

- **Chhattisgarh: The Future of India?**
- by **NANDINI SUNDAR: Interviewed by David Barsamian**
First Posted: 04-04-10 01:42 AM | Updated: 09-19-10 09:30 AM



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Chhattisgarh: The Future of India?

Interviewed by David Barsamian

New Delhi, India 29 November 2009

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Let's start with Chhattisgarh, a state in India where you have spent a great deal of time and you've written about. There is an uprising there. What do people need to know about this particular state and the forces and issues at work?

One is that it's a state which has a large population of Adivasis, indigenous people. Originally, when it came into being and was hived off from Madhya Pradesh, of which it used to be a part, the sort of official rhetoric was that in both Chhattisgarh and in the adjoining state of Jharkhand, there would be greater attention to Adivasi issues. Instead of that happening, what one has seen is

that the hiving of the state actually was a way for the sort of local ruling elite to more concentratedly exploit the natural resources that both Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh have. So it's a state which is, say, about 38% Adivasi, has a large proportion of Chhattisgarhi what are called other backward classes, or not upper-caste people. And it's also very, very mineral rich and very forested. So it's a sort of classic case of rich state, poor people.

In terms of the ruling—can I use a term such as oligarchy there—is it mostly from Chhattisgarh itself or are they mostly from outside the state?

The Chief Minister for the last two terms, Raman Singh, is from UP (Uttar Pradesh), and so are some of the leading ministers, and traders who settled in the region. And it's actually the trading community which controls all the money that funds elections. So even if people run for office in what are called reserved constituencies, areas where only indigenous people can run, when it comes to the Congress and the BJP, their politics are determined by the trading community, because they are the ones who fund the campaigns.

And the BJP is the Bharatiya Janata Party. It is the ruling party in Chhattisgarh. What are their politics?

We know what their politics are from both their campaign to demolish the Babri Masjid in 1992 and to build a Rama temple in its place. The BJP and various other friends of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) demolished the Babri Masjid. There was this whole run-up to it and afterwards there were riots in which overwhelmingly Muslims were killed. The BJP was engaged in a huge double-speak: on the one hand, saying, "We think that it should be demolished," but then, when it actually was demolished, saying, "We didn't do it."

We saw that again in Gujarat in 2002, where they were responsible for the killing of at least 2,000 Muslims and displacing thousands more. The RSS was clearly involved in carrying out the pogrom, mobilizing people, giving them swords and crucially voter lists to find and kill Muslims. At the same time claiming that they're a government within the Constitution because Narendra Modi and the BJP won the elections.

This is exactly what they're doing in Chhattisgarh. They've promoted what they call a people's movement, but which is actually a state-sponsored vigilante organization. It's called Salwa Judum. And they've used this vigilante organization to go around burning villages and killing people. So on the one hand, they can claim that it's a people's movement; on the other hand, they fully support it. So it's sort of a classic example of the way the BJP works, trying to occupy both the space of the state and the space of civil society, quote, unquote.

The RSS is—I think I could describe it as a Hindu extremist formation.

It's a Hindu fascist formation. It doesn't believe in the Indian Constitution, it has its own flag. In fact, even now, after the report on the demolishment of the Babri Masjid, which has just come out after 17 years, BJP and RSS leaders are going around saying that "We are proud we did it, and we don't think there was anything wrong." So there is a complete disregard for the Constitution. The RSS is a sort of classic fascist organization, which wants to capture state power as well as wants to have its own wings outside of the state.

How do these Hindu fascist formations view Adivasis in Chhattisgarh and in other parts of India?

They start off viewing them with contempt. And if you look at the way that they sort of think about civilization, it's all about upper-caste Hindu ideas of what constitutes civilization. But at the same time, they've been very successful mobilizing Adivasis through their friends (*fronts), like the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, which has hostels and so on in Adivasi areas, and sort of bringing them into the Hindu fold. So there is a sense of inclusiveness which comes by sort of transforming and obliterating their original identities. So on the one hand whenever they talk about Adivasi languages, it's with a great deal of contempt. On the other hand, many Adivasis are drawn to them because they say, "Well, finally we're accepted by somebody as equals within this large Hindu nation."

You said that the Adivasis constitute about 38% of the population of Chhattisgarh. How vulnerable are they in terms of protection under the law? What kind of umbrella do they fall under, if any?

Officially, the Adivasi areas in Chhattisgarh are governed under the fifth schedule of the Constitution, which is meant to provide special protection to Adivasis, to ensure that their lands are not alienated, that they can follow their own customs, and so on. But in practice, they've really been betrayed by the law. For instance, recently the government of Chhattisgarh shut down or closed 100,000 cases against Adivasis for minor forest misdemeanors. Going into the forest and cutting wood for firewood or plucking leaves, etc., could be something that the forest guards would charge you for. So Adivasis have always lived in a sense of emergency as far as the law has gone.

Chhattisgarh has, according to one report, the richest load of iron ore in the entire country. This obviously is a big economic prize, and who gets it will benefit greatly. Where is this iron ore primarily located?

It's located in what are called the Bailadila Hills, which is sort of in the center of what is now the Dantewada district. Since the late 1970s, the National Mineral Development Corporation, NDMC, has been mining this area. They've had a monopoly of it. And all the iron ore has been exported to Japan. But now several private-sector companies are being given captive mines in these hills.

What does that mean, captive mines?

I mean that they would be mines that are dedicated to their steel plants. Actually, it's a scam, because even if they don't build a steel plant, because the rates of royalty on iron are so low and the profits to be made from selling iron in the open market are so high, you could actually just make a lot by having a mine that's dedicated to you without having to necessarily invest in a steel plant for it.

Who are some of these corporations now that are moving into Chhattisgarh?

In this area both Tata and Essar are moving in. And in other parts of the state there are corporations like Jindal and Mittal, which are now, in fact, multinational. Tata is a multinational. It's based in India, just the way that some multinationals are based in the U.S., but it's acquiring properties across the world. There is also direct state involvement. The NMDC itself has tried to

set up a steel plant near Jagdalpur in Chhattisgarh's Bastar district. There is a whole range of MoUs being signed by the government with private firms.

MoU is a term that comes up a lot. What is it?

Memorandum of understanding.

Which is what exactly?

It's another scam, because it's sort of an agreement to invest. So now if you're a private firm, you could say, "I'm going to invest so many crores," which is tens of millions, "in building a steel plant." Whether or not you actually do it, you would be then given various concessions and given some royal treatment in getting other kinds of leases. So it's basically an agreement between a private firm and the government to invest for mining or for other purposes.

I've been noticing this term public-private partnership coming up a lot in the descriptions of what's going in terms of resource extraction in the country. And it seems to be some kind of pernicious technique where the state is enabling private corporations to make profits.

The whole Indian state, in a sense, is run like a public-private partnership—in fact, not just the Indian state. Look at the American state. All states are run as public-private partnerships in the sense of who gets to make policy, who gets to determine what laws should be passed, and so on. So if you look at the way that governments are structured, they're structured to sort of favor the private sector. That's one level at which you have public-private partnerships just built into the very structure of the state.

And then there are other ways in which locally, even when land is being acquired for a private company, it's a public-private partnership. It's not officially in the sense of the way that the term is technically defined, but because the land is acquired by the government and then handed over to private industry, in effect what it is is a public-private partnership in terms of acquiring land from villagers. But this is different from the technical meaning of public-private partnership. All I'm trying to say is that when we think about public-private partnerships, we need to think about all the different ways in which government and industry work together.

The resources, particularly the iron ore, in Chhattisgarh are primarily on indigenous land, on Adivasi land. What kind of push-back has there been from the Adivasi community about their land being lost?

There has been a lot of resistance, both at the local level where the land is being lost—for instance, in the ten villages which are going to be displaced by Tata, they have been protesting for the last two years, and there have been several beatings, arrests. People who didn't even own that land have been fraudulently compensated for it—and money has been made by local-level officials. So there has been that kind of protest locally. And also big demonstrations by people across the district. So, for instance, in November 2007, there was a rally of about 100,000 people in Jagdalpur protesting both against displacement and against what is called the Salwa Judum, the so-called people's movement that I mentioned earlier.

Salwa Judum is a vigilante formation that is entirely composed of local people.

It's a vigilante organization which is state-supported and accompanied by the security forces. We have a lot of evidence to show that it is supported, both from police diaries, which talk about senior ministers providing encouragement and funding rallies, and photos of the security forces accompanying them.

So what happened was in the initial phase—this was in June 2005 to December 2005—people were told that if they didn't come to mass rallies, then their villages would be burned, they would be fined. And then they were forced to go and burn other people's villages. And the security forces went and took part in the burning as well. So this lasted for about two years in different parts of the district.

And this is well documented.

We filed a case in the Supreme Court in 2007, and we've provided evidence of how this has been state-sponsored.

"We" being?

"We" being—there are two petitions. One was filed by me along with Ramachandra Guha, a historian, and E. Sarma, a former civil servant. The other was filed by three Adivasi leaders of that area: one from the CPI, Manish Kunjam—he's used to be a legislator there and is head of the CPI locally—and two others who had themselves been affected. Dudhi Joga had his house burned down, Kartam Joga was badly beaten. So in the second PIL, public interest litigation, which is a sort of class action suit, we submitted about 200 testimonies from villagers detailing killings, rapes, houses being burned, and we also provided evidence of government sponsorship.

I've read somewhere of something on the order of 640 villages have been emptied out. What does that mean? Does it mean that they're depopulated and the people are shifted and moved elsewhere?

In the initial phases of the movement people were moved into camps along the highway. So official estimates say over 50,000 people were put into camps. This was a straightforward form of strategic hamleting. It was very similar to what the British did in Malaya between 1948 and 1960 and later what the U.S. did in Vietnam. So people were forcibly brought into camps, other people fled into the jungles with the Maoists, and a large numbers, say, 100,000, fled to Andhra. In the last year or two since 2007, people have become sort of slowly—they had started going back from the camps to the villages, but now, because the government has launched what it calls Operation Green Hunt, which is a huge military offensive, people have started fleeing again from the villages in large numbers, so hundreds of thousands of people are moving to the neighboring state of Andhra Pradesh.

And these are entirely Adivasis?

Yes.

So if they're coming from deep in the forest, as you say, to camps along a road, and now even being transported out of Chhattisgarh into the neighboring state of Andhra Pradesh, how do they survive? These are forest people.

They're actually not surviving at all. People talk about how a whole family of 11 would live on one kilogram of rice. There was a survey done earlier this year of those who fled to Andhra Pradesh which said that out of the sample, about two thirds of the children had third grade malnutrition. There is nothing in the forest. People's houses were burned, all their grain was burned. They were just surviving on very, very little. And in Andhra Pradesh, too, they work for Andhra farmers for 20 rupees a day to get a little bit of rice, and they are under constant harassment from the Andhra Pradesh forest department. So it's just a horrible, horrible situation as far as people's subsistence is concerned.

You mentioned the strategic hamlet program, which the British used in Malaya and then the Americans in Vietnam. But the Americans used another tactic in Vietnam called the Phoenix program, which was kind of an extrajudicial assassination campaign to eliminate so-called terrorists, troublemakers, anyone who was resisting the government. Do you see that kind of parallel as well with the Salwa Judum?

Absolutely. What they have done is go around targeting the village- level workers of the Maoists. These are regular villagers. They're not armed. What they do is perhaps organize a meeting. If the Maoists come to the village and talk about land distribution, they might be part of that, or they might help the Maoists by providing a lookout. The sort of standard stuff that villagers do when there is an insurgent movement going on. So what the government did was to target these sangam members. The local village organizations are called sangams. So they would catch them, force many of them to become what they termed as SPOs, special police officers, so they would paid something like 1500 in the first couple of years. It's gone up a bit since then to 2,000 and something.

That's 1500 rupees a month?

Yes. So that they're really paying them very little and they were using them as informers to find other Maoists and sangam members. So that created this huge enmity between the villagers. Many of these SPOs were minors, so the government of India was actually using minors as the front-line soldiers in its war. And many of the Maoist soldiers are also minors. The Maoists have said that we recruit people after the age of 16 and we don't recruit them below that. On both sides you have these 16-year-olds fighting each other. It's a really tragic situation.

Fifteen hundred rupees is about \$30.

It's a lot of money in these areas, where there is such a high level of unemployment. Many people joined thinking they were going to get a job. And then also this idea of having a gun.

The state and the media demonize the Maoists as dangerous, bloodthirsty terrorists with no redeeming features or ideology. What would you say on their behalf in terms of the Maoist program in Chhattisgarh?

I can't say anything on behalf of the Maoists, because I'm not a sympathizer of theirs.

I didn't mean you were sympathetic. But what is their agenda? How do they recruit? Obviously, they must be saying something that is appealing to some number of people in Chhattisgarh to take up arms and resist.

They have been working in Bastar since late the 1980s. The kinds of issues that they took up are land distribution, freedom from harassment by the Forest Guard, higher rates for tendu leaves. Tendu leaves are a big issue there because they're used to make the local cigarette, and that's the major source of cash for villagers. So the Maoists managed to get the rates raised for tendu from about 25 paise to 95 paise. It may not seem like a lot, but for people there, if you work really hard and you get 100 bundles, you could actually get 95 rupees (about \$2.) a day instead of getting 25 rupees a day. So this is a major source of their popularity. Also, they have a cultural troupe which explains things to people in their own language, to value their culture, their language, their songs. They've really established themselves in the villages. And also all the cadres are local. Some of the leaders have come from Andhra Pradesh, but given that the Maoists are local people, there's bound to be a lot of the support for them.

They have also committed a lot of murders. Especially since Salwa Judum began, there has been escalation of violence on both sides. Media coverage? For instance, the 2002 genocide of Muslims in Gujarat, or when Sikhs were killed in Delhi by Congress workers in 1984, there was hardly anything in the papers. Recently, the government put out a half-page ad in all the major newspapers saying Maoists are nothing but cold-blooded murderers, they never said Modi, the Chief Minister of Gujarat, is nothing but a cold-blooded murderer or the people responsible for the 1984 killings were nothing but cold-blooded murderers, when that's exactly what they are. So the state is completely demonizing one section and ignoring its own violence and its own culpability for mass crimes.

In an article in Outlook magazine, you also make the observation about how New Delhi, the central government, is trying to hold Pakistan's feet to the fire in terms of non-state actors, that they should be able to control them. But when it comes to Salwa Judum in Chhattisgarh, it's not the case at all.

Absolutely. Both the major parties which rule the Indian political scene, the BJP and the Congress, are masters of double-speak. The BJP, as I said, makes a practice of supporting non-state actors while it's in the state, so that it can have the advantage of both violating the law and pretending to uphold it, and the Congress, again, by supporting the Salwa Judum. What's interesting about the Salwa Judum is that this is something that's being supported by both the Congress and the BJP and by the Chhattisgarh government and by the security establishment of the Center. So there is a strong police lobby, a security establishment lobby, which wants to promote this kind of use of non-state actors across the country. In fact, if you look at the Home Ministry reports, they talk about promoting local resistance groups. For the state to be as a policy promoting local resistance groups is more than a little ironic considering there are lots of resistance groups, very peaceful resistance groups, people protesting against the lack of rehabilitation by the Narmada Dam authorities, for instance, who get routinely beaten up and arrested.

Is Chhattisgarh a kind of template for what's going to happen to the rest of India or what already is happening in the rest of India?

I think the real template for what's happening now in central India is northeast India. In fact, what the Indian government is doing in Chhattisgarh, and has been doing since 2005, is exactly what it did in Mizoram between 1968 and 1980. The state of Mizoram was almost completely transformed. About 80% of the population was shifted. It's now one of the most urban states in India, because people were moved out from their villages into camps. And the use of emergency laws which allow the police to kill with impunity, like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, all of this has been tried in the northeast for the last 50 years, and now they're doing exactly the same to the indigenous people of central India.

And what's happening in Chhattisgarh, they're trying to replicate that in Orissa and elsewhere. The Indian government has lots of examples that it draws from its own counterinsurgency efforts across the country. Its use of SPOs, for instance, is something that they've adopted from Kashmir, where you have surrendered militants who are called Ikhwan, who are then used to identify. And in Punjab in the 1980s they used what were called cats, who were, again, surrendered militants who were assisting the police as informers in plainclothes. There is no accountability with people like these renegade militants.

This kind of information was not very evident in U.S. media descriptions of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Washington in late November 2009. There was a lot of "the world's greatest democracy," "we share the same values," "we have so much in common," etc. This is the part of India that's totally unknown, particularly in the U.S. You just mentioned Kashmir, an area with 3 million people with something like 700,000 security forces keeping the population in line. It's one of the most densely occupied places on the face of the earth.

Right. And it's scary, the creeping number of parts of the country which are getting militarized. Kashmir has been militarized for so long as has the northeast. Again, if you go to Manipur, as soon as you get off the plane, you see all these army people, The Assam Rifles at the corner with their guns. It was really scary for me when I first went to Manipur to see so many armed personnel across the state. Now in Chhattisgarh you see again people are living with constant combing operations, with the drone of helicopters overhead. These are people who may have never seen a train in their life. Buses are not something that are often available in interior villages, and suddenly you have this heavy, sophisticated weaponry being used. And people know now, they've been introduced to a whole new vocabulary of weaponry—horrible, militarized language that was not a part of their consciousness before this.

But the geographical aspect of this is also rather dramatic, because Kashmir is in the northwest corner of India. Then you mentioned the northeast. Chhattisgarh is central India. This is in the so-called heartland of the country.

And that's why there has been a bit more coverage of the offensive that the Home Ministry is planning than there has been, say, of what's been going on in the northeast for last 50 years. Because the media does cover mainland India a bit more than it covers the northeast.

But, again, if you look at the coverage of what's happening in Chhattisgarh, it's been kind of nonexistent. For something of this scale, there has been maybe one front-page headline about Salwa Judum when the planning commission had a report or something. Now, because of this major offensive, there was a brief period when Maoists were on the front page of newspapers

every day. But all these killings by the Salwa Judum and security forces never get reported. The fact that 644 villages were affected, so many thousands of people migrated to Andhra, none of this was sort of prominently covered in the newspapers, even here, leave alone in the U.S.

Do you think racism is a factor? Because these are overwhelmingly Adivasis, indigenous people.

Absolutely. I think we really have to understand the sort of deep levels of racism. But it's a combination of things as to why there has been no coverage of Chhattisgarh, partly because there are no Adivasi journalists. It's partly about racism, partly about a whole host of structural factors to do with the way the media works generally. Because generally the media, especially when it comes to matters related to crime, reproduces the police point of view because they're the organized force which feeds the media. That's a sort of standard Herbert Gans or Stuart Hall argument about how the media work and the police work as a primary definer of news.

The police here has been consistently putting out its version of the story. There has been the Chhattisgarh Special Security Act, which has made it a crime to write about the Maoists, in a sense. Anybody could be arrested under this act for simply reporting on a village being burned. Local journalists have been threatened. So there is a huge amount of sort of direct censorship and intimidation.

But apart from that, there are also reasons like there is no middle class, unlike in West Bengal when Lal Garh happened, again, a similar sort of attack on villages. There was a middle class in Calcutta who took it up and protested about it. Here, nobody speaks Gondi, the local language. All the journalists are non-indigenous. Also, very few newspapers had stringers, because it was a new state. So, for instance, I know that **The Hindu** didn't have a stringer there. So the only paper they had, really, were **The Express** and the **Hindustan Times**. So there has been a whole series of factors as to why this area has been so silenced, but I would say the major reason is just state intimidation.

In the late 1960s, there was a Naxalite movement in West Bengal. This was a communist left formation. Today you see in reports Maoists and Naxalites used interchangeably. Are they the same thing?

The Maoists really refer to the CPI (Maoist), the Communist Party of India (Maoist), which was formed in 2004 after two major parties merged, the People's War Group, which was active in Andhra Pradesh and in Chhattisgarh, and Maharashtra-Orissa belt in central India, and the MCC (Maoist Coordination Center), which has been active in Jharkhand and Bihar. And earlier the Maoist Coordination Center, the MCC, had merged with another group called Party Unity. (* actually People's War Group had merged with Party Unity) So these three major Naxalite formations came together and are now the CPI Maoists.

But there are also other groups, like Jan Shakti, which are also called Naxalite, but they're not part of CPI (Maoist). So Naxalite is a broader category, and it's a term that the state uses, really, in a kind of derogatory, pejorative way. But, again, because it's so widely used, it could be seen as a common shorthand as well.

The CPI (Maoist) is banned by the central government?

Yes, and so are all its fronts.

Under what law can the government do that?

It has something called the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, under which it has a list of banned organizations. In Chhattisgarh, the Chhattisgarh Special Security Act, under which the various fronts of the CPI (Maoist) are banned.

Do the Indian Maoists look to China and Chairman Mao and his “Little Red Book” for inspiration?

No. In fact, they sort of keep accusing China of having succumbed to capitalist roaders. They also disagree with the Nepal Maoists for having adopted a parliamentary path. So they aren't really influenced by either China or Nepal. They have their own sort of homegrown version of what their vision of India should be. In fact, it's quite interesting, because they wrote an article in the **Economic and Political Weekly**, which is all about local-level, small-is-beautiful type economy. And their vision is not very different from the sort every Gandhian vision of many organizations in the country, about promoting local-level irrigation, small-scale industry, stuff like that.

There's talk also of a “red corridor” in the country. Is that another media fiction?

A lot of it is hyped, partly because police stations want to declare themselves Naxalite affected so they can get money under what is called the Security-Related Expenditure scheme. So once you're Naxalite affected, then you get resources, you get modern equipment, wirelasses, and so on. So there has been an interest in expanding the threat by the security establishment.

I guess the Maoists are also happy to show that they're a powerful force. They're a very small organization, really. A couple of years ago, official estimates said something like there were 10,500 armed cadres across the country. Even if you count village-level sympathizers, how much can it be compared to the number of troops that the central government is sending in? Today there was an article that the Border Security Force, BSF, is sending in 13 battalions to counter the Maoists. This is in addition to all the CRPF battalions that already work there. CRPF is the Central Reserve Police Force, which is a paramilitary force. There are three types of things—and I'm doing this very crudely: there is a regular state police; then there are paramilitary forces like the CRPF, the BSF, which are under the Home Ministry, the central government; and then there is the army. So the paramilitary forces are in between the regular police and the army.

So the state is bringing a tremendous amount of military firepower to focus on what you described as a rather small group of fighters.

Yes. The top Maoist leaders may have sophisticated weapons like AK47s. I think they also manufacture some—there is a lot of low-level explosive activity going on, bombs being laid and so on. But this heavy firepower is being used against villagers who really have nothing but bows and arrows to protect themselves. I've been to villages where they've dug up the approach road and covered it up with grass so that security forces fall into it. It's that kind of low-level activity. And they're sending in thousands and thousands of troops. Actually, what people need is food and water and hand pumps and health workers. You just don't see battalions of health workers being sent in or battalions of schoolteachers being sent in.

In that Outlook article, you cite the home minister who said that there will be some development in Chhattisgarh. And you ask, where have they been for 62 years with development?

What the Home Minister is trying to say is that they're going to adopt what they call a hearts-and-minds approach, which is once you can consolidate control, then you bring in development. But what they're actually following is what is known as a cost/benefit approach, which is to make the costs of supporting insurgency so hard for villagers, make their lives so terrible that they're going to give up supporting the insurgents.

We've seen with the Salwa Judum camps, which were also meant to be a kind of hearts-and-minds thing, once people were forced into camps, there was a lot of corruption over there. There was a huge amount of pilfering. People were starving inside the camps as well. That's why many people started going back, because it was better to be in their own homes, even if they had been burned down, than to be in camps. Just in terms of the way the government is going about it, in purely military terms and in terms of counterinsurgency, this hearts-and-minds thing, they're just simply not serious about it.

But otherwise, also, if you look at, say, the slums in Delhi, where there are no Maoists, where is the development? You are in total control. What has prevented you from providing housing for the poor in Delhi? Or what's prevented them from them providing basic sanitation in Bombay? You have area domination for all these years in so many parts of the country, and you're not doing anything. This is a country where 50% of the people are at low subsistence levels. What's prevented you from addressing that issue?

On my way over here today I noticed a huge parking garage being constructed in the center of the city for the Commonwealth Games, which will be held later in 2010. There are people living on the streets, there is no housing for them, but there will be a parking garage for cars.

Many people in the slums in Delhi have been forcibly displaced. All of central Delhi has been, quote, unquote, cleaned up and people have been moved 30 kilometers out into the outskirts. The government has a policy which is supposed to provide low-cost housing to people. That they never do. There is no way of penalizing the government for not providing that. But it's the people who are suffering from the lack of government implementation of its own policies who are penalized.

To get back to Chhattisgarh, you say that the Prime Minister and the Home Minister, when they talk about the Maoist uprisings and various forms of resistance, never mention one crucial word, and that is "justice." What would constitute justice, in your view?

In the case of Chhattisgarh, what we've been asking for in the courts is an independent judicial commission which will hold an inquiry into all these killings, rapes, arson that we've provided evidence for. (* actually we are asking for an independent monitoring committee which will report to the court) And we're hoping that if there were such an independent commission, people would be able to come forward and give their testimonies.

Just to give you an example, there was a young woman who was raped. In order for a criminal trial to proceed, you need to have a First Information Report, FIR, something registered in the police station to say that this crime has happened, and then the police investigate. So the police refuse to register these because they are the ones who go around committing the crimes. She had been raped and appealed to the head of the local police in Dantewada, the SP, superintendent of

police, saying she had been raped and she wanted an FIR registered. And nothing happened. Then we filed her complaint in the Supreme Court. And in the meantime she went to court. And she was able to do this only with the help of a local NGO. Otherwise it would have been impossible for her to get this far.

And then the police superintendent files a letter in the Supreme Court saying, “We checked with so-and-so,” and he names all the people that she has accused, and they denied it, saying ‘We didn’t do it and we are being falsely maligned.’ So she’s made a false complaint.” So basically you ask the rapist whether they did it, they say no. This is the standard practice in the state. And they also claimed that she wasn’t available, when just the day before, she had actually submitted her testimony in court. So justice would mean that you don’t work through the existing police and the existing system but you have an alternative mechanism.

The Supreme Court has also asked the Chhattisgarh government to compensate people, rehabilitate them, move security forces out of schools. They asked them to implement the recommendations of the National Human Rights Commission, which did an investigation on Supreme Court orders in 2008 on our matter in the court. And the Chhattisgarh government has done nothing. They have not drawn up any rehabilitation plan. All those people whose houses were burned have just sort of built them on their own, if they could.

So justice would mean an inquiry, it would mean compensation, it would mean rehabilitation, it would mean an end to all these extrajudicial killings, to begin with. And I think that could make a huge difference in terms of bringing down the level of conflict.

But what kind of voice or what kind of amplification are these views receiving, let’s say, in the media or in parliament, for that matter?

Zero. Because both the mainstream parties are not interested in providing justice or even acknowledging that the state has actually carried out this violence. It’s amazing. The same newspapers which front-lined the violence in Gujarat have, in fact, supported the Salwa Judum and said, it’s a really good thing that the government is doing this and you need to get rid of the Maoists. So the media is not taking it up as a campaign, which is what you need for this kind of thing to actually happen.

Not just in Chhattisgarh but in other parts of India the Adivasis live in areas where there is a huge number of resources, not just forest resources but bauxite, for example, in Orissa and, in other states, coal, manganese, uranium, and the like. How big of a factor, then, is the economics of this, the political economy of corporations enriching themselves, with a state enabling that to happen?

It’s a huge factor in the sense that in all these scheduled Adivasi areas, lands cannot be acquired by non-tribals. In Andhra, for instance, if there is any land that is in the possession of a non-tribal in a scheduled area it has been illegally acquired. So the Supreme Court, in fact, issued this great judgment in Andhra saying that any land that is acquired for mining should be done through a joint venture or locals should benefit, etc. But none of this has happened across the country.

The way that industries get land is through the government acquiring it for them. Everywhere you see that land is being acquired forcibly. Since 2001, there have been several cases of people being

killed in police firings when they've been protesting against their land being acquired. In Torpa in Jharkhand, people are protesting a steel plant by Arcelor-Mittal. In Meghalaya state people are protesting against uranium mining. There are actions in Kalinganagar in Orissa. So there is this huge sense of land being taken away from people. And that's brought increasing support for the Maoists. What's happening is that the government is using the Maoist hype to suppress all these peaceful movements as well, which are protesting against land acquisition.

And industry, if you read FICCI reports, which is the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce, they talk very openly about needing to sanitize the area of Maoists so that they can come in and invest. And their recent task force report on dealing with Naxalism and terrorism actually talks of the need to arm private security guards. It's a really scary report, because they're basically saying the state needs to come in strongly and wipe out the Maoists, get us to invest. So, yes, industry is fully behind this policy.

Arundhati Roy, in an article in Outlook, points out the centrality of resources, minerals in particular, and the enormous deposits of iron ore in Chhattisgarh. What do you think about that?

Rather than saying that everything is explained by resources, I think it's more accurate to say that there has been a coming together of several different interests. On the one hand, you have the interests of the security establishment, because they have been doing exactly the same kind of counterinsurgency operations in Mizoram, where resources were not an issue. There is this whole thing about the Maoists actually control parts of India and we have to wrest them back. And the police have their own interests in getting promotions, which happens when you kill people in encounters. So there is that whole security establishment interest, which is a strong driver. On the other hand, you also have the corporate interests and government's interest in signing these MoUs. These are coming together.

And it's the same personnel often who are involved in both at the local level. So, for instance, Mahendra Karma, who is the leader of the Salwa Judum, he and his sons were the local agents for the Tatas in trying to get villagers to part with their land. So there is, yes, a happy meshing of interests at this time. Because it's also important to see that in a way land acquisition is happening without the Salwa Judum as well. The government is acquiring land all over the country using force. The militarization of these areas helps in that process. It helps you to acquire land. Take the Posco steel plant coming up in Orissa. Private armies were used to break the resistance, or at least they tried to break the resistance. But I think they're not entirely reducible to each other.

Is Mahendra Karma, the head of the Salwa Judum in Chhattisgarh, from the Adivasi community?

Yes. And he was also involved in a major timber scam in the mid-1990s. Because only Adivasis are able to buy Adivasi land, he actually bought up a lot of Adivasi land at very cheap rates in order to be able to sell the trees. Because the trees are very valuable. They're teak trees. So he's the kind of Adivasi who goes around exploiting his own people and really fattens off them.

So the state has been fairly successful in peeling off Adivasis and then using them.

A certain class of them, at any rate. So there is a growing degree of stratification. It has been successful in using some Adivasis against others, yes, as in the northeast again, where you have a ruling elite which is part of the legislature, which is part of the regular mainstream parties, etc., and then continues to support the Armed Forces Special Powers Act.

Given the amount of military firepower that the state is going to introduce into Chhattisgarh and in other parts of central India to subdue the Maoist uprising, what are the prospects of the military actually subduing the Maoist rebellion?

The prospects of killing people are very high. They've already started killing people across Dantewada. In September, they killed about 17 people in two villages. Again, recently they've killed seven, eight more. So in terms of subduing the Maoists, I think low. But this could just carry on for years—and already Chidambaram has said --

Who is --

The Home Minister. At one point there was this huge amount of coverage of what was going on, and then he said, this Operation Green Hunt is a figment of the media's imagination, and no such thing is really happening. And then almost to the day media coverage stopped. So this could just carry on for a long, long time. And the government itself is talking about at least one or two years, by which time people are going to be really desperate. I don't think a military solution will work.

Have there been any openings or overtures to the Maoists?

Chidambaram has been saying, We will agree to talks if the Maoists "abjure violence," whatever that means, and the Maoists have said that they will agree to talks if the Home Ministry withdraws central forces from these areas and also follows the Constitution by implementing a judicial commission on Salwa Judum and saying some of the things we've been asking for in the Supreme Court as well. It's not clear how serious both sides are. We've formed this committee called the Citizens' Initiative for Peace, which is a kind of large umbrella organization of people across the country. There's a retired speaker of parliament, some ex-judges, several senior bureaucrats, academics. And we've basically asking both sides to agree to a ceasefire and unconditional talks.

Isn't it likely, given past historical examples, that if there is a huge insertion of military force, that it will generate more opposition?

Wherever it's happened—again, in Mizoram, which is a very similar example, the introduction of increased forces immediately generated a huge amount of support for the insurgents. But both sides have to understand that talks are the only way. It's just going to mean a lot of misery and bloodshed for people whom both sides claim to represent.

What gives you hope for some kind of settlement? Are there any NGOs, are there any women's groups in Chhattisgarh that are working for justice?

There is the Adivasi Mahasabha, the CPI, which has been really active, asking for justice, peace talks, etc. They've organized huge rallies. There is also one local NGO led by Himanshu Kumar, who has been trying to get cases to court and highlight the issue. But really it has to be a sort of nationwide effort, because it's not just confined to one state now. The central military forces are being sent to many states, and the Maoists are also active in many states.

How is it for you as an educated, sophisticated urban dweller to go into those rural areas?

Chhattisgarh is now like my second home. I've been going there since 1990, and I have people that I stay with when I go. It's like family. Some of my closest friends are there. But for, I guess, other urban dwellers it's really difficult because it's just a very different world. It's just a different part of India.

It's a part that you care about.

I've been visiting there for 20 years now, so I care about it a lot. But for most urban people it's just something that's completely alien to their experience. They have no conception of what it's like. Adivasis are sort of strange creatures who they may see on the roads of Delhi building their houses, but that's really their only experience of Adivasis.

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