



Print This Article

Daily News & Analysis

Wednesday, November 04, 2009 9:24:00 PM

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo must be obtained from www.3dsyndication.com.

Maoist, tribals and the idea of progress

Antara Dev Sen / DNA

I have just heard two very different bits of news today. One, that Manmohan Singh has announced that "tribals must be the primary beneficiaries of the development process." And second, that Claude Levi-Strauss, the French anthropologist and founder of Structuralism has died.

I didn't know that Levi-Strauss was still alive. Which is perhaps fitting for the philosopher who gave no importance to individuals and was fascinated instead by the processes of human society, the author who triggered the view of "the death of the author" shaped by Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes.

While we struggled with Structuralism and Post-Structuralism and their various descendants, the grandfather of it all was living quietly in Paris. He would have turned 101 this month.

There is no grief when you hear that one you thought was dead had died. Yet, as the news of his death sank in, sank slowly through the layers of once-precious but long discarded thoughts, through memories of fresh adulthood, I felt a strange loss. Levi-Strauss made you feel uncomfortable, often angry.

His attack on Jean Paul Sartre, prominent among my many heroes at one time, calling him a "prisoner of his cogito" was of course unacceptable. But it was difficult to brush aside his point that Sartre may not have grasped the complexities of the 'primitive' (or 'savage') mind. Levi-Strauss's belief that there is no primitive mind, just a human mind that is the same for all, and his great respect for tribal myths helped change our ethnocentric view of life.

Not entirely, of course. Discrimination and high-handedness towards the tribal population flourishes shamelessly in our country. Hence our Prime Minister's emphasis on equitable growth is a relief. "There has been a systemic failure in giving the tribals a stake in the modern economic processes that inexorably intrude into their living spaces," said the PM. He spoke of the resulting alienation and how it had taken "a dangerous turn in some parts of our country".

In short, he was accepting that Naxalism had been nurtured by state apathy and desperate poverty in the tribal areas. "The systematic exploitation and social and economic abuse of our tribal communities can no longer be tolerated," he said.

And he expressed concern that the interdependence of the forest and the forest dweller has not been appreciated and that the Forest Rights Act had not been implemented. He spoke of recognition of rights, livelihood opportunities and environmental protection — even of the harassment of tribals by government officials.

This is a most significant — if incredibly belated — step towards dealing with the Maoist militancy. The state has miserably failed to look after its people in the tribal belt. Most forest dwellers have no rights over their habitat and, treated as encroachers, live at the mercy of government goons. The tribal areas still retain their natural wealth, roughly accounting for 80 per cent of our mineral deposits and 70 per cent of our forests.

Lured by mammoth foreign and Indian investments, the state is forcing the tribals out of their homelands to pave the way for industrialisation that will not benefit them. With the state clamping down on Maoists, who had promised them what the state failed to give, the few options the tribals had of eking out a living have been snuffed out. If the PM does succeed in making the tribals the primary beneficiaries of the development process, Maoism won't have a leg to stand on.

And in the process, if we re-examine the ideas of 'development' and 'knowledge', we may all gain from it. As Levi-Strauss said, "Enthusiastic partisans of the idea of progress are in danger of failing to recognise... the immense riches accumulated by the human race. By underrating the achievements of the past, they devalue all those which still remain to be accomplished."

The writer is is Editor, The Little Magazine

[About us](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Advertise with us](#) | [Subscription](#) | [Reprint rights](#)

© 2005-2009 Diligent Media Corporation Ltd. All rights reserved.