

# Chintapalli Again

## One Eventful Day in a Lawless Life

K Balagopal

*The Indian People's Human Rights Tribunal is holding an inquiry into the burning, allegedly by the police, of 46 tribal hamlets consisting of 638 houses in the Chintapalli Agency area of Visakhapatnam district. The first sitting of the Tribunal began in Visakhapatnam on December 11, 1987. Tribal victims of the arson had come from Chintapalli to depose. But hardly two hours after the start of the inquiry a mob organised by the police stormed the hall and assaulted the deponents.*

HE is a tribal youth. Perhaps he does not look like the image of a tribal one holds from hearsay, for his generation has learnt to give themselves haircuts and put on stitched shirts, but he is a tribal nevertheless. He lives deep inside a forest that must have been very thick once upon a time. Now, though, it is no longer very dense. The bald patches where he and his people have cut and burnt down the trees stare out from the sloping hill-sides, a pale yellow and brown quilt of harvested fields in the thick green jungle. But these patches are not all. There has also been a general thinning of the forest; a tree here and a tree there have disappeared casually, sold by the government or stolen by the smugglers. He knows that it is he and his people who are blamed by the government for the demise of the forest and is bitter about it. The officials tell them so whenever they visit their hamlets. He probably does not know that there are some other people who defend him and his shifting cultivation; if he knew, he probably would not comprehend. No, it is not the defence but the defenders he would find incomprehensible; their arguments he would understand, but *them* he would not.

For in his world, in the world as he knows it, he cannot place them. He knows his kind, his tribe and other tribes, both the ones that do *podu* cultivation like him in the reserve forest and the luckier ones who have survey numbers for their fields, if not *par* (as the miracle of miracles) and revenue receipts. He knows the traders, the ones who sell fancy stuff at the shanties as well as the more prosperous ones who come into the forest after harvest time and buy up their grain, bean-seed and oil-seed. He knows them quite well now indeed, though there was a time when he knew little, about them and got cheated easily. Not that he is not cheated now, but he *does* know them. Perhaps he vaguely understands that getting cheated by them is not a consequence of ignorance but of 'the way things are. He also knows the category of people whom he identifies by

the generic term Officers'. Some of them he is able to specify as forest or revenue officers. They abuse him and order him around but they do not beat him, and he knows how to fold his hands obsequiously in their presence and nod his head in intelligent ignorance when they tell him what is wrong with his behaviour. But some of them are corrupt and extortionate and of them he is wary. He knows the policemen too, who not only abuse but beat him and steal money and food, especially fat hens. Them he knows to avoid, if he has prior intimation. If he does not, then he is done for, and he knows that too. There is the third type of 'officer' whom he cannot yet name clearly but can identify; he does not abuse or beat and talks as if he is concerned about your well-being; he talks about schooling for children, medicines for the sick and loans for buying goats and cattle. With him he opens out a little, but there is a barrier-learned from experience—that he does not cross. He tells of his woes, of the rains that have failed, the traders who cheat (this is a sure hit with the 'officers' and he knows that from experience), of the waywardness of the RTC buses, of the medicines that are never there in the hospital, and so on. But land—land that gives food and life—ah! at that point he stops. If he talks of land and of *'partus* for the land he and his people have created—yes, *created*, not just tilled—with their hands, that very moment the smile of concern on that amiable face freezes into a scowl and he knows he has trespassed. The first time he saw that change it was with a shock of incomprehension that he shut up. Now he knows better.

This is the world he knows. The only enigmatic character he has met in this world till now is that 'officer—as he calls him too for want of a better word—who keeps a medicine shop in the shanty. Selling medicines is all right, that he understands. The man is known to be honest and that too he understands. What he does not fully understand is the odd way this 'officer' sometimes behaves, like when

a tiger from beyond Sileru slipped into their valley the summer before the last. There was a bad drought that time and the tiger was moving from one dried up *gedda* to another in search of water. Maybe it found the water, maybe it did not, but it ate up a lot of cattle, and there was even a rumour that at some unspecified village beyond Koyyuru, it had eaten a boy. This man came then and said he wanted to know where and how the tiger came, whose cattle it had eaten and which way it went. He was quite meticulous in his curiosity. They told him eagerly, hoping he would track it down and kill it. But no, he just wrote and wrote on a piece of paper, and clicked photos of half-eaten carcasses, of cattle. This he could not understand. The children wanted to get into the photos but he shoo-ed them away. Though, he said, if there was a child that had been eaten by the tiger he would photograph it. It was much later that they learnt that all they had said had been printed in a paper that learned men like the sarpanches of the shanty towns read. The tiger, meanwhile, went away with the summer.'

This incomprehensible man turned up again this summer. That was a bad time, this summer, when the police burnt down all their hamlets. Yes, they burnt down all of them. It was on a Thursday and the Friday following it. Many people have asked him which is the date, the month and the year, but he only knows it began on a Thursday and ended on a Friday. The police came to his hamlet first, he is even a little proud of that. They set it on fire and then went on setting hamlet after hamlet on fire.

That time this odd man came again and took photographs. He put them all in his paper. He wrote well, one was told, of Sindari Gasi, that lean and foolhardy Kondh, who died trying to take out all the grain from his house. That was at Tiyyamamidi, high up on the other side of that hill behind which the sun sinks in winter. The papers, he was told, had written that Gasi got burnt to death. That is not true. No grown up person can burn to death in the open, these papers are fools. It was the smoke that killed him. It choked him and as he ran out of the hut he hit a boulder and fell down. More smoke choked him and he died. His neighbours ran to the retreating policemen and told them that a man had died in the fire and they replied: "Burn the corpse, what do you expect us to do?" Now Gasi's wife and the kids get much sympathy but to ask an honest question, who told him to try to save all the grain? There were others who lost bags and bags of paddy, jowar, rape-seed, bean-seed, ragi, whole tin boxes of saris and dhotis, and hundreds of rupees in currency notes kept hidden in the tin trunks. They were wise not to risk their lives..

Well, they wrote all this in the papers and printed the photographs. And then big 'officers' came from a place they called Hyderabad. No, he does not know where Hyderabad is but he knows it is somewhere far beyond Visakhapatnam where the collector lives, and can be reached only by a helicopter, or so he was told at the shanty. The collector himself behaved obsequiously with these officers, so they must have been really big people. They were sympathetic and they said that houses would be built for the victims and that they would get compensation, money as well as grain. Well, it is a sin to tell a lie, and so he will admit that they did get some compensation. They got just 1 bag of rice (just one bag, in return for the dozens burnt), 1 sari and 1 dhoti (just one pair, in return for the tin trunks full of clothes burnt) and they got 250 rupees in cash.

And the houses! The government has sanctioned them tiled houses that are to be built wherever there is some vacant *banjar*. His own hamlet got a colony half an hour's walk away from the burnt one. It is near the road, that is a mercy, but it is so far from his lands, so very far. But he dare not say that to the officers because they are not his lands in the first place.

One thing he did not understand that day and does not understand to this day. Those officers who came that day were obviously very big men. The collector himself held the car door open for them. The policemen too stayed back way behind the officers, at a respectful distance. And, too, the big officers were so sympathetic and so angry. But why did they not chide the policemen, why did they not warn the policemen in public not to do such things again? In public, in public, they should have chided them so that all his people could hear. Why did they not put it down in writing and give a copy to him and his people that the innocent tribals are not to be harassed ever again by the police? True, they had said it would not happen again; they had said so to his people privately and orally, but he knew by now that oral commitments made by officers are not worth the breeze they ruffle. It has got to be in writing: that much about civilisation he too understood. When the policemen came a month later to his hamlet, beat people and demanded food, his father, a stupid old man, had said: "that officer from Hyderabad said you would not do this again" The policemen had laughed in his face and said: "Where is the order? Is it written down with a GO number and all that? Go get the order, you bastard, and we will spare you" And for his pains his father had had to give up his fattest hen, the one that was laying eggs daily.

No, they had given nothing in writing, and that had surprised him. It continued to surprise him. That such big officers from Hyderabad could not stop the sub-inspector of Chintapalli, now that is something "he could not comprehend

about civilised people and their ways.

There was another thing he could not comprehend, and that was about the houses the government gave them. It was a half and half commitment. The government would give the tiles and rafters and the people were told to put up the walls and lay the floor. Well, of course, that would cost 600 or 800 rupees and they did not have the money. Whatever money they had had got burnt anyway, and there was no grain to be sold because that too had got burnt. In truth, there was none left even for seed. The government, meanwhile, came and put up four pillars and tiles on the top. And his people had shifted into these 'houses'. It is winter now and the forests are cold at night, but they are living under the bright red tiles, with all four sides naked to the the wind. This was another thing about the government he could not understand. Instead of giving 1 bag of rice, 1 sari, 1 dhoti and half a house, maybe it could give a full house?

Anyway these 'officers' left after a couple of days. He had thought that was the end of it and soon perhaps things would return to normal. Indeed everything seemed to have become quiet until another set of rather strange 'officers' came one day. They came in a car along the main road, but they got off the car at forest tracks and walked deep inside. They spent a lot of time at each hamlet and asked a lot of questions. When was your house burnt, who burnt it, what did they say while burning it, how much got burnt with the house—they wanted to know all this. They were particularly interested in knowing whether the police had accused his people of harbouring naxalites while burning the houses. The police had said so, of course, and he had found it a relief to be able to tell that to these 'officers' without hushing up.

And they were kind and sympathetic. More kind and sympathetic than the big officers from Hyderabad, and more forthright too. They did not just tolerate his people criticising the government, they were themselves quite critical about it. They were the first ones who said it was not wrong to cut down the forests, that the government cannot do whatever it pleases, that it cannot burn down their houses even if they have cut the forest or given shelter to naxalites. It was, he later realised after many days of reflection, the first time that anyone had told them they need feel no guilt for leading an unlawful existence. Some of his people could not quite comprehend how these officers could criticise the other officers so vocally. But the others, especially the younger ones, became bold and said many things. His younger brother—he remembered this well—actually said that this is a government that makes rich people richer and the poor poorer. The fool actually said so, not realising that the 'officers' would immediately understand that he had spoken to the naxalites. He had remonstrated to his brother there and then, aloud and in

their Kondh tongue; mercifully, these Telugu people do not understand it—the Oriya officers of Koraput where his father spent his childhood might have understood a little, at least that he was calling the lad a fool.

It had been nice, those two days. And those officers, while leaving, gave a promise that led to further trouble many months later, this winter. They promised that they would get an inquiry done into the burning of their houses and the people should all come and tell everything, "Everyone?", he had asked, "Yes, everyone<sup>11</sup>", they said. Because each must tell how much exactly was burnt in their house, down to the last grain of millet. That is what they said and the way they said it, he had been sure it would be a bigger officer than the collector that would do the inquiry.

All of his people wanted to go to the inquiry, of course. Some of them really thought they would get back the grain and the clothes that were burnt. He himself did not think so, but the relief from the burden of illegality was some thing he too felt. It was three decades ago that his father and mother had brought their children from the Koraput forests of Orissa to the Andhra forests. They had first come to Araku and Ananlagiri, then to Paderu, and finally in his time to Chintapalli. All along he had been told: who asked you to come here, go back where you came from. That was the first guilt, the original illegality. In the fields, sowing the land and harvesting it, they had been told: this is reserve forest, it belongs to the government, and your labour is illegal. Their *labour* they said was illegal, because what they laboured upon they did not own. That was the next guilt, the derived illegality. And in the house, eating the food they had sown and harvested and cooked, he and his wife and his children were told, this plot too does not belong to you, it belongs to the government, your residence *here* is illegal. Their *existence* was illegal, and yet they were not criminals.

He had learnt in these three decades what this illegality can do to you. You never talk, except in your tongue and to your people. With others you do not talk, you supplicate. You never trust, excepting your people; others you look upon with perpetual distrust. You never deal on equal terms, on terms of equal respect, except with your people; with others you give obsequies and take abuse. To have lived this life, to have watched one's children grow into this life, was a pain that he and his kind had come to know. And now these 'officers' had come along and said, don't feel guilty, come and tell at the inquiry, justice will be done.

And so they had all waited; at the beginning of winter, when the mountain fog was just beginning to sit heavy on the darkness melting at dawn, they came again. The inquiry, they said, was due to begin and he and his people should give signed statements telling who burnt the

houses, how they were burnt and how much was burnt. They went from hamlet to hamlet collecting the statements; he gave his and so did all his people. The strange officers wrote down the statements in a neat hand that fascinated him, for there was a secret craving for learning what he had hid inside himself. Come to the inquiry, they said. Come to the Chintapalli shanty next Wednesday and a bus will take you to Visakhapatnam, they said. He had decided to go.

No, he was not a fool. He had understood, as few of his people had, that these officers were somehow different people. They were as much enemies of the other officers as he and his people were. At the back of his mind was the half-thought that perhaps it was not very safe to talk to these people, or to go to their inquiry. And yet he had decided to go, because unlike everybody else, they had not said a single word in abuse, had not uttered a single angry phrase at him and his people.

In the beginning, to be truthful, he *did* have a slight hope that maybe his premonitions were wrong, maybe it was safe to give statements to these people; but the hope was belied the very next day. It was turning dark and cold, and all the eleven families of his hamlet sat huddled around a fire lit with wood stolen from the forest. Suddenly the twigs rustled and ten policemen were in their midst. Some were dressed in uniform and carried the long and heavy rifles that had become a familiar sight to them; but two or three of them were without uniform and carried these ugly new guns that made one shudder just to look. Since it is a sin to tell a lie he would not say they beat anybody. But it surprised him now to realise that it took him an effort to recall that they did not beat anybody; his memory of that evening, maybe because of the sick feeling that the confirmation of an evil premonition leaves in your stomach, smelt of violence. But the policemen did abuse them and demanded a meal of chicken and rice, and four hens, fat healthy hens, were killed and cooked that evening. The policemen ate the meal and said, "don't you go to Visakhapatnam for the inquiry; these inquiries will come to nothing, and we and you have to live here forever". While leaving, they had made things even clearer: "if you go to the inquiry we will break your limbs and burn your houses once again".

But nevertheless the next Wednesday found them all at the Chintapalli shanty, dressed and ready to go to Visakhapatnam for the inquiry. They had been told that a bus, a hired bus, would be there but it was not there. They had been told it would be there by noon but it did not come till half past two. Meanwhile the policemen took them aside one by one and threatened to break their limbs and burn their houses once again if they did not go back immediately. The 'officers' who had arranged the inquiry then took them by public transport through a devious route

and by night they were in Visakhapatnam.

There were 58 of them. It was quite a crowd and they felt cosy and safe that night, safe in a *choultry* in the belly of a big town ablaze with neon lights and mercury lamps. The 'officers' fed them at a hotel and said they would come the next morning and coach them how to talk at the inquiry. It was in fact he who had insisted on that. He knew his people, dump unlettered fools who would get everything mixed up at the first harsh question. Talk to them nicely, talk to them in their tongue, and they would tell endless fibs and yarns, but bark at them in Telugu as the officers do (not these friendly officers, but the other ones) and their thoughts get stuck in the throat as if they are made of wild gun. And, too, he had some notion what it would be like at the inquiry. Once—three, no four years ago—the forest officers had booked him for cultivating in reserve forest and he had been through a trial that lasted quite a few days. Now, not to be unduly modest, he was a courageous sort, but he could never forget the fright that all those men in black barking at him in Telugu had caused. And before he knew—he, who spoke Telugu almost as well as the much-learned sarpanch of Pedavalasa—he had got his statement mixed up and the magistrate shouted at him and sent him to jail. He had narrated this to the nice officer and said, coach these fools or else we will all be in jail. He had laughed and said, this is not that kind of an inquiry, these judges are nice old people who will not shout at you, and anyway they will talk in English and I will be there to help you out in Telugu. Nevertheless, he had promised to come the second day and coach them.

But in the morning, well before he came, trouble started. The police knew they were all there. They waited at the street corner in jeep and picked up two of his people when they went out to smoke beedies. They were taken, they said later, to nobody less than the superintendent of police, and that man ordered them: "you pack up and leave. We stopped the bus those civil liberties fellows arranged for you, he said, and now we will fix up a nice bus that nobody can stop and we will put you all back at Chintapalli. Go get all your people and come, I am being polite, but if you don't all go back you fellows will have your limbs broken and your houses burnt again."

Saying this, the SP released the two, who came back and conveyed the threat to the rest of the people. They were furious, and that had surprised him. He himself felt slightly sick with fear but these dumb idiots were furious. They jumped on the two messengers. Who asked you to go out for beedies, they shouted at them. You have chickened out, they said, go lick the policemen's boots, but we will not come. They were dumb, the idiots, but he felt proud of them.

Meanwhile the nice officer and his friends came and told everybody not to

mind the threats. We will be with you, they said, and so long as we are with you nobody is going to touch you. They were good as their word, and the two messengers went back to the policemen to report their failure. Nothing daunted, the police sent them again and again that day and they came, pale with fear, carrying the threat with them. And one by one a few of his people had slipped out but a large chunk of them stood fast. And thus the police were frustrated that day. Why they did not just raid the *choultry* and arrest all of them, he could not say. That was one of those devious things that he could never understand about these civilised people. Why did the policemen talk abusively about these nice officers behind the back—they referred to them as those 'civil liberties bastards'—and yet why did they hesitate to arrest them, why did they invariably withdraw hastily from the *choultry's* gate as soon as these people appeared at the door, these were enigmas he could not unravel.

The next day was the day of the inquiry. He and the rest of his people, 46 in total, trooped across the sprawling town to where the hearing was being held. It was a hall in a huge campus—they called it a university—a big hall, with glass windows and lots of chairs. Outside, across the main door, was a banner with dark blue lettering on white cloth. It said, he was told, 'Indian People's Human Rights Tribunal, Inquiry into the Chintapalli Arson Case'. Inside the hall he felt safer than he ever had since the previous morning. They all sat on long and soft sofas, racing them, at the other end of the hall, sat the two judges with a mike in front. One look at the judges, and he felt reassured. They were a nice pair, a man and a woman, with aged and benign faces, and he felt sure they would not bark at him, nor send him to jail, if he faltered.

The inquiry began. They were called one by one and asked to stand before another mike and answer questions. The first witness just went numb with fear. He would either shout hopelessly loud into the mike and create a racket or else he would withdraw and mumble. But soon they got accustomed to the procedure and the contraption, and when his own turn came he stood straight and firm and answered all the questions without falter

### Economic and Political Weekly

Available from

Brij Bhusand Prasad  
Sri Saraswati Pustakalaya  
New Colony, Balooghat  
Nazipur, Muzaffarpur 842 001  
Bihar.

News Centre  
Newspaper Agent  
Ice factory Road  
Cuttack  
Orissa - 753 003.

irig. His hamlet was such and such, it had eleven houses, and they were all of the Kondh tribe. The police came on a Thursday—the month? he did not know, but the year was the current one—they came, he repeated, on a Thursday at dusk and had burnt down all the eleven houses. Had they said anything? Yes, they had said "you fellows are harbouring naxalites and giving them food"; they had said "you do not belong here, go back to Orissa where you came from"; they had said "you pull down and destroy your houses or we will burn them". And burn them they did. What had he lost? The house, of course. And it was not just any house. It was a house with a newly made door-frame. He did not add that it had teakwood rafters because the wood had been stolen from the forest and he was not fool enough to say so. Did anything get burnt with the house? Yes, of course. The policemen had given them hardly five minutes to clear out. In the house there were bags and bags of paddy, jowar, ragi... how many bags? Well, five bags of paddy that would have fetched 600 rupees at least, ten bags of jowar that would have fetched 1,000 rupees, three bags of ragi that would have fetched another 300 rupees, three bags of bean-seed that would have fetched, well, 1,200 to 1,500 rupees, a tin trunk full of saris and men's clothes, 400 rupees in currency kept in the trunk...

He was reciting the loss when it happened. And he felt sick with all his suppressed premonitions when it happened. A mob of men and women, with the women in front, came into the hall shouting at the top of their voices. He could not make out what they were shouting but they were obviously no friends. He stopped short in his recital, his legs shaking and his voice numb with fear. The organisers of the inquiry started arguing with the women but he had eyes only for the men behind. They wore no uniform but there was no mistaking them. There was no mistaking the short crop, the close shave, the leathery face and above all the eyes, yes the eyes, the most beautiful part of a human face, yet so ugly in these cruel men. From the first time he had ever seen a policeman, the hard eyes rimmed red with drink had always marked them out for him.

They came in behind the women. They made no attempt to argue with anyone. They just picked up the steel chairs in the last row, folded them, and made straight for his people. They beat them with the chairs, not straight down on the head, that would have split the skull, but across the body, as if they were slapping them with the chairs. His petrified feet trembled as his people picked up theirs and ran. The last one running out of the door shook him out of his stupor and he too ran out.

Well, that was how it ended, and what remained was a nightmare. The policemen kept a tight vigil on them that evening and night. He had suffered alternate pangs of fear, remorse and anger. Fear that they

may not get back home safe, remorse for having foolishly come, and anger, sudden bursts of anger, at the perfidy of it, at the unnamable injustice that would first burn their houses and then prevent them from telling about it; and anger too for the sake of these nice people, for the two nice old judges who were obviously as scared as they, anger for their sake, that they had taken so much trouble in vain just to give these wretched creatures of the jungles a hearing on their sufferings.

They had got up early the next morning, three hours before the sun, and had taken a bus back to Chintapalli. And now he stood at the edge of the forest path that would lead to his hamlet. He thought of his people who would be waiting for him

## *Her Solution*

**Badal Mukherji'**

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*She had worked out the one sure way to get even with the sordid man's world around her in which a day labourer earning at most Rs 25 a day spends Rs 7 or more on booze.*

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SHE is a widow, and like all those above middle age in this remote part of Bihar, does not know her age\* Dark skinned, furrowed face, thin, short but not exactly as underfed as a lot of others in this community are—and we wonder why. For she has no land, not even the two/three bigha plot that the poorest around do. Those two bighas, if the land is of reasonable quality and has a well, will produce about 40 maunds of rice which a family of six will slowly consume over about six months. For the rest, the families prefer a son or two in the city, casual labour or begging, in that order. But none applies in her case.

Her eldest daughter, forsaken by the husband, lives with her, along with two young kids below five. She has a fifteen year old son and a small hut but no other assets. The daughter is sickly and looks after the household; mother and son work away. Where, we ask. They are both physically too small to work as day labourers, and do not look as exhausted as day labourers ought to. Again we get no direct response.

So we take a different line. How hard times are, how expensive every thing has become; clothing, vegetables, rent... She readily agrees, and she knows. Not having any land herself, she has to buy every thing in the market. Rice is Rs 3 a kilo, so are most vegetables they buy (sounds like only potatoes; other vegetables are costlier). Why, even the rent is Rs 30 per month. Why rent, we ask, is this not your own home? It appears that they pay the rent for the shop. She has two sons in the city but the Dubai model has not quite worked out for her as expected. The two sons never sent back one paisa. Most families with sons in the cities are making it good, but not she. We come back to the

in his hamlet, he thought of the nameless tear that would be draped like fog over their houses, fear of what was in store for them in the coming months for the sin of his having been to the inquiry. He thought, too, of the wise old men who would ask him in anger and pain: "why did you ever go to the inquiry, you fool?" But he knew the answer, and he knew that he would go again. For the first time he had been told there was nothing wrong in what he did, no sin in his existence, for the first time he had not been scolded, not been abused, for the first time the writhed guilt of an unlawful life had been lifted from his shoulders. That was why, and he would say so. They would understand, too.

shop. Clearly it is the source of their livelihood; rope making is a common low skill activity and the raw material is almost free, but then, it does not seem to pay very much. So, what else do you sell?

It came out slowly in dribbles but the first denial was fast and firm—not their or anybody else's body. Given that assertion, the rest, though not clearly stated, could be put together.

Conjecture—she learnt it way back when, when she was a kid. Maybe she helped her father or an uncle heat the stoves, mix the right ingredients, add the correct quantity of various fluids. It is sold in a medium sized tin drum called a 'tangi' which holds about seven bottles of fluid; Rs 28 a 'tangi'. Virtually every household has one at any point of time, but the men drink up far more than a bottle a day. She sells country liquor.

She is probably a co-owner and shares the profit; we could not get out the details, for she was cagey and also because the implication hit us though slowly but very hard. She had worked out the one sure way to get even with the sordid man's world around her in which a day labourer earning at most Rs 25 a day spends Rs 7 or more on booze. If you cannot get the money from these wretches on any account, not for a meal a day, a broken roof, a sick child, then buy it, buy it against their own craving for alcohol, buy it against their own disaster.

I have had to suppress her name as well as the name of her village, for we do not want her any harm. Maybe even more than that, we do not have (he courage to meet her anger either.

She was interviewed by Deepika of MA(II), DSE.