

'LEFT-PROGRESSIVE DISCOURSE'

Forests, OGH and Political Economy

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As central India's forest belts are swept into an ever-intensifying state offensive and resulting civil war, there has been a strong convergence of left, liberal and progressive arguments on Operation Green Hunt (OGH). This note argues that this 'basic line' is problematic. The line can be summarised as :

The conflict is rooted in resource grabbing by corporate capital, in the form of large projects, SEZs, mining, etc.

Such resource grabbing leads people to take up arms to defend themselves, resulting in the ongoing conflict.

The conflict thus consists of a state drive to grab people's homes and resources, with people resisting by taking to arms as self-defence.

Supporters of the Maoists' positions now often conflate these points with the more orthodox positions on the necessity for "protracted people's war" in a 'semi-feudal semi-colonial' state. Liberals in turn tend to deny these orthodox positions and instead advocate the resource grab–displacement–corporate attack issue as the "real" explanation. Both, however, accept this as the predominant dynamic at the heart of the current conflict.

But at the heart of this line lies an unstated question : why are forest areas the main battleground in this war? While the conflict is not coterminous with the forests—most of India's forest areas are not part of this war, and the conflict extends outside the forest areas in some regions—forests are both politically and geographically at its heart.

Most answers to this question are either over-specific—"the minerals are found there"—or over-general—"these areas are backward/remote/marginalised, a creation of uneven development, and the state is weak there." The latter are all correct generalisations, but in themselves they beg the question: why are these areas backward, marginalised and under-developed?

THE FOREST AREAS

Some basic features of the political economy of forest areas are outlined in a sketch here. The key defining feature of these areas is one legal-political-institutional complex: India's system of forest management. The British initiated the current system of resource control in forest areas in the mid-nineteenth century, and it reached its present form around the turn of the 20th century. The system has since then maintained a remarkable continuity for more than a century, an indicator of its importance to India's ruling classes.

This system has its roots in the requirements of British industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century, for which timber was a key raw material, both within India (for the railway networks that strengthened imperial control and allowed extraction of resources) and in the UK itself (particularly ship building). The systems of forest control that existed

in India at the time, where village communities, religious institutions, local rulers and tribal societies operated multiple and complex systems of management, did not permit such easy extraction. They also did not serve British interests, since timber trees were naturally not given high priority in such management systems. As a result, the British instituted the Forest Department and passed a series of three Forest Acts - in 1865, 1878 and 1927—to essentially bring India's timber resources under their control and provide a legal-institutional form for their management. The 1927 Act remains India's main forest law.

The British Forest Acts were based on the principle of expropriation: any area could be declared to be a government forest, whereupon rights in this area would have to be respected /settled (the process varied over the course of the three acts). The form of such rights was whittled down to essentially individual land rights by the time of the 1927 law, and even these were subject to the decision of a forest settlement officer. The resulting failure to record even the individual rights of adivasis, Dalits and most other forest dwelling communities is well documented. This process continued and was consolidated after independence, excepting in the Northeast.

But this was not merely a question of administrative failure. The forest laws had three key consequences for production relations. The first was that, as with enclosures anywhere, they sought to reduce what were essentially territories and landscapes to commodities, in this case exemplified by timber. The variations in pre-colonial management systems notwithstanding, none of them was based on principles of commodity management; though often far from democratic or egalitarian, they were concerned with regulation of use and (at most) extraction of revenue. Their purpose did not revolve around the extraction of a single commodity; this was an innovation of the British. The result of this process was to bring Indian forests into a specific position within the global capitalist commodity circuit, servicing the industrial needs of transport sectors within the imperialist bourgeoisie.

But, unlike the classical enclosures of England, the enclosure attempt in India's forests failed—bringing about the second consequence. The attempt to seize most of central India's forests met with fierce resistance, being one of the triggers for a series of adivasi uprisings across central India (the tribals of the Northeast having largely fought off British control from the beginning). The British lacked the force to clear these areas of people and suppress their management systems, and the post-colonial Indian state—despite its ever increasing reserves of repressive power —has also lacked the ability to do so. The result has been that one reality exists in the world of law, where forests are uninhabited wilderness, and another exists in reality, where millions use and depend on them for survival. More important than the fact that these uses are illegal is that they are not recorded, and as such outside the knowledge of the state system.

This produced the third and most important consequence: a distorted system of property relations, from the point of view of classical 'capitalism'. In short, security of private tenure does not exist in the forests. Enclosure, rather than creating and defining the rule of private property, has produced a chaotic situation of competing claims, de facto management systems that clash with de jure ones and state policies that are based on a combination of fantasy at the time of policymaking (Project Tiger, for instance) and brutality in implementation. These apply to all resources in the area, not only to land.

A lack of defined property relations has, in turn, further shaped both the integration of these areas into Indian capitalism and the forms of resistance adopted by people in these areas. First, accumulation in these areas is simultaneously constrained and driven by the direct exercise of state force. Close relations with the formal state machinery are a precondition for accumulation in forest areas, whether one is a tendu leaf contractor, a landlord, a tea estate, a forest guard or Vedanta. This is accumulation by dispossession as a continuous process.

Such a situation obviously poses risks both to legitimacy and to 'orderly' accumulation. But it also proves to be a useful compromise in a context where state force alone simply cannot exterminate or remove the entire forest dwelling population. The current situation provides direct benefits to large sectors of India's ruling classes. On the one hand, the continuous subsidy to capital that is created by the provision of free or cheap minerals, water, timber and land from forest areas has contributed an untold and inestimable amount to India's capitalist 'development', both earlier and in the recent neoliberal era. It is no accident that most large projects at all stages since independence have involved forest land. On the other hand, this situation has produced a partially proletarianised population of crores of people—mostly, but not only, adivasis—whose traditional productive resources (particularly forest produce) have been expropriated, and who are now vulnerable to super-exploitation as migrant workers. Nor are the consequences limited to present day forest dwellers; the resulting desperate reserve army of workers has had a historical and geographical 'ripple effect', diminishing the strength of the working class as a whole (most visible in the heavy and increasing use of adivasi migrant labour across India's "developed" capitalist belts).

RESISTANCE IN FOREST AREAS

The consequence of this is that the link between capital, the state and the use of force is thus blatantly obvious in forest areas in a manner that it is not elsewhere. If hegemony consists of the combination of consent with the armor of coercion, it is the armor that forest dwellers see. This, together with the reality of ill-defined property relations, has had consequences for the way people have fought back.

Indeed, the persistence and reproduction of collective property relations among adivasi and tribal communities is not the result of some kind of historical exceptionalism, or relics of a "past culture" or "feudal mode of production." Rather they are a reflection of the concrete combination of weak private property relations and state repression on the other. In the forest and tribal areas, the nature of capitalist exploitation makes collective production both concretely possible and a key source of resistance (since it is the subject of direct repression), and as a result these forms of production are being reproduced. The communities with the strongest systems of collective production in India today are the tribal communities of the Northeast, such as the Nagas, the Mizos, the Garos and others, who have literally been at war against expropriation attempts continuously since the colonial period. In central India, where such struggles have been less successful, the state suppression of community management systems has progressed much further—but they remain alive in such phenomena as community forest management (practised by thousands of villages in Orissa and Jharkhand), collective gathering and management of minor forest produce, collective grazing systems, etc.

Where internal differentiation has occurred, as it has in all communities, such differentiation has also been 'distorted'. It has produced small elites, generally among those close to the state machinery (including beneficiaries of reservations, panchayat

leaders, JFM Committee members, etc.), who are polarised against large masses of people on the brink of destitution. This is also true among non-advansi forest dwelling communities, most of whom were already integrated into a greater degree of private property relations prior to the declaration of state forests, but among whom similar processes have operated in forest areas.

FORMS OF RESISTANCE

The net result of this has been to produce a situation where the state is both strong and weak. The strength, of course, stems from the availability of force and the lack of integration into the mainstream political system, which ensures that any agitation is met with inhuman repression. But the weakness stems from the lack of hegemony and the very clear boundary between "rulers" and "ruled." In the forest areas, the binary of "state vs people" has a glaring reality that people experience in their daily lives. The state both is and is seen to be the direct agent of exploitation.

The result is that struggles in these areas have often given space for more radical formations, and for raising more fundamental political issues, than in other parts of India. This is not just true of the CPI (Maoist), but of the history of struggles in advansi areas generally, both before and after independence. Often phrased in millenarian and revivalist language, the advansi uprisings of the nineteenth century demanded not just the exit of the British but the reconstruction of their entire society. Closer to the present day, the undivided CPI found some of its strongest bases among advansis, as have both the CPI(Maoist) and the democratic mass organisations. The longest running armed conflicts in India—the struggles in the Northeast—are also marked by the same dynamics. Meanwhile, the weakness of the state has also made it the target of other struggles in forest areas. For instance, practically all streams of the Indian left—from the parliamentary parties through the armed groups and the mass organisations—have staged their most successful drives for land occupation (i.e. land takeovers by the landless) on forest land.

FORESTS AND THE WAR

It is incorrect, in this light, to see forests as either separate from Indian capitalism or society or to see them as simply the more remote or backward parts of that society. Rather, forests and forest areas function within a specific politico-economic space as a result of the manner in which they are integrated with the Indian economy. It is not that there are no similarities between this space and that of other parts of the Indian socioeconomic formation; there are parallels with the role of the state in urban areas, for instance, or with the nature of oppression among the landless peasantry. But the specificity of forest areas, produced by their role within the current socioeconomic formation, is still valid. As said earlier, most of the current discussion on Operation Green Hunt does not recognise this fact, and instead seeks to both over-specify it and, more importantly, over generalise it.

The tendency to over-specify is visible in a factual error made by nearly all current critiques: the argument that the conflict is over corporate projects. Displacement by corporations and projects covers a huge area in absolute terms, but this is only a small part of India's forests and advansi areas. The vast majority of advansis and forest dwellers, including in Maoist areas, are not threatened with displacement, and will not be threatened with it, however intense the corporate offensive may become.

To fail to see this is to open an obvious factual contradiction that is easy for the state and its supporters to attack. If the armed struggle is a question of self-defence against displacement, the Digvijay Singhs immediately ask why the CPI(Maoist) did not so strongly oppose displacement-inducing projects earlier. Others demand to know that if the only issue is corporate projects, why are some of the most intense struggles being fought where there is no project visible? Moreover, say the news anchors, if the war is one of self-defence against corporate displacement (which after all does not apply to most of India), is the CPI(Maoist) being delusional when it talks of overthrowing the Indian state? Indeed, by over-emphasising the displacement issue, many reduce the Maoist movement to precisely the kind of formation that they are most critical of : an issue based anti-displacement struggle, with all its ideological and political vulnerabilities.

The answer to all of these questions, of course, is that the struggles (armed and unarmed) in forest areas are not a response to displacement alone; they are a result of the continuum of state-driven repression and expropriation that dominates in these areas, of which corporate projects are but the most extreme example. Operation Green Hunt may have been initiated due to corporate pressure, but the war as a whole is much older and much broader.

But to accept this is to, in turn, open another flank for attack. If displacement and "annihilation" are not the issue, can it be said that there is "no choice" but to take up arms? If oppression in the forests is the problem, many mass organisations have worked in these areas before the Maoists, and many such struggles continue both there and elsewhere. True, most of these organisations have resorted to physical self-protection when attacked—the vast majority were and are not Gandhians. But there is a gulf between such "violence" and the strategy of protracted people's war.

In order to respond to this, many abandon over-specific arguments, but instead fall into over-generalisation—using simplified versions of traditional Maoist positions. In this view, the war in the forests is the "leading edge" of working class struggles in the country, a result of the intensification of "neo robber baron capitalism". This war is here presented as the most radical response to a brutal state intent on expropriating everything from its oppressed, and the rest of India's working class should, in this view, look upon the war as both model and inspiration. The CPI (Maoist) itself tends to adopt this position in its recent public statements (being clear, after all, that it is not fighting an anti-displacement struggle).

But it is not clear how a struggle that currently has its deepest roots in forest areas—with their specific history—can be described as the "leading edge" of a new democratic revolution. There is no linear manner in which the forest areas can be placed on a continuum of backwardness from the other areas of India; their configuration is specific to them, with some similarities but many differences with formations in other parts of the country. Sweeping claims of being a "leading edge" would only be true if the war in the forests is obviously generalisable, in the sense of developing a praxis that is extendable to other areas and configurations of exploitation in the country. This is not clear in either Maoist statements or in the external analyses that adopt this line.

Indeed, one might note, as a "stylised fact", that in some senses the Maoist organisations have undergone the opposite journey—from having their core base among sectors of the landless and the marginal peasantry, who are more within 'normal' state

functioning and property relations, their centre has moved into the forest areas. Even within the forests, the majority of communities and areas are not within the Maoist fold. The party has shown less ability to expand in regions such as western Maharashtra, south Gujarat, western Madhya Pradesh, etc., where—due to regional social processes and struggles—the forest economy has shifted more towards a "normal" peasant configuration. Thus, overall, the party appears to have moved from areas of *stronger hegemony to ones of weaker hegemony*. This does not strengthen belief in the ability of "people's war", as they frame it, to be a strategy of struggle in areas where binary "state vs people" modes of exploitation do not exist so concretely.

And it is here that the more fundamental danger arises. Posing the question of people's war as an inevitability, a choice between a marauding state intent on annihilating people and a revolutionary force whose promise lies in making a "better state", does not correspond to the political reality of most of the oppressed in India today. For all its venality, brutality and inhumanity, the Indian state retains a weakened but still very real hegemonic status in most of the country. For most working class Indians, bourgeois democracy may have failed to deliver its claims, but it is not a lie; and to merely declare that it is one is not going to make it so.

To ignore this, and focus only on the state's coercive operations in the forests, makes the conflict appear either irrelevant or, worse, alien to the majority of the population. It converts oppression rooted in Indian capitalism into the problem of some remote far off area, a war between "tribals" and "corporates" in what seems to be a foreign land. This, ultimately, only serves the government's purposes; what better way to ensure that opposition to Operation Green Hunt, outside the conflict zones, fails to develop a mass character? Instead of weakening state hegemony, one thus finds oneself reinforcing it.

ALTERNATIVE POSSIBILITIES

It is important to stress the connections and parallels between the forest conflict and oppression in other areas, without slipping into over-generalisations. These parallels operate at different levels. One instance is the increasing use of law as a direct tool of accumulation, such as through Special Economic Zones, anti-encroachment drives in urban areas, etc. There are strong similarities between these processes and the use of forest law; exposing this function of law in turn exposes the class nature of the state. Another similarity is the continuous process of enclosure and extermination of systems of common production, often using the law, but also through other methods.

Which parallels are relevant and how are, of course, matters of separate debate. In this of course there will be sharp differences the various left streams on their understanding of the present socioeconomic formation. In general, however, such connections need to be exposed and analysed to build both a broader praxis and an understanding of how, in each sphere of struggle, hegemony can be weakened. But to simply overlook the political positioning of forest areas and continue with over-specific or over-general arguments is to risk strengthening the government's narrative—with attendant dangerous consequences for all. □□□