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State withers into signs in starved Bastar - Guerrillas & their guns rule over land where there are no roads, power, water or schools



Tribal Naxalite supporters on their way to a rally in the Bastar jungles. Telegraph picture

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Dandakaranya Forests (Bastar): The State is a painter of signs.

The arrow road from Raipur to Konta on the northern Andhra frontier is the flowering of a myriad welfare slogans: Educate Your Child. Pox And Polio Cripple, Inoculate Your Child. Small Family, Happy Family. Drink Clean Water, Drink Milk. Preserve the Forest. Use Condoms, HIV kills. Hunger kills too but that isn't an assigned slogan anywhere.

And the painter's done his painting and left, anyhow. See you till the next elections. Meanwhile, ponder my sage advice on the walls.

As our motley party — armed Maoist guerrillas in fatigues and backpacks, theoreticians and propagandists fisting the air, militiamen in mufti — sweeps deeper into the Bastar woodland, fallen leaves crackling underfoot like crisps, the slogans wane and the State fades away until there is no clue left it exists.

No roads, no power, no water, no intimations of even an effort made. We cross a squat structure that a mangled strip of metal announces to be a jail; its walls are tumbled, its insides abandoned to the ravages of the bush. The State has withered to remnants.

The only government in these parts is the armed column straggling single-file ahead of us with all its worldly goods — guns and banners, pots and pails, gunnybags and satchels: "Janatana Sarkar", people's government. You wonder why it gets labelled a parallel government so often. There's nothing for it to run parallel to. Tribal elder Kuria Gond tells us why he has turned out with each head of his settlement of Maranhar to feistily wave the Maoists by. "*Kamrade, mai-baap, yahi log hai jo hai, hamara ijjat aur jangal ka.*" (The comrades, they are all we have, they stand for our forests and our pride.)

Nature, in all its harshness, meant Bastar to be endowed in its bounties: oceans of sal and sangwan bustling with wildlife; seasons rich in tendu and seasons rich in tamarind and mahua; a slew of rivers and natural dams that criss-cross the plateau, more than enough to sustain its sparse tribal communities. Even a scorched day brings its celebrations.

At twilight, the forest begins to sweat out its fragrances — honey, gums, fermented “mahua”, frothy and heady “sulfi”, fresh off the palms, the splendoured white flowering of “kuleech” which springs rebellious from the heart of rock.

Even so, Bastar is a starved chicken’s neck pincer at the tri-junction of Orissa, Andhra and Maharashtra. Its many treasures have been reaped and carted away for profit by incessant coloniser-contractor waves.

Its ecology has been scratched and smashed by cynical hunters of fortune — leopard skin, deer meat, iron ore, bauxite, they’ve scavenged it to the bare bone.

If you haven’t heard or bothered about the fires flaming here, it is probably because this is too famished a flank and too far away. The nether half of a newly created state that’s mostly remained off the pale of consciousness. Bastar, when it was a single district, would have counted among India’s largest, but nine out of ten would probably fail to locate it on a map straight off. Something tribal, somewhere remote.

The natives of the land have been left to eke out their inhuman indices — literacy begins at nil and strains to reach 21 per cent in pockets; nearly 700 of the 1,220 villages have no schools (where there are schools, they are mostly shut); only 59 have primary health centres, if only in name — death because of disease and malnutrition is rampant.

Eighty-four per cent of the tribals remain marginal agricultural workers, often having to migrate in search of daily wages. Most of Bastar still lives an essentially pre-modern existence.

The arterial roads are excellent and there is surplus power but that only deepens ironies. Both have been used by the outsider to exploit and extract Bastar’s riches, both have limited uses for the tribal.

The State mostly slept on its slogans and promises. It filled the legislative bodies with the minimum required by quotas and it painted more slogans.

This is how the Naxalites arrived here in the early 1980s, ploughing parched aspiration with seeds of an egalitarian revolution. They spread fast because they had more to assist them than merely tribal disaffection.

Contiguity with Naxalite bases in neighbouring states, the forested, sparsely populated terrain and, most of all, a State that, at least initially, just didn’t care.

The Reds had free run and they cried their slogans loud. End feudal exploitation. End contractor raj. Pay higher wages. Stop abusing the women. Leave tribal land and its fruit to the tribal. They were fired by their zeal, they quickly inspired sympathy and support. Where they couldn’t inspire politically, they dominated by the gun.

The colour of the Naxalite base has always been grey rather than red; it is tough to judge what support comes from sympathy and what from fear.

There are those like Kuria Gond who’d stand up and be counted among willing votaries of the “Janatana Sarkar” but there are others who aren’t so sure.

“Do we have a choice?” asks Souri Chamda, a village teacher, who professes no love for Maoist ideology or ways but often runs errands for them, “They have guns and you have to do their bidding. I would rather have a proper government ruling over us, but where is it to be found? We see no government other than on faraway highways. The Maoists are the only ones we have, and you have to like it, because you cannot afford to lump it.”

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