

# India: The 'green hunt' and gold in the hills

Monday 7 December 2009, by [MOHAN KOMMALAPATI Narendra](#) (Date first published: 4 December 2009).

The plains of peninsular India are ringed by two rows of hill ranges with their bases in the south, spreading up the coastlines in two great arcs west and east. The eastern ranges, "eastern ghats", start in the state of Tamil Nadu and cross the states of Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa and trail off into Bengal.

The forested regions are home to some of the oldest communities of India, described variously as adivasi (aboriginal), vanvasi (forest dwellers), girijan (people of the hills) and, in the sanitised language of the Indian constitution, under the collective name of "Scheduled Tribes".

Their social being was considered so special that the state sought to bring them under its paternalist wing and bestow upon them the protection of that eminent document.

Constitutional provisions notwithstanding, little stands between them and the powerful coalition of local and global interests behind the twin steamrollers of "growth" and "development". Little, that is, apart from their dogged resistance and famous resilience.

History shows us that the tribes are no strangers to displacement and desperate resistance. The Koya and Reddys along the Godavari hills and the Santhal of Bengal fought British colonial oppression with a valour that won the grudging admiration of the enemy.

A British officer said of the Santhal resistance: "The one piece of equipment they did not have among their meagre possessions was a white flag."

This time too, raising the white flag is not an option for the Chenchu of the southern Tiger Hills, the Gond of the central Adilabad, the Gharchiroli, the Moraya and Dorla Koya of Chhattisgarh, or the Dongri Khond of Orissa eking out lives not far removed from their stone age ancestors.

They work a few acres yielding a subsistence of grain, fish, fowl, fruit and tubers from the jungle, with scrawny chickens foraging around the huts, cattle as lean and hardy as their owners, and a few weekly markets for trade. There seems nothing to attract greedy eyes.

But there is gold in them hills!

In fact, more than just gold. A conservative list includes bauxite in Orissa, Iron ore in Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand states, and deposits of uranium, limestone, marble, dolomite, tin, graphite, copper, gold, diamonds, corundum, beryl, alexandrite and fluorite, and possibly coal in addition to teak, hardwood, bamboo, waters of several rivers, wildlife and fish.

The bauxite deposits alone have been estimated to be worth between US\$2-4 trillion.

At the heart of this pirates' chest is the estimated 10,000 kilometres of uncharted dense forests known locally as Abhujmad (unknown forests) spread over the states of Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh.

In the language of the government, its security agencies, the corporate media and assorted

“security” experts, it is the “red corridor”, “red zone” or “Maoist stronghold”.

Along with the tribes in the forest, and assorted traders and petty tyrants of the police and forest departments on the edges, there are also the guerrillas known variously as “Naxalites”, “extremists”, “Maoists” or the self-described armed squads of the Communist party of India-Maoist.

This is the biggest faction of the Naxalite parties (that believe in a Chinese type pre-socialist revolution). It has a reputation for militarism, acts of sabotage and arbitrary violence — at times amounting to brutality.

This brand of Naxalism is the bogey for the state to launch an all out war on the tribes under the name Operation Green Hunt, an undertaking variously advertised and simultaneously denied by home minister P. Chidambaram.

A Harvard-trained corporate lawyer cum company director, Chidambaram presides over or funds a virtual zoo of paramilitaries. There are the “Black Cats” providing VIP security, “Cobras” (Command Battalion for Resolute Action) in Central India and “Grey Hounds” in Andhra Pradesh.

There are some “Scorpions” and even an “Octopus”. There are also semi-state militia parading as “Tigers” of various hues from green to black, and the Salwa Judum in Chhattisgarh state.

Supplementing the work of these carnivores are the more prosaically-named Border Security Force, Indo-Tibetan Border Police, Central Reserve Police Force, Armed Border Force, and Naga Battalion.

Several of these forces, with support from the regular army and air force, have been unleashed against the tribes to “combat extremism and restore law and order”.

A report by the Peoples Union for Civil Liberties, Peoples Union for Democratic Rights, the Human Rights Law Network and other rights organisations said state police, Salwa Judum and paramilitaries killed six people and destroyed houses in one village.

They killed one person in another, stabbed nine to death in a different village and arrested eight persons from two others.

This all occurred in two single days (September 17 and October 1) in one state!

Behind this array of guns and bayonets stands a different army. It is an army of pinstriped uniforms, Harvard and Chicago university-trained diplomats, occupying five-star hotels and first-class air lounges.

It involves the corporate houses of Tata, Essar, Mittal, Jindal, Posco, Rio Tinto, BHP Billiton and the Vedanta Corp.

Indian writer Arundhati Roy described them as the MOUists — after the Memorandum of Understanding in the corporate world.

The scale of operations can be seen from the fact that one small state alone, Jharkhand, had signed 90 MOUs. An open slather of plunder and corruption is afoot.

The former chief minister of the state was found in possession of A\$1 billion. How much more has made its way into Swiss bank accounts is anybody’s guess.

With both national and state governments planning a protracted military campaign of four- to- five

years around Abhujmad and outlying forests, every petty operative in the machine will develop a vested interest in perpetuating the conflict.

The ability to inflict arbitrary violence gives enormous powers to extract a tribute and supporting shady activities, such as poaching and logging.

Picture this alongside a string of power plants, factories, smelters, open-cut mines, highways and airstrips built with callous indifference to the environment or the inhabitants.

Those tribal people that remain are, at best, likely to find employment as ill-paid security guards or mercenaries pitted against their own. A few could graduate to the ranks of quisling collaborators.

For the majority, it means a loss of home and culture no less severe than the Palestinian nakbah (“catastrophe” — Palestinian name for the massive ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from their land when Israel was formed in 1948).

First World workers could also be hit. Mining and manufacturing companies will find the sweatshop labour, tax holidays and non-existent environmental regulation on offer far too attractive to ignore.

First World capital will use Third World workers as the stick to beat down First World standards of pay and working conditions in the name of “flexibility”.

Capital is now truly global in its reach. This requires workers to also become truly international in their outlook and struggles.

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\* From: International News, Green Left Weekly issue #821 9 December 2009.