

CHHATTISGARH

Physiognomy of Violence

A cycle of violence and counter-violence is devastating the lives of adivasis in Dantewada district of Chhattisgarh, a Maoist “liberated area”. There is no official record of the number of persons killed as a result of the brutal violence of the Salwa Judum. While the Maoists had put an end to the severe harassment of the adivasis by forest and police officials, successfully resisted domination and oppression of the adivasis by the patel-patwari, and raised the rate for picking the tendu leaf, there are certain conflicts of interest in the present context of a counter-insurgency that have created a divide within the tribal community, which makes the present atmosphere tense.

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A number of strategies of counter-insurgency have been used by the establishment in India, each of them more obnoxious than the next. One would perhaps be reading too much of a method into these acts if one were to contend that a certain unified entity called “the state” is with experimental intent trying out one strategy after another. Certainly, what is happening in Chhattisgarh is in all probability a local stratagem spun out of the immediate situation, which has at its focus a very angry and uncontrollable man called Madavi Masa, better known as Mahendra Karma, MLA of Dantewada. But all the strategies add up to a matrix of brutality, the victims of whose viciousness are the most marginal people of the country.

The direct brute force of the armed forces was tried out in the border areas – Nagaland, Mizoram, Kashmir – since the desire to secede from India evokes such hatred in the mainland that few would care to speak out against the employment of inhuman force against it. The same cannot be said of every insurgency in the country. Naxalism, certainly, meets with perhaps the least unsympathetic reaction of all insurgencies from society because of its contribution to protecting the poor, especially the adivasis and dalits, from exploitation and oppression. Quite strange people profess respect for the Naxalites on this score. Hence direct force, while it has certainly been used extensively in states such as Andhra Pradesh, would not be acceptable beyond a point if used against the Naxalites. A brutally rational alternative is the

encouragement of private vengeance against it. The Senas of Bihar have come in handy in that state. Support to bands of vengeful ex-Naxalites is being tried out in Andhra Pradesh. And the Salwa Judum, a cruel joke of a peace movement, in Chhattisgarh. A point that the Naxalites may (or may not) like to note is that each such strategy succeeds only because of some fault or faults of theirs. If they had taken conscious steps to break the caste mould of politics in Bihar, mobilisation of opposition to them in the form of caste Senas would have certainly been less easy. If they had learnt to distinguish mere rowdyism from radical militancy in the recruitment of cadre, and been more open, transparent and merciful in imposing punishment upon “informers” and “renegades”, the vengeful gangs that are targeting their friends in Andhra Pradesh would have been less populous. As for Salwa Judum, it is arguable that the Maoists’ non-chalant exercise of power in their “liberated areas”, unmindful of whose interests and whose rights they are trampling on and how unthinkingly, has opened a chink in their otherwise unbreachable armour that their enemies are using with a callous want of hesitation.

Dantewada – A Maoist ‘Liberated Area’

That the violence and counter-violence that is fast devastating the lives of adivasis on a large scale in Dantewada district of Chhattisgarh is taking place in a Maoist “liberated area” is a fact that needs to be kept in mind in understanding what is happening there. That fact justifies nothing of what the Chhattisgarh administration is doing there, but then nothing justifies the tendency in democratic circles to talk as if all that is relevant for understanding the role of the Maoists in the area is the poverty and general backwardness of the tribes living there. It is good and necessary to insist that Maoism shall not be treated as a mere problem of crime and disorder but should be seen as a socio-economic issue. It is fine that one hears more and more persons say this these days, even if that means little in practice. But nothing is gained by ignoring the fact that Maoism is not some social reform movement that uses guns for greater effect, but a political movement aimed at smashing the existing state and building an alternative state, not at one go but by proceeding from remote and neglected rural areas to the more developed rural areas,

and the urban areas finally. A liberated zone is an area where an incipient state of the future has been or is declared to have been established, forcing out the existing state. One is free to like this or dislike this, wholly or conditionally, but one cannot ignore this is analysing the Maoist movement and the reactions to it such as the Salwa Judum phenomenon.

It would be idle to pretend that any state would with equanimity tolerate the proclamation of "liberated areas" within its territory from where its authority is pushed out by force. It is very doubtful that the Maoists themselves would behave more tolerantly in a similar situation. This is not because sovereignty is some unbreachable quality but because it has guns in its defence. But there are many points that the establishment in Chhattisgarh would need to ponder before it draws from the very notion of its territorial sovereignty the conclusion that the support that it is illegitimately extending to the brutal gang called Salwa Judum is legitimate. One, these areas were outside the ken of its administrative, let alone developmental, lens for decades before the Maoists declared them liberated areas. The district collector of Dantewada, a mild and pleasant-mannered officer of tribal origin, concedes that much. If sovereignty, like property, provided for a prescriptive right, the Maoists can certainly claim the right to sovereignty in Dantewada by prescription since they took over an area practically unoccupied by the Indian state. More seriously, given this fact, the Chhattisgarh government should in all humility be less righteous in its response to the Maoists. Two, and this is the more difficult point to drive into the heads of sovereigns, however inviolate territorial sovereignty may appear, if you gave guns in your hands to defend it, when a political challenge to it arises from a political force having substantial base among the people, especially the poor or otherwise disadvantaged sections of the people, it calls for a political handling of the issue and not suppression by brute force.

But brute force is what the government of Chhattisgarh is deploying. The idea is plainly that the jungles will be cleared of all habitations, and the inhabitants driven to camps located in patrollable areas, which will later be replaced by colonies. By this means the Maoists will be cut off from their popular support and deprived of food and shelter. Thus isolated they will be forced to surrender, leave the area, or else engage with the paramilitary in suicidal

battles. The chief minister has openly declared that "those in the camps are with the government and those in the forests are with the Maoists". Officially, there are 54,768 people now in 17 camps located on accessible black-top roads spread over Konta, Geedam, Bairamgarh, Bijapur and Usoor blocks, and residential colonies are being built apace to replace these camps. A visitor cannot avoid the suspicion that this figure is exaggerated, whether for the purpose of propaganda or the more mundane purpose of pocketing the money sanctioned for feeding the refugees, but there is little doubt that the highways of south Bastar are teeming with refugees from the interior of the jungles.

Brutal Violence of Salwa Judum

The odd thing about these refugees is that the majority of them did not come to the camps because they were driven away from their habitations, but rather they left their habitations because they were driven into these camps. The means by which this has been achieved is the brutal violence of the Salwa Judum. Mobs of the Salwa Judum have gone on rampage with the paramilitary in tow forcing villagers to come out and join the camps. Recalcitrant villages are attacked by mobilising pliant villages. Any one who does not join these attacks is beaten/fined. In the area surrounding Mahendra Karma's native village of Pharsapal in Dantewada block, the prevailing rule is that any one who does not join the rampaging mobs of Salwa Judum has to pay a fine of Rs 700 and receive seven lashes (It was not possible to find out the significance of the digit 7). In these mobilised attacks on reluctant villages, large-scale arson is perpetrated. Upwards of a hundred houses each have been burnt in many such villages. Not only the house but all the grain, clothes, and all the household goods are also consigned to fire. The cattle, goats and poultry are taken away. And identified supporters of the Maoists, if they have not already escaped, are killed.

These killings are not even recorded. In law, every suspicious death, and that includes every death by bullets, is to be followed by inquest and post-mortem examination. But in Dantewada it is officially acknowledged that after opening fire upon the Maoists and/or the people with them, the armed forces and the Salwa Judum gang accompanying them turn back and come away. They neither wait to confirm

the death or survival of the persons hit, nor do they bring them for treatment if alive, or inquest if dead. Hence, strangely, there is no record of the dead on the other side in this war the Chhattisgarh government is fighting against the Maoists. One only needs to add that this does not happen so routinely even in Kashmir where the argument that the militancy is Pakistan's proxy war is readily available as an excuse for not giving the dead bodies a civil treatment.

The consequence is that while there is a precise count of the number killed by the Maoists from June 2005 (when the Salwa Judum started) till mid-May 2006, namely, 12 special police officers (SPOs) 25 paramilitary personnel and 191 civilians (almost all of them adivasis), there is no count of how many of the Maoists and their supporters have been killed. (There is a suspicion that some persons killed by Salwa Judum have been shown as victims of Maoist violence, but that number is unlikely to be very large.) Until June 2005, there is little doubt that it was the Maoists who killed more, for the police in Bastar had never developed the habit of encounter killing to anything near the same extent as their southern brothers of Andhra Pradesh. But after the creation of Salwa Judum the situation is not the same. There have been innumerable instances reported in Maoist publications of gruesome murders committed by the Salwa Judum-paramilitary combine, and there is little reason to dismiss it as propaganda. But it is difficult to arrive at a precise estimate.

What is relevant is that except the handful of paramilitary personnel and perhaps a few Maoists of Andhra Pradesh origin killed in the conflict, all the dead in the last one year's violence are local adivasis. The number is in all probability close to 400. It is they who have been killed, it is their houses in their hundreds that have been burnt down, it is they who have gathered in the camps, whether dragged there by the Salwa Judum or driven by fear of the Maoists. Of course, most of the participants in the Salwa Judum are local adivasis too, and it is they who burnt down the houses of fellow adivasis and have participated in killing them. If the adivasis had themselves voluntarily created the Salwa Judum, then one would have perhaps merely rued the demise of adivasi innocence and bracketed out the very notion of a unitary entity called "adivasi" insofar as Chhattisgarh is concerned. But it was not they who created it to fight the Maoists. The dissatisfaction, unhappiness, dislike

of the Maoists among a section of the adivasis at various levels (not necessarily all exploiters or wicked men as the Maoists would want us to believe) was taken advantage of by political interests who drove them into a frenzy and created a criminal gang for their own purposes. Excepting Mahendra Karma himself, all the rest of the vocal leaders of Salwa Judum are non-tribals. And Mahendra Karma is always surrounded by non-tribals who are plainly from the Hindi heartland of north India. Moreover, all those who have visited Chhattisgarh in recent months and interacted with the Salwa Judum at the camps must have observed that it is where the leaders are non-tribals – of Andhra origin in Konta, and from UP and Bihar in Bairamgarh, Jangla and Bijapur – that their conduct is uncouth and offensive. The reason probably has something to do with the generally expansive nature of people who live in and among the plenitude of nature, but there is a more concrete reason too. The adivasis who are angry with the Maoists are those who have suffered personal injury caused to them, whether with or without justification. It is different with the Andhra or Bihari settlers who are the vocal spokesmen of the Salwa Judum. Some of them may have suffered some personal injury but in the main their enmity is more political-ideological. The very marked tone of Sangh parivar ideology cannot be missed in their anti-Maoist rhetoric.

Conflicts of Interest

It is this altogether unhappy plight of the adivasis that is most worrisome. The tragedy is that this is happening in a state created in the name of adivasis, and in a “liberated area” constituted by the Maoists primarily with the support of adivasis. If the state of Chhattisgarh has continued to be as indifferent to the adivasis as the previous state of Madhya Pradesh, the Maoists appear to have taken their social base too much for granted. In the initial days of their entry into the region, as in the contiguous parts of Andhra Pradesh, they had put an end to the severe harassment the adivasis suffered at the hands of forest and police officials for cultivating land in the reserve forests, and to the oppressive Patel-patwari dominance. The rate for picking tendu leaf was substantially increased. Indeed, the main reasons for the wide popularity of the Naxalites in the entire forest region abutting the Godavari river in Telangana, Vidarbha and

Chhattisgarh, is the protection they gave to the forest-dwellers for cultivation in reserve forests, the substantial increase they achieved in the payment for picking tendu leaf, and the end they put to the oppressive domination of the headmen and patwaris. The income from tendu leaf picking has in particular played a significant role in tribal life ever since. They would have been at a terrible disadvantage in negotiating the monetised economy they are surrounded by if they did not have this income. Which also explains why a strike of tendu leaf picking dictated by the Maoists with the best of intentions could make the adivasis unhappy, a point relevant for the present crisis.

But it will not do to stop the story here and depict all the people opposing the Maoists as vested interests hurt by this widely appreciated activity of the Maoists. The Maoists have gone ahead from there towards their goal of state power by declaring the areas of their influence as guerrilla zones, and in the case of Dantewada forests, a liberated zone as well. Thereafter the need to establish and secure their authority, protect their armed squads from the police and the paramilitary, secure the obedience of the people living in the area to the sanghams set up by them, etc, become matters of predominant concern. This can alienate people who cannot all be characterised as exploiters. An elected sarpanch who is told that he cannot run the gram panchayat because the affairs of the village will be run by the sangham of the Maoists may well be unhappy, and if he is beaten up for being unhappy he may well become an enemy of the Maoists. Yet for merely this reason he cannot be called an exploiter or oppressor. If in bringing social life in the area under the decision-making institutions devised by the Maoists, the traditional community structure of the adivasis is ruptured, then notwithstanding some regressive elements of the tradition that are better rid of, the people may in fact lose rather than gain because there is no guarantee that the strength the community has traditionally given the tribe to face external incursions will be replicated by the Maoist institutions. And all people who are unhappy with this cannot be condemned as traditional elders who have lost their authority, or their henchmen.

If in forcing the state out of the liberated area, employment creating works such as the laying of roads taken up by the state is banned, people hoping for some

remunerative employment are bound to be upset. Indeed this is a frequent complaint heard in Dantewada, and the Maoists’ answer that roads only bring exploiters into the tribal area, or that the state which was never interested in laying roads in the area for 50 years is suddenly interested now not for the sake of the people but only to make the forests accessible to the paramilitary to hunt down the Naxalites, can only sound specious to the ears of the people who have lost the employment opportunity. What is really happening is that the interests of the people and the Maoists’ political agendas start diverging from the day they declare an area a guerrilla zone, and more so, a liberated zone, a fact that should be obvious if one has not imported into reality the Maoist theory that the revolutionary movement as conducted by them is in the highest interest of the people.

Their conduct in blasting school buildings is a stark case in point. In their literature they have sought to explain this saying that the government had closed down the schools to house the paramilitary forces in the buildings and that is why they blew them up. But in fact no school was closed for the purpose. School buildings are occupied fully by the forces now because the schools are closed for vacation. Otherwise the forces would stop at school buildings to take rest. Bringing armed personnel into school premises can certainly be objected to but blowing up schools for that reason is an inexcusable conduct, more particularly in an area with poor educational levels. The tehsildar of Konta, who frankly describes the Salwa Judum activists milling around his office as criminals, says the Maoists have blown up 31 out of the 400 school buildings in his tehsil. There appears to be no reason to disbelieve him. There are no other insurgents in the country who have done this excepting the pan-Islamists of Kashmir who have no respect for the education imparted by a non-theocratic state. Coupled with the tendency to hunt for informers and kill them, these and similar conflicts of interest have always contained the possibility of popular disaffection with the Maoists. As far back as 1991-92 the Communist Party of India (CPI) led a Jan Jagaran Abhiyan against the Maoists but that was put down by the Maoists by killing about a dozen CPI leaders. The CPI is said to have later criticised itself for having kept the company of men like Mahendra Karma in running the Abhiyan. Or maybe

it was the ritual self-criticism required to placate the Maoists and stop them from killing more of their leaders. But last year, following a poor harvest the previous year, there were gatherings of people in areas of Maoist influence in Bijapur police district of Dantewada to discuss the problems arising from the Maoists' ban on employment generating public works undertaken by the government, and the strike of tendu leaf picking dictated by the Maoists to force increase in the payment. Mahendra Karma an ex-CPI man who subsequently joined the Congress and made a lot of money, came to know of this and jumped into the fray and took over the dissatisfaction to fashion the Salwa Judum.

Tense Atmosphere

About a year on, he is a very tense man. He is aware that he cannot call back the "movement", he cannot get off the tiger he has created. The moment that happens, the lives of the Salwa Judum leaders, including his own, will be at terminal risk, for forgiveness is not a virtue highly prized by the Maoists, and the death penalty is perhaps the most frequent punishment in their penal code. The lesser Salwa Judum leaders in the camps say that the fight will go on till the Maoists are wiped out and they can safely go back to their villages, but Karma knows this is a pipe dream. In the meanwhile life of the voluntary as well as reluctant denizens of the camps ruled by the Salwa Judum is miserable, for the camps are little better than cattle sheds. Those villagers who have not joined the camps but run deep into the forests to live under Maoist protection are by all accounts leading even worse lives for the camp dwellers at least have food provided by the government. There is a third class who decided to go neither with the Salwa Judum nor the Maoists. They have crossed Chhattisgarh's notional border with Andhra Pradesh and are scattered all over the forests of Khammam district, living on the generosity of their fellow-tribes people over there. Fortunately, the forests on either side are populated by the same tribe, the Koyas.

This misery is compounded by fear of death. The paramilitary force described as the "Naga battalion" is known for the brutal treatment of the Maoists or their sympathisers it is in search of, and the residents of the 17 roadside camps are sitting ducks for the Maoists. Three recent

incidents, all from Konta taluka, attest to the insecurity of the opponents of the Maoists living in the camps. The first happened on February 28 when the Maoists detonated a landmine at Darbhaguda and killed 26 persons returning from a Salwa Judum meeting at Dornapal. It is generally believed that those who did not die in the blast had their throats slit. Again, on April 29, 15 men staying at the Dornapal camp were killed by the Maoists. About 36 residents of the camp, all of them originally from the village of Manikonta had gone to their village to fetch their belongings. They were abducted by the Maoists, the old and the children among them let off, and the able-bodied massacred. The most recent incident happened in the early hours of May 13 when a big group led by the Maoists – their number variously given in the Hindi press as 150 and 300, and in the Telugu press as 1,000 – attacked the roadside refugee camp at Injaram on the NH 221 and killed three SPOs and one Salwa Judum member. Such

attacks can happen any time. On the other side, the government of Chhattisgarh has appointed 5,000 Salwa Judum members as SPOs and is training them in the use of rifles. They are a potent life threat to the Maoist sympathisers if any of them ever venture near their deserted habitations. Their very appointment is in fact a gross abuse of authority since the provisions of the Police Act that permit the appointment of SPOs was never intended to arm one social group to exterminate another.

Small wonder then that a very tense atmosphere prevails in south Bastar today, especially Konta taluka. With the rains, things are likely to become worse. For one thing, the camps will be even more unlivable. Secondly, the inmates of the camps as well as those sheltering in the forests are likely to be tempted to sneak back and till their lands. This can endanger their lives. Thirdly, as time progresses the bitterness of the divide among the tribes is likely to become worse, to the detriment of all. But who in Chhattisgarh cares? 