

# Thunder from Antiquity

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*[The smriti [Hindu mythology] foreshadows complete victory of the [self-contained] village, with consequences far deadlier than any invasion. —DD Kosambi.]*

In a speech the Prime Minister has acknowledged the turmoil of 'red corridor', stretching from the foothills of Himalayas to the tip of the peninsula, as the most serious of all threats to national security India faces today. This essay traces its origin to the method of village settlement during the Maurya (320-200 BC) and the Gupta (AD 300-500) empires.

The territory was still thinly settled over long distances in difficult country. There was plenty of space for retreat of tribesmen as well as for expansion of plough-cultivation. There was neither enough marketed-commodity production nor enough surplus of products for extensive slavery to be profitable. In order to tie up labour to land the Maurya emperor had begun with application of force, and later the Gupta emperor turned to invoking imaginary theocratic caste obligations.

Each village was so manned by professions as to make it self-contained and barter based, thereby rendering it exclusive, stagnant and timeless. In the process the door of entry had closed on the face of certain tribes. They are the ones who have been wandering since then in the hills and forests of red corridor.

Two things are required to redeem the situation, namely, the excluded tribesmen have to get connected with the nation's market, and welcomed into the general society. But how — that is the question.

1. *The Battle of Dandakaranya*: The setting is a mythical region, but now real, Dandakaranya, situated at the heartland of India, a continuous forest belt that spills over from Chhattisgarh into Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. A village, Belnar, nestles on the bank of river Indravati, meaning literally the abode of god Indra. The village is divided evenly between Kallars, a community of 'backward caste' subsistence peasantry; and Murias, a scheduled tribe, food-gathering in forest. Here is a dramatic scene of classic battle between the two, which is reminiscent of class struggles of some two thousand years ago, or of dispensation of justice by Rama, the incarnate of god Vishnu, to the forest-dwelling savages narrated in the epic, Ramayana.

Self-proclaimed Maoist guerrillas of tribesmen drill with bamboo-stick at hand and target practice with wooden bow-and-arrow. They are sworn revolutionaries committed to armed struggle against India.

Their opponents have responded by launching the *Salwa Judum* (Peace Mission), with material support from government forces. This initiative has been mobilized by the urban middle class like traders, contractors, and school teachers. It has armed the unemployed youths, educated just enough to have certain disenchantment for labouring in field or forest, but not enough to be absorbed with honour in the modern economy, enticed with a paltry sum of Rs 1,500 a month.

The two communities, Kallars and Murias, are about equally tormented and impoverished, miserable by any standard of human living. Yet, ironically, the Maoists identify Kallars as exploiters and Murias as exploited, oblivious that they are both similar victims of a single regime of age-old injustice and exploitation.

Dandakaranya is part of an underground armed movement in the red corridor. Chhattisgarh, home to many of India's indigenous peoples, or adivasis, is most gripped by the conflict. Sitting at a bottom of the Indian heap, the adivasis here make a living selling items of value that can be found in the forest: bamboo, kendu leaves to make hand-rolled cigarettes, mahuya flower to distill into country liquor. They also bear some of the country's worst rates of poverty, health and malnutrition. But there are riches here, too. Chhattisgarh is negotiating 1.8 billion dollars of private Indian investment, mostly in mining industries.

The Maoists exert varying degrees of influence in 13 of 28 Indian states, i.e. over a quarter of India's 600 districts. They survive niftily by extorting taxes from anyone doing business in the forest, from bamboo merchants to road construction companies. 'It is one of the most substantial anti-state ideologies and movements,' argues Ajai Sahni, a security analyst and executive director of the Institute for Conflict Management, New Delhi. 'Unless something radical is done in terms of structural revolution in rural areas, you will see a continuous expansion of Maoist insurrection.' It looks increasingly like a civil war, one claiming more and more lives and slowing the industrial growth of a country hungry for the coal, iron and other riches buried in these isolated realms bypassed by India's economic boom.<sup>1</sup>

2. *Fortress Village*: The pastoral vedic era came to an end; elaborate fire sacrifices (yajna) were gone. The age of settled agriculture is in. Now soil has to be ploughed, cattle tended, natural resources conserved. In the epic, Mahabharata, the dying Bhishma enjoined: Burning forest is a grave sin.

Chandragupta Maurya, the first universal monarch of the subcontinent, ascended the throne in 320 BC. Virtually self-sufficient village sprouted here and there for the first time as the basic unit of production; it would later spread over and characterize the whole of India. The first major village settlement was promoted directly under state control, which fought a deadly battle with private enterprise, especially the trader. The Indian merchant class therefore appears to remain silent till the twentieth century.

Village of between 100 and 500 families of sudra cultivators were formed, with territories between three and six miles in diameter. A trifling amount of uncultivated land was granted to priests free of taxes. The rest was assigned to the tax-paying holder for his own life.

These sudra settlers were driven from other places, or deported from overpopulated cities. A rigid system of costly passports and the frontier guards at every district made it impossible for a cultivator to leave. There was no escape for the proletarian from a crown village. No workers' associations or trade guilds, none of the religious preachers or proselytizers or trade guilds were permitted entry into the village. No bards, dancers, clowns, ballad-singers, or other entertainers of any sort could visit. Indeed, no village building suitable for meetings, plays, or games could be built at all. Says Chanakya: 'From the helplessness of the villages and the exclusive preoccupation of men with their fields stems the growth of revenue for the royal treasury, of the supply of forced labour, grain, oil and other liquid produce.'

The scene changed in the Gupta era. Now the settlements could not be held by force because of the vast distance, relatively plentiful supply of uncleared land, and the difficulty of clearing off food-gathering savages from their habitat. So, the royal strategy was to mix religion with private initiative. An acute monetary crisis, however, was looming large. Coins of precious metals, silver and gold, had been profusely drained out of the empire to service trade deficits due to excessive imports of luxuries by the *nouveau riche*. The available quantity of coins in circulation was not adequate to support selling of commodities for cash in markets on a scale consistent with the growing volume of rural output. The scarcity of money supply was overcome by assigning artisans specific to each village so that barter exchange would do.

Each village now had its required blacksmith, carpenter, potter, barber, and other artisans, adding up to a total number of precisely twelve. Each artisan received a plot of land to till at his spare time or with family labour. In addition, each was entitled to a certain portion of harvest from every peasant cultivator family. The village became self-sufficient and cash-free. In the process, inevitably, the caste order got permanently implanted into the fabric of village society.

The Gupta state had encouraged private settlement, on condition of paying tax in kind. The very prosperity thus generated would bring down the dynasty. The tax, being in kind, had to be collected as well as consumed mostly by local officers. Therefore, the imperial coffer at the capital city shrank; the central army thinned. It led to the rise of local princelings from new tribes, ambitious feudatories, or daring officials. Hence the decline and fall of the Gupta empire.

Basking in the sunshine of Gupta florescence, the chieftains of food-gathering tribes had enlarged tribal property by trade or as mercenaries in more advanced armies. Some of them were tempted to find means of converting that bounty into their private property. For them, brahman priests could discover or invent ancestors in the epics, or write them in some ancient text. A new breed of mythology literature, the Puranas, sprang up. Puranas claim immemorial antiquity but were written or rewritten to order, generally between the sixth and the twelfth centuries. Specializing in fabrication of myths, they, made aboriginal rites respectable.

Narrated in Puranas, ceremonies like the *hiranyagarbha* (golden womb) were performed by aspiring tribal chiefs. Here the priest would insert the ambitious candidate into a golden pot, the 'womb'. Mantras for a pregnant woman were recited, followed by the birth-mantras, after which the freshly minted Hindu stepped out from his contracted position to thank the priest for his rebirth. Thereby he acquired a high caste, while the obliging brahmans acquired the precious vessel as part of their fee. The new caste entitles him and his well-born descendents to instruction in brahmanic lore from which the sudra and the pre-caste tribesmen were barred.

To avoid the risk of possible claim to a share of the tribal treasure by other tribesmen, the newly anointed high-caste Hindu would leave no stone unturned to block the path of their conversion. With additional fee, the priest could ensure even that by chanting some more slokas. Thus certain tribes were left out of the pale of Hinduism.

About two centuries after the fall of Gupta dynasty, Muslim troops first entered India in AD 712, culminating in due course into the Mughal Empire. The Muslim impetus to

the mode of production was limited mainly to the introduction of Chinese discoveries such as gunpowder, paper, porcelain, and tea. As for the British, they encouraged caste and used it systematically to keep India divided.<sup>2</sup>

Those residual tribesmen had remained where they were. They are the present-day residents of Danda-karanya, of the red corridor.

3. *Social Assimilation*: The course of Indian history shows tribal elements being fused into a general society. The common method of assimilation in ancient times had been as follows. Brahmans gradually penetrated the tribes, gathered the tribal myths together, and displayed them as unified cycles of stories and set them in a better-developed social framework. The old gods were not smashed, but adopted and adjusted. Brahmanism thus gave some apparent unity to what would have been social fragments without a common bond.

This procedure had an inherent fault. The social edifice looked consistent and balanced, but lacked dynamics as it undercut the productive basis of the economy. There are two paths of transition from feudalism to capitalism. In the one, 'the producer becomes merchant and capitalist. This is the really revolutionizing path.' In the other, 'the merchant establishes direct sway over production. It cannot by itself contribute to the overthrow of the old mode of production, but tends to preserve and retain it as its precondition.'<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the second path is ambivalent. The Hindu society had both paths blocked.

The low-caste sudras were cultivators and artisans, the only producers. But the code of Hinduism banned capital accumulation by sudras.<sup>4</sup> There goes the first path of transition. As for the second path, the Mauryas had nipped the merchant in the bud. The Guptas had favoured traders, but the monetary crisis followed by the cash-free, barter-full self-contained villages constricted the merchant capital. All in all, the Hindu society had produced a regressive economy and a derisive military, making the country an easy prey to external aggression, which mushroomed soon after the departure of the Guptas<sup>5</sup>.

The historical lesson from the Maurya-Gupta episodes, together with the findings of modern economics and sociology, recommends a three-fold sequential approach towards the tribes of the red corridor, namely, (a) recognition and appreciation of every tribe, (b) consolidation of tribes into several larger groups, and (c) their exposure to the wider society of India and of the world. In the past, the traditional method of absorption had taken hundreds of years; but now it could be possibly expedited. The middle stage, in particular, is to be short in duration, because otherwise there is a danger of the movement getting stuck at that point.

Each culture has a dignity of its own. Having arisen in a certain context, negotiating with the surrounding environment, it contains some knowledge worthy of consideration. For each tribe, its culture, belief, totem, lifestyle should be recorded and appreciated. Figuratively speaking, every tribe would have a distinct Purana for its own pride and self-esteem— this time it would be realistic, comprehensive, and analytical.

Second, living in commons, e.g. forest and valley, and drawing upon common rivers and meadows, tribes often get into conflicts among themselves. Reconciliation among them would be a helpful experience for subsequent interface with the general society.

Tribes should be encouraged to engage in collective projects of land clearing and irrigation.

Third, human development entails an equation with two sides: the left-hand side reflects human capabilities, and the right-hand side, economic, political and social opportunities to use those capabilities<sup>6</sup>. It means that capabilities of a person are to be developed; he should have full access to all achievements of human civilization — knowledge, belief, history, science, technology, arts, morality, and ethics. And he must get entry into the nation's economy, polity and society to exercise his capabilities.

Human development can be simply defined as a process of enlarging choice. Thus defined, it represents a simple notion, but one with far-reaching implication. First, human choices are enlarged when people acquire more capabilities and enjoy greater scope to engage those capabilities. Human development seeks not only to increase both capabilities and opportunities but also to ensure an appropriate balance between them in order to avoid the frustration that a mismatch between the two can create.

Formally, a human society bears certain comparison with the universe. In the limitless space of the universe, celestial bodies such as planets, stars, galaxies orbit in paths determined by Newton's law of gravity. In a sense, so do humans too, in a society. They act and interact among themselves and move around in the social space. An application of Newton's law of gravity, modified marginally, on human society has brought meaningful insights<sup>7</sup>. One theorem is essentially as follows: for example, selecting a few individuals from among tribesmen to give them opportunities for education, training and job tends to disconnect them from their community, and has little filtering effect down the tribal population as a whole. In a word, it creates a 'creamy layer', an elite class among simpleton others. The consequence of India's policy of special reservation for scheduled caste (SC) and scheduled tribe (ST) students in educational institutions and government jobs bears testimony to this proposition.

Another interesting theoretical conclusion from the modified law of gravitation is that the tribes, which are socially close to one another but far away from the general society in a one-dimensional space of society, will continue to maintain the distance; in other words, a robust low-level equilibrium will prevail, unless a sufficiently powerful phenomenon such as trade comes to attract them towards the general society. That is why the second stage of the three-fold approach to assimilate the tribes should be kept short in duration, so that a group of tribes has no time to become self-contained, an independent subsystem.

It is said that 'the most important limit to human development is early infant development<sup>8</sup>.' The co-discoverer of the double helix of DNA and the genetic code, the two most significant scientific breakthroughs of the twentieth century, Francis Crick, deeply disliked religion, once saying that religion is all right between consenting adults but should not be taught to children. Desire to undercut religious obscurantism, someone has said in a lighter vein, was a cogent motive in Crick's scientific career, shaping his choice first of gene and later consciousness as problems that, if cracked, would destroy the last refuges of vitalism—a doctrine that the functions of a living organism are due to a divine spirit distinct from physico-chemical forces.

The scheduled castes (SC) comprise 16 percent of India's population, and the scheduled tribes (ST) 14 percent—adding up to 30 percent. Most of them are treated as

untouchable, even today, by upper-caste Hindus. This is the reality despite the Constitution of India, Article 17, which reads: “Untouchability” is abolished and its practice in any way is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability rising out of “Untouchability” shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law.

Considered a soft target, the tribes of India are facing a barrage of rival proselytization campaigns. Some 80 percent of India’s population is returned as Hindu in decennial census. Newton’s law of gravity would predict a sizeable power of attraction by this group. Yet, in comparison with competing religions, Hinduism has a drawback, namely, caste<sup>9</sup>. Under the circumstances, it would be prudent to formally introduce tribal students at an early age to the principles of three faiths—Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam—as part of high school curriculum, so that they are prepared to make informed judgment on such matters later in life.

4. *The Peasantry*: The world economy is at a turning point. To pursue cheap labour, heavy industries are moving from west to east. The pace of industrialization in China and India has quickened. Industry in the east is encroaching upon agricultural land causing hardship especially to poor peasants.

With rapid improvement of means of communication and drop in cost, money travels around the globe at a trifle charge, in no time. As a result the velocity of money has accelerated and the volume of money supply has risen. Interest rate has fallen, resulting in a higher wage rate/interest rate ratio. One corollary of this phenomenon is that the fixed cost (machine, equipment, structure) financed by borrowed money tends to rise relative to the variable cost. Several farmers in India have committed suicide under the strain of heavy debt in difficult years<sup>10</sup>.

Now, should the poor peasantry (most belong to lower caste) come to join the Maoist tribesmen, it would throw a formidable challenge to the state. To be sure, a ‘structural revolution’ is now necessary. But a democratic polity, itself a product of the prevailing system, is incapable of questioning the social-political structure. Only a joint mobilization of social and political forces can meet the threat. The starting point of action would be to remove all artificial social barriers that stand on the way of equal human dignity.

Rousseau says: ‘Man is born free, but is everywhere in chain.’ In order to release man in India from chain, first of all, the caste system with which all communities—Christian, Hindu, Muslim—are inflicted more or less is to be terminated. In no other country in the world do people suffer over 4,000 irreconcilable theocratic caste-fragmentations, or more than one third of the population is practically condemned as ‘untouchable.’ The Constitution of India has abolished untouchability, which is an integral part of the notion of caste that belongs to Hinduism. It is time the Constitution proceeds to abolish caste itself, all of it.

The moral ground for abolishing caste is well known. It can be argued, in terms of the sacred scriptures, that the Veda does not approve caste, that Manu’s theory of caste is untenable, and that the law of karma is false”. Shorn of castes, no longer will there be any humanitarian distance between tribes and the people of confessional faiths like the ones cited above. As a matter of fact, the attainment of equal human dignity would amount to a fundamental social gain for tribes as well as for poor peasants and artisans. It would contribute to social cohesion.

All this has to be grounded on an appropriate mode of production. No one should be held on to one's ancestral commodity production. A tribesman, for example, would be free in his choice of career consistent with his capabilities, be it in research on particle physics or in architecture.

5. *Engels' Law*: 'According to the materialistic conception, the determining factor in history is, in the last resort, the production and reproduction of immediate life. But this itself is of a twofold character. On the one hand, the production of the means of subsistence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools requisite therefore; on the other, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species.'<sup>12</sup> After its author, this statement may be called Engels' law of civilization. Family and factory, these are the two pillars of civilization. Families assemble to form a society; factories, an economy. Society and economy are the two sectors which determine the course of history.

The collapse of the Soviet Union might have been ultimately due to the multiple fractures of its social fabric, woven by discordant ethnicities under duress, unattended by any overarching canopy of unity. China, by contrast, is a relatively well-knit community at harmony with itself, dedicated since antiquity to the society, less obsessed with heaven or hell. In this respect India is more akin to Russia than to China, hence susceptible to the Russian handicap.

Political power can unravel a society, but not reconstruct it. Absent a dynamic society, Engels' law predicts, history slips backward, as did the Hindu society under the Mauryas and the Guptas. The rebels of red corridor do not seem capable of resolving the social contradictions of India. This deficiency alone, if nothing else, would elude them of substantial victory at this stage.

Economy is the other sector. An empty economy cannot hold a viable society or a functioning polity. A certain level of economic attainment is a pre-condition for human development.

In the present confrontation between the guerrillas of red corridor and the state of India, why would either side come to amicable terms with the other? The stance of the state of India is understandable.

The insurgents are said to be violently against a proposed investment of Rs 500 crores (some two billion dollars) in mining industries in the state of Chhattisgarh. Demand for fair monetary compensation and rehabilitation of displaced families is acceptable, but armed resistance to the projects as such is another matter. India is relatively poor in mineral resources. But that scarcity need not be an insurmountable hindrance to the country's economic expansion — vide the records of Japan or England. Preventing utilization of the meagre resources, with due respect to the affected families, helps neither the tribes nor the country. On the contrary, economic growth could be an effective solvent to social prejudice and tribal misery. The Indian economy has been gravely crippled by the legacy of the Gupta dynasty of the fifth century. Many of our social and political evils might have been swept away if there were a wave of economic upsurge. Raising unjustified obstruction to economic growth is counterproductive to human development. A country can have economic growth without justice, but not justice in the absence of a vibrant economy.

## NOTES

1. Ramchandra Guha, "The Battle of Bastar," *The Telegraph*, 26-29 June 2006; Somini Sengupta, "In India, Maoist Guerrillas Widen People's War," *New York Times*, 13 April 2006. See also, Ranjit Sau, "A Theory of the Red Corridor," *Frontier*, (38:38) 9 April 2006.
2. D D Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (1st ed. 1956, revised 2nd ed. 1975); *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline* (1970); Max Weber, *The Religion of India* (1958), p 130.
3. Karl Marx, 1894, *Capital*, vol 3, p 334, Progress Publishers, 1966.
4. Windy Doniger, *The Laws of Manu*, p 250, Penguin, 1991.
5. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, p 226, Oxford University Press.
6. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report*, 1990.
7. George Akerlof, 1997, "Social Distance and Decisions," *Econometrica* 65, pp 1005-1027.
8. Kenneth J Arrow, 1997, "Invaluable Goods", *Journal of Economic Literature* 35, p 760.
9. After its long presence in Indonesia for 1,500 years, Hinduism receded as Islam appeared in the archipelago. The following story may explain Hinduism's retreat. In his research trips to Indonesia, author V S Naipaul met a person, Adi, who replied to a question as to why he was a Muslim in these words: "My parents were Muslim. It is also more logical than Catholicism. The Trinity business is something I cannot understand. Protestantism is better. Hinduism has caste. That I reject." *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey*, 1981, p 288.
10. Ranjit Sau, "Farmers Need Equity, Too" (letter to editor), *Economic and Political Weekly*, 3 July 2004.
11. Ranjit Sau, "Manu's Curse", *Frontier*, (38:24), 1 January 2006; "Two Theorems on the Hindu Varna-Caste Order," loc. cit.(38:42), 7 May 2006; "Reservation on Reservation," loc. cit. (38:46), 4 June 2006.
12. Frederick Engels, 1884, "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State," *Marx and Engels Selected Works*, vol 3, p 191, Progress Publishers, 1970.

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