

BACK FROM BASTAR

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IN THE HISTORY OF INDEPENDENT India, the most bloody conflicts have taken place in the most beautiful locations. Consider Kashmir, whose enchantments have been celebrated by countless poets down the ages, as well as by rulers from the Mughal Emperor Jahangir to the first prime minister of free India, Jawaharlal Nehru. Or Nagaland and Manipur, whose mist-filled hills and valleys have been rocked again and again by the sound of gunfire.

To this melancholy list of lovely places wracked by civil war must now be added Bastar, a hilly, densely forested part of central India largely inhabited by tribal people. In British times Bastar was an autonomous princely state, overseen with a gentle hand by its ruler, the representative on earth—so his subjects believed—of the goddess Durga. After independence, it came to form part of the state of Madhya Pradesh and, when that state was bifurcated in 1998, of Chattisgarh (a name that means “thirty-six forts,” presumably a reference to structures once maintained by medieval rulers).

The forts that dot Chattisgarh now take the form of police camps run by the modern, and professedly democratic, Republic of India. For the state is at the epicenter of a war being waged between the government and Maoist guerrillas. And within Chattisgarh, the battle rages most fiercely in Bastar.

The conflict in Bastar and its neighborhood get little play in the Indian press, which is both urban-centered and self-congratulatory, flying, as it were, from Delhi to Bangalore and back again—from the center of power and patronage to the center of India’s booming software industry. To get to Bangalore from Delhi one must pass over Bastar, literally, for obscured from the airplane in the sky are the bloody battles taking place on the ground. Other sections of the Indian Establishment likewise ignore or underrate the Maoist challenge, although an exception must be made for Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who recently identified it as the “biggest internal security threat” facing the nation.

In recent years the Maoists have mounted a series of bold attacks on symbols of the Indian state. In November 2005 they stormed the district town of Jehanabad in Bihar, firebombing offices and freeing several hundred prisoners from the jail. Then, this past March, they attacked a police camp in Chattisgarh, killing fifty-five policemen and making off with a huge cache of weapons. At other times, they have bombed and set fire to railway stations and transmission towers.

The Indian Maoists are referred to by friend and foe alike as Naxalites, after the village of Naxalbari in north Bengal, where their movement began in 1967. Through the 1970s and ’80s, the Naxalites were episodically active in the Indian countryside. They were strongest in the states of Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, where they organized low-caste sharecroppers and laborers to demand better terms from their upper-caste landlords. Naxalite activities were open, as when conducted through labor unions, or illegal, as when they assassinated a particularly recalcitrant landlord or made a daring seizure of arms from a police camp.

Until the 1990s the Naxalites were a marginal presence in Indian politics. But in that decade they began working more closely with the tribal communities of the Indian heartland. About 80 million Indians are officially recognized as “tribal”; of these, some 15 million live in the northeast, in regions untouched by Hindu influence. It is among the 65 million tribals of the heartland that the Maoists have found a most receptive audience.

Who, exactly, are the Indian tribals? There is a long-running dispute on this question. Some, like the great French anthropologist Marcel Mauss, merely saw them as “Hindus lost in the forest”; others, like the British ethnographer Verrier Elwin, insisted that they could not be so easily assimilated into the mainstream of the indic civilization. While the arguments about their cultural distinctiveness (or lack thereof) continue, there is—or at any rate should be—a consensus on their economic and political status in independent India.

On the economic side, the tribals are the most deeply disadvantaged segment of Indian society. As few as 23 percent of them are literate; as many as 50 percent live under the poverty line. The state fails to provide them with adequate education, healthcare or sanitation; more actively, it works to dispossess them of their land and resources. For the tribals have the ill luck to live amid India’s most verdant forests, alongside India’s freest-flowing rivers and atop India’s most valuable minerals. As these resources have gained in market value, the tribals have had to make way for commercial forestry, large and small dams, and mines. According to sociologist Walter Fernandes, 40 percent of those displaced by development projects are tribals, although they constitute less than 8 percent of the population. Put another way, a tribal is five times as likely as a nontribal to have his property seized by the state.

On the political side, the tribals are very poorly represented in the democratic process. In fact, compared with India’s other subaltern groups, such as the Dalits (former Untouchables) and the Muslims, they are well nigh invisible. Dalits have their own, sometimes very successful, political parties; the Muslims have always constituted a crucial vote bank for the dominant Congress Party. In consequence, in every Indian Cabinet since independence, Dalits and Muslims have been assigned powerful portfolios such as Home, Education, External Affairs and Law. On the other hand, tribals are typically allotted inconsequential ministries such as Sports or Youth Affairs. Again, two Muslims and one Dalit have been chosen President of India, but no tribal. Two Muslims and one Dalit have served as Chief Justice of India, but no tribal.

This twin marginalization, economic and political, has opened a space for the Maoists to work in. Their most impressive gains have been in tribal districts, where they have shrewdly stoked discontent with the state to win people to their side. They have organized tribals to demand better wages from the forest department, killed or beaten up policemen alleged to have intimidated tribals and run law courts and irrigation schemes of their own.

The growing presence of Maoists in tribal India is also explained by geography. In these remote upland areas, the officials of the Indian state are unwilling to work hard, and are often unwilling to work at all. Doctors do not attend hospital; schoolteachers stay away from school; magistrates spend their time lobbying for a transfer back to the plains. On the other side, the Maoists are prepared to walk

miles to hold a village meeting, and to pitch camp in the forest and live off its bounty. It is from the jungle that they emerge to preach to the tribals, and it is to the jungle that they return when a police party approaches.

Last summer this correspondent traveled with a group of colleagues through Bastar to study the impact of a new, state-sponsored initiative to combat Maoism. Known as *Salwa Judum* (a term that translates, ironically, as “peace campaign”), the scheme had armed hundreds of local villagers and given some the elevated title of Special Police Officer (SPO). While the state claimed *Salwa Judum* to be a success, other reports suggested that its activists were a law unto themselves, burning villages deemed insufficiently sympathetic to them and abusing their women.

‘...that the landscape of Bastar is gorgeous. Hills loomed in the distance. The vegetation was very lush: wild mango, jackfruit, sal and teak, among other indigenous species. The forest was broken up with patches of grassland. Even in late May the terrain was very green. The bird life was as rich and as native as the vegetation— warblers and wagtails on the ground, the brainfever bird and the Indian cuckoo calling overhead’.

The scenery was hauntingly beautiful and utterly desolate. Evidence of the former lay before one’s eyes ; evidence of the latter, in the testimonies of those this writer met and interviewed. As a means of saving Bastar from the Maoists, the *Salwa Judum* and the state administration have uprooted more than 40,000 villagers and placed them in camps along the road, recalling the failed “strategic hamlets” used by the US military in South Vietnam more than forty years ago. While some tribals came voluntarily, many others came out of fear of the administration and the goons commissioned to work with it. Whether refugee or displacee, they live in primitive conditions—in tents made of plastic sheets strung up on bamboo poles, open on three sides to the elements. Some permanent houses have been built, but these are inappropriate to the climate and context, being small and dark, with asbestos roofs. Worse, the residents of the camps have been given no means of livelihood. Once independent farmers, hunters and gatherers, they now had to make do with the pickings that came from coolie labor. In the camps, the men wore sad, simple *lungis* and *banyans*; the women, crumpled and torn saris; the children, sometimes nothing at all.

Moving away from the camps into the villages off the road, there was evidence of depredations by vigilante groups. In one hamlet ten homes burned by a *Salwa Judum* mob [witnessed the horror]. This village lay close to a hill where Maoists were said to sleep by day; the villagers were alleged to sometimes give them refuge at night. Among these tribals the feelings against the *Salwa Judum* ran very high. Before a clump of mahua trees with golden orioles calling in the background, a tribal woman demonstrated the humiliations she was subjected to. The men were equally bitter—wishing to live quietly in their homes, but forced to report to a nearby camp and spend the nights there.

On the other side, the Maoists had made a particular target of the freshly recruited SPOs. In one especially gruesome incident, the guerrillas kidnapped fifty villagers, some of them *Salwa Judum* members. They later set thirty-seven free, but killed the thirteen identified as SPOs. Maoists also attacked village

headmen and village council representatives, whom they consider part of the bourgeois political system.

The armed officials of the state, patrol only in the daytime and mostly along the roads. Bunkered in their stations, they are mainly interested in protecting themselves. Meanwhile, Salwa Judum has been given a free hand. A local journalist summed up the attitude of the police as follows: "Let the villagers fight it out among themselves while we stay safe."

According to the Asian Centre for Human Rights, close to 400 people were killed in the civil war in Bastar last year. Of these, about fifty were security personnel; about a hundred, Naxalites or alleged Naxalites; the rest, civilians caught in the cross-fire.

Bastar forms part of a contiguous forest belt that spills over from Chattisgarh into Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. In the Ramayana epic this region is known as Dandaka-ranya, a name the Maoists have integrated into their lexicon. They have a Special Zonal Committee for Dandakaranya, under which operate several divisional committees. These in turn have range committees reporting to them. The lowest level of organization is at the village, where committees known as *sangams* are formed.

Working under the pseudonym "Sanjeev," a Maoist leader—slim, clean-shaven and soberly dressed in dark trousers and a bush shirt of neutral colors explain his party's strategies. Now 35, he had been in the movement for two decades, dropping out of college in Hyderabad to join it. He works in Abujmarh, a part of Bastar so isolated that it remains unsurveyed (apparently the only part of India that holds this distinction), and where no official dares venture for fear of being killed.

Speaking in quiet, controlled tones, Sanjeev showed himself to be deeply committed as well as highly sophisticated. The Naxalite village committees, he said, worked to protect people's rights in jal, jangal and zameen—water, forest and land. At the same time, they made targeted attacks on state officials, especially the police. Raids on police stations were intended to stop police from harassing ordinary folk. They were also necessary to augment the weaponry of the guerrilla army. Through popular mobilization and the intimidation of state officials, the Maoists hoped to expand their authority over Dandaka-ranya. Once the region was made a "liberated zone," it would be used as a launch pad for the capture of state power in India as a whole.

Sanjeev's belief in the efficacy of armed struggle was complete. When asked about two landmine blasts that had killed many innocent people—in one case members of a marriage party—he said that these had been mistakes, with the guerrillas believing that the police had hired private vehicles to escape detection. The Maoists, he said, would issue an apology and compensate the victims' families. However, when asked about other, scarcely less brutal killings, he said they were "deliberate incidents."

As for the Maoists in neighboring Nepal, who had laid down their arms and joined other parties in the framing of a republican Constitution, Sanjeev was emphatic that in India they did not countenance this option. Here, they remained committed to the destruction of the state by means of armed struggle.

How many Maoists are there in India? Estimates vary widely. There are perhaps 10,000 to 20,000 full-time guerrillas, each armed with an AK-47, most of them conversant with the use of grenades, many with landmines, a few with rocket launchers. They maintain links with guerrilla movements in other parts of South Asia, exchanging information and technology with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and, at least before their recent conversion, the Nepali Maoists.

The Indian Maoists got a huge shot in the arm with the merger, in 2004, of two major factions. One, the People's War Group (PWG), was active in Andhra Pradesh; the other, the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) in Bihar. Both dissolved themselves into the new Communist Party of India (Maoist). Since the merger the party has spread rapidly, with former PWG cadres moving north into the tribal heartland from Andhra, and erstwhile MCC cadres coming south from Bihar.

The general secretary of the united party calls himself "Ganapathi," almost certainly a pseudonym. Statements carrying his name occasionally circulate on the Internet—one, issued in February, reported the successful completion of a party congress "held deep in the forests of one of the several Guerrilla Zones in the country." The congress "reaffirmed the general line of the new democratic revolution with agrarian revolution as its axis and protracted people's war as the path of the Indian revolution." The meeting "was completed amongst great euphoria with a Call to the world people: Rise up as a tide to smash imperialism and its running dogs! Advance the Revolutionary war throughout the world!!"

Like other Communist movements, the Naxalite leadership is overwhelmingly male. No tribals are represented in the upper levels of the party hierarchy.

How influential is the Maoist movement in India? Once more, the estimates vary widely. The Home Ministry claims that one-third of all districts in India, or about 150 in all, are recognized as "Naxalite affected." But this, as the Home Minister himself recently admitted, is a considerable exaggeration. State governments have a vested interest in declaring districts Naxalite-affected, for it allows them to claim a subsidy from the center. Thus, an armed robbery or two is sometimes enough for a district to be featured on the list.

About forty districts, spread across ten states and containing perhaps 80 million Indians, live in a liminal zone where the Indian state exercises uncertain control by day and no control by night. Some of these districts are in the northeast, where the nighttime rulers are the Naga, Assamese and Manipuri rebels. The other districts are in the peninsula, where Naxalites have dug deep roots among low castes and tribals grievously shortchanged by the democratic system.

How, finally, might the Maoist insurgency be ended or at least contained? On the Maoist side this might take the shape of a compact with bourgeois democracy, by participating in and perhaps even winning elections. On the government side it might take the shape of a sensitively conceived and sincerely implemented plan to make tribals true partners in the development process, by assuring them the title on lands they cultivate, allowing them the right to manage forests sustainably, giving them a solid stake in industrial or mining projects that come up where they live and that often cost them their homes.

In truth, the one is as unlikely as the other. One cannot easily see the Maoists giving up on their commitment to armed struggle. Nor, given the way the Indian

state actually functions, can one see it so radically reform itself as to put the interests of a vulnerable minority, the tribals, ahead of those with more money and power.

In the long run, perhaps, the Maoists might indeed make their peace with the Republic of India, and the Republic come to treat its tribal citizens with dignity and honor.□

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