

'STATE, TRIBALS, NAXALS'

Whose Democracy is This?

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Bastar region of central India, the home of several primitive tribes, is suffering a bloodbath since the last several decades, more in recent years.

Naxalism in Chhattisgarh and in several other states was started by urban leaders who still call the shots largely from urban hide-outs. The governments of the affected states and the centre are totally governed by urban or urbanized leaders and enforce an urban form of democracy. The fight against Naxalism is designed and executed by urban leaders of security forces. The conflicts are covered, analyzed and highlighted by the media, owned and run by another set of urban people. What is most shocking is a huge casualty of people from the tribal communities, or as they would be called here—indigenous people or natives. They are being killed in hundreds in Bastar alone, every year. Most of them are just caught in the cross-fire.

Their only fault was to remain a voiceless exploited community since the inception of democracy in India. The height of their exploitation was well documented even in the pre-independence period and more so since then, by the writers of contemporary history, media and some of the more sensitive people in the government machinery. They remained badly exploited by corruption in the government, harassed by political process, by democracy through its different forms, by outsiders who captured their resources and by a state which relentlessly pursued the principle of "eminent domain" to grab the forests over which they had complete ownership.

It is for this reason Naxals found a fertile ground to enter and flourish. This might sound an oversimplification of the scene, but as far as the tribal communities are concerned, this was probably the only fruit of democracy, or counter-democracy, they got to enjoy while doing nothing to earn it. All they wanted from the urban rulers was salt and a bit of kerosene, and now they get bullets, knives and explosives; torture and terror. The tribal communities had been adding everything to keep the urban life better by saving the forests, adding nothing to carbon emissions, not causing another hole in ozone layer, and asking for only the common salt from urban society, the only commodity that linked urban communities with the tribal people for centuries.

They were getting this essentially by barter of chicken or other more precious forest produces. And the different forms and pillars of urban democracy, and ideologies have now given them mass-deaths, uncertain life, humiliation, human rights violation and a dangerous future. In this new and small state of Chhattisgarh the parliamentary machinery has failed politically to realize and highlight the plight of people of Naxal and Salwa Judum affected areas. In Chhattisgarh, the two main political parties, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party and the main opposition party, Congress, are partners in launching and promoting *Salwa Judum*. The so-called people's movement for 'peace' was designed by these two political forces under their urban or urbanized leaderships and with over-enthusiastic senior officers.

Salwa Judum is like a Franken-stein of urban democracy. It may be considered as a big failure or at least tragedy of democracy in this state that there was no voice against Salwa Judum in the state assembly. A very

insignificant vocal protest by the left parties who have no presence in a 90-seat assembly, a small, very small section of media, which had no impact on the combined Herculean muscle power of both the main political parties, could not stop Salwa Judum. Both the main political parties are largely convinced that it is a war of tribals, and they too have to fight it.

The political understanding of the state is that without the active involvement of the tribals, the Naxals cannot be defeated. The huge loss of innocent lives is considered an inevitable collateral damage! To many people in America, this may be familiar as a George Bush doctrine. But Indians have their own variant back home as well as one can see. This blood is not urban, not elite, not of the ruling class and has no voice. The names and faces don't matter to the urban society and urban democracy, except as numbers in newspaper headlines.

The judiciary in India is almost necessarily made of urban society and a few of the judges who come from deprived backgrounds, very quickly get converted to an urban elite caste and become arrogant enough to declare that no judge with self respect should declare their properties which is compulsory for all public servants. Such an arrogant elite urban caste is responsible to maintain the rule of law and justice in this country. The judges who launch a suo moto legal proceeding in their own courts when they get stuck in a traffic jam or find a railway platform not clean enough for them, found nothing wrong in the thousands of killings in Chhattisgarh within a few years.

Not a single case of public interest was initiated by the judiciary of the state on its own, when news-pages were overflowing with blood. The judges of the state high court were busy in all these years to get a more expensive high court premises, a lavish and palatial luxury in a state where more than fifty percent of the population lives below the poverty line, and can eat twice a day only after a huge subsidy on rice. Such a self centered judiciary is busy making its new paradise, and unable to think of an intervention to soothe the bleeding wounds of the tribals.

Another assault of urban democracy was from the media. Very few newspapers and media organizations could realize the complexities of *Salwa Judum*, and related issues. No media organization of any significance allotted even a month of any of its journalists to study the state of affairs in Naxal and Salwa Judum areas. The media of the state had very little concern, except the routine news reports of killing of one side or the other, and usually the innocent unrelated people. The so-called mainstream media remained conveniently noncommittal, noncommittal to such historical butchery.

But the media was not criticized by anyone, because media-watch has died down in India. Owners, editors and journalists have almost no one from the tribal community among them and so is the understanding of tribal tragedies in the so-called fourth column. When the political bosses and the government repeatedly said that anyone who opposes *Salwa Judum*, is with Naxals or supporting their cause, almost no one in the state media commented on it. In truth it could be compared with the arrogant statement of Bush that whoever was not with the attack on Saddam, was with Al Qaeda. But the liberal space for a difference of opinion is lost on the political canvas of Chhattisgarh-politics.

This is the state of urban Indian democracy. Hardly anyone anywhere mentioned the horrible memories of a similar movement like *Salwa Judum* in

the early nineties. In a part of Bastar a few political people and a few overenthusiastic police officers had started and promoted a Mass Awareness Campaign against the Naxals. When it died an early death, the police and political leaders could not save a single participant of that *Jan Jagaran Abhiyan*. It is a painful but well documented fact in the state government's records that every-one of the campaigners was taken out of villages and killed by the Naxals, publicly, one by one.

There were hundreds of them who lost lives after calling off the campaign. That part of history, which is only a decade and a half old, is very conveniently forgotten by all urban people. And now huge amount of money is flowing into Salwa Judum or the relief camps established to accommodate people displaced due to this movement and Naxal-attacks on participants. Big pilferage in this money has become another reason behind its continuation.

Social activists, human rights organizations and non-governmental organizations etc. have mushroomed in the last five years in this region. They are active on papers, in roadside demonstrations and run to courts with public interest petitions, giving voice to voiceless people. In Chhattisgarh the common perception of this sector is of Naxal-sympathizers.

This was generated with human rights organizations criticizing the government for even the first information of the smallest human rights violation, but did nothing when Naxals killed people, innocent people, dozens in one explosion. And when contacted, several of them had to say that it is their official agenda to fight only against state atrocities. This was unacceptable to the little political understanding of the people of Chhattisgarh. They could not make the difference between violation by the state and by the Naxals.

The fine difference between the state and the other forces could be accepted in some societies where these agendas are designed and drafted, but not in an area like Chhattisgarh. Many years back, human rights organizations lost complete respect in this state as a judicious sector. Now their movements are largely like convincing the converts. It is like religious chanting by the people of the same faith. The loss of credibility of a sector, which is so important to democracy, is a great loss. But hardly there is anyone trying to change public perception. In a democracy, how can any democratic institution function with such total disregard to public sentiments?

People could be ignorant of the finer aspects of democracy and human rights, but an insensitivity to their ignorance, sounds very undemocratic. It is a great loss to the democracy that the civil society movement is detached from the common people. Now most of the people in Chhattisgarh don't differentiate between a human rights activist and a naxal-sympathizer. Such loss of credibility was taken to greater height, or depth, by several social activists of national repute.

Chhattisgarh government was blamed for suppression of freedom of expression when its agencies arrested an ex-journalist with huge prima facie evidence of his working for Naxals, along with his son. When this writer tried to explain the truth to such campaign to the so-called national media carrying that, it didn't find a place in the 'letters to editor column'. So the people in Chhattisgarh, which includes the media of the state, are a witness to the false propaganda which is doing more harm to democracy while shouting for saving it. Such celebrity activists from Delhi have further destroyed a democratic space, which was, and is, very much needed as a safe-guard.

It is not only Chhattisgarh which is suffering Naxal violence; at least half a dozen other states are also victims of this attack on Indian democracy. A government of an Indian state is after all a democratically elected government, answerable to the people, the judiciary, the Human Rights Commissions and other institutions of democracy. They are a lot better than kangaroo courts and landmines that are on offer from the Naxals as a better substitute. Governments didn't start the fight with the Naxals, and demoralizing them endlessly, needlessly, and even baselessly at times, while it is losing its police personnel every passing day in blasts, is like defeating the cause of democracy. This Maoist war, fought largely with landmines is not a normal situation for the police or the government.

The government could be bad, its agencies could be making a number of mistakes, but at the same time this is the only democratic tool people have.

It was very shocking and painful to see Naxals demolishing electricity towers and putting millions of people living in the jungles of Bastar, in dark for more than a week, killing the workers who had gone there to restore electricity. Probably none from the civil society movement spoke against it, till the chief minister of the state pointed it out publicly and condemned the otherwise hyper-vocal activists. How could the people of Chhattisgarh have any respect for such people who select dead bodies to pay respect? The common people in urban Chhattisgarh or the people who are a bit far from the Naxal violence have almost no concern for the war-zone, and a whole community being crushed for none of its fault. Many people there are not interested in news reports of Naxal-violence or tribals getting killed.

Civil society movement, which should have been doing some mass political education of people, has become irrelevant and untrustworthy to the majority of the people. Such an indifference to a great human tragedy among majority of common people is a great danger to democracy. Urban people, who have a voice, are comfortable because they feel that their turn would never come. In a sense through Salwa Judum all players of democracy in the state of Chhattisgarh have either created a buffer of innocent tribals as a human shield to fight Naxals, or have allowed this horrible thing to happen by being indifferent to it, by over looking it while busy carving a new capital, or palatial high court buildings. Some campaigners of democracy have also damaged the scene by demolishing their own credibility.

The history of future might witness one day an apology by the people who are in the positions of democratic powers today. It could be to the future generations of the tribals slaughtered today, just the way stolen generations of aborigines are getting an apology in Australia. In India tribal children are being used as child soldiers in hundreds by Naxals, and could be in small numbers by security forces too. But most rulers of urban democracy would have preferred to have them as bonded child labourers, so no big deal for the urban and powerful society if tribal kids are laying landmines or carrying weapons.

Various kinds of failure in different areas of urban democracy, is killing voiceless people in hundreds who were very happy and contended without this urban tool to rule. But urban democracy and also the urban Maoist violence have proved themselves totally insensitive to this non-urban part of humanity. Could there be a greater urban-nonurban divide?

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[This is a slightly abridged version of a speech delivered by the author at Berkeley]

