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Indravelli 1985

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THE Seventh National Highway, in its run from Hyderabad to Nagpur, leaves the Godavari basin at the commercial town of Nirmal and climbs on to the West-Central highlands of Adilabad by a brisk series of twists and turns picturesquely called Mahbub ghat; and then it has a run of about 50 kms on the plateau before it dips again into the sweltering district headquarters town of Adilabad. If, on the 20th of April this year, you happened to be on this road or in the teak forest flanking it, you would have seen a very odd sight. You would have observed pickets of 4 or 5 reserve constables armed with rifles holding up traffic every now and then and subjecting the passengers of buses, lorries and jeeps to a close scrutiny. They even pull out some people from the buses, and some vehicles are stopped altogether.

The police are on the look out for people going to Indravelli. On any other day of the year Indravelli is so typical of a roadside village in a tribal area—with the tribal hutments consigned to the periphery and the road flanked by the houses of Marathi and Telugu settler landowners, of an odd Revenue or Forest or 'Tribal Development' official, and most prominently the big and ugly houses of the Marwari traders with the unmistakable swastika and the best-of-both-worlds motto *shubblaabh* daubed in simulated turmeric (that is to say yellow paint) on the door-post—that you would have wondered why the police should be interested in people going to Indravelli. But 20th of April is not any other day of the year.

Four years ago that day, on 20th of April 1981, the police fired on a large gathering of tribals organised by the Girijana Rytu Coolie Sangham for a public meeting. The meeting was first permitted and then cancelled at the last minute and Section 144 Cr PC was promulgated; tribals who could not know of the prohibition and who came walking dozens of miles along forest paths were deliberately assaulted and fired upon. The exact death toll is a matter of dispute. The government maintains that only 13 persons died, and indeed only 12 names have been identified to date; but the local estimate is much higher, and a fact-finding committee of civil liberties people from Delhi and elsewhere, which included among others (and thereby hangs our tale) Manoranjan Mohanty, Professor of Political Science

at Delhi University, gave its estimate as sixty.

Since that year the Sangham has made it a habit to hold a commemoration meeting at Indravelli on that date every year. A memorial monument was built amidst continuous police threats, and confiscation of the building material. On the first anniversary the police went around and so effectively propagated their threat of 'one more Indravelli' that not a single tribal turned up at the commemoration meeting. The second year, when the memorial monument was inaugurated, was better. The police blocked roads, held up buses plying along the route and pulled out anybody who had bought a ticket to Indravelli; as evening came on, they even got the buses cancelled. But the tribals came nevertheless. The third year, the gathering was about 10,000 and was addressed among others by George Fernandez. This steadily increasing success of the commemoration meeting sets half the background to what happened this year.

GROWING STRENGTH OF TRIBAL MOVEMENT

The other half is the steadily increasing strength of the tribal movement among the Gonds of Adilabad. The Gonds are a tribe who do not fit the romantic urbanite's notion of an *adivasi*. They dress themselves in the manner of the Maratha peasants who have occupied the lands of which the Gonds have been dispossessed. At festival times they probably put on an exotic appearance but on a normal day it is not possible to catch them in anything other than a dhoti and perhaps a full-sleeved shirt. They speak Gondi, Marathi and a smattering of Telugu and Hindi. Shifting cultivation and mahua—archetypal themes in journalistic discussions of 'tribal problems'—are no longer issues of much moment with them. Shifting cultivation is confined to the hilly slopes deep inside the forest, and the mahua is an occasional tree that stands out in lonely splendour on the deforested plains, splendid by virtue of its closely packed crown and the smell, if you know to recognise it. If you talk to the Gonds today, they are more likely to complain about the small amount the Marwari *set/is* of Adilabad pay for the cotton crop. And you will believe their plaint if you visit Adilabad and look at the prosperous Mar-

waris, and—in the proper season—the heaps of bright white cotton by the roadside, which the people appropriately call 'silver mountains'.

The price of cotton, and land, of course.

Adilabad is a district where the 'Village tank', a universal phenomenon and even an institution in the rest of Telengana, is prominently absent. In the typical village of North and West Adilabad, which is the recently deforested area, there are few tanks, few irrigation wells, and no canals, notwithstanding the fact that the district is ringed on three sides by the Godavari and two of its tributaries—the Pranahita and the Penganga. Agriculture depends almost exclusively on rainfall, which increases the land-hunger further. The tribals have been robbed of the best land by the non-tribals and they are therefore continuously in search of new land. The only way they can get it is to cut down forests. They have always been doing this, ever since the Government of the Nizam of Hyderabad introduced non-tribal settlers into the district and parallelly adopted a forest policy of growing teak. But they have always had to contend with the Forest department, its corrupt officials, and Court cases. The main advantage they have gained with the formation of the Sangham is that their new-found collective strength deters the corrupt officials from their exactions.

The state, naturally, has never liked this. And it has reacted in the only way it knows: by deploying the police and giving them the licence to do what they please. Indravelli of 1981 was the first attack. In March last year there happened an incident that could easily have been one more Indravelli in miniature, and which was widely publicised in the Press. The setting was a bunch of villages—Satnala, Ibyaguda, Jamini, Mediguda, Mangurla—a few kms to the east of Adilabad town. Tribals of this area had occupied about 300 acres of forest land, and 65 acres of land illegally retained by an ex-Makhtedar. And the peasants (both tribal and non-tribal) of Toyaguda, Mangurla and Jamini were agitating for proper compensation for the 1,000 acres of land they would lose under an irrigation project on the Satnala stream. The story of this compensation is a good instance of how every welfare measure in our country is used *against* the people. The state pays compensation according to what is called the market value of the land: but since this is a notified area where no transfer of land is permitted, the only market value available is that of many years ago, of the time before the

notification. Thus, good cotton growing land worth at least Rs 25,000 per acre was paid compensation of only Rs 5,000.

In the early hours of March 10 the police raided these villages in three vans and nine jeeps, and after indiscriminate lathi charge, rounded up 60 to 70 tribals. As they put them in the vans and reached Satnala on the way back, they were surrounded by a large fathering of tribals who had come from various villages to the weekly fair at Satnala. The police lathi-charged them, fired eight rounds into the air, and compounded their catch by arresting another seventy persons. They were all thrashed mercilessly at Adilabad police station and 52 of them (including two women) were charged with assaulting and attempting to murder the police "while they were scouting the forests for a wanted naxalite". The Court, in its wisdom, refused some of them bail and they had to spend nearly a month at distant Nizamabad district jail before they could obtain bail; the others were given bail with the condition that they should stay at far-off towns like Nirmal and Bhainsa, where they would not get even the daily meals that their friends would get in jail.

Another series of assaults that took place in June-July 1984 again illustrate the cycle of proclaimed welfare and developmental measures turning against the people, and then the police being let loose on the people for harbouring naxalites. In the southern taluka of Khanapur, a major source of supplementary income to the tribals and other poor people is the collection of gum. Now, it is part of the mythology of 'Tribal Development' how the greedy private traders buy such forest produce dirt cheap from the tribals (among the more exotic stories being the exchange of a basket of tamarind for a packet of cigarettes), and how the benign state has rescued the tribals by setting up tribal co-operatives and corporations. Very few people know that these co-operatives actually pay them *less* than the greedy private traders, except that the replacement of barter of cigarettes and salt against forest produce with cash payment makes it look more civilised. The reason is that the private trader regards the forest produce procured by the tribal as the property of the tribal and pays for its value though he pays much less than the market value. The institutions of the state pay neither the real market value nor the market value less a nominal profit for the state; they do not in the first place regard the forest produce procured by the tribals as their property at all; the forest and all it contains is the property of the state, and

all that the tribal gets is a wage for procuring it, which naturally turns out to be much less than the diminished market value paid by the private trader. Speaking of Adilabad, the tribal gets only Rs five to eight per kg of gum from the tribal co-operative, whereas the private traders pay Rs 12. The 'nationalisation' of forest produce is a bigger fraud on the forest dwellers than the commercialisation of forests that began about a century and a half ago. Its purpose has never been to ensure that the forests provide a decent livelihood to the tribals, but only to take away the forests from the petty marauders and concentrate the wealth in the hands of the state to serve the interest of the principal propertied classes of the country.

The forest-dwellers themselves may not know all this but they do know who pays them more. And so a lot of 'smuggling' takes place, to which the state reacts by setting up police stations and camps and assaulting the tribals. During June-July 1984 there were repeated raids on Dharmajipet, Kadem, Dathojipet, Gangapuram and Allampalli. A large number of people were beaten, arrested and some of them were released upon payment of Rs 200 each to the SI of Khanapur; houses were pulled down, pots and utensils smashed and limbs broken. A police camp was set up for a period at Allampalli and the policemen forcibly took 20 chickens from the people of Allampalli and three goats from the people of Gangapuram.

'FREE HAND' FOR POLICE

Since March 1985 things have worsened. To N T Rama Rao, his re-election this year has apparently meant that he can behave without regard to anybody's opinions. He has quickly acted in giving the police the 'free hand' that is their fondest fancy, in dealing with the peasant movement. And this brings us to the odd sight you would have seen if you had been on the Seventh National highway on the 20th of April this year.

The police decided that prohibiting the Indravelli meeting is not the best way of assaulting the tribals. They permitted the meeting, and assaulted the people as they prepared for it. They arrested the organisers, including Ganji Rama Rao, for many years member of the State Assembly before the CPI split. They arrested him at Indravelli three days before the meeting and declared to the Press that he was arrested at far-off Asifabad while extorting donations from traders by threats. They arrested students who were carrying a plaque to be attached to the monument.

They drove back tribal groups coming to the meeting by driving jeeps into them. And unlike in the previous year they arrested even the speakers who had come to address the meeting. One of them was Manoranjan Mohanty, for whom this was to be a return visit to Indravelli where he had come with the fact-filing committee four years ago.

The jeep in which he and some others were travelling was stopped at the village of Gudihathnur where the road to Indravelli branches off from the high way. The jeep was stopped by barricading road with big stones. Their bags were taken and the contents thrown out. Where they protested, they were beaten with fists proclaimed to be 'under arrest'. The grounds of the arrest was stated to be preventive detention under Sec 151 Cr PC. After they got into the jeep they were further beaten with rifle butts. In this manner they were taken to Adilabad and the eight of them (including the jeep driver, cleaner and a friend of theirs) were thrown into a single lock-up; they were kept there till the next night without being given any food to eat, but were copiously photographed, finger-printed and interrogated. Mohanty repeatedly requested the SI to let him speak to the Superintendent of Police, for he had an air ticket to Delhi the next day where he had to attend a UGC seminar, and therefore had to get back to Hyderabad before the night. It must be presumed that the SI informed the Superintendent of Police but that gentleman was disinclined to oblige.

To their consternation and surprise the arrested persons discovered late the next night that their detention was not preventive as they had been told all along, but they were being charged (the jeep driver, cleaner and all) with having criminally intimidated the villagers of Gudihathnur by threatening to kill them if they did not go to Indravelli, and further, for good measure, for having incited them to revolt against the police and proceed to Indravelli. It was with great difficulty that they could get bail next day in the Court of the Munsif Magistrate, Adilabad. The Police Prosecuting Officer pretended to disbelieve Mohanty's claim that he was a Professor at Delhi University, and challenged him to prove it!

A few days later, when some Pressmen asked N T Rama Rao why intellectuals and academics were ill-treated in this manner, he is reported to have replied: "But why should those people encourage such activities?". There is no better epilogue for the shameful episode.