

A RESOURCE WAR TO DIE FOR: IS THE CONFLICT OVER MINERALS CENTRED IN CHHATTISGARH THE WORST WAR THERE HAS EVER BEEN IN INDIA?

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ABSTRACT

On the surface, such a claim may seem ridiculous, and technically, the state has not declared this conflict as a war. Also, both sides portray it as primarily an ideological conflict. But when one analyses the patterns of violence and listens to accounts of Adivasi men, women and children, one has to accept that this is a classic civil war, with Adivasis who often know each other killing and dying on opposing sides. Though the leadership on both sides is largely non-tribal, with police officers and senior Maoists both instigate Adivasis alike as pawns into a long-term conflict to achieve distant aims. While the vast expansion of security forces have been paid largely out of enormous foreign investment pouring in for the region's minerals exploration, Maoists are paid 'protection money' flowing from mining companies. How could peace be brought, with justice? Is there even a movement for peace? How does this war compare with other wars in India, and worldwide? Few have targeted civilian villagers as remorselessly, though Ashoka's Kalinga war, over 2,000 years ago, that killed 100000 people directly, and many indirectly according to Ashoka's own inscriptions, presents a model of genocidal invasion and takeover all too comparable to the present situation. This paper walks through this context of Bastar.

Keywords: **Resource politics, Operation Green Hunt, Adivasi, Bastar, Development**

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One of the worst wars ever

The death of Madkam Hidme, a 21 year old young woman from Gompad village, at the southern tip of Chhattisgarh in Sukma district, who was abducted in a raid by Koya commandos on June 13, 2016 and apparently raped in Chinthagoppa police camp before being killed and dressed in a Maoist uniform to fake an ‘encounter’, is the latest atrocity that has woken many people to what is happening in the Bastar region (India Resists 2016). The *padayatra*¹ led by Soni Sori to Gompad to mark Independence Day 2016 is joined by many activists for peace. But what chances are there for peace right now?

Bastar is, or was, among the most beautiful places in the world – certainly about the most beautiful that I have ever visited and got to know – beautiful in terms of its human development, as well as wild nature. Though endlessly portrayed in the media now as victims of violence, ‘sunk in poverty and neglect’, ‘Maoist supporters’ or ‘primitive’, I would attest that Adivasis in South Chhattisgarh have, or had, among the most highly developed human cultures I know of, in many domains, including the vitality and sophistication of their music and dance, knowledge of plants, subtlety, humour and warmth of social interaction and hospitality, including the enlightened indigenous education system known as the *ghotul*,² where children learnt from each other, and had a lot of fun (Elwin 1947). 1982, the year I first visited Bastar, was also when Naxals from Andhra Pradesh first made forays and started to put down roots there (Choudhury 2012). Crossing Abujhmad forest, one feared tigers, bears and elephants, but not the people at all, even when one met Adivasis in the forest, well armed with bows and arrows.

Memories from that time are vivid. Walking alone there as one did then is unthinkable now. Now, visiting a village is controversial by definition, especially after any atrocity. So polarised have things become that one has to work out which side any person is on, and to survive, villagers have to approach any outsider with suspicion. Such is the spiral of atrocities that staying neutral is fraught with pitfalls, with cruel punishments from Maoists for anyone aiding security forces, and cruel punishments from security forces for anyone aiding the Maoists.

To say this is the worst war there has ever been in India may seem ridiculous at first glance, but in terms of its impact on civilians, in villages where they have lived peacefully ‘since history began’, it is no exaggeration. For people there, it is obviously the worst war ever. For someone familiar with world

¹ A foot march.

² It is a kind of dormitory for youths among the Adivasis of Bastar.

history it follows horrendous precedents set in all too many times and places, from genocides perpetrated hundreds of years back on indigenous American peoples, through the Vietnam and ‘Contra’ wars, to fighting raging currently in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Congo, Somalia, Yemen, Turkey, Ukraine, and elsewhere.

Wars in ancient and medieval India certainly killed a lot of people, if history books are to be believed; but the vast majority were paid fighters, who chose to join an army. Rape and pillage were part of the pattern in many wars, though Shivaji is said to have punished even officers in his own army who committed rape with death.

Since independence, a considerable number of people have died in India’s wars against Pakistan and China; but again, most of these were soldiers, who chose the military profession of kill-or-be-killed. A number of conflicts have amounted in effect to undeclared wars, and these have often had a huge toll for civilians as well as fighters. This applies to the Telengana conflict, against Hyderabad’s attempt to secede, and against communist peasants who had ‘reclaimed’ land in about 3000 villages; and episodes of intense violence and repression in the Northeast, including the campaign to stamp out Naga rebels from the mid-1950s, which involved the passing of AFSPA in 1958, and the aerial bombardment of Mizoram’s capital Aizawl in 1966 (Barman 2013); against the Naxals in West Bengal, Bihar and Andhra; in Punjab, and in Kashmir, especially from 1989. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) was passed on September 11, 1958 to facilitate ‘law and order’ in the Naga Hills area of Assam, before being applied to other areas of the country. It was modelled on the Armed Forces Special Powers Ordinance, passed on August 15, 1942 to suppress the Quit India Movement. An estimated 2500 people were killed under AFSPA, with thousands jailed.

Counting how many people have been killed in these undeclared wars in the name of asserting law and order in independent India, under AFSPA is a serious issue, but also it is pertaining to investigate in other areas, like Chhattisgarh, involving almost total impunity for armed police who have committed atrocities. Sociologist A.R. Desai (1990) documents many cases from the Northeast and other areas. In Manipur alone, the N. Santosh Hegde Commission, investigating six alleged fake encounters, out of 1528 listed in the state since the late 1970s, found conclusive evidence confirming that all six were indeed fake (Ningthouja 2015; Roy 2016). The ‘Impunity Project’ investigated and listed a huge number of cases of false encounter killings from several parts of India (Hoenig and Singh 2014). The pattern of violence becomes even clearer as brought by Bhattacharjee (2015), which details the system in which security force officers gain awards and promotions by killing militants – monstrous enough in itself, but even worse when it becomes clear that hundreds of innocent people have contributed to this body count, and that the pattern has travelled from the Northeast and West Bengal to Punjab and Kashmir, to Chhattisgarh and neighbouring states.

Since 2004-05, South Chhattisgarh, right in the tribal heart of India, has been an epicentre of violence almost without any parallel. The merger of the Bihar/Jharkhand-based Maoist Communist Centre of India (MCCI) with the Andhra-based People's War Group (PWG) in September 2004 was undoubtedly a major element in the increasing violence unleashed in Adivasi areas. But the formation of Salwa Judum (SJ) in June 2005 essentially unleashed a violent civil war, forcing Adivasis to fight each other and choose between the two sides, causing displacement of about 300000 from 644 villages burnt by SJ in south Chhattisgarh within months of its formation (PUDR et al 2006; Mukherjee 2013: 107; Dungdung 2015: 11).

If the scale of these atrocities is unprecedented in India, it is all too comparable to many other modern wars that have caused massive displacement, such as the civil war that has overwhelmed Darfur in Sudan, and recently Syria. What makes these modern wars so terrible is the kind of violence, as well as the scale. Survivors of violence by security forces, and paramilitaries under their command, from SJ to Special Police Officer (SPOs) and the 'District Reserve Group' (Ghose 2016), from 2005 to 2016, tell of rapes preceding killings, with hundreds, if not thousands, of women, children and men tortured, wounded and killed, a large proportion of them certainly innocent, and journalists presently under extreme intimidation in Chhattisgarh (DUJ 2016; Borpujari 2016).

As Himanshu Kumar relates a key story from that time that he became involved in,

'In 2006, four girls were raped by SPOs who were functioning as Salwa Judum leaders. The girls were brought to the Ashram, to our legal aid centre, by youth from the village. We tried to file an FIR at the police station in Dantewada. Because the perpetrators were SPOs, the complaint was never filed. We moved their application to the Superintendent of Police. He never replied. We then moved to the court in Konta, the Judicial Magistrate First Class (JMFC). The judge recorded their depositions, took testimonies of eyewitnesses and family members, and issued arrest warrants. The matter was transferred to a Dantewada session court.

While this was happening, I met with the central Home Minister, P Chidambaram. I invited him to come to Dantewada and meet the victims of Salwa Judum and the SPOs. I told him that it would be important that he come, so that people can believe that the state cares. By coming, he could send the message that the system cares. I gave him a CD, with documentation, with the testimony of these girls. Chidambaram promised to come, but he never came.

Three years later, on December 19, 2009, after seeing no justice in their cases, these girls, who had already been raped, were kidnapped

by police. They were kept at the Dornagal Police Station in Sukma district for five days, before they were returned. They were threatened. They were asked, “how dare you talk to Himanshu?”

During those five days, I contacted Chidambaram. He said, it’s not my problem, talk to the officers. I spoke to GK Pillai, the Home secretary; I called to the Director General of Police in Chhattisgarh; I called the Superintendent of Police for Dantewada; I called the Collector of Dantewada. No one helped.

After the girls returned, they refused to talk to us. They were frightened, angry. We had assured them we would get justice. We failed miserably, and put them in more danger. I lost all hope in the system’ (Podur 2013).

Another case involves Sodi Sambo, of Gompad village, at the extreme south of Chhattisgarh, near the Andhra (Telengana) border, which was attacked by Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) COBRA personnel on October 1, 2009, who killed 13 women, children and men. Sodi was shot in her leg, whose bone was smashed. As the only surviving eye-witness, she became vulnerable. Rescued by Himanshu Kumar who got her treated at AIIMS in Delhi, a second trip there, early in January 2010, ended up with her effective kidnap by police, who banned lawyers and others from meeting her at AIIMS. She was produced soon after in the Supreme Court, and then apparently sent to Konta jail – in effect, she has been ‘disappeared’ (Borpujari 2010A & 2010B; Iqbal 2012).

Too often, rape functions as a ‘weapon’ of this war, used systematically as an emblem of domination (Iqbal 2010; Padel 2013). Among two cases highlighted by activists, S.R.P. Kalluri, when he was Superintendent of Police (SP) in Sarguja district, is reported to have raped a tribal woman called Ledha Bai, whose husband was a Maoist, and ordered her gang-raped by other police. In October 2011, he is reported to have overseen the torture of Soni Sori, in which stones were inserted into her vagina, that were later removed at a hospital in Kolkata. Ankit Garg, as SP for Dantewada, who was apparently directly responsible for this torture, received a gallantry award in 2012, ostensibly for the Mahasamund attack on Maoists (in which civilians also died) on October 9, 2009, while Kalluri received an award for ‘meritorious service’ in January 2013 – both awards angrily denounced by human rights activists (Sethi 2012; Kamayani 2013; SSS 2013).

‘Operation Greenhunt’ as a Resource War

The pattern of violence has escalated over the years, as the State has met Maoist insurrection with extreme forms of repression, spreading from West Bengal to Bihar and Andhra Pradesh in the 1960s-70s, and from there (especially what is now Telengana) to what is now south Chhattisgarh, east Maharashtra and Odisha during the 1980s-2000s. The states of Chhattisgarh

and Jharkhand were created in 2000, not in immediate response to popular movements, 'but at a time when the market was ready to exploit the natural resources', especially minerals, as industrial policies brought out by both states in 2001 showed clearly; especially with the formation of Salwa Judum – meaning 'peace march' or 'purification hunt' in Gondi,³ though 'In practice Salwa Judum was anything but a peace march' (Dungdung 2015: 7-9).

In neighbouring states, similar patterns of conflict over resources were also getting worse – for example, the Maikanch police firing on December 16, 2000, killing three Adivasi protesters against Utkal Alumina's plans in Kashipur, Odisha, and wounding many others (Padel & Das 2010: 121-138); and the Tapkari police firing on February 16, 2001, that killed nine and severely wounded 22 protesters, nearly all of them Mundas, against the Koel Karo dams – a symptom of this collusion in Jharkhand, in an area where Maoists were not operational, though people had been politicised since the time of Birsa Munda (EPW 2001).

In the same month of June 2005 that SJ was formed, Tata Steel and Essar signed Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) with the Chhattisgarh government for new iron ore mines and steel plants on Adivasi land. As many have commented, these two phenomena cannot be unconnected. Maoists had started a policy of assassinating class enemies in Bastar, and one piece of evidence that proves the connection is that Mahendra Karma, who was instrumental in forming SJ, having lost relatives to the Maoists in this way, was also a leading figure in the Tata Steel and Essar plans (Roy 2010; Prasad 2016).

After the first cycle of extreme violence occurred during 2005-06, another cycle started in 2009 under the name 'Operation Greenhunt' – a name as absurd as 'War on Terror', and similarly officially denied, while in common use by politicians and media. How can you make war on an abstract noun? What is a 'Greenhunt'? The absurdity and lack of logic conceals systematic use of terror as a tactic, and a clinical logic: the close connection between campaigns to get rid of the Maoists, and the mining companies that want these lands and their resources. A 'Greenfield' project is a lovely enticing name for taking an unspoilt area of green forest, and turning it into a brown wasteland. Similarly with 'Operation Greenhunt' – a green name involving extreme levels of destruction, in this case 'combing operations' searching for Maoists under forest canopies, killing, capturing and terrorising Adivasis who are out in the forest practicing their ancient economy – a 'new normal' of hunting Adivasis in a war against the people who have always inhabited

³³ Gondi is the language mostly spoken by Gond tribe in South Chhattisgarh, parts of Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Telanghana and many areas that remain the Gond domain.

India's forest areas, driven by an economic logic that demands access to the minerals and other resources under and around the lands where they live.

One war that certainly bears comparison with the scale of violence taking place now in Adivasi lands of east-central India is Ashoka's Kalinga war, over 2200 years ago, in which his soldiers conquered Odisha against fierce resistance by the Kalinga people. Ashoka's own inscriptions record that 100000 people were killed directly in this war, with 150000 enslaved and many times this number dying afterwards of famine and disease (Thapar 1961: 255-7; Padel & Das 2010: 55). In this light, the naming of 'Kalinganagar' could not be more ironic: the massive conglomeration of steel plants around a new township in Jajpur district of Odisha that came up during the 1990s; especially when the police firing there killed 14 Adivasis on January 2, 2006, all from different villages, protesting against construction of a new Tata Steel plant on their land (Padel & Das 2010: 405-8).

The mass use of police to break down opposition to large-scale 'development projects', in support of big mining corporations, including Tata Steel, Jindal, Essar, Vedanta and Posco, is very revealing. Often several thousand police are deployed at a time – much more than any force confronting the Maoists. This shows the real nature of the conflict, and what is really at stake. So do patterns of funding, when they emerge into public view, as they did for a moment on December 16, 2009, when Naveen Patnaik, as Chief Minister of Odisha, publicly thanked the steel companies for paying 66.2 lakh rupees for a new police station in Kalinganagar – the first time he had visited there since the firing nearly four years before (ToI 2009).

The model for all these police firings goes back to one event in particular during colonial times, when a military officer named Colonel Dyer 'made an example' by firing on the crowd collected in Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar, on April 13, 1919, killing hundreds. But another aspect – what recent police firings have been all about – is highlighted by B.D. Sharma in his famous 29th Report as Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (1989), where he refers to the State already making a 'declaration of war' against its tribal citizens, and policies that undermined tribal people's traditional rights to the forest and other resources as 'internal colonialism' (Sharma 1989: 287, 291).

Obviously, Marxists are correct to call this whole process 'Primitive Accumulation' and 'Accumulation by Dispossession', but there is a need to go far beyond these phrases, to understand the complexity of how modern capitalism works, and the interlocking roles of numerous foreign financial institutions with Indian ones. When Manmohan Singh characterised the Maoist conflict as India's gravest security threat, repeatedly since 2004, this legitimised a huge expansion of security forces in Adivasi areas. Blaming the banned CPI (Maoist) is not enough. Introspection into the policies implemented by government officials, along lines suggested by B.D. Sharma's

Report, and finding ways to change the patterns of violence, are vital if the alienation of Adivasis is ever to be corrected.

In practice, what has unfolded in and around Chhattisgarh is an undeclared civil war, and while both sides wish to portray it as mainly ideological, this masks the real nature of what is a happening: a vicious resource war, driven above all by investment in mining and metal production, in line with a vast increase in mining investment worldwide, as well as in India (Padel and Das 2010: 309). The logic of the 'resource curse' is very simple: countries or regions rich in natural resources, in the age of ultra-capitalism we live in, become epicentres of exploitation, so that what 'should' bring wealth according to an economic logic divorced from political realities, brings extreme levels of poverty and violence instead. The hypothesis works among regions within as well as between countries, and a recent study surveying the condition of mining in India has brought a lot of evidence showing that the poorest areas in India are those under intensive mining (CSE 2008; Padel and Das 2010: 243-7). At its worst, a resource curse tips into an escalating resource conflict or war. This is the process we have watched unfolding in South Chhattisgarh and neighbouring areas.

This is not to deny that Maoists may be correct on the aspect of class war, and other issues. One irony is that many measures that Maoists have implemented, such as fair prices for *tendu* leaves, banning illegal liquor shops, and reclaiming land illegally acquired by non-tribals, are policies that the government should be promoting itself.

The problem is that Maoists have exacerbated the class war aspect, in Andhra Pradesh and during the 1980s-90s in Bastar, by their policy of 'assassination of class enemies'; while every attack on police and others has provoked a massive backlash onto innocent people in nearby villages, escalating the conflict into a far wider violence. This causes incalculable human agony, at the same time as it motivates more Adivasis to join the Maoists to get revenge, since justice by normal channels seems impossible. Obviously, by far the greater violence is from the state side, in the scale of human rights abuses, including the number of Adivasis in jails.

Another basic structural feature of the conflict is that Maoists, like police, get a lot of their funding through the investment for mining. When they attack mines, they do not try and close operations down but get explosives, and the attack functions as a bargain over protection money. The Essar case, where clear evidence from several sources showed that the company was paying 'protection money' to the Maoists, is almost certainly an example of a widespread funding pattern (PTI 2011; Sethi 2011). In this sense, the Maoists have evolved a 'warlord' role, similar to groups where ideology merges into a tussle for power and resources in a pattern of modern 'dirty wars' in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, Syria and elsewhere (Scahill 2013).

Analysing the system that fuels this war

The situation in Chhattisgarh right now is getting even worse (Borpujari 2016; DUJ 2016; Ghose 2016; Prasad 2016; Singh 2016). A system of endemic exploitation is vastly compounded by money pouring into a ‘poor’ region (Padel & Das 2010: 428-54), that has turned into a war driven by mining companies (Padel 2012). Claims that mining will bring ‘development’ are a cruel joke, when one understands how the mining industry really works. ‘Development-Induced Displacement’ is actually Investment-Induced Dispossession, and *de-development* on a colossal scale, of ecosystems along with the communities that have always lived in symbiosis with them (Padel 2013; 2015), as Sharma (2010) describes part of an ‘Unbroken History of Broken Promises’ towards Adivasis. Behind the big companies are numerous foreign as well as Indian institutions and individuals, including accountancy firms, banks and hedge funds among many other investors, and arms companies: the Chhattisgarh-Odisha-Jharkhand conflict needs to be understood as a war driven by demand for metals needed for more wars. Like the mining industry it depends on, the *Shadow world* of the arms trade is superlatively corrupt, and at the heart of today’s world economy, and the economy of each ‘developed country’ (Feinstein 2011).

Present plans for ‘greenfield’ iron-ore mines in Raoghat (Chhattisgarh), Khandadhara (north Odisha) and Saranda Forest (south Jharkhand), threaten Adivasi communities in still-unspoilt, densely forested mountain ranges. The Niyamgiri range has been saved for the moment by the Dongria Kond movement there (Saving Iceland 2014; Padel 2014A). But will these pressures over mineral deposits ever cease?

Perhaps most wars since ancient times can be understood as resource wars – especially looking on land as a primary resource – but increasingly, wars are over ever-scarcer resources, that function as the material base for capitalism, especially for its military industrial media complex – oil and gas deposits primarily, in the Middle East and many other places (Klare 2008, 2012; Mitchell 2011), mainly minerals and coal in India and so many other countries. Above all the resource, all Life on Earth depends on – water, considering the resource conflicts engendered by big dams, and the huge water demands for producing steel and aluminium – over 40 and 1000 tonnes respectively for producing a tonne of steel and aluminium (Padel & Das 2010: 333; Padel, Dandekar & Unni 2013).

Can we imagine a future in which resources are shared equitably, and power is accountable, in a system of long-term sustainability where economics is harmonised with ecology? Or is our human race doomed to devour the resources that nourish us in wars over the scarce resources still remaining?

After the assassination of Maoist leaders who seemed inclined towards peace, such as Azad and Kisenji, can we imagine plans for peace in central India,

along with justice, or at least a process of truth and reconciliation, and Free Prior Informed Consent for communities threatened with displacement in the name of development?

Perhaps, as Noam Chomsky has recently said, the only hope for survival of the human race for future centuries is a process of beginning to learn quite fast from indigenous peoples, instead of going on seeing them as ‘primitive’ and taking over their territories (*Telesur TV* 2016). This hope, based in respect for Mother Earth, is expressed in the Cochabamba declaration of the Rights of Nature, made in Bolivia in April 2011:

‘We, the people and nations of Earth: considering that we are all part of Mother Earth, an indivisible, living community of interrelated and interdependent beings with a common destiny.... recognizing that the capitalist system and all forms of depredation, exploitation, abuse and contamination have caused great destruction, degradation and disruption of Mother Earth, putting life as we know it today at risk.... conscious of the urgency of taking decisive, collective action to transform structures and systems that cause climate change and other threats to Mother Earth.... proclaim this Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth....’ (Rights of Nature 2010).

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