

RE-VISITING THE NEO-SUBALTERN: CONTEMPORARY DISSIDENT MOVEMENTS OF ADIVASIS IN THE JUNGLEMAHAL

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This article broadly engages with the emergent domains of multiple tropes of subalternity, marginalization and dissidence in today's India, with special focus on the Junglemahal area of West Bengal that comprises Maoist affected regions such as Purulia, Bankura and Medinipur. The present research seeks to focus on the failures of the postcolonial state through an investigation into its flawed paradigm of repressive governance and brutalization. It focuses on the market economy and its associated narratives of development and in doing so it scrutinizes the dichotomy between the so-called new and aspirational India and the India of the marginalized, or what Utsa Patnaik describes some years back as the "republic of hunger". The present paper therefore probes into the ascending zones of deprivation, pauperization and the resultant insurgent voices that foreground the outcries of marginalization and problematizes the hegemonic templates of developmentalism in India today, a narrative that is getting further reinforced with the arrival of the right wing political establishment. Giorgio Agamben in his work "*Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*" theorized his notion of the Homo Sacer as the dissident subaltern who is reduced to his/ her bare life by the repressive mechanisms of brutal state power. The poor tribals, farmers and dalits in India who are dissenting against multiple forms of state and corporate usurpation are being branded as Maoists and seditious anti-socials actualize Agamben's notion of the Homo Sacer, who was also branded as the outsider by the mighty Roman Empire and through such ostracisation policies, the Homo Sacer's murder could be legalized or legitimized. The present research would investigate whether our larger apathy and indifference to farmer's suicide and state sponsored terrorism to counter subaltern dissidence in today's India are similar replication of the process of recolonisation and Homo Sacerisation. The total number of Adivasis and indigenous people living in India is eighty-eight million- which is approximately one fourth of the world's total indigenous population.

Historically these communities with independent cultural identities have been subjected to displacement, dispossession and repression for more than a century and are now India's poorest and most marginalized communities. Since the colonial era these indigenous people have been constantly dispossessed of their resources and homelands. In the name of "economic growth" the current neo-liberal globalization policies have rendered these people bereft of the bare necessities of life. Under the garb of democracy the government has been befooling its people. The sound and fury of 'India Shinning', 'Make in India' don't reach these marginalized zones where making both ends meet is an ever eluding mirage.

Recolonisation and Failure of the Postcolonial State

The story of the aboriginal communities in India is one of denial, suppression and subjugation. In Jangalmahal the tribal people most of whom are Adivasi and tribal lead a miserable existence plagued by poverty, illiteracy and malnutrition. A Central Government report in 1999 says 46% people live under poverty line in Jangalmahal whereas in our country 26% people live under poverty. Santhal, Lodha and Sobor are the poorest tribes among other tribes. Cultivated land is the main resource of our country. But most of the lands in Jangalmahal are barren. In the forest areas like Belpahari and Kankrajhor of West Medinipur, the only means of livelihood is to collect forest resources. From the forest the women have to gather timbers, kendu leaves, Sal leaves. Daily income of the people of these very areas is less than rupees thirty to thirty five. Considered from that point of view, they should be included in the list of BPL as declared by Planning Commission. These people have been deprived of proper availability of food, shelter, education, employment and health care. Most of the children of the Santhal, Gond, Oraon tribes in this region suffer from under nutrition. There is very little scope for education for the adivasis, especially for those who speak Santhali because in most of the schools and colleges there are a few or no Santhali teachers who can communicate better with the students. Reports of molestation by the army or the police on the tribal women who go to the forest for collecting timber and leaves also come frequently. Due to various reasons such as monsoon failure, high debt burdens, government policies, and many other issues, the farmers in these regions like most part of the country they are compelled to end their lives. In 2012, around 14000 helpless farmers committed suicide in India. Interestingly most of them were Dalits and hence were doubly marginalized. In today's era of privatization the Tatas, Jindals, Ambanis have occupied everything- land, water, food, electricity and what not. In some areas big dams have been constructed, most of which have private owners. These dams are feared to submerge huge areas. These issues do not find space in mainstream literature, media, or debates in public domain. The Dalits and the tribals are considered outsiders in the society. But their land, resources, the coal, mineral, water are being grabbed by the industrialists and the government

is being grabbed by the industrialists and the government is colluding with the corporate lobby in this loot of tribal lands and other resources. The hilly landscape of the south Orissa has been abode to the Dongria Kondh from time immemorial. Now these lands have been sold to the multinational companies for the bauxite the hills contain. The Niyamgiri hill which is the home of the Niyam Raja, the Universal God, has been given to the company Vedanta, one of the biggest mining corporations. The adivasis in Dantewada are undergoing similar kind of enforced displacement. In Jharkhand in the name of development project the government has caused land alienation of 30 lakh acres since 1951 till now. When the hundreds of thousands of tribal people who are the original owners of the land are rendered homeless, the prime minister expressed his government real concern on June 18, 2009, as in parliament he told: “ If the left-wing extremism continues to flourish in parts which have natural resources of minerals, the climate of investment would certainly be affected.” In 2007 the world witnessed a ghastly violence unleashed by the west Bengal government. The state’ s plan was to expropriate 10000 acres of land in Nandigram of East Medinipur for a Special Economic Zone to be developed by the Indonesian based Salim group. The villagers started protesting against this forceful land acquisition. They agitated under the banner of Bhoomi Uchhed Protirodh Committee (Committee to Oppose Uprooting from Lands). The administration was directed to confront the resistance of the villagers. On 14 March 2007 an operation with around 3000 policemen along with armed party cadres faced a crowd of 2000 villagers at the entries of Nandigram and in the clash the police killed 14 villagers and wounded 70 more. An editorial in The Indian Express wrote that the party machinery has become the “ sword arm of an industrialization policy...” Renowned persons who protested against this brutal act of the state included author Mahasweta Debi, Arundhati Roy, Aparna Sen, Kabir Suman, and many others. Land acquisition controversy occurred in a prominent way in Singur, another village of the Junglemahal area. The state this time proposed to have 997 acres of highly fertile farmlands and offer to Tata for manufacturing Nano car. Protests were raised against this forceful land acquisition under the colonial Land Acquisition Act of 1894 and amidst resistance from the villagers and the then opposition leader Mamata Banerjee, supported by many intellectual the Tatas decided to move out of Singur. Instead of focusing on the development of the poor tribal people the government has always joined hands with the industrialists. This is how a massive portion of Indian people have been oppressed and exploited in diverse ways directly and indirectly by the government for years. Media has been in constant collusion with the government and the corporate world. It manufactures simulacral images which are shamelessly distorted and which effaces the real condition of countless marginalized sections of our society from the public domain. Media is helping in spreading the sense of smugness at the apparent happy state of things among the people, especially among the youth. People are hustled into thinking that the ruling

government is the best one and their votes have not gone wasted. Media serves as the major tool in this process of hegemonisation mainly because most of the revenues come from the corporate world that indirectly runs the government. And in this game of business the poor are the obvious sufferers. They are relegated to the brink of existence and the rich wallow in the quagmire of opulence and luxury

Probing the Counter-hegemony and Tropes of Resistance

When the state does nothing to alleviate the plight of the poor, they take their own course. After decades of suppression these people are making efforts to assert their rights. They feel that the structural inequality of the society can only be redressed by the violent overthrow of the establishment. The social hierarchies need to be subverted. When the state usurps their land they can understand that that this is not for their development. When roads are built through their jungle they know that these are not meant for their walk. For years these ignorant rustics have been befooled by the state and its policy makers. But time has come to deconstruct and script a thriving counter narrative. They are taking recourse to different forms of resistance-violent, non-violent, revolutionary and criminal. These black – skinned Adivasi people protest by cutting the roads, killing people or local leaders, announcing Bandh etc thereby asserting their subjectivity in a world that is bent on effacing their existence. Most importantly the reactionary movements on the part of the poor are multiplying in numbers day by day. In 2008 a report called Development Challenges in Extremist Affected Areas, prepared by the Planning commission, said that

“ The Naxalite (Maoist) movement has to be recognized as apolitical movement with a strong landless and poor peasantry and Adivasis. Its emergence and growth need to be contextualized in the social conditions and experience of people who form a part of it. The huge gap between state policy and performance is a feature of these conditions. Though its professed long-term ideology is capturing state power by force, in its day to day manifestation, it is to be looked upon as basically a fight for social justice, equality, protection, security and local development.”

Their organizations are known by different names in different parts of the country. In Jharkhand and Bihar they are popular as Maoist Communist Center (MCC), and in Andhra Pradesh the Maoists had tremendous support as Peoples War Group (PWG). The Maoist uprising in Jangalmahal hit the headlines of all newspapers during the Left Front Regime. The Maoists guerilla army is made up of the poverty-stricken tribal people who have been relentlessly exploited for decades in every possible ways by the government and the businessmen. In 2006 India's research and Analysis Wing estimated that almost 20000 people are involved in the Maoist leader of the rebels in Janglemahal. Twenty blocks of West Medinipur district (i.e. Jhargram, Jamboni, Lalgah, Belpahari, Sankrail etc) are extremely

Maoist influenced. Among the twenty one blocks of Purulia district twelve (i.e. Manbajar 1 & 2, Arsha, Ragunathpur, Banduan, Balarampur and Baghmundi etc) are found in increasing Maoist activities

Tribals and Dalits, the New *Homo Sacer*

As the number of tribal uprisings was increasing the government was under extreme pressure as the rebels were leaving no stone unturned to overthrow the establishment. The then Prime Minister Dr.Manomohan Singh called the Naxalite-Maoist insurgency as the “ single biggest internal security challenged ever faced by our country” . The Home Secretary of India G.K. Pillai said on the escalation of Maoist violence in 2010:

“ If you see the violence profile of the left wing extremism itself, it has been going up year after year. Last year was possibly one of the bloodiest years and our estimate is this year it is only likely to go up whether we like it or not. Because we will no longer allow this policy of continued expansion by the Maoists to continue unabated and the State has now decided that this must stop and we will take back areas which we have lost. We are in one sense taking back those areas and much of the shouting and violence which is going on is because some of the areas we have, in fact, started to take back.” (Pillai, 2010)

Instead of pondering over the actual cause of the resistance on the part of the dalits and adivasi people the government has adopted brutal measures to curb them. Every kind of dissent, even the non-violent protest is termed as criminal offence. The tribal people, the landless, the hungry peasantry who are fighting merely for their rights are branded as Maoists under draconian, undemocratic laws. The uprisings are confronted with police firings, military operation. The people engaged in this battle against injustice are captured, tortured and put to death by the state. Acts like Armed Forces Special Powers ACT that gives the army legal authority to kill on suspicion are employed. Military forces are engaged to eliminate such ‘ internal security threat’ .Central Para Military forces, Indian Reserve Battalions, COBRA battalions, Central Armed Police Forces were deployed. Operations like Operation Green Hunt have been carried on. The special police, CRPF, BSF, and the notorious Naga Battalion are committing merciless atrocities. In Chattisgarh ,Salwa Judam, a military organization was launched to counter the naxalite violence in 2005 just days after the MoU with the Tatas was signed. The militia comprising of the local youth had been trained by the Chhattisgarh government. Salwa Judam operated in hundreds of villages in Bijapur and Bhairamgarh blocks near Bailadila,where Essar Steel’ s new plant was proposed. Hundreds of people were killed. Around 60000 people moved to camps and many others migrated to Andhra and Orissa. But ironically the National Human Rights Commission of

India (NHRS) appointed by the Supreme Court of India declared that the Salwa Judam was a spontaneous reaction of the local people against the Maoist atrocities and all the allegations against them were rejected. Similarly in Bihar a group was formed by the Bhumihar and Rajput landlords to curb the Naxalites and other Dalits and tribal people. The group known for its brutal massacres against the dalit civilians was called Ranvir Sena and it was patronized by the state. Many paramilitary groups like Fear Vikas, Green Tigers, Red Tigers, Kakatiya cobras, Kranti Sena emerged in Andhrapradesh. In West Bengal the Government sought assistance from the Central Government. Companies of Central Reserve Police Force and Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (COBRA) forces were employed. In Lalgarh an Operation was launched after a special meeting between District officials, Deputy General of Police and home secretary Ardhendu Sen and the whole nation saw merciless police atrocities against the village people who were fighting for their survival. The joint forces in the Junglelmahal area resorted to a large scale torture of the villagers including rape of the women. They captured many villages in Medinipur, Salboni, Garbeta, Goaltore and some parts of lalgarh. In May 2006 Planning Commission appointed an expert committee headed by D. Bandopadhyay. In its report the committee made a forceful plea to depart from the conventional ways of looking at the Naxalite issues and suggested to address the development related issues to achieve a long term solution to the problem. But instead of focusing on the development of the backward areas the state has been adopting measures to eliminate the dissenters.

Reimagining a World Gone Terribly Wrong

Through numerous manipulative ways the dissenting subalterns or to borrow Giorgio Agamben's term, the ' Homo Sacers ' , have been victimized by a massive powerful force of the state. When the exploited masses are asking the government how can it offer lands to the industrialists when it can't resettle the fifty million people who have been displaced in the name of development, their voice is silenced by various hegemonic forces. The down trodden can't register their protest. They are expected to bow down before the colossal forces of the government. The affluent section and the aspirational upwardly mobile section immerse themselves in the unscrupulous carnival of exploitation at the cost of the have-nots' lives. This dichotomy seems to be a never ending phenomenon. The poor tribal people of Junglelmahal are expected to live in the veritable hell of poverty and hunger ungrudgingly. They are to be the perennial sufferers at the hands of the police and the ' Harmads ' , the armed militia of the CPI (Marxist). The government will spend crores of money on the military operation to abolish the Maoists but will not spend a penny in alleviating their grievances. Time has come now for the policy makers to wake up from the consumerist dream and realize that usurping land and hills for the Special Economic Zone cannot make

India shine. Ours is a nation with a long tradition of those who have lived and died with the vision of an egalitarian society. We cannot march forward when the 100 million of adivasi population living in the fringes are lagging behind. We have to walk hand in hand towards a new philosophical space with a “different imagination-an imagination that is outside of capitalism as well as Communism” (P.214, *Broken Republic*, Roy).

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