

KAFKASQUE TERROR

They are not Maoists

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[In the remote zones of tribal Orissa, epic non-violent land struggles against mass displacement and the mining mafia are blooming. And despite violent police repression, they have refused to succumb or pick up arms. So why is the political establishment pushing the people of India to the wall?]

On March 30, they tried yet again to crush this non-violent movement. Since then, tribal villages in Kalinganagar in Orissa are under siege by the police, in symphony with "Tata goons"—as locals call them—and ruling party (BJD) supporters. 'Outsiders' are not allowed to get in, people are not allowed to move out. Food, medicine, relatives, journalists, civil society groups, nobody is allowed. BJP leader Jual Oram and Congress leaders were attacked by "BJD-Tata goons"; three journalists were beaten up badly when they tried to record this attack, their cameras smashed, their valuables looted.

Here's a report by independent journalists from the ground, confirmed by activists and documentary filmmakers from Orissa who spoke to *Hardnews* during the Independent People's Tribunal held in Delhi from April 9 to 11 : "The March 30 attack was the culmination of months of sporadic aggression by the police and Tata goons. That day the police simply did not try to maintain law and order, rather they first sprayed rubber bullets and plastic pellets on the tribals, entered Baligotha village, set food-stocks afire, poured kerosene in the wells, killed cattle, vandalised the memorials of the martyrs of January 2, 2006 police shootout, looted valuables, stole livestock and destroyed all sorts of electronic machines like TVs, DVD players, sewing machines, etc...

"Surprisingly, this planned attack by some 27 platoons of armed security forces and two platoons of Operation Green Hunt forces along with a hundred-odd Tata goons happened exactly two days after the district magistrate met the villagers and assured them that their grievances would be looked into."

Said Mamata Das, an activist, "They have turned Kalinganagar into a fortress. Three people have apparently died due to lack of medical attention - even doctors who wanted to enter are not being allowed. Journalists are not allowed to go in. There is police everywhere, while the goons are given a free run. Several local leaders and tribals have been arrested. They are raiding houses, beating up people, picking up villagers. They want to teach the people a lesson so that the Tatas can go ahead, and no one can oppose displacement."

There is another pattern which often follows all these peaceful struggles and conflict zones: mysterious deaths, dead bodies found in strange places, accidents, murders. Activists say, in some cases, identified tribal activists are charged with false cases, including murder cases, beaten up mercilessly and put in jail for long periods. They want to crush the spirit and body of the tribals with the Kafkasque terror of the police, judicial and prison system.

The Tatas and the BJD-led government under Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik are adamant and cold. Patnaik, passionately backed by the UPA regime (earlier, NDA), is selling off thousands of acres of precious forests, mountains and indigenous land to

miscellaneous Indian and foreign big business corporates and mining giants at throw-away prices.

Even ecological hot spots are being given away to notorious mining companies like the Vedanta of UK. And when the people resist, they bring in platoons of armed cops, who, along with contractors and company goons, move in tandem. Or else, they brand these peaceful locals as Maoists.

This is a pattern of repression visible in all the non-violent, peaceful resistance struggles in most conflict zones in the pristine interiors of Orissa and elsewhere in India. Indeed, barring in Malkangiri in western Orissa, these people's movements have no relationship with violent forms of struggle, or with Maoists. They have no political linkages with Maoists, despite the terrain and content of struggle almost being the same.

They are derived from indigenous narratives of social and political currents, Marxism-Leninism, Gandhian socialism, Ambedkar's ideas, indigenous philosophies experimenting with new ideas, influenced by multiple forms of resistance, including oral and folk narratives, tribal histories, and the greatness of innumerable rebellions of the past (as in Dantewada), including against the British. Hence, proving the kaleidoscope of militant rainbow struggles which have emerged against the new economic policies of neo-liberalism in India. Not one act of violence has been committed by any of the various struggles in Orissa : against the Posco project in Jagatsinghpur, against the mining projects in Kashipur and Niyamgiri, against the Vedanta university project between Konark and Puri, or, as against the Tata steel project in Kalinganagar.

So why is the State hounding them like criminals in their own land, making them suffer a spiral of injustices, putting them in jail with false cases, beating them up, forcing them to the brink, even killing them in cold blood when democracy itself looks like a total farce? If they don't want to leave their land, why should they be forcibly displaced?

So why are they being crushed so ruthlessly? And can they crush the human spirit because they are driven by nothing else but profit and greed parroted as 'development' endlessly by the media, and especially the Union home minister? What about their side of the story? The people's version?

People too are adamant. They have witnessed the dehumanisation in the name of rehabilitation in earlier projects - there have been struggles earlier against other projects too in this area, followed by intense repression, when men had to run away to the forests. The immediate provocation now is the construction of a common corridor project, which the tribals are opposing.

In the Kalinganagar industrial belt, next to a dilapidated school, where the January 2, 2006 killings happened, most tribal villages are close by. In this huge meadow like expanse, next to a pucca road with factories in the neighbourhood, the people quickly gathered on that fateful day from all sides of the villages, with their bows and arrows and sickles, including hundreds of women, just behind the school where the Tatas were planning to build a wall escorted by armed security forces. The people rushed towards the spot, in a peaceful mass action of resistance, and a rattled police opened indiscriminate fire, killing 14 people, including three women.

Now, the people think, the corridor is a ploy to divide the villages physically (like the Israeli wall in the heart of occupied Palestine?). They will not allow the corridor to happen. Hence, the current police siege. "In fact, the road was supposed to be used not as a common corridor by many industries, but as a major passageway to the site earmarked for the proposed Tata steel plant," said Jual Oram, after he was attacked by BJD supporters.

The tribals in the villages of Kalinganagar have a beautiful script. They write poetic tributes in memory of the dead. In this aesthetic zone of intimacy, the dead are buried next to their homes, in the cross-currents of connecting compounds, squares and across fences.

What is remarkable is that the landmarks of the dead are remembered with huge stones, some of them massive and sculpted with hands, on which little stories are written. Children play on these stones, tired travelers stop by, sit and take a pause, others share anecdotes, strangers are offered a glass of water as they wait outside sparse and clean homes with just a few commodities. One can criss-cross the memory of the dead, touch them, speak with them, feel their absence and presence day and night, as if they are still around, like the leaf in the wind and the vast expanse of green which floats in their life and in their folk narratives.

Only those who die accidentally or in unnatural circumstances are cremated. So they were cremated behind the headman's house on the ground, and on a raised platform, 14 landmarks in stones were raised, in memory of every tribal shot dead by the police. On the stones are written their names, and little tributes. Grotesquely, the goons tried to desecrate the memorial also. This is like taking a knife and slashing through the most inner zones of a tribal heart. And this is unacceptable.

In every stone, there is Birsa Munda. In every story of rebellion, there is Birsa Munda.

So will Birsa Munda's legacy be also branded as Maoist and pushed to the wall?

On January 2 this year, Birsa Munda came alive again in the form of his grandson Sukra Munda. Sukra came to the cluster of villages in Kalinganagar in Jajpur district in solidarity with the struggle of the tribals, all of them followers of Birsa Munda.

The memory of legendary Birsa Munda, the great tribal rebel of the magnificent forests, rocks and mountains of Chaibasa and Singhbhum in Chhotanagpur, in what is now Jharkhand, is inscribed as memory on the walls of their huts, in the beats of their hearts, and in the remains of the day. At Kalinganagar in Orissa, the legacy of Birsa is still alive. Like a raw wound, and a moment of amazing pride. Far away from the land of Birsa, the angst and anger of rebellion (ulgulun) against the dikus (outsiders) pulsates in every man and woman's heart.

There is a thread of this magical inheritance in the geography of their indigenous journey from one tribal land to another, because their maps are always differently designed. In these unwritten maps, drawn like a line on the moist ground next to a river, are enshrined the folk narratives of the oral traditions and their beautiful hand-written script, like the paintings crafted on mud walls.

In this rain-soaked narrative, lies silent, subaltern tribal theatres of amazing fluidity and sharp memories: their land, trees, rivers, forests, water bodies, earth, sky, flowers, birds, wildlife, poetry, songs, dances, fires, fertility, love, lust, midnights,

drums, darkened bodies of the forest and the sun— they all share and form a common, collective ethos.

All that belongs is for everyone. All what nature gives must be shared. And they will die if this indigenous birthright and geography is snatched away from them by aliens— often with guns.

This is the story in Dantewada of Dandakaranya. This is the story in Kashipur in western Orissa in the Eastern Ghats. This is the story in Niyamgiri, most precious ecological zone, sublimely beautiful and untouched.

And this is the story of the many rainbows of struggle against the mining mafia and corporates.

When Nandigram was burning with rage after the killings and rapes by CPM goons and West Bengal police, and when the peasant struggle led by the poorest of Dalits and Muslims, became epical, protracted and hard to crush, in solidarity, the tribals from Kalinganagar joined them, holding their hands, speaking a different language, but a language of struggle which all contemporary movements understand. And it was not a Maoist movement, as the CPM claimed.

This is the language in the undulating hills, rivers, waterfalls, streams and forests of Kashipur and its tribal epicenter at Kucheipadar, also called the Kashmir of Orissa. For a decade and more, this tribal, militant non-violent struggle has blocked the might of the big companies, looking for bauxite (processed alumina, later, also used in the arms industry) and other treasures in the mineral rich, water-rich hills and forests.

Journalists have been beaten up by goons of the contractors, people have been arrested and packed off to jail, police repression has followed countless times: but this indigenous movement has not lost its innocence.

It is relentless, dogged and refusing to move. They have seen the ravaged landscape near the Vedanta Aluminium Plant at Lanjigarh in the neighbourhood. Rivers, mountains, streams, trees - brutalised and poisoned. They will not allow this miracle of the Eastern Ghats to be ravaged like that. And the fact is, despite the repression, they have blocked the mining mafia and refused to move.

At Maikanch in this remote tribal belt, there are some little stones placed on top of a hill, a few flowers and a branch of leafy tree. This is the simplicity of memory - of those shot dead by the police in the peaceful resistance in Kashipur. The 'Maikanch murders' of December 2000, when three young tribal men were shot dead by police as they demonstrated against the Utkal Aluminium Joint Venture between Canada's Alcan, and India's Hindalco, are etched in the historical legacy of these epic non-violent struggles in Orissa and elsewhere. As in Niyamgiri and Jagatsinghpur. As earlier in Jadugoda in Jharkhand, Gandhamar-dhana hills and Chilika in Orissa, Raigarh in Maharashtra, Dadri in UP, and Nandigram and Singur, among countless other simmering struggles all over India, as in the Narmada valley and Garhwal hills. Victorious, still fighting, defeated, not defeated. As yet.

In Jagatsinghpur, in this demographically diverse and amazingly rich bio-diversity zone with multiple rivers, streams, water bodies, fertile land, fishing, agriculture and vegetable crops, and the smell of sea nearby, the multi-million multinational Posco project, the prime ministers' pet project, is hanging like a sword which must slash through the tribal heartland, if necessary with pure brute force. Here they grow paan so soft and sweet, that it melts inside the mouth. And the people have made

barricades outside the villages to block 'outsiders and musclemen' —they are not allowed to enter the project area. The villagers have refused to move.

They have tried dividing the people. They have done police raids. They have threatened them of dire consequences. They have tried to smash the movement. They put their leader, Abhay Sahoo of CPI, for ten months in jail for no crime other than leading a completely non-violent struggle.

Recently, the tribals did a long march from the port of Paradip to Puri, when hundreds of locals marched, and others from the various movements in Orissa joined in solidarity. "Even today, everyday, hundreds of women and men sit on peaceful sit-ins. And yet they want to brand us Maoists, or condemn us by raiding our homes and arresting us. Their goons threaten the villagers. The fear of police atrocity is real," Abhay Sahoo told *Hardnews*.

Truth : between justice and injustice, the Centre and state governments stand with injustice. Between corporates and people: the State stands with the corporates, with armed forces out to kill and terrorise people. Between armed struggle and unarmed non-violent struggle, all State violence is considered legitimate.

And why only blame Maoists for extra-constitutional tactics, including violence? Doesn't the political class and corporates routinely use extra-constitutional tactics and violence by State and non-State actors? And what are they doing in these non-Maoist zones?

At the Independent People's Tribunal, women from Dantewada recited heart-rending stories of despair and brutality. More than 300,000 rendered homeless, 700 villages burnt and ravaged, innumerable women raped, gang-raped, others shot in cold blood, men killed in cold blood and then branded Maoists, eye-witnesses killed, others disappeared, kidnapped and eliminated. All this by the police of the BJP-led state regime, and the armed Salwa Judum led by Congress leader Mahendra Karma and directly patronised by the state government and Centre. Even the ashram of Gandhian Himanshu Kumar was demolished several times. When he followed the Supreme Court order to rehabilitate displaced tribals, his activists were arrested, beaten up and packed off to jail.

The media reports only the police version. This too is embedded journalism. Only Maoist violence is reported. Censorship is legitimate. The Maoist statements on extra-constitutional encounters, murders and rapes are not reported.

There is no semblance of either development in these squashed memories of under-development, or an iota of constitutional rights or justice. If the testimonies of the people of Dantewada are evidence, then there have been unprecedented brutalities and there are thousands of tales of unimaginable injustices. And anybody can be raped, killed, arrested, shot dead in an encounter by Salwa Judum, Special Police Officers, para military forces and police.

Arundhati Roy narrated one of the many stories from Dantewada in the tribunal. Stuningly heart-rending, a story which shatters the cracked mirror of Indian democracy : "I met Chamri, mother of Dilip who was shot on July 6, 2009. She says that after they killed him, the police tied her son's body to a pole, like an animal and carried it with them. (They need to produce bodies to get their cash rewards, before someone else muscled in on the kill.) Chamri ran behind them all the way to the police station. By the time they reached, the body did not have a scrap of clothing on it. On

the way, Chamri says, they left the body by the roadside while they stopped at a dhaba to have tea and biscuits. (Which they did not pay for.) Picture this mother for a moment, following her son's corpse through the forest, stopping at a distance to wait for his murderers to finish their tea. They did not let her have her son's body back so she could give him a proper funeral. They only let her throw a fistful of earth in the pit in which they buried the others they had killed that day. Chamri says she wants revenge. Badla ku badla. Blood for blood."

So is Maoist violence the only truth of this cracked mirror?

In this silent zone of absolute suffering, despair and tragedy—mass legitimacy of the Maoists and the total loss of legitimacy of the Indian State are feeding onto each other. Locals say, and so do the Maoists, since Operation Green Hunt, 100 tribals and Naxalites have been killed. "Why don't the media report about them?" they ask.

The tribunal also noted what the media never tells : that the Salwa Judum was started in 2005 immediately after the people and the Maoists rejected the mining bid in mineral rich Dantewada and Bastar by two gigantic industrial houses. The strategy was time-tested: use the official machinery, pitch people versus people, burn their villages, rape them, kill them, displace them, scatter them. And then take their land and forests with the treasure below in the name of development, law and order and nationalism.

As Arundhati Roy said in the tribunal: "The Maoists are trying to overthrow the Indian State. I would say, the Indian State has already been overthrown—by the corporates."

Courtesy: HARDNEWS