

A Tale of Arson

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In Chintapalli in Visakhapatnam district of Andhra Pradesh, the tribals' conflict today, after the statisation of forests, is directly against the state than against non-tribal outsiders. The communists have been at the forefront of the tribals' struggles against illegal exactions by forest and police officials, for better prices for minor forest produce and for higher wages for work in the Forest Development Corporation's plantations and timber depots. The Andhra Pradesh government has responded with a police campaign to systematically burn down and destroy entire tribal hamlets.

lb the officer in charge of the combing party; As the sarpanch of village Sankada has requested the Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP), Chintapalli, that villages other than those of the Konds should not be burnt down, the DSP has ordered accordingly. Hence as the DSP has ordered that villages and houses of the Bagatas and Gadabas should not be burnt down, I am informing the same to you in my capacity as SHO, Chintapalli police station.

Sd/-
Head Constable
PC No 163
Chintapalli PS

Dated
3-5-1987

THIS letter, handwritten and underlined at the right place for emphasis so that the duller policeman could follow what had been ordered, is not a moth-eaten parchment from the archives of some Mughal *kotwali*. It was actually written on the date mentioned at the end of the letter and by the gentleman who put his signature on it. If it implies a damning indictment of the police, then perhaps they do not care if they damn themselves in first person and in black and white.

Chintapalli is a Mandal headquarters town perched on the Eastern ghats in Visakhapatnam district. From Visakhapatnam you go south-west for about a hundred kms, first south along the Calcutta-Madras highway and then west along a road that lies on gradually rising land that must have been forest-covered not more than three decades ago; at the end you reach the abruptly rising ghats. At the foot of the ghats is a village named Downuru, a beautiful anglicised name for the *ur* (an old south Indian word for a village or settlement) that is down the hill. Then you climb up what is locally called the *ghati*, a motoring term that refers not so much to the Eastern ghats as to the sharp curves and turns you negotiate as

you go up the hill, and then you are in Chintapalli. The town lies in what is called the Agency area of Andhra Pradesh that extends along a semi-circular stretch from Khammam and Last Godavari through Visakhapatnam to Srikakulam districts. This stretch is shaped not so much like a crescent as a sickle with the handle broken: the eastern end (Srikakulam) is sharp and pointed but the western end (Khammam) is broad and blunt, broader than the middle. It is inhabited by tribes such as the Koyas, Konda Reddis, Bagatas, Gadabas, Savaras, Jatapus, etc This tribal tract has seen many militant uprisings in the last one hundred years, each uprising followed after its brutal suppression by some reform or the other. Following the uprisings of 1879-80 and 1915-16, the first led by a tribal, Tammanna Dora, and the second by nobody in particular, the Britishers in a fit of paternalism demarcated these forest tracts as an 'Agency area', "inhabited by simple and ignorant people, who by reason of their ignorance and excitable temperament need handling with tact and sympathy. ... and require to be sheltered from the subtleties of the Law and the wiles of the more civilised traders and lawyers of the plains". That the Law and the lawyers, and even the traders in their specific contemporary form, were the creatures of the self-same British rule appears to have escaped the notice of I his hindsightful benevolence. After the next major uprising in 1922-24, whose leader Alluri Seetarama Raju is much better known than the earlier tribal leaders and has even rather dubiously been converted into a folk hero of NTR's variety of Telugu nationalism, no doubt because he was a non-tribal and in fact belonged to the dominant agricultural caste of the Godavari districts, the entire agency area

acquired better communications, in particular metalled and tarred roads. Today motoring through the agency can be a pleasure if you have a decent vehicle And after the next major uprising, the Srikakulam revolt led by the CPI(ML), the hated *Muttadari* system, through which tribal chiefs were converted into revenue farmers, with all the *abwab* and *nazrana* 'rights' that *de facto* go with it, was abolished in 1971. Simultaneously, Tribal Co-operative Corporations were set up to protect the tribals from the private traders; henceforth, tribals would sell the minor forest produce they collected only to the corporation and could buy their consumption requirements at the same place.

But one major cause of discontent—the reservation of forests for plantations, restriction on shifting (*podu*) cultivation, and generally speaking the conversion of the forests from natural wealth to state property—has not only not been alleviated, it has actually been increasing apace. In reality, all the 'reform' amount essentially to that, whatever the rhetoric The forests used to be natural wealth, nobody's private property, and the relations that various sections and classes of the people entered into with this natural wealth in the process of appropriating it, and the relations they entered into with each other in the course of the appropriation, determined its political economy. There were the tribals who lived in, on and with the forests; there were the land-grabbing non-tribals who occupied land cleared by the tribals, converted some of them into labourers and pushed the rest farther up the hills; and there were the traders who bought up forest produce dirt cheap from the tribals and sold them plains' produce—salt, clothes and drugs—at heavily inflated prices. Ever since the Britishers came this situation has been slowly changing, first through superimposition of the state's administrative authority and superior (revenue) right over the forests, aided by the formal conversion of forest wealth into state property, and culminating in the actual direct appropriation of that wealth by the state in the interests of the principal classes—native and foreign monopolists—whose raw material requirements are managed by the state. It does no damage to the argument that the conversion has been effected through paternalistic measures—demarcation of agency areas, restriction on private trade, legislation against tribal land alienation, setting up of tribal corporations and lately social forestry—purportedly intended to save the tribals

and ecology; it was mostly the tribals that were saved in the beginning and now it is the ecology that is being saved. Protecting the tribal from the land-grabbing non-tribal and the greedy trader actually meant protecting the forest from these predators; and that done, the forest is now being protected from the tribals themselves. Land which is cleared by the tribals for—shifting or settled—cultivation, which plains-people would have grabbed earlier, is now grabbed by a general proclamation of reservation by the forest department, and if the tribals still wish to live there they can grow eucalyptus trees under a social forestry scheme on the land on which they grew jowar or ragi earlier; if they choose not to, they can carry headloads in Kakinada, pull a rickshaw in Rajahmundry, or, if they have acquired by contact some of the dishonesty of civilised people, they can peddle ugly looking tubers as Ayurvedic cure-alls.

It may appear that this statisation of the forests has affected the non-tribal landlords and traders as much as the tribals; but that is not altogether true. The landlords cannot grab much land now—unless they are of the category of state or central ministers and can get some land deserved and recorded in the name of their tribal henchmen—but all the land that was grabbed in the past is intact with them. As for the traders, they thrive on the illegal trade in minor forest produce that goes on behind the back of the official corporations, abetted by the very same tribals, the purported beneficiaries of those bodies, who nevertheless prefer to sell on the sly to private traders, since for all their greed the traders pay more than the Tribal Corporation. The reason for this seemingly senseless paradox is that the trader pays for the forest produce, even if at a highly devalued rate, whereas the corporation pays, not for the produce, but only for its picking. The one is a price and the other is a wage.

Thus the tribals' conflict today is much more directly against the state than against non-tribal 'outsiders'. It is the state that restricts their right of cultivation, it is the state that evicts them, arrests them and jails them if they cultivate forest land, it is the state that manages the procurement and sale of forest produce, it is the state that monopolises the felling and auctioning of limber, and it is the state that reserves the sole right to reserve or dereserve any bit of forest land. The non-tribals are there—landlords, contractors and traders—but today they are either the creatures of the state of secondary to it as oppressors of the tribals.

the traditional inhabitants of the Chintapalli forest are the Bagata and Valmiki tribes. They have mostly taken to settled

cultivation on one-crop unirrigated land, growing paddy or *chollu* (better known as *ragi*), a coarse grain. Most of them either have pattas for their land or when that is not so, the prudence and opportunity that allowed them to confine themselves to what is called revenue land—as distinct from forest land—helps them avoid the risk of eviction. Other than cultivation of foodgrains, some of them have groves of mango, banana and jack fruit, which grow plentifully in these forests. Coffee plantations are also catching on as a habit, aided by state encouragement. Among the two tribes the Bagatas are almost exclusively peasants whereas the Valmikis have a smattering of learning and undertake some petty trade in addition to cultivation. In popular perception the former are 'innocent' and the latter 'lazy' and 'corrupt'.

But our subject is neither of these tribes but a third which does not in fact exist here as far as the state's administration is concerned. Bureaucracy follows its own principles of epistemology and acquires knowledge through means other than the five senses. The tribe thereby rendered non-existent are the Samantas, whose original homeland appears to have been Koraput district of Orissa. They have been migrating steadily from there into Andhra forests, partly due to displacement by Hydel projects but mainly as part of the continuous search for fresh land that defines the life style of shifting cultivators. The migration started in the fifties and by now their number in the Visakhapatnam forests is estimated as close to one lakh.

These people are about as primitive and unassimilated as can be. Conversion of wandering tribes into peasant settlers has generally meant four changes in our history: the tribals give up shifting cultivation and food gathering for settled plough agriculture; they forget their language and adopt the language of the neighbouring peasants; they give up their food and dress habits and imitate the habits of the same peasants; and they augment their mythology with amazingly absurd, tortuous and often unseemly tales whose total effect is to give the tribe an identity within Hindu society—it is a caste identity in the most perfectly assimilated case—and their gods and goddesses a place, however minor and ridiculous, in the Hindu gallery of deities. The Bagatas and most of the Koyas, among the Godavari and Eastern Ghat tribes, have gone through the whole transformation. The Samantas, however, have remained unassimilated in all these senses. They doggedly refuse to give up *podu* cultivation, they speak their own language and very little of either Oriya or Telegu, their gods remain their own, and even in the matter of dress and food habits they have only recently begun to change,

and only a little at that. While earlier their method of cooking was to make a *khichri* of every thing available, they have now learnt to cook the staple cereal and the dal or vegetable separately. And though the men continue to wear only a loin cloth, the women now wear a sari instead of their traditional dress of one piece of cloth across the waist and another across the shoulders. Oddly enough, the agents of this much of change are not proper Hindu peasants but the relatively better assimilated Bagatas, who have been trying to convert the Samantas to civilisation, with all the zeal of new converts; and even more oddly the zeal is a consequence of the reformatory urge given to the Bagatas by the Communist Party of India, which has always had a good following among them. The CPI, in fact, won the Chintapalli Mandal President's post in the recent panchayat elections. It is the CPPs Bagata cadre and followers who are the most genuinely distressed at the Samantas' unwillingness to take to civilised ways of living.

However, in spite of this palpable backwardness, the Samantas are not recognised as a tribe in AP. The reason given by officials to a delegation that represented the matter in 1978 was that they are an 'Oriya tribe' and are not native to Andhra and are therefore not listed among the tribes of AP. (So much, by the way, for 'national integration'!) A kindly commissioner of tribal welfare, however, advised them to call themselves Konds instead of Samantas and thereby get recognition. This they have readily done but they are yet to get the promised recognition, and so we have this absurd paradox that the most backward tribe in the state is not a tribe for its bureaucracy. It may be thought that this makes little difference, since the 'welfare' that the recognised tribes are entitled to includes most things under the sun excepting the one thing they need—land. The commissioner of tribal welfare, the department of social welfare and special agencies like ITDA have no control over the reservation and dereservation of forest land, nor the use that the reserved forests are put to. That is certainly so, but one subtlety involved is that not being a tribe, the Samantas are not entitled to pattas even where, by accident more than design, the land they have occupied is the revenue banjar inside a gram panchayat and not forest land—an eventuality that frequently occurs with the haphazard delimitation of forest land.

Anyway, the Konds (as we shall call the Samantas hereafter) are blissfully unaware of all these subtleties; the only thing they know is that when they cut down and burn forests—and the clean shave they Rive the hills is a sight to watch—they are liable to be arrested and charged with a crime. What really happens is not this, of

course. What happens is that with the threat of charging them with a crime the forest and police officials collect regular bribes—in cash and kind—from them. Each hamlet is visited once in a while by these men in khakhi and the tribals give them a good meal of rice and chicken, and send them away with a gift of some cash. Ever since the abolition of Muttadari, the fight against these exactions, the fight for better price for minor forest produce and the fight for better wages for work in the Forest Development Corporation's plantations and timber depots, have been the main struggles of the tribals. The communists have always been at the forefront of these struggles, and in recent years the Kond shifting cultivators in particular have received much support from the armed squads of the CPI(ML) groups, as a consequence of which the exactions of the forest and police officials have decreased considerably.

Since the Konds are the major beneficiaries of the naxalites' presence in the forests, the state's drive to get rid of the naxalites has naturally turned its attention on to the Konds. They are frequently arrested on various criminal charges and sent to jail, the substance of the charge being that they are harbouring naxalites. Such arrests apparently have not had the required effect, for the police decided on more drastic action: burn down tribal hamlets to teach them not to harbour naxalites. This strategy, which was tried long ago in Srikakulam and is being resurrected now, is not peculiar to Visakhapatnam. It is part of a conscious strategy being pursued by the Telugu Desam government for the last three years. Sympathisers and activists of the CPI(ML) groups have had their fields and household properly destroyed and damaged ever since the start of the movement, but for the last three years there has been a definite policy to systematically raze the houses of persons suspected of harbouring naxalite activists. In the forests, whole hamlets are burnt down, for the undifferentiated tribal communities are either wholly or not at all sympathisers of the CPI(ML) groups; and in the class-differentiated plains, houses of individual sympathisers belonging to poor and landless peasant classes are picked out and smashed to bits—wall, roof, thatching, tiles and all—with a brutal thoroughness, so that not a bit of the rubble left behind can be used for reconstructing the house again. To my knowledge this tactic was first employed in the summer of 1984, in Huzurabad taluk of Karimnagar district, when about 36 houses in 8 villages were pulled down in search of stolen rifle and has today achieved a tally of about 400 houses destroyed in the plains of Karimnagar district, plus scores of tribal

hamlets burnt down—of the Gonds in Adilabad, the Koyas in east Godavari and now the Konds in Visakhapatnam.

The burnings in Visakhapatnam started one by one in the month of March. But it was on May 2 and 3 that a large number of hamlets were burnt down in a single operation almost resembling a planned military action. A police party of about 20 to 30 armed men, led by sub-inspector of police Ammi Naidu of Chintapalli police station, perpetrated the arson. This gentleman must certainly have fancied himself a film star, the way he set about the job. The hamlets he burnt down during these two days lie along a valley between two high hills. He started at one end of the valley on the first day and went along burning hamlet after hamlet until he reached the other end of the valley the next evening. The theatricity of his brutality was exhibited in one hamlet (Tentala Veedhi) where the Kond headman pleaded for half an hour's time to at least save the grain and livestock from the houses; the SI slapped him repeatedly across the face, took out a matchbox from the headman's own pocket, first set his hut on fire and then burnt down the rest of the hamlet. He certainly must have modelled himself after the more melodramatic of the film villains.

46 hamlets, with a total of 638 houses, have been burnt down till now. Thousands of fowl, thousands of bags of grain, thousands of rupees in currency notes kept hidden for security in the grain bags and many cattle and goats have perished. At the hamlet of Tiyyamamidi, a man who tried to save his grain got burnt and died. The arson would perhaps have continued for some more days if the SI had not, in his intoxication, burnt down a Bagata hamlet by mistake. This hamlet, Chittamamidi, with 41 houses, populated mainly by the Bagatas (as well as some households of Gadabas, a minor tribe) was completely burnt down though the

residents were not *podu* cultivators but settled peasants with recorded rights for their holdings. The news of this burning reached Veeranna Padal, sarpanch of village Sankada, himself a Bagata, an ex-CPI cardholder, and a genuinely public spirited man. He complained to the DSP, Chintapalli, and it was in reaction to his complaint that written instructions—the letter quoted in the beginning—were issued to the combing party in-charge not to burn down Bagata and Gadaba hamlets—implying by default that Kond hamlets should be burnt down. The sarpanch, however, did not rest after achieving this protection for his own community; he took up the matter with the sub-collector, ITDA, the collector, Visakhapatnam, and also to the Press. It was only after the Press published photographs of the holocaust that the arson stopped.

Much later, like doves of peace descending upon a battle field after the vultures have consumed the dead, the bureaucrats of India's welfare state arrive at Chintapalli. The principal secretary, social welfare, the commissioner, tribal welfare and lesser minions reach there in droves and distribute measly alms to the tribals, as if it was a natural calamity and not the policemen of their own government that had destroyed the tribals' houses, grain and livestock. Indeed, even as they are shedding tears (genuine, let us grant) over the tribals' plight, the director general of police goes round the state meeting pressmen everywhere to justify the arson, abuse the press for 'playing it up' and offer civil liberties people the challenge of a 'public debate'. And all the while the *sutradhari* of the drama, the chief minister of the state, is busy peddling his image as the symbol of democracy, helping Devi Lal win Haryana and confabulating with EMS Namboodiripad on the presidential elections. All of which makes good material for a farce, if one has the stomach for farces of this kind.

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