Lanka was enough to send a shiver down even the most sympathetic of spines, not just because of the brutal ways in which the LTTE chose to wage its war, but also because of the cataclysmic tragedy that has befallen the Tamil people of Sri Lanka, who it claimed to represent, and for whom it surely must take some responsibility.

Right now in central India, the Maoists' guerrilla army is made up almost entirely of desperately poor tribal people living in conditions of such chronic hunger that it verges on famine of the kind people only associate with sub-Saharan Africa. They are people who, even after 60 years of India's so-called independence, have not had access to education, healthcare or legal redress. They are people who have been mercilessly exploited for decades, consistently cheated by small businessmen and moneylenders, the women raped as a matter of right by police and forest department personnel. Their journey back to a semblance of dignity is due in large part to the Maoist cadre who have lived and worked and fought by their side for decades.

If the tribals have taken up arms, they have done so because a government which has given them nothing but violence and neglect now wants to snatch away the last thing they have – their land. Clearly, they do not believe the government when it says it only wants to "develop" their region. Clearly, they do not believe that the roads as wide and flat as aircraft runways that are being built through their forests in Dantewada by the National Mineral Development Corporation are being built for them to walk their children to school on. They believe that if they do not fight for their land, they will be annihilated. That is why they have taken up arms.

Even if the ideologues of the Maoist movement are fighting to eventually overthrow the Indian state, right now even they know that their ragged,

malnourished army, the bulk of whose soldiers have never seen a train or a bus or even a small town, are fighting only for survival.

In 2008, an expert group appointed by the Planning Commission submitted a report called "Development Challenges in Extremist-Affected Areas". It said, "the Naxalite (Maoist) movement has to be recognised as a political movement with a strong base among the landless and poor peasantry and adivasis. Its emergence and growth need to be contextualised in the social conditions and experience of people who form a part of it. The huge gap between state policy and performance is a feature of these conditions. Though its professed long-term ideology is capturing state power by force, in its day-to-day manifestation, it is to be looked upon as basically a fight for social justice, equality, protection, security and local development." A very far cry from the "single-largest internal security threat".

Since the Maoist rebellion is the flavour of the week, everybody, from the sleekest fat cat to the most cynical editor of the most sold-out newspaper in this country, seems to be suddenly ready to concede that it is decades of accumulated injustice that lies at the root of the problem. But instead of addressing that problem, which would mean putting the brakes on this 21st-century gold rush, they are trying to head the debate off in a completely different direction, with a noisy outburst of pious outrage about Maoist "terrorism". But they're only speaking to themselves.

The people who have taken to arms are not spending all their time watching (or performing for) TV, or reading the papers, or conducting SMS polls for the Moral Science question of the day: Is Violence Good or Bad? SMS your reply to ... They're out there. They're fighting. They believe they have the right to defend their homes and their land. They believe that they deserve justice.

In order to keep its better-off citizens absolutely safe from these dangerous people, the government has declared war on them. A war, which may take between three and five years to win. Odd, isn't it, that even after the Mumbai attacks of 26/11, the government was prepared to talk with Pakistan? It's prepared to talk to China. But when it comes to waging war against the poor, it's playing hard.

It's not enough that special police with totemic names like Greyhounds, Cobras and Scorpions are scouring the forests with a licence to kill. It's not enough that the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), the Border Security Force (BSF) and the notorious Naga Battalion have already wreaked havoc and committed unconscionable atrocities in remote forest villages. It's not enough that the government supports and arms the Salwa Judum, the "people's militia" that has killed and raped and burned its way through the forests of Dantewada leaving 300,000 people homeless or on the run. Now the government is going to deploy the Indo-Tibetan border police and tens of thousands of paramilitary troops. It plans to set up a brigade headquarters in Bilaspur (which will displace nine villages) and an air base in Rajnandgaon (which will displace seven). Obviously, these decisions were taken a while ago. Surveys have been done, sites chosen. Interesting. War has been in the offing for a while. And now the heli-copters of the Indian air force have been given the right to fire in "self-defence", the very right that the government denies its poorest citizens.

Fire at whom? How will the security forces be able to distinguish a Maoist from an ordinary person who is running terrified through the jungle? Will adivasis carrying the bows and arrows they have carried for centuries now count as Maoists too? Are non-combatant Maoist sympathisers valid targets? When this writer was in Dantewada, the superintendent of police showed pictures of 19 "Maoists" that "his boys" had killed. said, "See Ma'am, they have malaria medicines, Dettol bottles, all these things from outside."

What kind of war is Operation Green Hunt going to be? Will people ever know? Not much news comes out of the forests. Lalgarh in West Bengal has been cordoned off. Those who try to go in are being beaten and arrested. And called Maoists, of course. In Dantewada, the Vanvasi Chetana Ashram, a Gandhian ashram run by Himanshu Kumar, was bulldozed in a few hours. It was the last neutral outpost before the war zone begins, a place where journalists, activists, researchers and fact-finding teams could stay while they worked in the area.

Meanwhile, the Indian establishment has unleashed its most potent weapon. Almost overnight, the embedded media has substituted its steady supply of planted, unsubstantiated, hysterical stories about "Islamist terrorism" with planted, unsubstantiated, hysterical stories about "Red terrorism". In the midst of this racket, at ground zero, the cordon of silence is being inexorably tightened. The "Sri Lanka solution" could very well be on the cards. It's not for nothing that the Indian government blocked a European move in the UN asking for an international probe into war crimes committed by the government of Sri Lanka in its recent offensive against the Tamil Tigers.

The first move in that direction is the concerted campaign that has been orchestrated to shoehorn the myriad forms of resistance taking place in this country into a simple George Bush binary: If you are not with us, you are with the Maoists. The deliberate exaggeration of the Maoist "threat" helps the state justify militarisation. (And surely does no harm to the Maoists. Which political party would be unhappy to be singled out for such attention?) While all the oxygen is being used up by this new doppelganger of the "war on terror", the state will use the opportunity to mop up the hundreds of other resistance movements in the sweep of its military operation, calling them all Maoist sympathisers.

The West Bengal government tried to do this in Nandigram and Singur but failed. Right now in Lalgarh, the Pulishi Santrash Birodhi Jana-sadharaner Committee or the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities—which is a people's movement that is separate from, though sympathetic to, the Maoists—is routinely referred to as an overground wing of the CPI (Maoist). Its leader, Chhatradhar Mahato, now arrested and being held without bail, is always called a "Maoist leader". Everybody knows story of Dr Binayak Sen, a medical doctor and a civil liberties activist, who spent two years in jail on the absolutely facile charge of being a courier for the Maoists. While the light shines brightly on Operation Green Hunt, in other parts of India, away from the theatre of war, the assault on the rights of the poor, of workers, of the landless, of those whose lands the government wishes to acquire for "public purpose", will pick up pace. Their suffering will deepen and it will be that much harder for them to get a hearing.

Once the war begins, like all wars, it will develop a momentum, a logic and an economics of its own. It will become a way of life, almost impossible to reverse.

The police will be expected to behave like an army, a ruthless killing machine. The paramilitary will be expected to become like the police, a corrupt, bloated administrative force. People have seen it happen in Nagaland, Manipur and Kashmir. The only difference in the "heartland" will be that it'll become obvious very quickly to the security forces that they're only a little less wretched than the people they're fighting. In time, the divide between the people and the law enforcers will become porous. Guns and ammunition will be bought and sold. In fact, it's already happening. Whether it's the security forces or the Maoists or noncombatant civilians, the poorest people will die in this rich people's war. However, if anybody believes that this war will leave them unaffected, they should think again. The resources it'll consume will cripple the economy of this country.

The real problem is that the flagship of India's miraculous "growth" story has run aground. It came at a huge social and environmental cost. And now, as the rivers dry up and forests disappear, as the water table recedes and as people realise what is being done to them, the chickens are coming home to roost. All over the country, there's unrest, there are protests by people refusing to give up their land and their access to resources, refusing to believe false promises any more. Suddenly, it's beginning to look as though the 10% growth rate and democracy are mutually incompatible.

To get the bauxite out of the flat-topped hills, to get iron ore out from under the forest floor, to get 85% of India's people off their land and into the cities (which is what Chidambaram says he'd like to see), India has to become a police state. The government has to militarise. To justify that militarisation, it needs an enemy. The Maoists are that enemy. They are to corporate fundamentalists what the Muslims are to Hindu fundamentalists. (Is there a fraternity of fundamentalists? Is that why the RSS has expressed open admiration for Chidambaram?)

It would be a grave mistake to imagine that the paramilitary troops, the Rajnandgaon air base, the Bilaspur brigade headquarters, the unlawful activities act, the Chhattis-garh special public security act and Operation Green Hunt are all being put in place just to flush out a few thousand Maoists from the forests. In all the talk of Operation Green Hunt, whether or not Chidambaram goes ahead and "presses the button", one can always detect the kernel of a coming state of emergency. (Here's a maths question: If it takes 600,000 soldiers to hold down the tiny valley of Kashmir, how many will it take to contain the mounting rage of hundreds of millions of people?)

Instead of narco-analysing Kobad Ghandy, the recently arrested Maoist leader, it might be a better idea to talk to him. □□□

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