



The Forever War: Inside India's Maoist Conflict

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CHHATTISGARH STATE, India—It was 4 p.m. one March afternoon in 2008. The victims were living in a relief camp in a village called Matwada. Two dozen members of a government-backed civilian militia, accompanied by at least one police officer, burst into their homes. They dragged four men out onto the street, across from a paramilitary office, and began to beat them with sticks. They paused to pour water over the Matwada men, waking them when they fainted out of pain and fear. When their wives flung themselves across their husbands' weakened bodies, they were beaten too. Then the men were dragged from sight, into the forest. One managed to escape. The next day the remaining three were found buried next to a stream, stabbed in the eyes and the neck and finished off with a knife stab to the head. The men were suspected of being informants, of aiding the nascent Maoist insurgency in the eastern Indian state of Chhattisgarh. The survivor and three widows filed a criminal case against the state, and a court decided recently that the State of Chhattisgarh would compensate them for the wrongful attacks.

Fifteen months later, a village leader named Vimal Meshram was gunned down by Maoists in a market in Bastar, in a district adjoining Matwada. Meshram was an

outspoken supporter of a Tata Steel plant that the multinational—one of India's largest industrial companies—has been trying to build for the past five years. Meshram was one of at least 1,700 villagers, all police or police-supported vigilantes, who've been killed by Maoists in this district alone. In the bloodiest attack, at least 80 paramilitary troops were gunned down in early April as they tried to flush Maoist rebels from the Dantewada forests in Chhattisgarh. A little more than a month later, the rebels attacked again, this time placing a landmine on a national highway in Bastar, killing eight paramilitary troops when they ran it over in their truck. Less than two weeks later the Maoists blew up a bus in the same district, killing at least 50 civilians.

Scarce Resources

There is a proxy war underway in India's interior—a bloody conflict raging over that rare and valuable commodity in this too crowded country: land. On one side, powerful rebel groups claim to be fighting for the poor—farmers and small agrarian tribes in particular. On the other side, the government is locking up land and the resources buried beneath it (particularly coal and bauxite) for some of India's biggest private

companies. In its attempts to exterminate the Maoists, India's military and police forces have killed at least 1,300 insurgents since 2004. Trapped in the crossfire, some 2,900 villagers have also died; at least 100,000 have been displaced. The clash includes some of the most powerful industrial empires in India: Jindal Steel & Power and Tata Steel.

What began 43 years ago as a small but violent peasant insurrection in Naxalbari, a village in West Bengal, is now a full-fledged conflict and ideological movement. In 2004, the Maoists went so far as to form a political party—the Communist Party of India (Maoists). Though it was banned last year, and its entire senior leadership has since been arrested or gone into hiding, the Maoists have only grown stronger. In 2001, they were active in 56 districts in a small corner of the country. Today, they hold sway in 223 districts, boast an armed cadre of some 10,000 revolutionaries and can field a militia of at least 100,000, according to Ajai Sahni, executive director of the Institute for Conflict Management, a New Delhi think tank. The government has declared the Maoist rebels—also known as Naxalites—the greatest threat India faces from within. It is not surprising that the same decade that witnessed the rise of this violent Maoist insurgency also saw India's best economic performance in history.

"India's boom period has coincided with maximum dissent and dissatisfaction in rural India," Sahni says. Over the past two decades, the Indian government has been trying to lock up land for public projects like power plants and, more recently, private enterprises like Tata Steel. Often this means evicting farmers from the small, privately held farms their families have worked for generations. The biggest problem, Sahni says, is that the national government is abysmal at resettling people who have been stripped of their land, home and income.

In regions with dense tribal populations like Chhattisgarh, non-indigenous individuals and companies are prohibited from buying land owned by tribal members directly. But the law allows the government to acquire this land, then sell it to third parties. Hundreds of thousands of villagers have been dispossessed and displaced. Many now live in what could soon become permanent refugee camps, where they are prey to both sides in the proxy war and easy converts to radicalism. "There will always be developmental friction," says Sahni. "Of all the people displaced between 1950 and 1990, when India undertook large projects like dams, only 25 percent have been rehabilitated." In comparison, the few thousand who will be affected by Tata and Jindal's projects are so small that, according to Sahni, they "shouldn't cause friction. Rehabilitation and relief must precede dispossession."

Cleansing the Epicenter

Dantewada district, in Bastar, is the epicenter of Maoist activity. The village is 55 miles from Jagdalpur, where a factory under development by Tata will produce 5 million tons of steel a year. Iron mines nearby will feed the plant. Last fall, the federal government and the state government launched a "cleansing" operation here, to root out the Maoists. For the last five years, New Delhi has been trying to acquire 5,050 acres across ten villages, displacing some 1,750 landowners in the process. It has been met with resistance, and is accused of bullying and pressuring villagers and taking the land on Tata's behalf. Tata refuses to acknowledge these allegations. "Land acquisition is the government's job," a spokesperson said.

As he stands among his six acres of chickpeas, Hidmo Mandavi—chief of Takara Guda village—says Tata representatives have told him to sell his land. They've told other farmers this too, and have offered

them jobs in the new steel factory. “We’re not engineers,” Mandavi says. “We may get jobs—but they’ll be jobs serving water to others or sweeping the floors. Right now we live like owners. Why should we become servants?” Mehteram Kahsyap, another Takara Guda villager, refused to sell his 20 acres. “We’ve said [to Tata representatives] go put up your factory somewhere else,” he says. “This is fertile agricultural land, why would you put up a factory here? If we get kicked out we won’t survive.”

Their defiance doesn’t sit well, even in the world’s largest democracy. Kashyap has been jailed three times on charges of disturbing the peace. Police have broken up gatherings of as few as five people, though there is no law prohibiting such activities. A few years ago two busloads of villagers were on their way to meet the governor of Chhattisgarh to complain about being bullied into selling their land for the Tata plant. The group advertised their intentions in the newspaper to drum up support, but the police stopped the buses en route and hauled the villagers off to jail. Mashre Mora, a farmer from Dabpal who refused to sell out, returned home from a weekly gathering with his fellow farmers. They discussed water supplies and crop infestations and sorted out disputes with their neighbors. That evening some 40 police officers broke the lock to Mora’s house, knocked some tiles off his roof and dragged him to jail for disturbing the peace. It was his third arrest. “I’ve told them I won’t give up my land,” he says. “I’m uneducated and can’t get a job in an office, so once the money runs out what will I do? I only have the support of my farming, I don’t have any-



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Activists may walk softly, but police carry big sticks.

thing else.” The police say that they have no involvement in land acquisition, they only show up to hunt Maoists.

Some villagers have found their names on lists of people who have sold their land—though they say they haven’t. Kamal Gajbiya, 40, is a towering, muscular figure with a thick beard. A resident of Kumbli village, he owns eight acres with his brother, sister and mother. Gajbiya has met the same fate as Mora. On each trip to prison, he says, people he believes were Tata reps, accompanied by government officials, asked him to part with his land. “They said, ‘We’ll let you go; take the money,’” Gajbiya recalls. “I said, ‘I’m a prisoner, and I cannot talk to you.’” Last May he discovered his name had been struck from the revenue records because he had supposedly sold his

farm. Gajbiya filed multiple complaints with the Ministry of Information before he finally received a copy of the records showing that he and 1,750 other farmers had been struck from the government records as they had allegedly sold their land, even though he hadn't. He eventually obtained letters from those farmers stating their opposition to selling. There's nothing subtle about the government's threats. Retu Ram, a teacher from a neighboring village, was told he'd be transferred to another district if he didn't sell. Ram's colleague was told the same and, sure enough, got relocated. In another village, Banga Peeta Aito, a 60-year-old farmer, went to prison for a month on charges of disturbing the peace. His sons were told that until they agreed to take the check from Tata, their father would remain in jail. They finally caved in, and their father was released the next day. In its blanket denial of abuses, Tata declines to address specific incidents.

Tata claims it has been invited here by the government of Chhattisgarh, and that it is bringing economic opportunity to the area. "Although rich in mineral resources, Bastar is among the most backward regions of the country," says Sanjay Choudhry, a Tata spokesperson, who adds that the plant "will give a boost to all-round development in the region." The company, he observes, paid double the amount per acre set by the government and plans to offer a real estate exchange for up to 2.5 acres of land lost. It will also provide technical training and job-placement for one member from each affected family. Moreover, Tata says that 70 percent of the local landowners have accepted its offers, and the rest are coming around. "Youth of the area are in favor of industrialization, in which they see their future," Choudhry says.

The villagers dispute this.

Strife on a Cheerless Landscape

Some 400 miles north of Bastar, the thickly forested region of Raigarh gives way to a black, cheerless landscape. Soot blankets trees, shrubs, roads, buildings. The Jindal Steel & Power plant dominates the region. It runs a 7 million ton steel plant, a 2 million ton cement plant and a 1,600 megawatt captive power plant in the state. Its subsidiary, Jindal Power Ltd., is expanding its existing thermal power plant in a place called Tamnar with an additional \$2.4 billion, 2.4-gigawatt coal-fired power plant. Naveen Jindal, executive chairman of Jindal Steel and Power and a member of India's parliament, has transformed his company from a modest performer into an international player. Naveen's mother, Savitri, is chairman of the O.P. Jindal Group and ranks 44th on Forbes's billionaires list—with an estimated net worth of \$12.2 billion. Jindal Steel and Power has among the lowest production costs in the world, thanks to cheap supplies of iron ore, electric power and sponge iron, which is made from inexpensive bituminous coal rather than anthracite. To keep growing, Jindal needs more land and more resources, and the push has led to strife.

Although there have been public hearings to decide whether Jindal can build its new 2.4-gigawatt coal-fired plant, residents say they weren't allowed to voice their concerns. During one such meeting, in January 2008, several people were beaten by police and seven were hospitalized for a week. Among the abused was Harihar Patel, chief of the Khamaria village. "The company has a no-objection certificate okaying the project, but we never signed it," Patel says. Ramesh Agrawal, who runs an Internet café in Raigarh thinks that most of the public hearings are for show. Agrawal uses the profits from his café to pursue court cases against Jindal and inform villagers of their legal rights. When asked about the role his

company played in the public hearings, Naveen Jindal claims, “We had no role in conducting the public hearing except for making a brief presentation about the project. I believe some people wanted to create trouble, and the police had to intervene to maintain peace.”

But at times there isn’t even the farce of a public hearing. According to Krishna Lal Sao, an ex-cop in Tamnar, in 2003 Jindal Power dumped 1,100 truckloads of mud on his two acres of arable land just before harvest. Sao says that his fellow officers wouldn’t let him register a complaint and harassed so much that he resigned from the force in late 2005. In March 2007, a district court gave him title to his land and directed the police to restore his property. Then, without his permission, Jindal installed a cooling tower and warehouse on his farmland, and Sao gave up. He recently took out a loan and opened a stationery store.

In the Camps

Maoists need economic and human resources—money and men—to continue to spread their ideology and to strengthen their hold across the country. But anyone who comes across as a Naxal supporter will be hunted down both by the police and a government-backed civil militia known as the Salwa Judum (literally, “Purification Hunt”). Those ousted by the rebels—many of them victims of the appropriation of their lands—have ended up in relief camps. At least 45,000 are crammed into 23 camps run by the Judum that opened five years ago, when the proxy war began in earnest. The militia trains and arms its members and their enforcers—known as Special Police Officers—to secure the camps and conduct regular patrols in the surrounding forests.

There is an air of listlessness at the Dor-

napal camp, in the heart of this conflict-ridden area. Row after row of single-room, thatched roof mud huts are interspersed with piles of garbage. The air is filled with the acrid smoke of *bidis*, cheap cigarettes. There is no work for the farmers. A few may chance a day trip to check on the land they were forced from, and even sneak sowing a crop. But most do nothing, wasting their lives away. Kathar Ganga arrived at Dornal just after the camp opened. Maoists held a meeting in his village, he recalls, and accused his son of being a police informant. They killed him on the spot. He was just 20

“Attacks, explosions, dead bodies—such is the daily news from India.”

years old and newly married.

While Ganga and others like him may eventually return to their villages and again take up farming, Markam Joge never can. He joined the Judum as a Special Police Officer four years ago. His future lies with the Judum. He’s 21, married, with a five-year-old daughter. Joge earns \$46 a month hunting Maoists and their supporters. “I will raise my daughter here in the camp,” he says. “I do miss my village but now that I’ve picked up arms I can’t go back.” Salwa Judum members aren’t merely the protectors of the villagers, as they like to claim. “There is a complete collapse of the rule of law—with the root cause of violence in the area being the Salwa Judum and Naxal counterattacks,” says Nandini Sundar, a sociology professor at the Delhi School of Economics, who is researching the history and anthropology of citizenship and war in South Asia. Joge cannot simply hang up his arms and stop the fight. He has picked sides for life.

Some 15 miles from the Dornapal camp, deep in the forests, inaccessible even by mud road, is Naindra village. In 2006, the Salwa Judum raided and burned down the indigenous villagers' homes. Those who failed to escape, like Muchaki Ganga's father, were killed. "They slit his throat with a knife and left (his neck) hanging by a piece," Ganga says. "I'm too scared to go to the police. They'd finish us off if we complained." Not so, says Amresh Mishra, superintendent of police for Dantewada. "There are many incidents where Naxals have done this and blamed it on Salwa Judum and the police." After the houses were torched, Maoists came and gave the villagers clothes. The Judum returned twice more, set fire to the homes and abducted two boys and a girl who have not been seen since. The village was recently rebuilt by Himanshu Kumar, who for the past 18 years has run an ashram and a nonprofit school promoting literacy and basic hygiene in the heart of Naxal territory. An ardent supporter of the tribal people, he has carefully recorded police, Judum and government atrocities. He has supported some 600 legal complaints against these groups, while many are still grinding through the court system. The police are now trying to label him a Maoist. "The question is if this is an operation to kill Naxals or to start mining," he says. "But it's being done in a wrong way. They can't track down Naxals so they are going around killing innocent people." But Kumar thinks there is an easy solution. "If you want peace, give the tribals schools, hospitals, ration shops. The Naxals will never interfere with any of this."

Dilip Choudhary, the Additional Secretary to the Home Ministry, thinks this is easier said than done. The Maoists, he says, "have refused to respond to the simple call to give up violence"—the sole condition the government has set for talks.

Angry, Thinking People

In her book *Subalterns and Sovereigns*, Nandini Sundar observes that much of the debate in India today is not about the violence but the threat the Naxalites pose to the status quo. It's the security establishment's need to project this "threat" that justifies their often unchecked funding and use of force. The everyday, essential, but far less profitable task of improving governance—including an effective, impartial police force—plays little part in official efforts to deal with the rebels. As Sundar put it, "People are fighting against land acquisitions and the government is labeling them Naxals and then using that to suppress them. This is becoming increasingly dangerous as now (innocent) people are being fired upon." But, she adds, the Maoists have inflicted damage on industrial property, causing the companies to demand private security. The government is conflating both dilemmas. "If the Naxals were not there, the government would be able to acquire more land for the private sector."

Attacks, counter attacks, explosions, dead bodies—such is the daily news from India. And while the reasons for the carnage vary in different parts of the country—from land rights and access to hidden minerals to caste and class issues—the conflict can be broadly defined as the clash between industrialization and an older, agricultural, communal way of life. Keeping in mind India's socialist history, the urban-rural gulf only widens as one part of this diverse nation seeks to modernize and develop, and the other gets placed in camps. For India to become a true global power of any consequence, this dirty narrative of development needs to be resolved. Vast numbers of tribal citizens, many already the poorest in the country, have been rendered utterly destitute by the conflict and are suffering from severe malnutrition, Sundar says, adding, "They will not come back home unless they

can be assured of peace, which will come about only if criminal prosecution is initiated against the guilty, and there is an end to the continuing displacement.” The displaced, she says, fall into three categories. The largest includes those hiding in the jungles around their villages, or living at home, but periodically fleeing into the jungles after their villages are attacked by the security forces and Salwa Judum. Next are those who have fled to neighboring states because of attacks by the Salwa Judum, and live an uncertain existence on forest land at the mercy of the forest department officials or host villagers. The third category includes those in Salwa Judum camps.

Sundar has proposed a rehabilitation plan to the Supreme Court of India. It includes: individual compensation for injury, death and sexual violence; household compensation for property loss and damage; rebuilding of village infrastructures, including installation of ration shops, handpumps, schools and child care facilities; restoration of tribal society, which has suffered damage due to the breakdown of trust and fratricidal violence; and restoration of district administrative, police and judicial machinery. The plan includes contributions from the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights for restoring village schools and rehabilitating minors who were employed as combatants and addressing the psychological trauma of children who are

caught in the conflict. The National Commission of Women would be enlisted to counsel female victims of rape and sexual violence and help them file cases. “Victims’ voices must be given fair representation,” Sundar says.

Author Sudeep Chakravarti, who chronicles his extensive travels through the heartland of India’s insurgency in his book, *Red Sun—Travels in Naxalite Country*, explains that Maoists have moved away from their earliest priorities of the 1960s, when the movement was about sharecroppers and landless peasantry. In states like Chhattisgarh and West Bengal, uprisings are concerned with tribal rights; in Orissa and Jharkhand it’s over the rich mineral deposits there; in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and parts of Haryana it’s about caste and land. Now the movement is even spreading to Punjab where the area is over-farmed and undergoing a serious water crisis. The movement is growing as injustices proliferate.

“All the inequities of India are beginning to add up,” Chakravarti says. “The government can’t wish away resentment and rebellion. Repeatedly, since the 1960s the Maoist movement has been ‘annihilated.’ But from the time it started with three villages, it has come back stronger, and now it’s in 223 districts. These are not your frothing individuals. There’s a method to what they do. You have to accept that these are angry, yet thinking people.” ●