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What one can say about the plight of tribals is more and a little more of the same. There is little variety to the processes that have over the years peasantised them, proletarianised them, marginalised them, lumpenised them or merely killed them. Which of these has happened a little or much more than which other varies with the region and the tribe, but that is about all the variation in the plaints. It remains a plaint even in the instances where they have been peasantised or proletarianised rather than lumpenised or killed, for their existence as peasants or proletarians is of a much inferior kind than that which falls to the lot of less underprivileged communities. But - at least in Andhra Pradesh - while the incorporation of tribes into the agrarian economy has been going on for a very long time, and today most tribal cultivation is in technique not very different from that of the nontribal peasantry, though it is at a significantly low-cost low-yield and low-technology level, very very few of them have entered modern industry or mining as proletarians, though the coal mine belt of Andhra Pradesh runs through a tribal region, and there is quite a lot of coal-based and forest-based industry and cement units close to the tribal habitat. But - needless to add - it is the tribals that have suffered the displacement consequent upon the extension of mining and industry in the tribal areas.

What exactly has Indian economy, politics and society done to - even as it claims to have done a lot for - tribals? Perhaps a few stories will tell at least certain aspects of the truth.

I

The most unfortunate of all tribes are those that were overtaken by Capital and its State while still at a food-gathering stage. It is these communities that have got completely marginalised and rendered either destitute or criminals. These that had learnt the practice of cultivation before the onslaught of Capital could at least find a subordinate niche for themselves as a peasant community, though the commercial and industrial uses of forests - and hence their 'protection' - has interfered with their right to continue cultivation in the forests.

The Chenchus of Nallamala hills and forests of the Krishna river basin are among the less fortunate tribes dependent principally upon foodgathering (which includes hunting). Knowledge and practice of agriculture and animal husbandry have slowly percolated to them but not enough to describe them as a community of tribal peasants. Indeed, while almost all the Chenchus live in small hamlets scattered deep inside the Nallamala hills and forests, and are experts in making their habitat yield them a livelihood, yet unlike the Kondareddis of East Godavari and the Samanthas of Visakhapatnam they have indulged in very little of even shifting cultivation on the hill slopes.

But this life of foodgathering in the most beautiful forests of Andhra Pradesh has been assaulted by one after the other of the institutions of Capital and its State, not excluding wildlife preservation. That a bountiful nature can be a curse to the people who reside there is a paradox of class society that is well attested to by the fate of tribals. First the ~~the~~ Forest Department declares itself owner of all the forests - a piece of audacity no less startling if one looks at it the right way than the White people's claim that one of them discovered America (and they usually seem to mean that they actually invented it, much as our Forest Department behaves as if it has personally grown the forests); it conserves the forests for commercial and industrial use supplemented lately by the exigencies of greening this once green Earth which the very promoters of today's renewed greening rendered a naked brown; and it puts restrictions on what wood the tribals can gather to build themselves a hut or make such implements as they use, and on where they can graze ~~the~~ their goats and cattle. The possibility of clearing a patch of forest and learning to plough it and grow crops, a process that the ancestors of every one of us, every single one of us including such brahmins as claim the ancestry of the saptharshis, went through two hundred years ago, five hundred years ago, a thousand years ago or three thousand years ago, and which we now ~~the~~ deny to those left behind because in the meanwhile our consumption needs have grown to devastating proportions, is thus completely ruled out to them.

And then comes the corollary to the State's ~~the~~ proprietary right which declares that since the forests are the State's property, the gatherers of forest produce are by order prohibited from certain kinds of food gathering (such as hunting) and equally by order are required to sell what the

proprietor classifies as minor forest produce to the proprietor himself at a price decided by him, a piece of gross violation of Manmohan Singh's economics which is however still applicable to the tribals years after the Hindujas and Wadias have been liberated from it. And with every rule, every restriction, there come officers and chowkidars to implement them, and with them comes corruption and harrassment. A large part of tribal poultry and brewery has gone to servicing the government of India's proprietary right over tribal habitat.

Having thus enclosed tribals in restrictive injunctions and the rapacity of its corrupt guardians, the State indulges in what can fairly be called the pretence of tribal welfare. Having restrained severely the tribals' access to the livelihood available in their natural surroundings, and having restrained all possibility of their seeking improvement of their material conditions on their own in their own surroundings, the State gives them free schools to send their children to, partially free houses to live in, free training in making baskets or other marketable products, free seeds for those who already have land to grow new and marketable varieties of crops, and so on. Quite apart from the fact that the schools boast of fine buildings but very little schooling; that the houses may or may not ~~survive~~ survive the first monsoon downpour; that there may or may not be a market for the baskets they make and the new crops they grow unless they sell them to the State's own agencies at the price dictated by the buyer - quite apart from all such considerations, such 'tribal development' can be a good supplement to guaranteed livelihood, but to project it as an alternative to the livelihood source the tribals have been robbed of is just deceit.

And to top it all the Chenchus of Nallamala have had their habitat declared a tiger reserve, the Nagarjunasagar-Srisaïlam tiger reserve, one of the bigger in the country. While there is some controversy whether tigers have at all been conserved in the reserve, with various experts questioning the claim of increase in tiger population based on a population estimate extrapolated from a census of sampled pug marks, there is no answer to the question the Chenchus and other nontribal peasants of the forest ask: 'If you love tigers so much why don't you shift all of them to Hyderabad and declare that city a tiger reserve?'. Their problem is not that they want the tigers to become extinct. They do not exactly love tigers (for they see them free, and nobody loves a tiger unlocked, not even Maneka Gandhi), but they have in the past lived with them. Indeed they have also died with them, for they have killed tigers whenever dire necessity has arisen just as the tigers have killed them whenever they have interfered with the tigers' cattle-poaching. But their problem is that

they have to pay for tiger conservancy while nobody ~~one~~ pays for tribal conservancy. As an educated Chenchu (the only doctor in the entire community) said, there is forest conservancy and wild life conservancy but no tribal conservancy. The tiger reserve has meant official restrictions on $\frac{1}{2}$ movement inside the forests, and while the restrictions do not apply to the Chenchus who live inside the reserve, they apply to everybody else and therefore ~~must~~ restrict income-generating activity like tree-felling at the behest of licensed contractors (as well as unlicensed tree felling on smugglers' behalf in which the Chenchus indulge off and on) ~~and the Chenchus~~. The real or possible growth of ~~the~~ tiger population has also meant that the Chenchus have to be much more careful now ~~in going~~ while going into the forest to graze goats or cattle - if they have any - ~~and~~ or pick minor forest produce or hunt small prey, which are their principle sources of livelihood.

This is by way of a prologue.

The Chenchus of nine forest pentas of Kollapur taluk in Mahbubnagar district received a peremptory order this January. (A penta is what the Chenchus call their hamlets. The word means dung or animal shit in Telugu. It is unlikely that the Chenchus - though nobody seems to have asked them as yet - agree with the self-adulatory opinion of the Telugu people that ours is the sweetest tongue ~~in~~ Earth). The order said that they must leave the forest and come down to the plains and settle down ~~a~~ near the village of Malachintalapalli. Nobody among the Chenchus nor even any of the more knowledgeable people of Malachintalapalli knew why. Some thought it was part of the programme of shifting all the Chenchus out of the tiger ~~reserve~~ reserve 'for their own good' as had been attempted in the pentas of Kurnool and Prakasam districts on the other side of the Nallamala forests across the Krishna river. On the other hand the revenue officials who gave and got the order implemented said 'it was only to serve the Chenchus better'. Being in the thick forests, the revenue and tribal welfare officials found it difficult to reach the Chenchus in their pentas to implement the varied schemes they had designed for the good of the down-trodden tribes. The roads were not ~~a~~ jeepable and even if they were the officials were afraid of the tigers and the naxalites that separately roam the forests. This could have been a not very unplausible explanation, but the officials were so ~~much~~ shifty-eyed about it that a third explanation soon gained currency: that it was the police who had desired the displacement, for they suspected the Chenchus of sheltering the naxalite squads inside the forests. The speed with which the displacement was effected convinced everyone that the last was the right explanation. For a mere revenue or tribal

welfare department's order would never have got implemented that fast.

The Chenchus were not very unhappy to leave the forest for life there was not exactly a paradise, and moreover they were promised a house and some arable land per family at Malachintalapalli. In any case they had no option, and they went, about 200 families from the nine pentas. Their first disappointment came with the houses promised. They were only shown house plots and that too on marshy land. When they refused to accept those plots they were given plots on better land but without title deeds. No houses were built for them and they were asked to build on their own. Living in the open without even trees for shade they started building - and are still building - huts for themselves with borrowed, bought, scavenged or stolen material. By summer they had managed to build about 60 huts and were living three families per hut. The next disappointment in store was the promise of arable land. Not a single acre was given to them. Indeed the only they got from the government that forcibly displaced them was 25 kgs of ~~■~~ rice to live on while they built themselves a hut and found some means of livelihood. What the Chenchus did was to go back to the forest each day to continue their old vocation - collecting gum and selling it to the government's tribal cooperative corp'n. An adult can at best manage to collect half a kg of gum a day, but with the additional burden of having to walk 20 kms back and forth from their new residence, they ~~could~~ are able to collect only half as much.

Summer soon came, and with it came ~~gastro-entrititis~~ gastro-entrititis, a major killer of poor people in this State. Lack of assured drinking water forces them to search out and drink unpotable water, and the fatal infection results. As the Chenchus were new in Malachintalapalli, and as Malachintalapalli is in one of the most drought-prone taluks of one of the most drought-prone districts of not only Andhra Pradesh but the entire country, their problem was much worse. Three middle aged men and one 8 year old girl died in quick succession, which is when their forcible displacement and subsequent plight became public knowledge. An over-enthusiastic pressman reported the deaths as starvation deaths and the local officials retorted that they were only gastro-entrititis deaths, a variety of death that the government of India does not as yet feel alarmed to acknowledge ; and bit by bit the government's culpability in robbing the tribals of their livelihood became public knowledge.

II

From the Nallamala forests and hills straddling the Krishna river we move to the forests of the Godavari basin in

Adilabad district. The Gonds, the principal tribe of Adilabad, are not as helpless as the Chenchus of Nallamala. They are capable cultivators, and the old Gond kingdom headquartered at Aheri in neighbouring Maharashtra was more of a genuine kingdom than the territories ruled by Chenchu chieftains in the inaccessible hills of Nallamala.

The forest of the Godavari basin, being a predominantly teak forest, has been subjected to more systematic exploitation for commercial uses than Nallamala whose most high profile product is bamboo for the paper industry. Acres and acres of the forest consists of teak plantations maintained by the Forest Development Corporation. The coal mines running along the banks of the Godavari too have intruded substantially into the forests, all the way from Adilabad through Karimnagar and Warangal districts to Khammam district. And yet the more than 1 lakh workforce of the Singareni Collieries Company that runs the mines contains very very few tribals. While the problem caused to tribals by forest reservation is evident, there is no systematic study of what the opening up and development of the Singareni coal mines has done to the tribals of Adilabad.

But there are more recent and more localised examples. The coal belt of Adilabad and Karimnagar also contains limestone and other minerals suitable for cement production. There are a few cement factories close to the coal mines. One such factory is Orient Cement ~~Cement~~ Company at Devapur, owned by one of the many Birlas. The story of the company is typical of its genus. It occupies 4000 acres of land at Devapur, right at the edge where the coal mines give way to the still extant forest. Indeed, a few kms west of the cement company the forest is dense and hilly. What has happened to the tribals of Devapur who owned and cultivated part of the 4000 acres is that the few who had title for their land got some nominal compensation under the Land Acquisition Act, nominal because the logic of land acquisition legislation and litigation is tailored to situations where there is a recognisable market in land and land is truly a commodity - not for unirrigated tribal land in an area where legislation banning alienation of tribal land renders the formation of a market for even irrigated land impossible. Those who did not have title to their land got nothing, of course. Nor did any of them get ~~employment~~ jobs in the company. The only work the company gives the tribals is that of casual labour, and that too not as a principle of compensation but in competition with local nontribal labour.

The damage the cement factory has done goes well beyond this. Cement is a highly polluting industry. The fine white dust it spews from its chimneys not only causes bronchial problems to neighbouring people, a problem which is present even in urban areas with cement factories close by, but in rural surroundings the cement dust devastates the crops. It spreads a white coat on the green ~~l~~ leaves each time the wind blows that way and when this happens day after day the crop output is reduced sharply.

The victims of Orient Cement company's polluting cement dust are the Gond, Kolam and Nayakapu tribals of 17 hamlets sandwiched between the factory and the forest. They speak of their fate in bemused tones. They saw the factory come ~~up~~ up at Devapur and took care only to know that their lands would not be taken over. They did not aspire for jobs in the factory nor did anyone imagine they would get jobs. A few of them throng the gates ~~once~~ once in a while hoping for a day's work as a casual labourer, but that is about all. They were content to ~~watch~~ ^{watch} the factory come ~~up~~ up and tend their fields as ever. Just as their forefathers had watched the coal mines being opened up farther to the east and tended their fields. To the west was the forest, but with a host of regulations and restrictions the forest too was no longer as accessible to them as it had once been. About four years ago, in Maddimada, one of these 17 hamlets, forest officials had raided and demolished houses allegedly built with timber stolen by the tribals from the ~~forest~~ forest, and when the tribals rebelled the police opened fire and killed one tribal. But between the cement factory to the east (built on land that had once been covered by forests accessible to them) and the forests to the west (which ~~were~~ ^{were} no longer as accessible as they once were) the tribals of these 17 hamlets had land, and that they thought was securely theirs. But then the cement dust came.

It has destroyed their livelihood almost completely. Their crops such as jowar, maize, red gram and green gram yield less than half of what they normally do. In some ~~some~~ hamlets located in the path of the wind during the kharif season, which is of course the only ~~season~~ ^{season} here, the cement precipitation has been ~~much~~ much higher and the ~~yield~~ ^{yield} ~~has~~ have gone down to 25 percent of normal.

It is not as if the Orient Cement Company does not have an ESP to precipitate the cement dust and prevent it from ~~ex~~ escaping into the surroundings. But, firstly, it appears the mechanism fails frequently, almost every day, and secondly the management keeps it on only during the day. It is switched off at night because nobody is watching. Everbody then watches the early morning sight of a thin cloth of cement covering the fields

The tribals continue to cultivate the fields because, as they put it 'even if it does not yield grain for us to eat, it will be good for cattle-fodder'. They, like most tribals, must be wishing they were born in some manforsaken semi-arid region where atleast they would have escaped this intense assault on their lives by Capital and its State.

III

Rachakonda is a village of Nalgonda district, difficult of access but quite close to Hyderabad. It is as if lodged in a bed of bare hillocks and barren land. Nobody had thought this rocky tract capable of yielding a livelihood until some lambadas, a community that is simultaneously nomadic, pastoral and peasant, recognised as a scheduled tribe in this State for the last decade, and without doubt the most hardy and tough of Andhra's tribes, settled in and around the rocky tract in 31 hamlets. They dug wells wherever possible, borrowed money and got pumpsets installed, and made the periphery of the tract very fertile. The trouble with the bare boulder like hillocks that abound in Telangana is that heavy rain cascades down the sides and can damage the soil and crops around unless the streaming water is suitably channelled. But they have the advantage that lighter rain slides down more gently and sinks into the ground around the hillocks. The land around the hillocks usually has the best ground water table, a fact that the lambadas took advantage of to render the waste land fertile, ~~down~~ to the point that an acre of that land now fetches about 50 to 60 thousand rupees.

There is the snag that the lambadas do not have title deeds for the land, but they did not allow that to bother them. It meant they would have to do without bank loans and other government assistance, but the lambadas are an extremely industrious and enterprising lot. They can and do manage without institutional aid.

This little paradise was invaded by the Indian Army one day last year. That morning the lambadas saw a man in ~~Army~~ Army clothing doing what they recognised as some kind of a survey of their rock-studded habitat. He would peer through some instrument, shift position and peer through it again, and finally he left after placing an ominous looking stone in their land. Later a jeep load of such creatures came and repeated the operation on a vaster scale. And then the lambadas learnt that the army was planning to take over the Rachakonda rocks for a ~~small~~ field firing range. It was only 80 kms from Hyderabad where there is

an Army contonment, and it was barren rock-strewn land. The fact that lambada hamlets existed in and around the proposed firing range was a matter of no consequence. The Indian Army is the defender of the nation's Unity and Integrity whereas the lambadas only grow food. They could be evicted, and told to seek compensation under the Land Acquisition Act. In truth it is difficult for them to claim compensation because most of them have no title deeds for the land. And even if, as a matter of the State's munificence, they do get some nominal compensation, where do they find such land as they have practically created with their own toil?

IV

That is how tribals are living, not living, dying, dead. Such and even more pathetic tales can be told without end. Some of them suffer frequent physical violence from nontribal savarna communities. It is the plains tribes and those of the forest tribes that are caught in the plains that are most vulnerable in this regard. vizianagaram, a north-coastal district, of which the legendary old naxalite stronghold Parvatipuram is part, has ~~was~~ witnessed umpteen such assaults where tribals living in the plains have been attacked by the savarna communities, driven out of their homes, and their lands grabbed. In terms of attacks from the police it is the forest tribes that are most vulnerable for they are suspected - not baselessly - or harbouring naxalites. Since they are also accused - truly - of being in the illegal enjoyment of about 4 to 5 lakh acres of forest land with the armed support of the naxalites, the suspicion that they have naxalite sympathies should occasion little surprise.

Andhra Pradesh has a notion of a 'scheduled area' where tribals are supposed to be principally concentrated and where they are supposed to get special protection from the State. The protection consists of legislation banning transfer of tribal land to nontribals in scheduled areas as well as special development and welfare schemes in education, housing, agriculture, horticulture, crafts, etc. But the ground reality - driven by age old incursions of nontribal agriculture and trade and more recent assault of Capital and its State - has gone so awry that while 60% of the State's tribals are living outside the scheduled area, even in such a once-upon-a-time densely tribal tract as Bhadrachalam division, only 100000 of the 220000 population is tribal according to the 1991 census. And though no land transfer to nontribals is permitted in the scheduled areas and there are special courts for handing back the land illegally transferred, 55% of the ~~arable~~ cultivated land in the State's scheduled areas is held by nontribals, to which must be added the land illegally

today there is talk of watering down or doing away with even notional special protection in the matter of prohibiting land transfers, in keeping with the ruling laissez-faire philosophy. The idea has always existed as an undercurrent of official policy - and frequently expressed by incautious officials - that the forests have a higher purpose to serve than provide livelihood to tribals and that the tribals should be weaned away from dependence upon the forests and brought into the mainstram (of unemployed Indian destitutes) through schools, vocational institutes and the even simpler process of outmigration to the slums of India. The climate where this could be openly acknowledged was absent until recently but with current changes in economic policy perceptions it will be perhaps articulated openly and therefore implemented more ruthlessly.

What, then, would one be writing about tribals five years hence?