

# SANDWICH THEORY, MAOISTS AND MIDDLE INDIA

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They—Delhi Students— were actually referring to the views of a section of articulate, influential, middle India in the wake of the controversies over Salwa Judum in Chattisgarh and now Operation Green Hunt. The 'theory', if one may call it that, holds that the Adivasis and rural poor are caught in the crossfire between armed Maoist 'terrorists' on the one side and a militarised Indian state on the other. It is the duty of middle India, according to the 'sandwich theory', to 'rescue' the hapless Adivasis and rural poor from the armed combatants. Both combatants have ulterior motives: the Maoists wish to take political power through the barrel of their guns, and the Indian state wishes to grab Adivasi lands and natural resources and hand them over to corporations, foreign and domestic. Thus, the 'sandwich theory' sees middle India as the saviour of the nation as envisioned in the Indian Constitution. The apparent neutrality of the theory is appealing to many. Equally, many are uneasy about 'sandwich theory' not least because it frames the question as one of 'violence versus non-violence' and forces them to give a 'yes' or 'no' answer with little room for debate (e.g. NDTV, 'The Buck Stops Here' 23/09/09, 07/10/09, 20/10/09). The privileged statuses of the proponents of this theory, the positions they occupy in academia, media, institutions of governance, and such adds to the scepticism of privilege that many even in middle India have developed over the years since Independence. Although there is widespread opposition to Salwa Judum and Operation Green Hunt, their understanding of it divides middle India. The 'sandwich theory' merits reflection, therefore.

Middle India values democracy, and most will agree that, in principle, democracy demands respect for every man, woman, and child, rich or poor, urban or rural, of any caste or nationality. Respect for all entails crediting all human beings with basic intelligence by virtue of being human. Democracy is based on the belief that all people possess the capacities to determine their destinies. If this is true, then the 'sandwich theory' is fundamentally undemocratic.

Most people in middle India today agree that the Adivasis and rural poor have real and legitimate grievances against the economic policies of successive governments. According to the 'sandwich theorists' the Maoists exploit their grievances to further their own ends. This precludes the possibility that at least a section of the Adivasis and rural poor may have chosen to go with the Maoists. The argument denies the Adivasis and the rural poor their agency, their capacities to determine what is and is not good for them, and basic intelligence to decide who they wish to support and why. The attitude implicit in the 'sandwich theory' masks the latent authori-tarianism that lurks beneath the facade of compassion for the poor. Of course, the Adivasis and the rural poor do not articulate their political choices in the language of scholars from Harvard and Oxford, IIT and JNU, or theories of democratic development, civil society, post-communism or post-Marxism, but that is not to say they are passive victims

without self-determination. By portraying them as hapless victims of Maoists and the State alike, middle India can avoid engaging with the Adivasis and rural poor as political equals.

The representation of Adivasis and rural poor as voiceless victims is not new, however. It is an idea that has been developed and refined in India at least since independence. The development discourse at the end of the World Wars was about 'poverty'. It was a crude concept, a rough and ready term. Soon it became apparent that like 'the invisible hand of the market', the mysterious ways of development rewarded the few and impoverished the many. As disenchantment with development grew, the 'poor' was replaced by a more nuanced, exotic sounding term: the *subaltern*. The subalterns are untouched by modernity, outside the pale of civil society, innocent, an idea perilously close to the 'noble savages' of colonial thinkers. The subalterns are people whose aspirations cannot be understood without being interpreted and represented by middle India. From subaltern to victim is a quick and easy step. As long as the Adivasis and rural poor remain victims, middle India is not required to speak in its own name, about its own interests and aspirations; it is enough to interpret for "them". How true is the picture that the Adivasis and rural poor are victims caught between the combatants in Operation Green Hunt?

#### **WHO EXACTLY IS 'SANDWICHED' HERE?**

Throughout India's modern history, since the advent of colonisation, two adversaries have remained steadfast and undeterred in their opposition to each other. During the colonial era and in the post-Independence era, 'tribal rebellions' and 'peasant uprisings' were the volcanoes that erupted from time to time and rocked the edifice of state power. When the rebellions and uprisings subsided they continued to bubble away beneath the surface, forming the volcanic fault-line upon which Indian society is founded. On their part, the Adivasis have shown remarkable consistency. Their demands have never wavered from: 'jal, jangal, jameen' (water, forest, land). The rural poor have echoed their demands with as much consistency. Indeed, it may be noted in the passing, that indigenous people the world over have never wavered from that singular demand of 'jal, jangal, jameen'.

Against this, the state, colonial or post-Independence, has shown remarkable consistency in its responses to the demands of the Adivasi and the rural poor. They have responded with guns and bayonets, mobilised the full might of the state, imprisoned, tortured, raped, and plundered the Adivasis and rural poor, and sentenced many to death. The state has been equally consistent in its demands for more land, more resources, and more cheap labour. This extraordinary consistency of the two combatants has thrown everyone in between, middle India, into turmoil from time to time. Some have sided unequivocally with the Adivasis and the rural poor. They have been branded variously as extremists, insurgents and terrorists and met the same fate as the Adivasis. Others have sided unequivocally with the state, colonial or otherwise, and proactively participated in mobilising the state machinery against extremists, insurgents, terrorists, whatever. Yet others have felt hemmed in and 'sandwiched' between the two adversaries. Thus, it is middle India that is 'sandwiched' and feels beleaguered by the combatants.

In substance what happened in Kalinganagar, or Singur, or Nandi-gram or Lalgah, or now in Narayan-patna, follow in the same traditions, but middle India dithers to call them tribal rebellions or peasant uprisings. The current debates echo similar debates during the freedom struggle : M N Roy's spat with Lenin on the 'agrarian question', Aurobindo's conversion from violence to non-violence, debates over Bhagat Singh and Chauri Chaura, to name a few. The 'sandwich theorists' are surprisingly ahistorical in their approach to the current stand off. Many go along with the state's representation that the Maoist movement began as recent as 2004, a representation based on realignments within the movement. Every-one knows notwithstanding the peaks and troughs, the Maoist movements, whether one likes them or not, have a longer history than 2004. There is a significant difference however, between the situation that confronts middle India today compared to the situation it had to face during the freedom struggle and post-independence period. That difference has to do with 'globalisation'.

### **MIDDLE INDIA AND THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE**

The Boer Wars, the Scramble for Africa, and other colonial conflagrations culminated in the World Wars between imperialist nations with Britain at the helm. The freedom struggle was directed against British imperialism, at a time when Britain was militarily strong but a declining economic power. A wide crosssection of classes, communities, nationalities, castes in Indian society between the Adivasis and the State, joined the freedom struggle, each with their own demands and their own aspirations. Industrial expansion occurred during that interim period of the World Wars. An emergent industrial class that profited from the World Wars also aspired for political power, and joined the freedom struggle. The debates about violence and non-violence, extremism and liberal democracy, social justice and rule of law, and other such questions were part of a wider process of forging a social contract between the multifarious classes, communities, castes, tribes, nationalities, religions, linguistic groups. The social contract was later embodied in the Constitution when India became a republic.

The social contract was based on a vision of the Indian nation. It was a vision that included all and opened with the words 'we the people'. It promised to all 'justice: social, economic and political'; it promised the Adivasis protection of their water, forests and lands, land reforms to the rural poor, offered special status to different nationalities, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Kashmir, jobs and collective bargaining rights to urban workers, linguistic reorganisation of states, rule of law and constitutional democracy, and most importantly adopted as its motto: 'satyam eva jayate' (truth alone prevails). That vision of a nation is at the heart of the dilemma that confronts middle India today.

Independence of India was inaugurated with partition at two ends of the nation and the Telangana uprising in its belly. The Telangana uprising, like other Adivasi and peasant struggles, was put down by the Indian army, and many were tortured, imprisoned and executed. Middle India was confident that with a new Constitution in place, the causes of tribal rebellions and peasant uprisings would be consigned to history. The imprint of the Communist Party of India, the largest opposition party in India's Constituent Assembly that drafted India's Constitution, was writ large in the social contract. Middle India believed in their

vision of the nation. Given the time, India would be a nation founded on social justice, equality and non-discrimination.

When the Naxalbari and Srikakulam uprisings erupted two decades later, it was clear that something had gone terribly wrong with that vision; that the social contract on which modern India was founded was wilfully broken. When the police and army cracked down on Naxalbari and Srikakulam tribals and peasants, as they always did, the state justified its actions in the same vein as today. The fight was not against tribals and peasants, but against armed Maoist insurgents, it was about violence and non-violence, the state argued. But middle India refused to be 'sandwiched'. Thousands of students and youth joined the Naxalbari and Srikakulam tribals and peasants. They were abducted, imprisoned, tortured, killed and Indian English added a new meaning to the verb 'encountered' after the faked 'encounter' killings. Even those opposed to the Maoists' ideologies and methods refused to be 'sandwiched'. Above all the 'rule of law' applied to Maoists as much as anyone else, they insisted. No one accused them of being terrorist sympathisers for that reason, not even the state. Post Naxalbari, middle India was dismayed, frustrated, angry, and disappointed with the state for breaking the social contract. They still held on to the vision of the nation that was forged during the freedom struggle, even when the vision was slipping away. 'This is not the India our parents and grandparents fought for' the post- Independence generation seemed to say.

Many social justice movements emerged. The democratic rights movement in modern India grew and expanded as more people were 'encountered'. They insisted that the Courts, as guardians of the Constitution, had a duty to ensure it was enforced against all the parties to the social contract. 'Law is on trial' Justice Bhagwati, the former Chief Justice of India, warned in his Law Day speeches. A novel jurisprudential theory called the 'episulatory jurisdiction' was innovated. Anyone without means could drop a postcard to the Supreme Court complaining of violation of her Constitutional rights and they would be heard. Paradoxically these interventions had the effect of entrenching systemic discrimination and exclusion of the Adivasis and rural poor in the heart of constitutional democracy: the judicial system.

The interventions of middle India were based on a view that denied Adivasis and the rural poor their agency. They were hapless victims, the voiceless subalterns, so "we" the saviours of the nation had to do something, and of course "we", middle India, would prove that rule of law and the constitution could be made to work for "them". Take Public Interest Litigation (PIL). Writ after writ was issued by courts for implementing regular laws. The petitions called upon the state to implement minimum wage laws, health and safety laws, laws against bonded and child labour, resettlement and rehabilitation of displaced people. The Courts became involved in administration and law enforcement but rarely punished any state official for failing in their statutory and constitutional duties. As the boundaries between the executive and the judiciary became murky PILs send a clear message that state officials could get away with violations of constitutional and statutory duties.

PIL did not work for the 'subalterns' whose *jal*, *jangal* and *jameen* were acquired for building modern India, whether they be public sector companies like

the National Thermal Power Corporation, the Narmada dam, or Konkan railway. Simultaneously PILs set the precedent for unilateral judicial interventions. It was clear that the Courts, at least, would not be an impediment to the state's vision of development even if excluded half the population.

Take Lok Adalats, an idea canvassed by middle India and later legislated into the statute books. Lok Adalats dispensed with procedural rules of evidence, civil and criminal procedures in cases involving the poor, ostensibly to cut down backlog of cases and expedite justice to the poor. In effect, it entrenched a system different procedures would be followed for the rich and for the poor. The rich would get a proper judicial hearing following rules of evidence and civil and criminal procedures; and procedural laws would be dispensed with for the poor. After all, cases of the poor were for paltry sums anyway. Never mind that to the poor the paltry sums meant a great deal. Equality in the eyes of the law?

The post-Naxalbari, post-Emergency period saw a ballooning of NGOs, voluntary organisations, and 'civil society' organisations accompanied by criminalisation of politics. Nearly forty percent of Indian MPs and MLAs are supposed to have criminal records involving serious crimes like murder, extortion, abduction and rape according to citizens groups like National Election Watch and Association of Democratic Reforms. The political spaces of the Adivasis and rural poor usurped by criminalisation, was contested by the NGOs and voluntary organisations. Middle India came up with an amazing proposition: all politics was anti-poor, corrupt and criminalised, therefore, they can be a democracy without politics. Of course, as the Adivasis and rural poor, being subalterns, could not speak, it fell on the NGOs or voluntary groups to interpret for them.

As middle India tried desperately to salvage the vision of a nation forged during the freedom struggle, the Berlin Wall collapsed, the *Time* magazine announced 'Communism was dead' on its cover pages, and Fukuyama declared history itself had ended.

#### **THE NATION UNDER 'GLOBALISATION'**

Once again, India is in a situation comparable to the early twentieth century. Like Britain in the early twentieth century, the United States which assumed the leadership of imperialist nations after World War II, is economically weak and reliant on militarism it can ill-afford. Once again, the loosening grip of imperialist reins offers Indian industrialists and financiers an opportunity to expand their operations. The lure of ten percent growth based on many more nuclear plants, mining corporations, industries, special economic zones, and speculative investments promises them a whole new world, if only they would dare to conquer it. The new world of their dreams requires conquering the Adivasis and the rural poor. Where will they go? What of the social contract? This much is clear even to middle India.

'Globalisation' erodes the idea of a nation, however. Indeed it is premised on the idea that nations no longer matter, and if they matter at all, they do so only on the condition that they are homogenised and adapted to the global marketplace. There is no longer an industrial, propertied, elite in India, therefore, that is interested in joining ranks with middle India to renegotiate power with imperialists. Instead all negotiations on power have shifted to the international

arena; they will happen henceforth in the UN, the WTO, the G8 summits, and the World Economic Forums. The pesky Adivasis persist with their *jal, jangal* and *jameen*. Having accepted the 'inevitability' of 'globalisation' middle India is left without the conceptual tools to envision a nation, to flesh out self-determination. How should the India of their dreams look like? And what is the 'down payment' they are willing to put down (to use the language of WTO trade negotiators) to secure their vision of an India of their dreams?

The UN's World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995 was a turning point. Al Gore the then Vice-President of the United States declared at the Summit that aid and development assistance to the Third World would from then on would be channelled through NGOs, and aimed at 'good governance'. 'Good governance' resonated with 'responsible government' of the colonial era. What did Al Gore and the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development ramify for the Adivasis and the rural poor?

The language of discourse changed in India. Indian NGOs and voluntary organisations were awash with funds. More importantly, they were armed with new ideological and conceptual resources developed by international organisations: ideas of 'empowerment', 'democratic development', 'good governance', 'civil society participation' and such. In fairness many applied the funds to save the social contract. But the social contract was never about 'democratic development', 'empowerment' and 'good governance'. The social contract was about self-determination, equality, redistributive justice, power-sharing and equity, about *satyam eva jayate*, not transparency.

More NGOs and voluntary organisations, more funding for the non-governmental sector, more 'empowerment' and 'good governance' programmes did not equate to more representation of the Adivasis and rural poor. If anything it was the opposite. The more funding became available for NGOs and voluntary groups, the more the Maoist influence increased. Yet, there are no social theories, no quantitative or qualitative research methods that can establish any correlation between the two.

The NGOs and voluntary groups took up all the issues that the Adivasis and the rural poor raised: the model of development, traditional water systems, land management, forest conservation, corruption, criminalisation of politics. They balked at one central question: the question of political power. This was the only question that the Maoists took up. Middle India wants the Adivasis and the rural poor to trust their word when they say middle India is with the Adivasis and rural poor. How should the Adivasis and rural poor do this when they are reduced to voiceless subalterns, when they are no longer political subjects with agency? Moreover without a vision of a nation, even many in middle India are not forthcoming with that implicit trust.

### **CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE?**

The Indian state has once again framed the issue, as it has always done, as one of violence versus non-violence. In a 'globalised', privatised world, populated with NGOs, the Indian state does not have to resort to state propaganda via *Doordarshan* to make its claims. In a privatised, 'globalised' world state claims are made through private agents committed to 'globalisation'. For example consider the 'sandwich theory'. Numerous NGOs and private organisations have

promoted the theory. For example in January 2005 the *Observer Research Foundation* under its International Terrorism Watch Programme held a two day workshop on 'the Naxal challenge'. The trustees of this foundation are eminent journalists who have been part of Congress and BJP governments at various times. They published a book from the workshop proceedings titled 'The Naxal Challenge: Causes, Linkages and Policy Options.' The editor of the volume, at the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, specialises on Naxalism which falls under the research cluster 'Terrorism and internal security'. The blurb for the book is written by the former governor of Jharkhand, and a chief of army staff. The question of whether the Maoists should be seen as terrorists at all is foreclosed in the way the debate is framed.

Well resourced organisations set out the assumptions underpinning the debate, the terms of the discourse which middle India must follow, not least because they are bombarded with research, publications, high profile media coverage, all based on the assumptions presented by think-tank organisations. The Independent Citizens' Initiative report on Salwa Judum by influential citizens, some of them close to the powers that be, echoes a similar 'sandwich theory' position. Their position is nowhere comparable to that of Jayaprakash Narayan or V M Tarkunde. For the latter, their positions against non-violence stemmed from a vision of the nation based on the social contract of the freedom struggle; it included the Maoists as much as the Adivasis. Today, the positions against non-violence are based on a conception of India as an emergent global power that needs to put a human face on 'globalisation'.

Add to this the terms for the numerous research grants, project funding, and overseas assistance given to NGOs requiring them to conform to liberal democracy, parliamentary processes, and judicial norms. Where is the room to say these processes were tried, tried over and over again for at least six decades, they have failed, and that the parliament, the judiciary and the executive have thrown the social contract to the winds of 'globalisation'? What new vision of the nation can middle India forge?

The Adivasis and rural poor insist it is a matter of *jal, jangal* and *jameen* as they always have. The Maoists, their ideological, political and military shortcomings notwithstanding, and there are many of those stand unequivocally on the side of the Adivasis and rural poor, whatever their motives. Middle India insists it is possible to put a human face on 'globalisation'. To the contrary, the new wave of struggles in Kalinganagar, Singur, Nandigram, Lalgarh challenges them to renegotiate the social contract, a challenge that requires a renewed freedom struggle, forging new alliances, and new conceptions of development and decolonisation. 'We too fought for freedom', a Santhal says in a recent film on Lalgarh. Indeed they did. How does one answer that question? By saying the Maoists are bad boys? By saying the Santhals are subalterns that need middle India as their interpreters?

The social contract forged during the freedom struggle was premised on a false assumption. It was based on the assumption that it was possible to build a modern liberal democratic, capitalist nation without colonisation. There has never been, and can never be, capitalism without colonies, though its forms can change, and has changed since that fateful day when Columbus set sail looking

for the 'riches of the Indies'. 'Globalisation' is forcing middle India to colonise her own people. This is nothing new. It happened under British Rule too. Since the days of Siraj-ud-daula, the various Nawabs and Rajas, a section of the Indian elite has steadfastly stood by imperialists, helped them run Empires, and made a buck for themselves. J S Mill observed that India was the great experimental laboratory for the Empire. When the fortunes of Empires fluctuate, it forces middle India to take a stand. It is happening today. The nation-state structure and constitutionalism makes it difficult for middle India to rationalise colonisation of her own people.

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