

Should We Have Talked to the Chhattisgarhi Mother?

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The much anticipated Operation Green Hunt has started in fits and starts. It is a high stake hunt. The government is waiting to re-assert its authority in the forested reaches of Central India. The corporations are waiting for unhindered access to the wealth underneath the land. The Maoists are [perhaps] waiting for the atrocities to begin so that the discontent takes deeper roots into the hearts and minds of the adivasis. And the adivasis...what are they waiting for? We do not know. We do not know because we never asked them.

The Chhattisgarh State Government never asked them when framing the industrial policy of the State that discouraged all cottage industries and occupations that could have benefited small endeavours by communities. The adivasis were never asked whether they wanted to do agriculture on their land or vacate it en-masse for steel, bauxite and iron-ore processing plants. In fact, on October 12, at the public hearing for Tata's mega steel project, villagers were prevented by security forces from attending it. The project was cleared in the presence of a staged audience of 50 people without a hitch. The proposed plant will churn out 5.5 million tonnes of steel annually that will be needed to build, bridges, flyovers, malls, cars, high rises—almost everything that the adivasis from Lohandiguda will never use. A total of 10 villages will be displaced from 2044 hectares of land. A few hours away by bus, Essar is to set up a steel plant of similar capacity.

Very few journalists went out of their way to find out if the feelings of the adivasis were hurt after their villages were torched or their harvest looted; if they felt resentful when the government-backed vigilante, the Salwa Judum, smoked them out and herded them into camps. By December 2007, fifty thousand of them, according to a Human Rights Watch report, were being held inside 24 barbed wired camps in unhygienic conditions. The media went where the state directed it—to the schools blown up by Maoists or to the site of the truck that overran an IED. The adivasi was neatly kept out of the reports filed from the sites of these ghastly attacks. The media never reported that close to 300,000 people have been rendered homeless by the senseless violence, not just from guns but also from the paradigm of development that seems to be ushered in on six-lane highways.

The hallways of Raipur and Delhi were so abuzz with discussions on M-O-Us and M-A-Os that everyone forgot about the 65,000 adivasis who fled into neighbouring Andhra Pradesh. Did they want to go back and live in their homes on their lands? Did they want to live at all? They were no one's problem. Where were they to go to complain about the rapes and loots? Police?



Judiciary? When they did muster up the courage to file complaints aided by civil organisations, the state lashed out at the organisations. Vanvasi Chetna Ashram (VCA), a Gandhian organisation, has been working for two decades in empowering tribal communities around Dantewada. On May 17, the state power was on full display when the ashram of VCA was razed to the ground under the watchful eyes of 500 strong CRPF personnel.

The crimes of the VCA had been unpardonable—they have helped to file more than 500 complaints [none of which have been acted upon till now] on behalf of the adivasis, for rape, loot, torture and murder against the law enforcement agencies and the Salwa Judum. The VCA also had the temerity to petition the Bilaspur High Court against the police encounter in Singaram where 19 “Maoists” were killed. The villagers claimed the dead to be their unarmed relatives. Ever since then the VCA’s staff has been threatened and assaulted to strike fear so that their voice is stifled—a gentle admonition from the powerful state not to act impudently. After all, the state had already set an example by keeping Dr Binayak Sen in jail for over two years on trumped-up charges. It was a reaffirmation of the state’s with-us-or-against-us logic and for the others to draw lessons from it. Look, the state seems to say, we don’t care what you do in your spare time whether it is reducing infant and maternal mortality, or saving the fast vanishing biodiversity, don’t dare question our logic of either arming civilians or co-opting the role of media in a democracy. The sentiments of the state have often been faithfully echoed by refined intellectuals who profess to capture the complexity of the whole situation in the length of their columns and decry the nonsense the activist-types spout. The nonsensical activists are perhaps the only actors that can stop the brutalisation of the adivasis through peaceful negotiations.

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No one went to the Gonds or the Gothikoyas and explained to them that the Constitution of India, the country in which they live, has special provisions to protect their lands under the Fifth Schedule. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs has certainly not been in touch with them. As if it was not enough protection, the Forests Rights Act of 2006 ensured the rights of the Scheduled Tribes and forest dwelling communities over their land and common property natural resources. Or perhaps, the woman from Lingagiri misunderstood the Act and ran away from her home when her village was raided and gave birth to her son in the forest. Perfect plot for an English thriller to be read while waiting for a flight that never seems to be on time. And you must have guessed the name of the boy by now—son of the forest, Adavi Ramadu. Fact and fiction are so tightly interlaced in Lingagiri that it seems unreal.

When the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) did finally go to Dantewada after “activist” people like Prof Nandini Sundar filed a PIL in the Supreme Court against Salwa Judum for the atrocities perpetrated by them, they were accompanied by a large contingent of armed security personnel. The members of the NHRC team themselves were all IPS officers—a blow to its impartiality. The adivasi women were questioned in the camps in presence of gun-totting security personnel and the Salwa Judum activists—the alleged tormentors. None of the women admitted of rape in such a conducive atmosphere. To the utter surprise and consternation of the the team, the entire village of Chikurubatti ran away at the sight of the approaching team accompanied by armed CRPF jawans. In spite of their best intentions, the team did not get to

hear what the adivasis had to say. They did not think that the entire village fleeing said something.

No one asked the adivasis anything. That is the way it is supposed to be. These people belong to the sacrificial stock. With the meditative resolve of a tantric we have sacrificed them at the altar of development. Although tribals constitute eight per cent of India's population, they are 40 per cent of the 60 million people displaced by large projects from 1947 to 2004. The people of southern Chhattisgarh might just boost the percentage.

We will mobilise our ground and air forces, enact laws which divide the society along the for-us-against-us lines, send our Ministers and bureaucrats to the US to confer on techniques of anti-terrorism, counter-insurgency and "governance", hold talk shows after talk shows in ties and imitative body language, sanction crores of rupees for development packages, but one thing we will not do is to take off our blinders and squat next to the mother who delivered in the forest and ask her, "Hey mother of Adavi Ramadu, why did you have to flee your home? What will make your life a little easier?"

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<http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article1759.html>