

The Guardian
[England]

The heart of India is under attack

To justify enforcing a corporate land grab, the state
needs an enemy – and it has chosen the Maoists



By *Arundhati Roy*

guardian.co.uk, Friday 30 October 2009 22.00 GMT

The low, flat-topped hills of south Orissa have been home to the Dongria Kondh long before there was a country called India or a state called Orissa. The hills watched over the Kondh. The Kondh watched over the hills and worshipped them as living deities. Now these hills have been sold for the bauxite they contain. For the Kondh it's as though god had been sold. They ask how much god would go for if the god were Ram or Allah or Jesus Christ.

Perhaps the Kondh are supposed to be grateful that their Niyamgiri hill, home to their Niyam Raja, God of Universal Law, has been sold to a company with a name like Vedanta (the branch of Hindu philosophy that teaches the Ultimate Nature of Knowledge). It's one of the biggest mining corporations in the world and is owned by Anil Agarwal, the Indian billionaire who lives in London in a mansion that once belonged to the Shah of Iran. Vedanta is only one of the many multinational corporations closing in on Orissa.

If the flat-topped hills are destroyed, the forests that clothe them will be destroyed, too. So will the rivers and streams that flow out of them and irrigate the plains below. So will the Dongria Kondh. So will the hundreds of thousands of tribal people who live in the forested heart of India, and whose homeland is similarly under attack.

In our smoky, crowded cities, some people say, "So what? Someone has to pay the price of progress." Some even say, "Let's face it, these are people whose time has come. Look at any developed country – Europe, the US, Australia – they all have a 'past'." Indeed they do. So why shouldn't "we"?

In keeping with this line of thought, the government has announced Operation Green Hunt, a war purportedly against the "Maoist" rebels headquartered in the jungles of central India. Of course, the Maoists are by no means the only ones rebelling. There is a whole spectrum of struggles all over the country that people are engaged in—the landless, the Dalits, the homeless, workers, peasants, weavers. They're pitted against a juggernaut of injustices, including policies that allow a wholesale corporate takeover of people's land and resources. However, it is the Maoists that the government has singled out as being the biggest threat.

Two years ago, when things were nowhere near as bad as they are now, the prime minister described the Maoists as the "single largest internal security threat" to the country. This will probably go down as the most popular and often repeated thing he ever said. For some reason, the comment he made on 6 January, 2009, at a meeting of state chief ministers, when he described the Maoists as having only "modest capabilities", doesn't seem to have had the same raw appeal. He revealed his government's real concern on 18 June, 2009, when he told parliament: "If left-wing extremism continues to flourish in parts which have natural resources of minerals, the climate for investment would certainly be affected."

Who are the Maoists? They are members of the banned Communist party of India (Maoist) – CPI (Maoist) – one of the several descendants of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), which led the [1969 Naxalite uprising](#) and was subsequently liquidated by the Indian government. The Maoists believe that the innate, structural inequality of Indian society can only be redressed by the violent overthrow of the Indian state. In its earlier avatars as the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) in Jharkhand and Bihar, and the People's War Group (PWG) in Andhra Pradesh, the Maoists had tremendous popular support. (When the ban on them was briefly lifted in 2004, 1.5 million people attended their rally in Warangal.)

But eventually their intercession in Andhra Pradesh ended badly. They left a violent legacy that turned some of their staunchest supporters into harsh critics. After a paroxysm of killing and counter-killing by the Andhra police as well as the Maoists, the PWG was decimated. Those who managed to survive fled Andhra Pradesh into neighbouring Chhattisgarh. There, deep in the heart of the forest, they joined colleagues who had already been working there for decades.

Not many "outsiders" have any first-hand experience of the real nature of the Maoist movement in the forest. A recent interview with one of its top leaders, Comrade Ganapathy, in *Open* magazine, didn't do much to change the minds of those who view the Maoists as a party with an unforgiving, totalitarian vision, which countenances no dissent whatsoever. Comrade Ganapathy said nothing that would persuade people that, were the Maoists ever to come to power, they would be equipped to properly address the almost insane diversity of India's caste-ridden society. His casual approval of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) of Sri Lanka was enough to send a shiver down even the most sympathetic of spines, not just because of the brutal ways in which the LTTE chose to wage its war, but also because of the cataclysmic tragedy that has befallen the Tamil people of Sri Lanka, who it claimed to represent, and for whom it surely must take some responsibility.

Right now in central India, the Maoists' guerrilla army is made up almost entirely of desperately poor tribal people living in conditions of such chronic hunger that it verges on famine of the kind

we only associate with sub-Saharan Africa. They are people who, even after 60 years of India's so-called independence, have not had access to education, healthcare or legal redress. They are people who have been mercilessly exploited for decades, consistently cheated by small businessmen and moneylenders, the women raped as a matter of right by police and forest department personnel. Their journey back to a semblance of dignity is due in large part to the Maoist cadre who have lived and worked and fought by their side for decades.

If the tribals have taken up arms, they have done so because a government which has given them nothing but violence and neglect now wants to snatch away the last thing they have – their land. Clearly, they do not believe the government when it says it only wants to "develop" their region. Clearly, they do not believe that the roads as wide and flat as aircraft runways that are being built through their forests in Dantewada by the National Mineral Development Corporation are being built for them to walk their children to school on. They believe that if they do not fight for their land, they will be annihilated. That is why they have taken up arms.

Even if the ideologues of the Maoist movement are fighting to eventually overthrow the Indian state, right now even they know that their ragged, malnourished army, the bulk of whose soldiers have never seen a train or a bus or even a small town, are fighting only for survival.

In 2008, an expert group appointed by the Planning Commission submitted a report called "Development Challenges in Extremist-Affected Areas". It said, "the Naxalite (Maoist) movement has to be recognised as a political movement with a strong base among the landless and poor peasantry and adivasis. Its emergence and growth need to be contextualised 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." A very far cry from the "single-largest internal security threat".

Since the Maoist rebellion is the flavour of the week, everybody, from the sleekest fat cat to the most cynical editor of the most sold-out newspaper in this country, seems to be suddenly ready to concede that it is decades of accumulated injustice that lies at the root of the problem. But instead of addressing that problem, which would mean putting the brakes on this 21st-century gold rush, they are trying to head the debate off in a completely different direction, with a noisy outburst of pious outrage about Maoist "terrorism". But they're only speaking to themselves.

The people who have taken to arms are not spending all their time watching (or performing for) TV, or reading the papers, or conducting SMS polls for the Moral Science question of the day: Is Violence Good or Bad? SMS your reply to ... They're out there. They're fighting. They believe they have the right to defend their homes and their land. They believe that they deserve justice.

In order to keep its better-off citizens absolutely safe from these dangerous people, the government has declared war on them. A war, which it tells us, may take between three and five years to win. Odd, isn't it, that even after the Mumbai attacks of 26/11, the government was prepared to talk with Pakistan? It's prepared to talk to China. But when it comes to waging war against the poor, it's playing hard.

It's not enough that special police with totemic names like Greyhounds, Cobras and Scorpions are scouring the forests with a licence to kill. It's not enough that the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), the Border Security Force (BSF) and the notorious Naga Battalion have already wreaked havoc and committed unconscionable atrocities in remote forest villages. It's not enough that the government supports and arms the Salwa Judum, the "people's militia" that has killed and raped and burned its way through the forests of Dantewada leaving 300,000 people homeless or on the run. Now the government is going to deploy the Indo-Tibetan border police and tens of thousands of paramilitary troops. It plans to set up a brigade headquarters in Bilaspur (which will displace nine villages) and an air base in Rajnandgaon (which will displace seven). Obviously, these decisions were taken a while ago. Surveys have been done, sites chosen. Interesting. War has been in the offing for a while. And now the helicopters of the Indian air force have been given the right to fire in "self-defence", the very right that the government denies its poorest citizens.

Fire at whom? How will the security forces be able to distinguish a Maoist from an ordinary person who is running terrified through the jungle? Will adivasis carrying the bows and arrows they have carried for centuries now count as Maoists too? Are non-combatant Maoist sympathisers valid targets? When I was in Dantewada, the superintendent of police showed me pictures of 19 "Maoists" that "his boys" had killed. I asked him how I was supposed to tell they were Maoists. He said, "See Ma'am, they have malaria medicines, Dettol bottles, all these things from outside."

What kind of war is Operation Green Hunt going to be? Will we ever know? Not much news comes out of the forests. Lalgarh in West Bengal has been cordoned off. Those who try to go in are being beaten and arrested. And called Maoists, of course. In Dantewada, the Vanvasi Chetana Ashram, a Gandhian ashram run by Himanshu Kumar, was bulldozed in a few hours. It was the last neutral outpost before the war zone begins, a place where journalists, activists, researchers and fact-finding teams could stay while they worked in the area.

Meanwhile, the Indian establishment has unleashed its most potent weapon. Almost overnight, our embedded media has substituted its steady supply of planted, unsubstantiated, hysterical stories about "Islamist terrorism" with planted, unsubstantiated, hysterical stories about "Red terrorism". In the midst of this racket, at ground zero, the cordon of silence is being inexorably tightened. The "Sri Lanka solution" could very well be on the cards. It's not for nothing that the Indian government blocked a European move in the UN asking for an international probe into war crimes committed by the government of Sri Lanka in its recent offensive against the Tamil Tigers.

The first move in that direction is the concerted campaign that has been orchestrated to shoehorn the myriad forms of resistance taking place in this country into a simple George Bush binary: If you are not with us, you are with the Maoists. The deliberate exaggeration of the Maoist "threat" helps the state justify militarisation. (And surely does no harm to the Maoists. Which political party would be unhappy to be singled out for such attention?) While all the oxygen is being used up by this new doppelganger of the "war on terror", the state will use the opportunity to mop up the hundreds of other resistance movements in the sweep of its military operation, calling them all Maoist sympathisers.

I use the future tense, but this process is well under way. The West Bengal government tried to do this in Nandigram and Singur but failed. Right now in Lalgarh, the Pulishi Santrash Birodhi Janasadharaner Committee or the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities – which is a people's movement that is separate from, though sympathetic to, the Maoists – is routinely referred to as an overground wing of the CPI (Maoist). Its leader, Chhatradhar Mahato, now arrested and being held without bail, is always called a "Maoist leader". We all know the story of Dr Binayak Sen, a medical doctor and a civil liberties activist, who spent two years in jail on the absolutely facile charge of being a courier for the Maoists. While the light shines brightly on Operation Green Hunt, in other parts of India, away from the theatre of war, the assault on the rights of the poor, of workers, of the landless, of those whose lands the government wishes to acquire for "public purpose", will pick up pace. Their suffering will deepen and it will be that much harder for them to get a hearing.

Once the war begins, like all wars, it will develop a momentum, a logic and an economics of its own. It will become a way of life, almost impossible to reverse. The police will be expected to behave like an army, a ruthless killing machine. The paramilitary will be expected to become like the police, a corrupt, bloated administrative force. We've seen it happen in Nagaland, Manipur and Kashmir. The only difference in the "heartland" will be that it'll become obvious very quickly to the security forces that they're only a little less wretched than the people they're fighting. In time, the divide between the people and the law enforcers will become porous. Guns and ammunition will be bought and sold. In fact, it's already happening. Whether it's the security forces or the Maoists or noncombatant civilians, the poorest people will die in this rich people's war. However, if anybody believes that this war will leave them unaffected, they should think again. The resources it'll consume will cripple the economy of this country.

Last week, civil liberties groups from all over the country organised a series of meetings in Delhi to discuss what could be done to turn the tide and stop the war. The absence of Dr Balagopal, one of the best-known civil rights activists of Andhra Pradesh, who died two weeks ago, closed around us like a physical pain. He was one of the bravest, wisest political thinkers of our time and left us just when we needed him most. Still, I'm sure he would have been reassured to hear speaker after speaker displaying the vision, the depth, the experience, the wisdom, the political acuity and, above all, the real humanity of the community of activists, academics, lawyers, judges and a range of other people who make up the civil liberties community in India. Their presence in the capital signalled that outside the arclights of our TV studios and beyond the drumbeat of media hysteria, even among India's middle classes, a humane heart still beats. Small wonder then that these are the people who the Union home minister recently accused of creating an "intellectual climate" that was conducive to "terrorism". If that charge was meant to frighten people, it had the opposite effect.

The speakers represented a range of opinion from the liberal to the radical left. Though none of those who spoke would describe themselves as Maoist, few were opposed in principle to the idea that people have a right to defend themselves against state violence. Many were uncomfortable about Maoist violence, about the "people's courts" that delivered summary justice, about the authoritarianism that was bound to permeate an armed struggle and marginalise those who did not have arms. But even as they expressed their discomfort, they knew that people's courts only existed because India's courts are out of the reach of ordinary people and that the armed struggle

that has broken out in the heartland is not the first, but the very last option of a desperate people pushed to the very brink of existence. The speakers were aware of the dangers of trying to extract a simple morality out of individual incidents of heinous violence, in a situation that had already begun to look very much like war. Everybody had graduated long ago from equating the structural violence of the state with the violence of the armed resistance. In fact, retired Justice PB Sawant went so far as to thank the Maoists for forcing the establishment of this country to pay attention to the egregious injustice of the system. Hargopal from Andhra Pradesh spoke of his experience as a civil rights activist through the years of the Maoist interlude in his state. He mentioned in passing the fact that in a few days in Gujarat in 2002, Hindu mobs led by the Bajrang Dal and the VHP had killed more people than the Maoists ever had even in their bloodiest days in Andhra Pradesh.

People who had come from the war zones, from Lalgah, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Orissa, described the police repression, the arrests, the torture, the killing, the corruption, and the fact that they sometimes seemed to take orders directly from the officials who worked for the mining companies. People described the often dubious, malign role being played by certain NGOs funded by aid agencies wholly devoted to furthering corporate prospects. Again and again they spoke of how in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh activists as well as ordinary people – anyone who was seen to be a dissenter – were being branded Maoists and imprisoned. They said that this, more than anything else, was pushing people to take up arms and join the Maoists. They asked how a government that professed its inability to resettle even a fraction of the 50 million people who had been displaced by "development" projects was suddenly able to identify 1,40,000 hectares of prime land to give to industrialists for more than 300 Special Economic Zones, India's onshore tax havens for the rich. They asked what brand of justice the supreme court was practising when it refused to review the meaning of "public purpose" in the land acquisition act even when it knew that the government was forcibly acquiring land in the name of "public purpose" to give to private corporations. They asked why when the government says that "the writ of the state must run", it seems to only mean that police stations must be put in place. Not schools or clinics or housing, or clean water, or a fair price for forest produce, or even being left alone and free from the fear of the police – anything that would make people's lives a little easier. They asked why the "writ of the state" could never be taken to mean justice.

There was a time, perhaps 10 years ago, when in meetings like these, people were still debating the model of "development" that was being thrust on them by the New Economic Policy. Now the rejection of that model is complete. It is absolute. Everyone from the Gandhians to the Maoists agree on that. The only question now is, what is the most effective way to dismantle it?

An old college friend of a friend, a big noise in the corporate world, had come along for one of the meetings out of morbid curiosity about a world he knew very little about. Even though he had disguised himself in a Fabindia kurta, he couldn't help looking (and smelling) expensive. At one point, he leaned across to me and said, "Someone should tell them not to bother. They won't win this one. They have no idea what they're up against. With the kind of money that's involved here, these companies can buy ministers and media barons and policy wonks, they can run their own NGOs, their own militias, they can buy whole governments. They'll even buy the Maoists. These good people here should save their breath and find something better to do."

When people are being brutalised, what "better" thing is there for them to do than to fight back? It's not as though anyone's offering them a choice, unless it's to commit suicide, like some of the farmers caught in a spiral of debt have done. (Am I the only one who gets the feeling that the Indian establishment and its representatives in the media are far more comfortable with the idea of poor people killing themselves in despair than with the idea of them fighting back?)

For several years, people in Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Jharkhand and West Bengal – some of them Maoists, many not – have managed to hold off the big corporations. The question now is, how will Operation Green Hunt change the nature of their struggle? What exactly are the fighting people up against?

It's true that, historically, mining companies have often won their battles against local people. Of all corporations, leaving aside the ones that make weapons, they probably have the most merciless past. They are cynical, battle-hardened campaigners and when people say, "*Jaan denge par jameen nahin denge*" (We'll give away our lives, but never our land), it probably bounces off them like a light drizzle on a bomb shelter. They've heard it before, in a thousand different languages, in a hundred different countries.

Right now in India, many of them are still in the first class arrivals lounge, ordering cocktails, blinking slowly like lazy predators, waiting for the Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) they have signed – some as far back as 2005 – to materialise into real money. But four years in a first class lounge is enough to test the patience of even the truly tolerant: the elaborate, if increasingly empty, rituals of democratic practice: the (sometimes rigged) public hearings, the (sometimes fake) environmental impact assessments, the (often purchased) clearances from various ministries, the long drawn-out court cases. Even phony democracy is time-consuming. And time is money.

So what kind of money are we talking about? In their seminal, soon-to-be-published work, *Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminum Cartel*, Samarendra Das and Felix Padel say that the financial value of the bauxite deposits of Orissa alone is \$2.27 trillion (more than twice India's GDP). That was at 2004 prices. At today's prices it would be about \$4 trillion.

Of this, officially the government gets a royalty of less than 7%. Quite often, if the mining company is a known and recognised one, the chances are that, even though the ore is still in the mountain, it will have already been traded on the futures market. So, while for the adivasis the mountain is still a living deity, the fountainhead of life and faith, the keystone of the ecological health of the region, for the corporation, it's just a cheap storage facility. Goods in storage have to be accessible. From the corporation's point of view, the bauxite will have to come out of the mountain. Such are the pressures and the exigencies of the free market.

That's just the story of the bauxite in Orissa. Expand the \$4 trillion to include the value of the millions of tonnes of high-quality iron ore in Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand and the 28 other precious mineral resources, including uranium, limestone, dolomite, coal, tin, granite, marble, copper, diamond, gold, quartzite, corundum, beryl, alexandrite, silica, fluorite and garnet. Add to that the power plants, the dams, the highways, the steel and cement factories, the aluminium smelters, and all the other infrastructure projects that are part of the hundreds of MoUs (more

than 90 in Jharkhand alone) that have been signed. That gives us a rough outline of the scale of the operation and the desperation of the stakeholders.

The forest once known as the Dandakaranya, which stretches from West Bengal through Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, parts of Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, is home to millions of India's tribal people. The media has taken to calling it the Red corridor or the Maoist corridor. It could just as accurately be called the MoUist corridor. It doesn't seem to matter at all that the fifth schedule of the constitution provides protection to adivasi people and disallows the alienation of their land. It looks as though the clause is there only to make the constitution look good – a bit of window-dressing, a slash of make-up. Scores of corporations, from relatively unknown ones to the biggest mining companies and steel manufacturers in the world, are in the fray to appropriate adivasi homelands – the Mittals, Jindals, Tata, Essar, Posco, Rio Tinto, BHP Billiton and, of course, Vedanta.

There's an MoU on every mountain, river and forest glade. We're talking about social and environmental engineering on an unimaginable scale. And most of this is secret. It's not in the public domain. Somehow I don't think that the plans afoot that would destroy one of the world's most pristine forests and ecosystems, as well as the people who live in it, will be discussed at the climate change conference in Copenhagen. Our 24-hour news channels that are so busy hunting for macabre stories of Maoist violence – and making them up when they run out of the real thing – seem to have no interest at all in this side of the story. I wonder why?

Perhaps it's because the development lobby to which they are so much in thrall says the mining industry will ratchet up the rate of GDP growth dramatically and provide employment to the people it displaces. This does not take into account the catastrophic costs of environmental damage. But even on its own narrow terms, it is simply untrue. Most of the money goes into the bank accounts of the mining corporations. Less than 10% comes to the public exchequer. A very tiny percentage of the displaced people get jobs, and those who do, earn slave-wages to do humiliating, backbreaking work. By caving in to this paroxysm of greed, we are bolstering other countries' economies with our ecology.

When the scale of money involved is what it is, the stakeholders are not always easy to identify. Between the CEOs in their private jets and the wretched tribal special police officers in the "people's" militias – who for a couple of thousand rupees a month fight their own people, rape, kill and burn down whole villages in an effort to clear the ground for mining to begin – there is an entire universe of primary, secondary and tertiary stakeholders.

These people don't have to declare their interests, but they're allowed to use their positions and good offices to further them. How will we ever know which political party, which ministers, which MPs, which politicians, which judges, which NGOs, which expert consultants, which police officers, have a direct or indirect stake in the booty? How will we know which newspapers reporting the latest Maoist "atrocities", which TV channels "reporting directly from ground zero" – or, more accurately, making it a point not to report from ground zero, or even more accurately, lying blatantly from ground zero – are stakeholders?

What is the provenance of the billions of dollars (several times more than India's GDP) secretly stashed away by Indian citizens in Swiss bank accounts? Where did the \$2bn spent on the last general elections come from? Where do the hundreds of millions of rupees that politicians and parties pay the media for the "high-end", "low-end" and "live" pre-election "coverage packages" that P Sainath recently wrote about come from? (The next time you see a TV anchor haranguing a numb studio guest, shouting, "Why don't the Maoists stand for elections? Why don't they come in to the mainstream?", do SMS the channel saying, "Because they can't afford your rates.")

Too many questions about conflicts of interest and cronyism remain unanswered. What are we to make of the fact that the Union home minister, P Chidambaram, the chief of Operation Green Hunt, has, in his career as a corporate lawyer, represented several mining corporations? What are we to make of the fact that he was a non-executive director of Vedanta – a position from which he resigned the day he became finance minister in 2004? What are we to make of the fact that, when he became finance minister, one of the first clearances he gave for FDI was to Twinstar Holdings, a Mauritius-based company, to buy shares in Sterlite, a part of the Vedanta group?

What are we to make of the fact that, when activists from Orissa filed a case against Vedanta in the supreme court, citing its violations of government guidelines and pointing out that the Norwegian Pension Fund had withdrawn its investment from the company alleging gross environmental damage and human rights violations committed by the company, Justice Kapadia suggested that Vedanta be substituted with Sterlite, a sister company of the same group? He then blithely announced in an open court that he, too, had shares in Sterlite. He gave forest clearance to Sterlite to go ahead with the mining, despite the fact that the supreme court's own expert committee had explicitly said that permission should be denied and that mining would ruin the forests, water sources, environment and the lives and livelihoods of the thousands of tribals living there. Justice Kapadia gave this clearance without rebutting the report of the supreme court's own committee.

What are we to make of the fact that the Salwa Judum, the brutal ground-clearing operation disguised as a "spontaneous" people's militia in Dantewada, was formally inaugurated in 2005, just days after the MoU with the Tatas was signed? And that the Jungle Warfare Training School in Bastar was set up just around then?

What are we to make of the fact that two weeks ago, on 12 October, the mandatory public hearing for Tata Steel's steel project in Lohandiguda, Dantewada, was held in a small hall inside the collectorate, cordoned off with massive security, with an audience of 50 tribal people brought in from two Bastar villages in a convoy of government jeeps? (The public hearing was declared a success and the district collector congratulated the people of Bastar for their co-operation.)

What are we to make of the fact that just around the time the prime minister began to call the Maoists the "single largest internal security threat" (which was a signal that the government was getting ready to go after them), the share prices of many of the mining companies in the region skyrocketed?

The mining companies desperately need this "war". They will be the beneficiaries if the impact of the violence drives out the people who have so far managed to resist the attempts that have

been made to evict them. Whether this will indeed be the outcome, or whether it'll simply swell the ranks of the Maoists remains to be seen.

Reversing this argument, Dr Ashok Mitra, former finance minister of West Bengal, in an article called "The Phantom Enemy", argues that the "grisly serial murders" that the Maoists are committing are a classic tactic, learned from guerrilla warfare textbooks. He suggests that they have built and trained a guerrilla army that is now ready to take on the Indian state, and that the Maoist "rampage" is a deliberate attempt on their part to invite the wrath of a blundering, angry Indian state which the Maoists hope will commit acts of cruelty that will enrage the adivasis. That rage, Dr Mitra says, is what the Maoists hope can be harvested and transformed into an insurrection.

This, of course, is the charge of "adventurism" that several currents of the left have always levelled at the Maoists. It suggests that Maoist ideologues are not above inviting destruction on the very people they claim to represent in order to bring about a revolution that will bring them to power. Ashok Mitra is an old Communist who had a ringside seat during the Naxalite uprising of the 60s and 70s in West Bengal. His views cannot be summarily dismissed. But it's worth keeping in mind that the adivasi people have a long and courageous history of resistance that predates the birth of Maoism. To look upon them as brainless puppets being manipulated by a few middle-class Maoist ideologues is to do them a disservice.

Presumably Dr Mitra is talking about the situation in Lalgarh where, up to now, there has been no talk of mineral wealth. (Lest we forget – the current uprising in Lalgarh was sparked off over the chief minister's visit to inaugurate a Jindal Steel factory. And where there's a steel factory, can the iron ore be very far away?) The people's anger has to do with their desperate poverty, and the decades of suffering at the hands of the police and the Harmads, the armed militia of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) that has ruled West Bengal for more than 30 years.

Even if, for argument's sake, we don't ask what tens of thousands of police and paramilitary troops are doing in Lalgarh, and we accept the theory of Maoist "adventurism", it would still be only a very small part of the picture.

The real problem is that the flagship of India's miraculous "growth" story has run aground. It came at a huge social and environmental cost. And now, as the rivers dry up and forests disappear, as the water table recedes and as people realise what is being done to them, the chickens are coming home to roost. All over the country, there's unrest, there are protests by people refusing to give up their land and their access to resources, refusing to believe false promises any more. Suddenly, it's beginning to look as though the 10% growth rate and democracy are mutually incompatible.

To get the bauxite out of the flat-topped hills, to get iron ore out from under the forest floor, to get 85% of India's people off their land and into the cities (which is what Chidambaram says he'd like to see), India has to become a police state. The government has to militarise. To justify that militarisation, it needs an enemy. The Maoists are that enemy. They are to corporate fundamentalists what the Muslims are to Hindu fundamentalists. (Is there a fraternity of fundamentalists? Is that why the RSS has expressed open admiration for Chidambaram?)

It would be a grave mistake to imagine that the paramilitary troops, the Rajnandgaon air base, the Bilaspur brigade headquarters, the unlawful activities act, the Chhattisgarh special public security act and Operation Green Hunt are all being put in place just to flush out a few thousand Maoists from the forests. In all the talk of Operation Green Hunt, whether or not Chidambaram goes ahead and "presses the button", I detect the kernel of a coming state of emergency. (Here's a maths question: If it takes 600,000 soldiers to hold down the tiny valley of Kashmir, how many will it take to contain the mounting rage of hundreds of millions of people?)

Instead of narco-analysing Kobad Ghandy, the recently arrested Maoist leader, it might be a better idea to talk to him.

In the meanwhile, will someone who's going to the climate change conference in Copenhagen later this year please ask the only question worth asking: Can we leave the bauxite in the mountain?