

Frontier
August 29 –September 4, 2010

Subalterns Speak Out

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In the frequent debates on government and civil society response to Maoist violence in central India where Operation Green Hunt has been launched, the views of the adivasi communities themselves are missing. A recent people's hearing in New Delhi on the impact of land acquisition and resource grab on adivasis allowed their voices to be heard.

Central India is home to the adivasis and dalits, India's first people. It is also home to the richest concentration of natural resources in the country. Powerful Indian and global corporations race for control of the land, water, forest and mineral wealth of the region. In the process, the customary rights of the marginalised people are disregarded and crushed. Human rights abuses by the police, paramilitary forces and state-sponsored militia are perpetrated in the name of Operation Green Hunt, which wars against the very adivasi communities that the Constitution promises to protect. In the name of the Maoists, wider communities of adivasis are being attacked and killed. A virtual information blockade prevents the people of India from gaining knowledge of the truth about the massive war of the state against its own people.

The recently concluded meeting of the Independent People's Tribunal (IPT) on land acquisition, resource grab and Operation Green Hunt in the states of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal in New Delhi (April 9-11) issued a powerful call for an end to the ongoing war in tribal India and the initiation of a dialogue with the victims of violence. Students, activists, scholars and others participated in large numbers. The presentations were interspersed with documentaries and moving testimonies by adivasi victims of 'development' and 'state terrorism'. A six-member jury including this writer made interim recommendations at a press conference at the end of the meeting.

The adivasis spoke eloquently, with courage and clarity. Though differing in details their narratives focused on a single issue: atrocities by the police and Special Police Officers (SPOs); torture, rape, destruction and loot of villages and properties, murder of innocents; infliction of severe bodily harm; interrogations and illegal detentions and other acts of unspeakable cruelty and pain.

One may begin with Lingaram, tortured and forced to join the *Salwa Judum* in Chhattisgarh. He spoke about how the gram panchayat, dominated by non-adivasis, was a mute witness to the problems of the adivasi people and even posed a threat to their existence. Questioning the enormous funds spent on 'adivasis welfare' by government, he noted that no real progress actually took place at the grassroots. Lacking education and health services, the adivasis needed development on their own terms and not on those imposed by others. Himanshu Kumar, a Gandhian activist from Dantewada in Chhattisgarh, spoke about the advisory, legal and rehabilitation services rendered by his *Vanvasi Chetna Ashram* and the way authorities tried to crush him and his organisation and terrorise the villagers. Dr Binayak Sen brought out the structural violence embedded in the medical condition of the adivasis: statistics on malnutrition revealed a severe

hunger crisis emblematic of prolonged neglect. The state used development rhetoric but the masses were dying of hunger and malaria.

Speakers from Jharkhand and Orissa testified to numerous violations of laws relating to land acquisition, tribal protection, and pollution by corporate and state authorities. Prem Verma from Jharkhand said that social movements and their powerful grassroots support had led in some cases to the success of adivasi struggles to keep their land.

Alex Ekka referred to the umbilical relationship between tribal people and forests. He said: "Our worldview is cosmocentric. Every being has a place in this worldview, whether it is a rock, a bird, or a person. This is the worldview that will lead to a sustainable and peaceful life on what we adivasis call our mother earth." James Topo spoke forcefully on the pathetic state of education in tribal areas. The content of textbooks is completely irrelevant to the needs and context of adivasi children with the content-writers unable or unwilling to grasp that difference. The failure of education is exploited by officials; an example was given of a land acquisition officer giving a cheque to an adivasi assuring him that it was only a record of their conversation!

Tribal rights activist Gladson Dungdung spoke of the atrocities on civilians under Operation Green Hunt in Jharkhand. Adivasis experienced the operation in the form of harassment, detention, looting and beatings. The result was that the village economy had grounded to a halt, threatening the delicate balance of sustenance on which the adivasis survived. Fear had set in and villagers were unwilling to go into the forest to collect minor forest produce. Rural markets were empty and democratic spaces for protest by the adivasis had ceased to exist. Migration out of the forests was going on. Dungdung stated: "Operation Green Hunt is not for clearing out the Maoists but for establishing corporate houses in the 'mineral corridor', which had been labelled the 'red corridor' only after authorities realised that corporations were not signing MoUs for certain areas because of protest movements. However, the adivasis were determined never to give up their land: 'we tell the steel corporations that we don't want to eat steel, we want to eat foodgrain'."

Dr Bani of the Azadi Bachao Andolan (ABA) spoke of the many hurdles which were overcome in the course of the struggle to stop the huge NTPC thermal power plant, ruining thousands of acres of prime agricultural land. Most members of the Andolan claimed they had false criminal cases filed against them. Often, a farce was enacted in the name of public hearings for approval of projects. In one case, the hearing scheduled for a particular date at a distance of 20 km from the site of construction (in violation of the law) was arbitrarily and secretly held on an earlier day to prevent people from attending and participating.

Emphasising alternatives in development, Dr Bani referred to power production. While the government bought land for huge projects cheaply from poor farmers, the ABA had started small power plants, fully owned by the villagers, utilising local coal resources to generate power for 50-60 households with all revenues being split evenly among the villagers. Thus, development could indeed be locally conceived and locally beneficial.

Radha Krishna Munda of the *Jharkhand Jungle Bachao Andolan* spoke of the ground realities in the implementation (or lack thereof) of the Forest Rights Act in Jharkhand. He referred to the harassment the adivasis faced, creating an "atmosphere of suspicion and intimidation". Instead of implementing the beneficial provisions of the Forest Rights Act,

the police, the civil administration and the forest bureaucracy colluded with corporations to appropriate adivasi land.

Adivasis and activists from West Bengal described how peoples' movements and protests were dubbed Maoist in Lalgarh and elsewhere as happened in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh.

Sujato Bhadro stated that in Lalgarh, a day after the explosion involving the state chief minister's convoy in November 2008, the local police attacked villages 40 km away and mistreated the local people. A village woman's eyes were brutally gouged out; another woman had had a miscarriage. The joint forces in the conflict areas ran amuck, violating the rule of law and constitutional and international norms. People were abducted without production before magistrates as per law. And night raids were still going on. He added that since June 2009, the entire area of Lalgarh has been indefinitely under the sway of Section 144 of the CrPC.

Anup Mandal, a marathon runner at the national level, spoke of police torture in spite of his not being a Maoist. He was rescued by a journalist after receiving serious physical injuries. Confined to bed for four months, his dream of competing at the international level had been shattered and his life and career ruined.

Activists Montu Lal and Gajen Singh also testified on atrocities in Lalgarh. Government has set aside funds for the joint forces and the Harnad Vahini of the police but not for the welfare of the poor.

Speakers from Orissa dealt with people's resistance against displacement and dispossession. Activists Praveen Patel, Praful Samantra, Abhay Sahu and photographer Sanjit Das, pointed out how corporate greed in collusion with the government was bleeding the adivasis. Praveen Patel pointed out that foreign companies were getting away with virtual robbery, making huge profits, paying very little taxes and exacting a huge price by displacing the poor adivasis and making them suffer severe health and livelihood impacts resulting from pollution.

Praful Samantra pointed out that the sites containing bauxite ore were located atop mountains and were near the sources of many streams. Mining of the ore affected water supply for the adivasis in the area with no liability for the company concerned. He said that protests are suppressed violently. People were prevented from leaving their villages and could not even visit the local hospital. In September 2009, many innocent villagers were jailed as Maoists. They were not released though the administration promised that they would be released. Their families were still starving.

Arun Aggarwal said that the revenue from mining activities to the government accounted for a measly 1.4% of total profits while the rest was pocketed by the mining corporation. The politics of mining was complicated and corrupt; a nexus existed between corporations, corrupt politicians and the police. The Maoist movement arose in areas of mineral wealth only to stop the exploitation of the local people, he claimed. All mining activity should be conducted by government-owned enterprises and the profits distributed equitably, in his opinion.

Justice PB Sawant, presenting the interim report of the jury, clarified that the purpose of the tribunal was not to support the Maoists or to endorse violence but to speak on

behalf of the adivasi victims of structural and physical violence. The recommendations of the tribunal were read out by Prashant Bhushan :

i) Call off Operation Green Hunt and initiate dialogue with the local community; ii) Stop compulsory acquisition of agricultural or forest land and forcible displacement of the adivasi people; iii) Publish details of all MoUs, industrial and infrastructure projects and cancel leases for non-agricultural use of land; iv) Repatriate forcibly displaced adivasi people and fully rehabilitate them; v) Drop environmentally destructive industrial projects; vi) Return land acquired without the formal approval of gram sabhas; vii) Withdraw paramilitary and police forces from schools and health centres and provide adequate teachers and infrastructure; viii) Stop victimising dissenters who questioned actions of the state; ix) Replace exploitative, environmentally destructive and inequitable model of development with a participatory, people-friendly model giving importance to agriculture and the rural sector, respecting equity and the adivasi environment; x) Respect mandatory constitutional provisions on the consent and participation of the adivasi communities in the use of natural resources; and xi) Constitute an Empowered Citizens Commission to investigate and recommend action against persons responsible for human rights violations against adivasi communities and to ensure that the adivasis actually receive the benefit of government schemes meant for them.

The impact of the deliberations at the Tribunal is expected to be far-reaching. Eminent speakers included Sudha Bharadwaj, Goldy M George, Harish Dhawan, Pravin Patel, BD Sharma, Arundhati Roy, Vandana Shiva, Prashant Bhushan, SP Shukla, Shoma Chaudhury, Shanti Bhushan, Ajit Bhattacharjea, Kavita Srivastava and others.

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[Source : Infochange News & Features, April 2010]