

India Drives Tribals into Maoist Arms

By Sudha Ramachandran

January 16, 2010

KORAPUT, Orissa - Six weeks after police action in Narayanpatna in Koraput district in the eastern state of Orissa left two tribals dead and scores of others injured, tension here shows no signs of abating. Arbitrary arrests of tribals continue with about 109, including at least 12 children, thrown in jail so far on charges that include criminal conspiracy, rioting, sedition and waging war against the state - and police and paramilitary forces have stepped up operations to hunt down activists of the [Chasi Mulia Adivasi Sangha \(CMAS\)](#), a tribal rights organization active in the area.

The CMAS activists have retreated deep into the forests, where they are said to be regrouping. "The hunt for CMAS activists and the intimidation of tribals by the police has forced tribals to seek refuge in the surrounding forests, which are Maoist hideouts," a senior official in Koraput told Asia Times Online. "By their actions, the police are pushing the tribals to turn Maoist."

This is the case not just in Narayanpatna but also across villages and towns in India's tribal areas in Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. Police atrocities against tribals are fueling support for the Maoists.

Tribals are the most marginalized section of Indian society, worse off than even the Dalits (formerly referred to as Untouchables). Around 49.5% of tribals live under the official poverty line, 76.2% are illiterate and almost 30% have no access whatsoever to doctors in clinics. Displaced from their land and discriminated against in the industrial job markets are now fighting to keep their land, their only remaining resource.

With peaceful agitations and democratic institutions having failed to redress their grievances or provide them with a modicum of justice, tribal alienation in India's democracy has grown at a massive pace. And it is among this anger and alienation that Maoists are increasingly finding support and recruits.

India's Maoists believe in armed struggle to overthrow the state and bring socio-economic change. Many tribals say that they are opposed to the use of violence but are left with no option but to pick up the gun to counter the violence of the state and of its police and paramilitary forces. Many tribals still engage in mass politics and agitations to address their grievances. But are being pushed by the state to embrace Maoism and armed struggle.

And the line between tribal political activism and Maoist armed struggle is increasingly blurring with Maoists often coming forward to endorse and support tribal causes. The targets of Maoist violence are often those who exploit the tribals or harass them, like landlords, police and moneylenders.

Analysts have been pointing out that it is the failure of the state to address tribal grievances that is fueling support for the Maoists and their growing influence in the country. But the state seems to think that eliminating the Maoists militarily will resolve the problem.

A massive military offensive to eliminate Maoists was launched recently in the forests of Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh and Orissa. About 80,000 troops have been deployed here, with another 20,000 more to be sent in the coming weeks. This, in an area that has around 2 million people, over half of whom are tribal. While officials far away from the battlegrounds sound confident of success, those at ground zero are not optimistic. There is a feeling that as the anti-Maoist offensive gathers steam, tribal alienation from the state - already dangerously high - will soar. "The CMAS will grow, gain ground and capture Narayanpatna," the Koraput official warns.

Police officials say they are hunting down CMAS activists as they are engaging in violence and "anti-people activity". However, it is hard to dispel the feeling that the police action against the tribal organization has more to do with protecting the interests of powerful sections in the area.

The CMAS has been mobilizing tribals to take back land that was illegally grabbed from them by non-tribal landlords and moneylenders. And it has been successful in re-appropriating about 800 hectares acres of land. Not surprisingly, this has raised the hackles of the non-tribal landlords. The growing assertiveness of the CMAS has rattled mining companies and the liquor mafia, as well. This motley group of private mining companies, the liquor mafia, land grabbers and contractors is reported to be behind the setting up of *shanti* (or peace) committees in Koraput, Malkangiri and other districts to counter tribal organizations like the CMAS.

Orissa has rich mineral deposits. It has 70% of all of India's bauxite reserves (the sixth-largest deposit in the world), 90% of India's chrome ore and nickel and 24% of its coal. But tribals inhabit much of this mineral-rich land. Mining companies - Indian and multinational - have been lining up to extract this wealth. But tribal agitations and Maoist violence have been blocking their ambitions.

Informed sources in Koraput say that mining companies are putting money into *shanty* committees to clip the wings of the CMAS and other similar tribal organizations. While *shanti* committee members in Koraput and Malkangiri say that they came together "spontaneously" to counter the "forcible grabbing of land and looting of crops by outfits like the CMAS", it does seem that the local administration has played a role in putting them together.

Worse, it appears to be backing the *shanti* committees' activities. *Shanti* committees have been attacking and beating up tribal activists, even murdering them. Members of an independent fact-finding team who went to Narayanpatna to investigate the November police-firing incident were beaten up.

Still no action has been taken against the *shanti* committees. P K Sahni, deputy superintendent of police, Koraput, said that the activities of the *shanti* committees are "peaceful, legal and democratic". Its members are not taking the law into their own hands. Hence, "no cases have been filed against them". In contrast to their handling of the *shanti* committees with kid gloves, stands the police's extra-tough approach to the CMAS. The Koraput police have called for a ban on the organization.

Non-governmental organization activists in Koraput point out that the CMAS campaign to re-appropriate land grabbed from tribals is not illegal. The Orissa government has enacted laws recognizing the tribals' right over ancestral land and prohibiting the transfer of land to non-tribals. If the CMAS has been forcibly re-appropriating land this is because tribal appeals to the state for justice have fallen on deaf ears.

The CMAS has been a political movement so far, working for tribal rights through mass mobilization of tribals, agitations and protests. It is the police and the powerful interests they are protecting that are pushing them underground by hounding its activists, arresting them and calling for a ban on the organization.

There are striking similarities between what is happening in Orissa with the controversial *salwa judum* (peace march[??]) in neighboring Chhattisgarh. Like Orissa, Chhattisgarh's southern districts of Bastar and Dantewada are rich in minerals. And as in Orissa, tribals who have been resisting the takeover of their land by the state and private mining companies inhabit these areas.

Vigilante groups peopled by tribals, armed by the state and reportedly funded by mining companies and liquor mafias to counter the Maoists active here, have wreaked havoc in Dantewada and Bastar since 2005. The cycle of violence and counter-violence triggered by the *salwa judum* is reported to have driven tens of thousands of tribals out of their land - an important goal of the mining companies and landlords who fund the vigilante violence. It does seem that Orissa's *shanti* committees are aiming to achieve a similar goal in mineral-rich Koraput and other areas.

The ongoing military operations supposedly against the Maoists will enable the police and the mining companies, landlords and liquor mafias they protect to get rid of the tribals, all in the name of fighting the "Maoist terrorists".

Tribal activists in Malkangiri Asia Times Online spoke to say they are not Maoist as they are working overground and engage in mass politics instead of armed struggle. But this is a difference that the police do not or rather do not want to see. Police have apparently told them that when the paramilitary forces reach their village, tribals and Maoists will be treated similarly.

India's tribal heartlands can expect a bloodbath.

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http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/LA16Df03.html