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THE SPLIT REALITY

- Adivasis, Salva Judm and the State: who is provoking whom?

Cutting Corners - Ashok Mitra



Bastar tribal people at the Araku Valley market

Some news is considered more worth publicizing than some other news. This is part of an essential discipline, for otherwise we will remain perennially buried under an avalanche of data, information and gossip. The wheat, never mind the change of metaphor, has to be separated from the chaff. The media perform this task. Occasionally the government of the land helps the media to do the choosing: the authorities have their own views on what is printable and what is not.

The prime minister had recently convened a conference of chief ministers to discuss the ways and means for implementing the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act, passed by Parliament in 2006. The Union ministers of state for environment and forests as well as for tribal affairs were in

attendance. Most of the chief ministers, however, stayed away; they obviously had more important matters to deal with on the day. The only exception was the chief minister of Orissa.

The absence of chief ministers did not deter the prime minister from unburdening himself. There has been, he said, a systemic failure in giving the nation's *adivasis* a stake in the breathtaking economic progress the country is experiencing. On the other hand, the development process has actually led to an encroachment on both the living space and the means of livelihood of the tribal population. Such alienation of the *adivasis* from the national mainstream has persisted over decades. But enough ought to be enough, the social and economic exploitation of the tribal communities could not be tolerated any longer. The 2006 act, the prime minister told his listeners, embodies the government's resolve to reverse the trend. The nation's energy and resources must be fully mobilized to make effective the provisions of the act. The Union and state governments have to move together in the matter, and it would be necessary to 'factor in' the different nuances of tribals living in different parts of the country.

The prime minister drew attention to the need to improve rules and procedures to ensure prompt and adequate compensation to tribal people displaced from their habitat because of on-going development projects. That apart, the tribal people, he emphasized, must also directly benefit from these projects. Mere monetary compensation for land taken over and provision of alternative sources of income could hardly be the end of the matter. Preservation of traditional culture is of equal importance. The act, the prime minister asserted, addresses itself to these problems. He urged the chief ministers to post committed and competent officers in tribal areas who could cope with the challenge of the responsibilities assigned to them and interact with the tribal communities with tact, understanding and friendliness. At the same time, he urged the *adivasis* to eschew acts of violence; sustained economic activity is not possible under the shadow of the gun.

The media spared no efforts to give wide coverage to the contents of the prime minister's speech. It was of tremendous significance in the context of aggravated Maoist violence in the country's tribal hinterland. The prime minister, it was generally recognized, had spoken with great restraint as well as great civilization.

But the media happen to be choosy too, and the authorities encourage them to be choosy. While the prime minister's address, oozing noble intentions, received saturation coverage, a veil of silence has descended on the findings of a certain official committee. The committee on state agrarian relations and unfinished tasks of land reform was set up in January last year under the chairmanship of the then Union minister for rural development under the auspices of his ministry. The committee submitted its report in March this year to the present Union minister for rural development, and is now available as an official publication. Chapter IV of the report has a couple of concluding paragraphs, which are being quoted in full.

"A civil-war-like situation has gripped the southern districts of Bastar, Dantewada and Bijapur in Chattishgarh. The contestants are the armed squads of tribal men and women of the erstwhile Peoples War Group now known as the Communist Party of India (Maoist) on the one side and the armed tribal fighters of the Salva Judm created and encouraged by the government and supported with the firepower and organization of the central police forces. This open declared war will go down as the biggest land grab ever, if it plays out as per the script. The drama being scripted by Tata Steel and Essar Steel who wanted 7 villages or thereabouts, each to mine the richest lode of iron ore available in India. There was initial resistance to land acquisition and displacement from the tribals. The state withdrew its plans under fierce resistance. An argument put forward was 'you don't play foul with the Murias', it's a matter of life and death and Murias don't fear death. A new approach was necessary if the rich lodes of iron ore are to be mined. The new approach came about with the Salva Judm, euphemistically meaning 'peace hunt'. Ironically the Salva Judm was led by Mahendra Karma, elected on a Congress ticket and the Leader of the Opposition and supported wholeheartedly by the BJP led government. The Salva Judm was headed and peopled by the Murias, some of them erstwhile cadre and local leaders of the Communist Party of India (Maoist). Behind them are the traders, contractors and miners waiting for a successful result of their strategy.

"The first financiers of the Salva Judm were the Tata and the Essar groups in the quest for 'peace'. The first onslaught of the Salva Judm was on Muria villagers who still owed allegiance to the Communist Party of India (Maoist). It turned out to be an open war between brothers. 640 villages as per official statistics were laid bare, burnt to the ground and emptied with the force of the gun and the blessings of the state. 350,000 tribals, half the total population of Dantewada district are displaced, their womenfolk raped, their daughters killed, and their youth maimed. Those who could not escape into the jungle were herded together into refugee camps run and managed by the Salva Judm. Others continue to hide in the forest or have migrated to the nearby tribal tracts in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. 640 villages are empty. Villages sitting on tons of iron ore are effectively de-peopled and available for the highest bidder. The latest information that is being circulated is that both Essar Steel and Tata Steel are willing to take over the empty landscape and manage the mines."

One is suddenly made aware of the two-level reality defining our nation. At one level, we have the gushing rate of GDP growth, the ever-expanding list of Indian billionaires, perfunctory talk of making the growth process inclusive, and the prime minister's stentorian declaration to put an end to tribal exploitation alongside advice to the *adivasis* to abjure violence. The other level is the state of things depicted in the paragraphs reproduced from the report submitted to the Union minister for urban development. It is not a report prepared by some civil liberty zealots. It is a formal official report which narrates in lurid detail what is happening on the ground notwithstanding the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dweller (Recognition of Rights) Act and in total contradiction of the prime minister's honey-soaked words.

It would be outrageous for the authorities to pretend innocence about the gruesome occurrences in the 640 villages in the district of Dantewada. Officers must have known, ruling politicians must have known too. A few officers and influential politicians must have also colluded with the perpetrators of the grisly acts of massacre and pillage that took place there. No development activity is possible, according to the prime minister, under the shadow of the gun. Will he, please, identify the wielders of the guns in this instance? Or will he repudiate the findings of a committee set up by his own government?

A goody-goody piece of legislation passed in New Delhi cannot override ground reality. There is, beside, an issue of semantics as well: what is violence and what is counter-violence? A small news item last week mentioned that a guesthouse run by an industrial group in the forests of Orissa was attacked by a group of tribals. This particular industrial group is one of the major financiers of the Salva Judm in Chattisgarh. Who provoked whom?

