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Is the Centre missing woods for trees?

To observers of the development of underdevelopment in India one thing has long been abundantly clear — that the richest tracts of land in the country are home to some of its poorest people. It has been said, not without justice, that if one were to superimpose maps of mineral wealth and forests, tribal habitations, extreme deprivation, and, incidentally, Maoist activity, on one another, they would overlap to an astonishing extent.

The path of development in India and policies unremittingly pursued by the managers of the Indian state for over 60 years, and especially the last two decades of liberalisation, have unfortunately exacerbated a situation in which the extraction of mineral and forest wealth or the large-scale destruction of the latter has only benefited public sector corporations or increasingly private entrepreneurs who more often than not operate with state sanction, legitimate or otherwise, like ruthless, ungovernable mediaeval freebooters. The naming of names in this context may sound invidious, but the Vedanta group epitomises this kind of barely regulated enterprise.

Conversely, pre-eminent among those who have demonstrably gained next to zilch from this despoliation of natural resources are in fact precisely those people who have inhabited the vast swathes of territory that are richly endowed with mineral wealth and forests — state policy not been bent to redistribute the windfall gains of the mining industry, for instance, to local populations. At best they have got some jobs — if you can give that name to ill-paid, utterly exploitative and demeaning menial occupations such as humping earth from point A to point B. From Orissa, Jharkhand and West Bengal in the east to Chhattisgarh in the centre this is unvaryingly and depressingly true. When members of the political and administrative establishment — the aforementioned state managers, in other words — castigate Maoists for opposing and preventing development, they would do well to remember that the opposition arises precisely because this model of development does nothing for the local economy and the local people. When the Maoists oppose and block such development, they have the support of the people. In fact, all too often the widespread local support Maoists enjoy is precisely because they, almost single-handedly, organise movements against this kind of unconscionable exploitation, of internal 'colonialisation'.

That is why it has come as a huge surprise that the Centre issued on August 3, a directive that any project sited in forest areas will have to be cleared by the relevant gram sabhas, just as projects in tribal-dominated areas have to be cleared under the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act. This will apply to both private and government projects. This is just one small step in the right direction following the logic of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006. Both aim to protect the rights of forest dwellers to land and resources in areas they have inhabited for generations, whether backed by pieces of paper proving title or no — the first from the sanguinary claims of wildlifers who want conservation at the cost of the lives and livelihoods of forest dwellers while themselves making no discernible sacrifice or contribution and the other from unfair development trajectories.

But it would be much too early to see in this development the beginning of a more equitable order in the mineral- and forest-rich tracts in the country. First, the provisions for panchayat clearance for projects envisioned in the PESA Act can hardly be said to have protected the tribal people from the depredations of what we may call rogue capital for a number of reasons — pre-eminent among them are state collusion to circumvent legislative provisions, the weak bargaining power of mostly illiterate tribal people who have by reason of their myriad handicaps little access to the institutions that are supposed to uphold the rule of law and a climate of opinion that favours unbridled development through private enterprise with no thought for fundamental questions of equity and justice. Just as the PESA Act has been only a qualified barrier to predatory capital, we can assume that the new requirement, which will in fact apply to largely the same areas, will have similar effects unless there is a concomitant change of attitude within the bureaucracy and political establishment.

If there is indeed such change in the air and if there is a genuine desire to ensure that the wealth generated is spread more fairly and evenly, the United Progressive Alliance government should consider alongside this change another one. Over the past few years, the government has been pushing for a radical liberalisation of the mining sector. The Huda Committee appointed by it has recommended among other things drastic attenuation of screening processes with the objective of rapidly making over mining resources to private players. In such a context, the government must surely also consider an equally radical revision of benefit-sharing arrangements. For starters, royalty payable by private miners should be dramatically hiked upwards. Some of it should, moreover, be directly distributed to affected communities and individuals instead of all going into state coffers for indirect redistribution. This could happen through cash handouts or immediate investment in social infrastructure — schools, hospitals, vocational retraining for project-affected people and so on.

If the government is, indeed, serious about empowering forest and tribal communities this is a good opportunity to make a fresh start — let us not forget that welfare and social justice are two important elements in the unexpectedly strong mandate it has been given.

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