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Arundhati Roy

The Trickledown Revolution

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The law locks up the hapless felon
who steals the goose from off the common,
but lets the greater felon loose
who steals the common from the goose.
Anonymous, England, 1821

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Arundhati Roy

In the early morning hours of the 2nd of July 2010, in the remote forests of Adilabad, the Andhra Pradesh State Police fired a bullet into the chest of a man called Cherukuri Rajkumar, known to his comrades as Azad. Azad was a member of the Polit Bureau of the banned Communist Party of India (Maoist), and had been nominated by his party as its chief negotiator for the proposed peace talks with the Government of India. Why did the police fire at point-blank range and leave those telltale burn marks, when they could so easily have covered their tracks? Was it a mistake or was it a message?

They killed a second person that morning—Hem Chandra Pandey, a young journalist who was traveling with Azad when he was apprehended. Why did they kill him? Was it to make sure no eyewitness remained alive to tell the tale? Or was it just whimsy?

In the course of a war, if, in the preliminary stages of a peace negotiation, one side executes the envoy of the other side, it's reasonable to assume that the side that did the killing does not want peace. It looks very much as though Azad was killed because someone decided that the stakes were too high to allow him to remain alive. That decision could turn out to be a serious error of judgment. Not just because of who he was, but because of the political climate in India today.

The Trickledown Revolution

Days after I said goodbye to the comrades and emerged from the Dandakaranya forest, I found myself charting a weary but familiar course to Jantar Mantar, on Parliament Street in New Delhi. Jantar Mantar is an old observatory built by Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II of Jaipur in 1710. In those days it was a scientific marvel, used to tell the time, predict the weather and study the planets. Today it's a not-so-hot tourist attraction that doubles up as Delhi's little showroom for democracy.

For some years now, protests—unless they're patronized by political parties or religious organizations—have been banned in Delhi. The Boat Club on Rajpath, which has in the past seen huge, historic rallies that sometimes lasted for days, is out of bounds for political activity now, and is only available for picnics, balloon-sellers and boat-rides. As for India Gate, candlelight vigils and boutique protests for middle-class causes —such as "Justice for Jessica", the model who was killed in a Delhi bar by a thug with political connections—are allowed, but nothing more. Section 144, an old nineteenth-century law that bans the gathering of more than five people—who have "a common object which is unlawful"—in a public place, has been clamped on the city. The law was passed by the British in 1861 to prevent a repeat of the 1857 Mutiny. It was meant to be an emergency measure, but has become a permanent fixture in many parts of India. Perhaps it was in gratitude for laws like these, that our Prime Minister, while accepting an honorary degree from Oxford, thanked the British for bequeathing us such a rich legacy: "Our judiciary, our legal system, our bureaucracy and our police are all great institutions, derived from British-Indian administration and they have served the country well."

Jantar Mantar is the only place in Delhi where Section 144 applies but is not enforced. People from all over the country, fed up with being ignored by the political establishment and the media, converged there, desperately hoping for a hearing. Some take long train journeys. Some, like the victims of the Bhopal Gas leak, have walked for weeks, all the way to Delhi. Though they had to fight each other for the best spot on the burning (or freezing) pavement, until recently protestors were allowed to camp in Jantar Mantar for as long as they liked—weeks, months, even years. Under the malevolent gaze of the police and the Special Branch, they would put up their faded shamianas and banners. From here they declared their faith in democracy by issuing their memorandums, announcing their protest plans and staging their indefinite hunger strikes. From here they tried (but never succeeded) to march on Parliament. From here they hoped.

Of late though, Democracy's timings have been changed. It's strictly office hours now, nine to five. No overtime. No sleep-overs. No matter from how far people have come, no matter if they have no shelter in the city—if they don't leave by 6pm, they are forcibly dispersed, by the police if necessary, with batons and water canons if things get out of hand. The new timings were ostensibly instituted to make sure that the 2010 Commonwealth Games that New Delhi is hosting go smoothly. But nobody's expecting the old timings back any time soon. Maybe it's in the fitness of things that what's left of our democracy should be traded in for an event that was created to celebrate the British Empire. Perhaps it's only right that 400,000 people should have had their homes demolished and been driven out of the city overnight. Or that hundreds of thousands of roadside vendors should have had their livelihoods snatched away by order of the Supreme Court so city malls could take over their share of business. And that tens of thousands of beggars should have been shipped out of the city while more than a hundred thousand galley slaves were shipped in to build the flyovers, metro tunnels, Olympic-size swimming pools, warm-up stadiums and luxury housing for athletes. The Old Empire may not exist. But obviously our tradition of servility has become too profitable an enterprise to dismantle.

I was at Jantar Mantar because a thousand pavement dwellers from cities all over the country had come to demand a few fundamental rights: the right to shelter, to food (ration cards), to life (protection from police brutality, and criminal extortion by municipal officers).

It was early spring, the sun was sharp, but still civilized. This is a terrible thing to have to say, but it's true—you could smell the protest from a fair distance: It was the accumulated odor of a thousand human bodies that had been dehumanized, denied the basic necessities for human (or even animal) health and hygiene for years, if not a whole lifetime. Bodies that had been marinated in the refuse of our big cities, bodies that had no shelter from the harsh weather, no access to clean water, clean air, sanitation or medical care. No part of this great country, none of the supposedly progressive schemes, no single urban institution has been designed to accommodate them. Not the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission, not any other slum development, employment guarantee or welfare scheme. Not even the sewage system—they shit on top of it. They are shadow people, who live in the cracks that run between schemes and institutions. They sleep on the streets, eat on the streets, make love on the streets, give birth on the streets, are raped on the streets, cut their vegetables, wash their clothes, raise their children, live and die on the streets.

If the motion picture were an art form that involved the olfactory senses—in other words if cinema smelled—then films like Slumdog Millionaire would not win Oscars. The stench of that kind of poverty wouldn't blend with the aroma of warm popcorn.

The people at the protest in Jantar Mantar that day were not even slum dogs, they were pavement dwellers. Who were they? Where had they come from? They were the refugees of India's shining, the people who are being sloshed around like toxic effluent in a manufacturing process that has gone berserk. The representatives of the more than 60 million people who have been displaced, by rural destitution, by slow starvation, by floods and drought (many of them man-made), by mines, steel factories and aluminium smelters, by highways and expressways, by the 3300 big dams built since Independence and now by Special Economic Zones. They're part of the 830 million people of India who

live on less than twenty rupees a day, the ones who starve while millions of tons of food grain is either eaten by rats in government warehouses or burnt in bulk (because it's cheaper to burn food than to distribute it to poor people). They're the parents of the tens of millions of malnourished children in our country, of the 2 million who die every year before they reach the age of five. They're the millions who make up the chain-gangs that are transported from city to city to build the New India. Is this what is known as "enjoying the fruits of modern development"?

What must they think, these people, about a government that sees fit to spend nine billion dollars of public money (two thousand percent more than the initial estimate) for a two-week long sports extravaganza which, for fear of terrorism, malaria, dengue and New Delhi's new superbug, many international athletes have refused to attend? Which the Queen of England, titular head of the Commonwealth, would not consider presiding over, not even in her most irresponsible dreams. What must they think of the fact that most of those billions have been stolen and salted away by politicians and Games' officials? Not much, I guess. Because for people who live on less than twenty rupees a day, money on that scale must seem like science fiction. It probably doesn't occur to them that it's their money. That's why corrupt politicians in India never have a problem sweeping back into power, using the money they stole to buy elections. (Then they feign outrage and ask, "Why don't the Maoists stand for elections?")

Standing there, in that dim crowd on that bright day, I thought of all the struggles that were being waged by people in this country — against big dams in the Narmada Valley, Polavaram, Arunachal Pradesh; against mines in Orissa, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, against the police by the adivasis of Lalgarh, against the grabbing of their lands for industries and Special Economic Zones all over the country. How many years and (in how many ways) people have fought to avoid just such a fate. I thought of Maase, Narmada, Roopi, Nity, Mangtu, Madhav, Saroja, Raju, Gudsa Usendi and Comrade Kamla (my young bodyguard during the time I spent with the Maoists in the jungle) with their guns slung over their shoulders. I thought of the great dignity of the forest I had so recently walked in and the rhythm of the adivasi drums at the Bhumkal celebration in Bastar, like the soundtrack of the quickening pulse of a furious nation.

I thought of Padma with whom I traveled to Warangal. She's only in her thirties but when she walks up stairs she has to hold the banister and drag her body behind her. She was arrested just a week after she had had an appendix operation. She was beaten until she had an internal hemorrhage and had to have several organs removed. When they cracked her knees, the police explained helpfully that it was to make sure "she would never walk in the jungle again." She was released after serving an eight year sentence. Now she runs the "Amarula Bhadhu Mitrula Committee", the Committee of Relatives and Friends of Martyrs. It retrieves the bodies of people killed in fake encounters. Padma spends her time criss-crossing northern Andhra Pradesh, in whatever transport she can find, usually a tractor, transporting the corpses of people whose parents or spouses are too poor to make the journey to retrieve the bodies of their loved ones.

The tenacity, the wisdom and the courage of those who have been fighting for years, for decades, to bring change, or even the whisper of justice to their lives, is something extraordinary. Whether people are fighting to overthrow the Indian State, or fighting against Big Dams, or only fighting a particular steel plant or mine or SEZ, the bottom line is that they are fighting for their dignity, for the right to live and smell like human beings. They're fighting because, as far as they're concerned, "the fruits of modern development" stink like dead cattle on the highway.

On the sixty-fourth anniversary of India's Independence, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh climbed into his bullet-proof soap box in the Red Fort to deliver a passionless, bone-chillingly banal speech to the nation. Listening to him, who would have guessed that he was addressing a country that, despite having the second highest economic growth rate in the world, has more poor people than 26 of Africa's poorest countries put together? "All of you have contributed to India's success" he said, "the hard work of our workers, our artisans, our farmers has brought our

country to where it stands today… We are building a new India in which every citizen would have a stake, an India which would be prosperous and in which all citizens would be able to live a life of honor and dignity in an environment of peace and goodwill. An India in which all problems could be solved through democratic means. An India in which the basic rights of every citizen would be protected." Some would call this graveyard humor. He might as well have been speaking to people in Finland, or Sweden.

If our Prime Minister's reputation for 'personal integrity' extended to the text of his speeches, this is what he should have said:

"Brothers and sisters, greetings to you on this day on which we remember our glorious past. Things are getting a little expensive I know, and you keep moaning about food prices. But look at it this way— more than six hundred and fifty million of you are engaged in and are living off agriculture as farmers and farm labor, but your combined efforts contribute less than eighteen percent of our GDP. So what's the use of you? Look at our IT sector. It employs 0.2 per cent of the population and earns 5 per cent of the national income. Can you match that? It is true that in our country employment hasn't kept pace with growth, but fortunately sixty per cent of our workforce is self-employed. Ninety per cent of our labor force is employed by the unorganized sector. True, they manage to get work only for a few months in the year, but since we don't have a category called 'underemployed', we just keep that part a little vague. It would not be right to enter them in our books as unemployed. Coming to the statistics that say we have the highest infant and maternal mortality in the world—we should unite as a nation and ignore bad news for the time being. We can address these problems later, after our Trickledown Revolution, when the health sector has been completely privatized. Meanwhile, I hope you are all buying medical insurance. As for the fact that the per capita food grain availability has actually decreased over the last twenty years—which happens to be the period of our most rapid economic growth— believe me, that's just a coincidence.

My fellow citizens, we are building a new India in which our one hundred richest people, hold assets worth a full 25 per cent of our GDP. Wealth concentrated in fewer and fewer hands is always more efficient. You have all heard the saying that too many cooks spoil the broth. We want our beloved billionaires, our few hundred millionaires, their near and dear ones and their political and business associates, to be prosperous and to live a life of honor and dignity in an environment of peace and goodwill in which their basic rights are protected.

I am aware that my dreams cannot come true by solely using democratic means. In fact, I have come to believe that real democracy flows through the barrel of a gun. This is why we have deployed the Army, the Police, the Central Reserve Police Force, the Border Security Force, the Central Industrial Security Force, the Pradeshik Armed Constabulary, the Indo Tibetan Border Police, the Eastern Frontier Rifles— as well as the Scorpions, Greyhounds and Cobras—to crush the misguided insurrections that are erupting in our mineral-rich areas.

Our experiments with democracy began in Nagaland, Manipur and Kashmir. Kashmir, I need not reiterate, is an integral part of India. We have deployed more than half a million soldiers to bring democracy to the people there. The Kashmiri youth who have been risking their lives by defying curfew and throwing stones at the police for the last two months are Lashkar-e-Taiba militants who actually want employment not azadi. Tragically, sixty of them have lost their lives before we could study their job applications. I have instructed the police from now on to shoot to maim rather than kill these misguided youths."

In his seven years in office, Manmohan Singh has allowed himself to be cast as Sonia Gandhi's tentative, mild-mannered underling. It's an excellent disguise for a man who, for the last 20 years, first as finance minister and then as Prime Minister, has powered through a regime of new economic policies that has brought India into the situation in which it finds itself now. This is not to suggest that Manmohan Singh is not an underling. Only that all his orders don't come from Sonia Gandhi. In his autobiography A Prattler's Tale Ashok Mitra, former finance minister of West Bengal tells his story of how Manmohan Singh rose to power. In 1991, when India's foreign exchange reserves

were dangerously low, the Narasimha Rao government approached the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for an emergency loan. The IMF agreed on two conditions. The first was Structural Adjustment and Economic Reform. The second was the appointment of a Finance Minister of its choice. That man, says Mitra, was Manmohan Singh. Over the years he has stacked his cabinet and the bureaucracy with people who are evangelically committed to the corporate take-over of everything—water, electricity, minerals, agriculture, land, telecommunications, education, health—no matter what the consequences.

Sonia Gandhi and her son play an important part in all of this. Their job is to run the Department of Compassion and Charisma, and to win elections. They are allowed make (and also to take credit for) decisions which appear progressive but are actually tactical and symbolic, meant to take the edge off popular anger and allow the big ship to keep on rolling. (The most recent example of this is the rally that was organized for Rahul Gandhi to claim victory for the cancellation of Vedanta's permission to mine Niyamgiri for bauxite—a battle that the Dongaria Kondh tribe and a coalition of activists, local as well as international, have been fighting for years. At the rally Rahul Gandhi announced that he was a "soldier for the tribal people". He didn't mention that the economic policies of his party are predicated on the mass displacement of tribal people. Or that every other bauxite 'giri'—hill—in the neighborhood was having the hell mined out of it, while this "soldier for the tribal people" looked away. Rahul Gandhi may be a decent man. But for him to go around talking about the "two Indias"—the "Rich India" and the "Poor India"—as though the party he represents has nothing to do with it, is an insult to everybody's intelligence including his own.)

The division of labour between politicians who have a mass base and win elections to keep the charade of democracy going, and those who actually run the country but either do not need to (judges and bureaucrats) or have been freed of the constraint of winning elections (like the Prime minister) is a brilliant subversion of democratic practice. To imagine that Sonia and Rahul Gandhi are in charge of the government would be a mistake. The real power has passed into the hands of a coven of oligarchs —judges, bureaucrats, and politicians. They in turn are run like prize race-horses by the few corporations who more or less own everything in the country. They may belong to different political parties and put up a great show of being political rivals, but that's just subterfuge for public consumption. The only real rivalry is the business rivalry between corporations.

A senior member of the coven is P. Chidambaram, who some say is so popular with the Opposition that he may continue to be Home Minister even if the Congress were to lose the next election. That's probably just as well. He may need a few extra years in office to complete the task he has been assigned. But it doesn't matter if he stays or goes. The die has been rolled.

In a lecture at Harvard, his old university, in October 2007, Chidambaram outlined that task. The lecture was called "Poor Rich Countries: The Challenges of Development". He called the three decades after Independence the "lost years" and exulted about the GDP growth rate which rose from 6.9 per cent in 2002 to 9.4 per cent by 2007. What he said is important enough for me to inflict a chunk of his charmless prose on you:

"One would have thought that the challenge of development – in a democracy – will become less formidable as the economy cruises on a high growth path. The reality is the opposite. Democracy – rather, the institutions of democracy – and the legacy of the socialist era have actually added to the challenge of development. Let me explain with some examples. India's mineral resources include coal—the fourth largest reserves in the world—iron ore, manganese, mica, bauxite, titanium ore, chromite, diamonds, natural gas, petroleum, and limestone. Commonsense tells us that we should mine these resources quickly and efficiently. That requires huge capital, efficient organizations and a policy environment that will allow market forces to operate. None of these factors is present today in the mining sector. The laws in this behalf are outdated and Parliament has been able to only tinker at the margins. Our efforts to attract private investment in prospecting and mining have, by and large, failed. Meanwhile, the sector remains virtually captive in the hands of the State governments. Opposing any change in the status quo are groups that espouse â€" quite legitimately â€" the cause of the forests or the environment or the tribal population. There are also political parties that regard mining as a natural monopoly of the State and have ideological objections to the entry of

the private sector. They garner support from the established trade unions. Behind the unions – either known or unknown to them – stand the trading mafia. The result: actual investment is low, the mining sector grows at a tardy pace and it acts as a drag on the economy. I shall give you another example. Vast extent of land is required for locating industries. Mineral-based industries such as steel and aluminum require large tracts of land for mining, processing and production. Infrastructure projects like airports, seaports, dams and power stations need very large extents of land so that they can provide road and rail connectivity and the ancillary and support facilities. Hitherto, land was acquired by the governments in exercise of the power of eminent domain. The only issue was payment of adequate compensation. That situation has changed. There are new stakeholders in every project, and their claims have to be recognized. We are now obliged to address issues such as environmental impact assessment, justification for compulsory acquisition, right compensation, solatium, rehabilitation and resettlement of the displaced persons, alternative house sites and farm land, and one job for each affected family…"

Allowing "market forces" to mine resources "quickly and efficiently" is what colonizers did to their colonies, what Spain and North America did to South America, what Europe did (and continues to do) in Africa. It's what the Apartheid regime did in South Africa. What puppet dictators in small countries do to bleed their people. It's a formula for growth and development, but for someone else. It's an old, old, old, old story—must we really go over that ground again?

Now that mining licenses have been issued with the urgency you'd associate with a knock-down distress sale, and the scams that are emerging have run into billions of dollars, now that mining companies have polluted rivers, mined away state borders, wrecked ecosystems and unleashed civil war, the consequence of what the coven has set into motion is playing out. Like an ancient lament over ruined landscapes and the bodies of the poor.

Note the regret with which the Minister in his lecture talks about democracy and the obligations it entails: "Democracy – rather, the institutions of democracy – and the legacy of the socialist era have actually added to the challenge of development." He follows that up with a standard-issue clutch of lies about compensation, rehabilitation and jobs. What compensation? What solatium? What rehabilitation? And what "job for each family"? (Sixty years of industrialization in India has created employment for 6% of the workforce.) As for being "obliged" to provide "justification" for the "compulsory acqusition" of land, a cabinet minister surely knows that to compulsorily acquire tribal land (which is where most of the minerals are) and turn it over to private mining corporations is illegal and unconstitutional under the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act. Passed in 1996, PESA is an amendment that attempts to right some of the wrongs done to tribal people by the Indian constitution when it was adopted by Parliament in 1950. It overrides all existing laws that may be in conflict with it. It is a law that acknowledges the deepening marginalization of tribal communities and is meant to radically recast the balance of power. As a piece of legislation it is unique because it makes the community—the collective—a legal entity and it confers on tribal societies who live in scheduled areas the right to self-governance. Under PESA, "compulsory acquisition" of tribal land cannot be justified on any count. So, ironically, those who are being called "Maoists" (which includes everyone who is resisting land acquisition) are actually fighting to uphold the constitution. While the government is doing its best to vandalize it.

Between 2008 and 2009 the Ministry of Panchayati Raj commissioned two researchers to write a chapter for a report on the progress of Panchayati Raj in the country. The chapter is called "PESA, Left Wing Extremism and Governance: Concerns and Challenges in India's Tribal Districts", its authors, are Ajay Dandekar and Chitrangada Choudhury. Here are some extracts:

The central Land Acquisition Act of 1894 has till date not been amended to bring it in line with the provisions of PESA ….At the moment, this colonial-era law is being widely misused on the ground to forcibly acquire individual and community land for private industry. In several cases, the practice of the state government is to sign high profile MOUs with corporate houses and then proceed to deploy the Acquisition Act to ostensibly acquire the land for the state industrial corporation. This body then simply leases the land to the private corporation - a complete travesty of

the term ‘acquisition for a public purpose’, as sanctioned by the act.

There are cases where the formal resolutions of gram sabha expressing dissent have been destroyed and substituted by forged documents. What is worse, no action has been taken by the state against concerned officials even after the facts got established. The message is clear and ominous. There is collusion in these deals at numerous levels.

The sale of tribal lands to non-tribals in the Schedule Five areas is prohibited in all these states. However, transfers continue to take place and have become more perceptible in the post liberalization era. The principal reasons are — transfer through fraudulent means, unrecorded transfers on the basis of oral transactions, transfers by misrepresentation of facts and misstating the purpose, forcible occupation of tribal lands, transfer through illegal marriages, collusive title suites, incorrect recording at the time of the survey, land acquisition process, eviction of encroachments and in the name of exploitation of timber and forest produce and even on the pretext of development of welfarism.

In their concluding section they say:
The Memorandum of Understandings signed by the state governments with industrial houses, including mining companies should be re-examined in a public exercise, with gram sabhas at the centre of this enquiry.

Here it is then—not troublesome activists, not the Maoists, but a government report calling for the mining MOUs to be re-examined. What does the government do with this document? How does it respond? On April 24th 2010, at a formal ceremony, the Prime Minster released the report. Brave of him, you’d think. Except, this chapter wasn’t in it. It was dropped.

Half a century ago, just a year before he was killed, Che Guevara wrote: “When the oppressive forces maintain themselves in power against laws they themselves established, peace must be considered already broken.” Indeed it must. In 2009 Manmohan Singh said in Parliament “ If left-wing extremism continues to flourish in parts which have natural resources of minerals, the climate for investment would certainly be affected”. This was a furtive declaration of war.

(Permit me a small digression here, a moment to tell a very short Tale of Two Sikhs: In his last petition to the Punjab Governor, before he was hanged by the British Government in 1931, Bhagat Singh the celebrated Sikh revolutionary —and Marxist— said “Let us declare that the state of war does exist and shall exist so long as India’s toiling masses and the natural resources are being exploited by a handful of parasites. They may be purely British Capitalist or mixed British and Indian or even purely Indian…All these things make no difference.”)

If you pay attention to many of the struggles taking place in India, people are demanding no more than their constitutional rights. But the Government of India no longer feels the need to abide by the Indian constitution, which is supposed to be the legal and moral framework on which our democracy rests. As constitutions go it is an enlightened document, but its enlightenment is not used to protect people. Quite the opposite. It’s used as a spiked club to beat down those who a protesting against the growing tide of violence being perpetrated by a State on its people in the name of the “public good.”. In a recent article in Outlook, B.G. Verghese, a senior journalist came out waving that club in defense of the state and big corporations: “The Maoists will fade away, democratic India and the Constitution will prevail, despite the time it takes and the pain involved”, he said. To this, Azad replied. (It was the last piece he wrote before he was murdered.

“In which part of India is the Constitution prevailing, Mr Verghese? In Dantewada, Bijapur, Kanker, Narayanpur, Rajnandgaon? In Jharkhand, Orissa? In Lalgarh, Jangalmahal? In the Kashmir Valley? Manipur? Where was your

Constitution hiding for 25 long years after thousands of Sikhs were massacred? When thousands of Muslims were decimated? When lakhs of peasants are compelled to commit suicides? When thousands of people are murdered by state-sponsored Salwa Judum gangs? When adivasi women are gangraped? When people are simply abducted by uniformed goons? Your Constitution is a piece of paper that does not even have the value of a toilet paper for the vast majority of the Indian people."

After Azad was killed, several media commentators tried to paper over the crime by shamelessly inverting what he said, accusing him of calling the Indian Constitution a piece of toilet paper.

If the government won't respect the constitution, perhaps we should push for an amendment to the preamble. "We, The People of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic…" could be substituted with "We, the upper castes and classes of India, having secretly resolved to constitute India into a Corporate, Hindu, Satellite State…"

The insurrection in the Indian countryside, in particular in the tribal heartland, poses a radical challenge not only to the Indian State, but to resistance movements too. It questions the accepted ideas of what constitutes progress, development and indeed civilization itself. It questions the ethics as well as the effectiveness of different strategies of resistance. These questions have been asked before, yes. They have been asked persistently, peacefully, year after year in a hundred different ways —by the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha, the Koel Karo and Gandhamardhan agitations—and hundreds of other peoples' movements. It was asked most persuasively and perhaps most visibly, by the Narmada Bachao Andolan, the anti-dam movement in the Narmada Valley. The Government of India's only answer has been repression, deviousness and the kind of opacity that can only come from a pathological disrespect for ordinary people. Worse, it went ahead and accelerated the process of displacement and dispossession to a point where peoples' anger has built up in ways that cannot be controlled. Today the poorest people in the world have managed to stop some of the richest corporations in their tracks. It's a huge victory.

Those who have risen up are aware that their country is in a state of Emergency. They are aware that like the people of Kashmir, Manipur, Nagaland and Assam, they too have now been stripped of their civil rights by laws like the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) and the Chhattisgarh Special Public Security Act (CSPSA), which criminalize every kind of dissent—by word, deed and even intent.

When Indira Gandhi declared the Emergency at midnight on the 25th of June 1975, she did it to crush an incipient revolution. As grim as they were, those were days when people still allowed themselves to dream of bettering their lot, to dream of justice. The Naxalite uprising in Bengal had been more or less decimated. But then millions of people rallied to Jayaprakash Narayan's call for "Sampoorna Kranti" (Total Revolution). At the heart of all the unrest was the demand for land to the tiller. (Even back then it was no different—you needed a revolution to implement land redistribution, which is one of the directive principles of the constitution.)

Thirty-five years later things have changed drastically. Justice, that grand, beautiful idea has been whittled down to mean human rights. Equality is a utopian fantasy. That word has been more or less evicted from our vocabulary. The poor have been pushed to the wall. From fighting for land for the landless, revolutionary parties and resistance movements have had to lower their sights to fighting for peoples' rights to hold on to what little land they have. The only kind of land-redistribution that seems to be on the cards is land being grabbed from the poor and re-distributed to the rich for their land banks which go under the name of Special Economic Zones. The landless (mostly Dalits), the jobless, slum dwellers and the urban working class are more or less out of the reckoning. In places like Lalgarh in West Bengal, people are only asking the police and the government to leave them alone. The adivasi organization called the Peoples Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCAPA) began with one simple demand—that the Superintendent of Police visit Lalgarh and apologize to the people for the atrocities his men had committed on villagers. That was considered preposterous. (How could half-naked savages expect a government officer to apologize to them?) So people barricaded their villages and refused to let the police in. The police stepped up the

violence. People responded with fury. Now, two years down the line, and many gruesome rapes, killings and fake encounters later, it's all out war. The PCAPA has been banned and dubbed a Maoist outfit. Its leaders have been jailed or shot. (A similar fate has befallen the Chasi Mulya Adivasi Sangh in Narayanpatna in Orissa and the Visthappen Virodhi Ekta Manch in Potka in Jharkhand.)

People who once dreamt of justice and equality, and dared to demand land to the tiller have been reduced to asking for an apology from the police for being beaten and maimed—is this progress?

During the Emergency, the saying goes, when Mrs Gandhi asked the press to bend, it crawled. And yet, in those days there were instances when national dailies defiantly published blank editorials to protest censorship. (Irony of ironies —one of those defiant editors was B.G Verghese). This time around, in the undeclared emergency, there's not much scope for defiance because the media is the government. Nobody, except the corporations who control it, can tell it what to do. Senior politicians, ministers, and officers of the security establishment vie to appear on TV, feebly imploring Arnab Goswami or Barkha Dutt for permission to interrupt the day's sermon. Several TV channels and newspapers are overtly manning Operation Green Hunt's war room and its disinformation campaign. There was the identically worded story about the "1500 crore Maoist industry" filed under the byline of different reporters in several different papers. Almost all newspapers and TV channels ran stories blaming the PCAPA (used interchangeably with "Maoists") for the horrific train derailment in Jhagram in West Bengal in May 2010 in which 140 people died. Two of the main suspects have been shot down by the police in "encounters", even though the mystery around the train accident is still unraveling. The Press Trust of India put out several untruthful stories, faithfully showcased by the Indian Express, including one about Maoists mutilating the bodies of policemen they had killed. (The denial, which came from the police themselves, was published postage-stamp size hidden in the middle pages.) There are the several identical interviews, all of them billed as "exclusive", by the female guerilla about how she had been "raped and re-raped" by Maoist leaders. She was supposed to have recently escaped from the forests and the clutches of the Maoists to tell the world her tale. Now it turns out that she has been in police custody for months.

The atrocity-based analyses shouted out at us from our TV screens is designed to smoke up the mirrors, and hustle us into thinking, "Yes the tribals have been neglected and are having a very bad time, yes they need development, yes it's the government's fault, and it's a great pity. But right now there is a crisis. We need to get rid of the Maoists, secure the land and then we can help the tribals."

As war closes in, the Armed Forces have announced (in the way only they can), that they too are getting into the business of messing with our heads. In June 2010 they released two 'operational doctrines'. One was a joint doctrine for air-land operations. The other was a doctrine on Military Psychological Operations which "constitutes a planned process of conveying a message to select target audiences, to promote particular themes that result in desired attitudes and behaviour, which affect the achievement of political and military objectives of the country… The Doctrine also provides guidelines for activities related to perception management in sub-conventional operations, specially in an internal environment wherein misguided population may have to be brought into the mainstream". The press release went on to say "the doctrine on Military Psychological Operations is a policy, planning and implementation document that aims to create a conducive environment for the armed forces to operate by using the media available with the Services to their advantage".

A month later, at a meeting of Chief Ministers of Naxalite-affected states, a decision was taken to escalate the war. Thirty-six battalions of the India Reserve Force were added to the existing 105 battalions, and 16,000 Special Police Officers (civilians armed and contracted to function as police) were added to the existing 30,000. The Home Secretary promised to hire 175,000 policemen over the next five years. (It's a good model for an employment guarantee scheme: hire half the population to shoot the other half. You can fool around with the ratios if you like.) Two days later the Army Chief told his senior officers to be "mentally prepared to step into the fight against Naxalism….It might be in six months or in a year or two, but if we have to maintain our relevance as a tool of the state, we will have to undertake things that the nation wants us to do".

By August, newspapers were reporting that the on-again-off-again Air Force was on again. “The Indian Air Force can fire in self-defense in Anti-Maoist Operations” The Hindustan Times said, "The permission has been granted but with strict conditionalities. We cannot use rockets or the integral guns of the helicopters and we can retaliate only if fired upon…To this end, we have side-mounted machineguns on our choppers that are operated by our Garuds (IAF commandoes)”. That’s a relief. No integral guns, only side-mounted machine guns.

Maybe “six months or in a year or two” is about as long as it will take for the brigade headquarters in Bilaspur and the air base in Rajnandgaon to be ready. Maybe by then, in a great show of democratic spirit, the government will give in to popular anger and repeal AFSPA, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (which allows non-commissioned officers to kill on suspicion) in Manipur, Nagaland, Assam and Kashmir. Once the applause subsides and the celebration peters out, AFSPA will be recast, as the Home Minister has suggested, on the lines of the Jeevan Reddy report (to sound more humane but to be more deadly). Then it can be promulgated all over the country under a new name. Maybe that will give the armed forces the impunity they need to do what “the nation” wants them to do—to be deployed in the parts of India against the poorest of the poor who are fighting for their very survival.

Maybe that’s how Comrade Kamala will die—while she’s trying to bring down a helicopter gunship or a military training jet with her pistol. Or maybe by then she will have graduated to an AK-47 or a Light Machine Gun looted from a government armory or a murdered policeman. Maybe by then the media “available to the Services” will have “managed” the perceptions of those of us who still continue to be “misguided” to receive the news of her death with equanimity.

So here’s the Indian State, in all its democratic glory, willing to loot, starve, lay siege to, and now deploy the air force in ‘self defense’ against its poorest citizens.

Self-defense. Ah yes. Operation Green hunt is being waged in self-defense by a government that is trying to restore land to poor people whose land has been snatched away by Commie Corporations.

When the government uses the offer of peace talks to draw the deep-swimming fish up to the surface and then kill them, do peace talks have a future? Is either side genuinely interested in peace? Are the Maoists’ really interested in peace or justice, people ask, is there anything they can be offered within the existing system that will deflect the Maoists from their stated goal of overthrowing the Indian State? The answer to that is probably not. The Maoists do not believe that the present system can deliver justice. The thing is that an increasing number of people are beginning to agree with them. If we lived in a society with a genuinely democratic impulse, one in which ordinary people felt they could at least hope for justice, then the Maoists would be only be a small, marginalized group of militants with very little popular appeal.

The other contention is that Maoists want a ceasefire to take the heat off themselves for a while so that they can use the time to re-group and consolidate their position. Azad, in an interview to The Hindu (April 14th 2010) was surprisingly candid about this: “It doesn’t need much of a common sense to understand that both sides will utilize the situation of a ceasefire to strengthen their respective sides.” He then went on to explain that a ceasefire, even a temporary one, would give respite to ordinary people who are caught in a war zone.

The government, on the other hand, desperately needs this war. (Read the business papers to see how desperately). The eyes of the international business community are boring holes into its back. It needs to deliver, and fast. To keep its mask from falling, it must continue to offer talks on the one hand, and undermine them on the other. The elimination of Azad was an important victory because it silenced a voice that had begun to sound dangerously reasonable. For the moment at least, peace talks have been successfully derailed.

There is plenty to be cynical about in the discussion around peace talks. The thing for us ordinary folks to remember is that no peace talks means an escalating war.

Over the last few months, the government has poured tens of thousands of heavily armed paramilitary troops into the forest. The Maoists responded with a series of aggressive attacks and ambushes. More than 200 policemen have been killed. The bodies keep coming out of the forest. Slain policemen wrapped in the national flag, slain Maoists, displayed like hunter's trophies, their wrists and ankles lashed to bamboo poles; bullet-ridden bodies, bodies that don't look human any more, mutilated in ambushes, beheadings and summary executions. Of the bodies being buried in the forest, we have no news. The theatre of war has been cordoned off, closed to activists and journalists. So there are no body counts.

On April 6th 2010, in its biggest strike ever, in Dantewada the Maoists' Peoples Liberation Guerilla Army (PLGA) ambushed a Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) company and killed 76 policemen. The party issued a coldly triumphant statement. Television milked the tragedy for everything it was worth. The nation was called upon to condemn the killing. Many of us were not prepared to— not because we celebrate killing, nor because we are all Maoists, but because we have thorny, knotty views about Operation Green Hunt. For refusing to buy shares in the rapidly growing condemnation industry, we were branded "terrorist sympathizers" and had our photographs flashed repeatedly on TV like wanted criminals.

What was a CRPF contingent doing, patrolling tribal villages with 21 AK-47 rifles, 38 Insas rifles, seven Self Loading Rifles, six Light Machine Guns, one stengun and one 2-inch mortar? To ask that question almost amounted to an act of treason.

Days after the ambush, I ran into two paramilitary commandos chatting to a bunch of drivers in a Delhi car park. They were waiting for their VIP to emerge from some restaurant or health club or hotel. Their view on what is going on involved neither grief nor patriotism. It was simple accounting. A balance sheet. They were talking about how many lakhs of rupees in bribes it takes for a man to get a job in the para-military forces, and how most families incur huge debts to pay that bribe. That debt can never be repaid by the pathetic wages paid to a jawan for example. The only way to repay it to do what policemen in India do—blackmail and threaten people, run protection rackets, demand payoffs, do dirty deals. (In the case of Dantewada, loot villagers, steal cash and jewelry.) But if the man dies an untimely death, it leaves the families hugely in debt. The anger of the men in the car park was directed at the government and senior police officers who make fortunes from bribes and then so casually send young men to their death. They knew that the handsome compensation that was announced for the dead in the April 6th attack was just to blunt the impact of the scandal. It was never going to be standard practice for every policeman who dies in this sordid war.

Small wonder then that the news from the war zone is that CRPF men are increasingly reluctant to go on patrol. There are reports of them fudging their daily log-books, filling them with phantom patrols. Maybe they're beginning to realize that they are only poor khaki trash—cannon fodder in a Rich man's war. There are thousands waiting to replace each one of them when they're gone.

On May 17th 2010, in another major attack, the Maoists blew up a bus in Dantewada and killed about 44 people. Of them 16 were Special Police Officers (SPOs), members of the dreaded government sponsored peoples' militia, the Salwa Judum. The rest of the dead were, shockingly, ordinary people, mostly adivasis. The Maoists expressed perfunctory regret for having killed civilians, but they came that much closer to mimicking the State's "collateral damage" defense.

Last month in Bihar the Maoists kidnapped four policemen and demanded the release of some of their senior leaders. A few days into the hostage drama, they killed one of them, an adivasi policeman called Lucas Tete. Two

days later they released the other three. By killing a prisoner in custody the Maoists once again harmed their own cause. It was another example of the Janus-faced morality of “revolutionary violence” that we can expect more of in a war zone, in which tactics trump rectitude and make the world a worse place.

Not many analysts and commentators who were pained by the Maoist killing of civilians in Dantewada, pointed out that at exactly the same time as the bus was blown up by the Maoists, in Kalinganagar, Orissa and in Balitutha and Potko in Jharkhand, the police had surrounded several villages and had fired on thousands of protestors resisting the take over of their lands by the Tatas, the Jindals and Posco. Even now the siege continues. The wounded cannot be taken to hospital because of the police cordons. Videos uploaded on Youtube show armed riot police massing in the hundreds, being confronted by ordinary villagers, some of who are armed with bows and arrows.

The one favor Operation Green Hunt has done ordinary people is that it has clarified things to them. Even the children in the villages know that the police works for the ‘companies’ and that Operation Green Hunt isn’t a war against Maoists. It’s a war against the poor.

There’s nothing small about what’s going on. We are watching a democracy turning on itself, trying to eat its own limbs. We’re watching incredulously as those limbs refuse to be eaten.

Of all the various political formations involved in the current insurrection none is more controversial than the CPI (Maoist). The most obvious reason is its unapologetic foregrounding of armed struggle as the only path to revolution. Sumanta Banerjee’s book In the Wake of Naxalbari is one of the most comprehensive accounts of the movement. It documents the early years, the almost harebrained manner in which the Naxalites tried to jump-start the Indian Revolution by “annihilating the class enemy” and expecting the masses to rise-up spontaneously. It describes the contortions it had to make in order to remain aligned with China’s foreign policy, how it spread from state to state and how Naxalism was mercilessly crushed.

Buried deep inside the fury that is directed against them by the orthodox Left and the liberal intelligentsia is their unease with themselves and a puzzling, almost mystical protectiveness towards the Indian State. It’s as though, when they are faced with a situation that has genuine revolutionary potential, they blink. They find reasons to look away. Political parties and individuals who have not in the last twenty five years ever lent their support to say, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, or marched in solidarity with any one of the many of peaceful peoples’ movements in the country, have suddenly begun to extol the virtues of non-violence and Gandhian Satyagraha. On the other hand, those who have been actively involved in these struggles, may strongly disagree with the Maoists, they maybe wary, even exasperated by them, but they do see them as a part of the same resistance.

It’s hard to say who dislikes the Maoists more—the Indian State, its army of strategic experts and its instinctively rightwing middle-class, or the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India (Marxist), usually called the CPM, the several splinter groups that were part of the original Marxist-Leninists or the liberal left. The argument begins with nomenclature. The more orthodox communists do not believe that ‘Maoism’ is an ‘ism’ at all. The Maoists in turn call the mainstream communist parties ‘social fascists’ and accuse them of ‘economism’—basically, of gradually bargaining away the prospect of revolution.

Each faction believes itself to be the only genuinely revolutionary Marxist party, or political formation. Each believes the other has misinterpreted communist theory and misunderstood history. Anyone who isn’t a card-carrying member of one or the other group will be able to see that none of them is entirely wrong or entirely right about what they say. But bitter splits, not unlike those in religious sects, are the natural corollary of the rigid conformity to the party line demanded by all communist parties. So they dip into a pool of insults that dates back to the Russian and Chinese revolutions, to the great debates between Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin, to Chairman Mao’s red book, and hurl them at each other. They accuse each other of the ‘incorrect application’ of ‘Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong Thought’, almost

as though it's an ointment that's being rubbed in the wrong place. (My earlier essay Walking with the Comrades landed directly in the flight-path of this debate. It got its fair share of entertaining insults, which deserve a pamphlet of their own.)

Other than the debate about whether to not to enter electoral politics, the major disagreement between the various strands of communism in India centers around their reading of whether conditions in the country are ripe for revolution. Is the prairie ready for the fire, as Mao announced in China, or is it still too damp for the single spark to ignite it? The trouble is that India lives in several centuries simultaneously, so perhaps the prairie, that vast stretch of flat grassland is the wrong analogy for India's social and political landscape. Maybe a 'warren' would be a better one. To arrive at a consensus about the timing of the revolution, is probably impossible. So everybody marches to their own drumbeat. The CPI and the CPM have more or less postponed the revolution to the afterlife. For Charu Majumdar, founder of the Naxalite movement, it was meant to have happened thirty years ago. According to the Ganapathy, current chief of the Maoists, it's about fifty years away.

Today, forty years after the Naxalbari uprising, the main charge against the Maoists by the parliamentary left continues to be what it always was. They are accused of suffering from what Lenin called an "infantile disorder", of substituting mass politics with militarism and of not having worked at building a genuinely revolutionary proletariat. They are seen as having contempt for the urban working class, of being an ideologically ossified force that can only function as a frog-on-the-back of 'innocent' (read primitive) jungle-dwelling tribal people who, according to orthodox Marxists, have no real revolutionary potential. (This is not the place perhaps, to debate a vision that says people have to first become wage-earners, enslaved to a centralized industrial system, before they can be considered revolutionary.)

The charge that the Maoists are irrelevant to urban working class movements, to the Dalit movement, to the plight of farmers and agricultural workers outside the forests is true. There is no doubt that the Maoist Party's militarized politics makes it almost impossible for it to function in places where there is no forest cover. However, it could equally be argued that the major communist parties have managed to survive in the mainstream only by compromising their ideologies so drastically that it is impossible to tell the difference between them and other bourgeois political parties any more. It could be argued that the smaller factions that have remained relatively uncompromised have managed to do so because they do not pose a threat to anybody.

Whatever their faults or achievements as bourgeois parties, few would associate the word "revolutionary" with the CPI or CPM any more. (The CPI does play a role in some of the struggles against mining companies in Orissa.) But even in their chosen sphere of influence they cannot claim to have done a great service to the proletariat they say they represent. Apart from their traditional bastions in Kerala and West Bengal, both of which they are losing their grip over, they have very little presence in any other part of the country, urban or rural, forest or plains. They have run their Trade Unions into the ground. They have not been able to stanch the massive job losses and the virtual disbanding of the formal workforce that mechanization and the new economic policies have caused. They have not been able to prevent the systematic dismantling of workers' rights. They have managed to alienate themselves almost completely from Adivasi and Dalit communities. In Kerala many would say that they have done a better job than other political parties, but their thirty-year 'rule' in West Bengal has left that state in ruins. The repression they unleashed in Nandigram and Singur, and now against the adivasis of Jangalmahal, will probably drive them out of power for a few years. (Only for as long as it takes Mamta Banerjee of the Trinamool Congress to prove that she is not the vessel into which people should pour their hopes.) Still, while listing a litany of their sins, it must be said that the demise of the mainstream Communist parties is not something to be celebrated. At least not unless it makes way for a new, more vital and genuinely Left movement in India.

The Maoists (in their current as well as earlier avatars) have had a different political trajectory. The redistribution of land, by violent means if necessary, was always the centrepiece of their political activity. They have been completely unsuccessful in that endeavor. But their militant interventions, in which thousands of their cadre— as well as ordinary

people—paid with their lives, shone a light on the deeply embedded structural injustice of Indian society. If nothing else, from the time of the Telengana movement, which, in some ways was a precursor to the uprising in Naxalbari, the Naxalite movement, for all its faults, sparked an anger about being exploited and a desire for self-respect in some of the most oppressed communities. In West Bengal it led to Operation Bargadar (share-cropper) and to a far lesser extent in Andhra Pradesh it shamed the government into carrying out some land reform. Even today, all the talk about 'uneven development' and 'exploitation' of tribal areas by the Prime Minister, the Government's plans to transfer Joint Forest Management funds from the Forest Department directly to the Gram Panchayats, the Planning Commission's announcement that it will allocate Rs14000 crores for tribal development, has not come from genuine concern, it has come as a strategy to defuse the Maoist "menace". If those funds do end up benefiting the adivasi community, instead of being siphoned away by middle-men, then the "menace" surely ought to be given some credit. Interestingly, though the Maoists have virtually no political presence outside forested areas, they do have a presence in the popular imagination, an increasingly sympathetic one, as a party that stands up for the poor against the intimidation and bullying of the State. If Operation Green Hunt becomes an outright war instead of a "sub-conventional" one, if ordinary adivasis start dying in huge numbers, that sympathy could ignite in unexpected ways.

Among the most serious charges leveled against the Maoists is that its leaders have a vested interest in keeping people poor and illiterate in order to retain their hold on them. Critics ask why, after working in areas like Dandakaranya for thirty years, they still do not run schools and clinics, why they don't have check dams and advanced agriculture, and why people were still dying of malaria and malnutrition. Good question. But it ignores the reality of what it means to be a banned organization whose members—even if they are doctors or teachers—are liable to be shot on sight. It would be more useful to direct the same question to the Government of India that has none of these constraints. Why is it that in tribal areas that are not overrun by Maoists there are no schools, no hospitals, no check dams? Why do people in Chattisgarh suffer from such acute malnutrition that doctors have begun to call it "nutritional AIDS" because of the effect it has on the human immune system?

In their censored chapter in the Ministry of Panchayati Raj report, Ajay Dandekar and Chitrangada Choudhury, (no fans of the Maoists— they call the party ideology "brutal and cynical"), write:
So the Maoists today have a dual effect on the ground in PESA areas. By virtue of the gun they wield, they are able to evoke some fear in the administration at the village/block/district level. They consequently prevent the common villager's powerlessness over the neglect or violation of protective laws like PESA e.g. warning a talathi, who might be demanding bribes in return for fulfilling the duty mandated to him under the Forest Rights Act, a trader who might be paying an exploitative rate for forest produce, or a contractor who is violating the minimum wage. The party has also done an immense amount of rural development work, such as mobilizing community labour for farm ponds, rainwater harvesting and land conservation works in the Dandakaranya region, which villagers testified, had improved their crops and improved their food security situation.

In their recently published empirical analysis of the working of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGA) in 200 Maoist-affected districts in Orissa, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, which appeared in The Economic and Political Weekly, the authors Kaustav Banerjee and Partha Saha say:

The field survey revealed that the charge that the Maoists have been blocking developmental schemes does not seem to hold much ground. In fact Bastar seems to be doing much better in terms of NREGA than some other areas…. on top of that, the wage struggles, the enforcement of minimum wages can be traced back to the wage struggles led by the Maoists in that area. A clear result that we came across is the doubling of the wage rates for tendu leaf collection in most Maoist areas…. Also, the Maoists have been encouraging the conduct [sic] of social audits since this helps in the creation of a new kind of democratic practice hitherto unseen in India.

Implicit in a lot of the debate around Maoists, is the old, patronizing, tendency to cast "the masses", the adivasi people in this case, in the role of the dimwitted horde, completely controlled by a handful of wicked "outsiders". One

university professor, a well-known Maoist baiter, accused the leaders of the party of being parasites preying on poor adivasis. To bolster his case he compared the lack of development in Dandakaranya to the prosperity in Kerala. After suggesting that the non-adivasi leaders were all cowards “hiding safely in the forest” he appealed to all adivasi Maoist guerillas and village militia to surrender before a panel of middle-class Gandhian activists (hand-picked by him). He called for the non-adivasi leadership to be tried for war-crimes. Why non-adivasi Gandhians are acceptable, but not non-adivasi Maoists, he did not say. There is something very disturbing about this inability to credit ordinary people with being capable of weighing the odds and making their own decisions.

In Orissa for instance there are a number of diverse struggles being waged by unarmed resistance movements who often have sharp differences with each other. And yet between them all they have managed to temporarily stop some major corporations from being able to proceed with their projects—the Tatas in Kalinganagar, Posco in Jagatsinghpur, Vedanta in Niyamgiri. Unlike in Bastar, where they control territory and are well entrenched, the Maoists tend to use Orissa only as a corridor for their squads to pass through. But as the security forces close in on peaceful movements and ratchet up the repression, local people have to think very seriously about the pros and cons of involving the Maoist Party in their struggles. Will its armed squads stay and fight the State repression that will inevitably follow a Maoist ‘action’? Or will they retreat and leave unarmed people to deal with police terror?

Activists and ordinary people, falsely accused of being Maoists are already being jailed. Many have been killed in cold blood. But a tense, uneasy dance continues between the unarmed resistance and the CPI (Maoist). On occasion the party has done irresponsible things which have led to horrible consequences for ordinary people. In 2006 at the height of the tension between the Dalit and Adivasi communities in Kandhamal district, the Maoists shot dead Laxmananda Saraswati, leader of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad an fascist outfit of proselytizers, working among adivasis to bring them “back into the Hindu fold”. After the murder, enraged Kandha tribals who had been recently converted to Hinduism were encouraged to go on a rampage. Almost four hundred villages were convulsed with anti-Christian violence. Fifty-four Panna Dalit Christians were killed, more than two hundred churches burnt, tens of thousands of had to flee their homes. Many still live in camps unable to return. A somewhat different, but equally dangerous situation is brewing in Narayanpatna and Koraput, districts where the Chasi Mulia Adivasi Sangh (which the police say is a Maoist “front”) is fighting to restore land to adivasis that was illegally appropriated by local money lenders and liquor dealers (many of them Dalit). These areas are reeling under police terror, with hundreds of adivasis thrown in Koraput jail and thousands living in the forests, afraid to go home.

People who live in situations like this do not simply take instructions from a handful of ideologues who appear out of nowhere waving guns. Their decisions of what strategies to employ take into account a whole host of considerations: the history of the struggle, the nature of the repression, the urgency of the situation, and quite crucially, the landscape in which their struggle is taking place. The decision of whether to be a Gandhian or a Maoist, militant or peaceful, or a bit of both (like in Nandigram) is not always a moral or ideological one. Quite often it’s a tactical one. Gandhian satyagraha, for example, is a kind of political theatre. In order for it to be effective, it needs a sympathetic audience which villagers deep in the forest do not have. When a posse of 800 policemen lay a cordon around a forest village at night and begin to burn houses and shoot people, will a hunger strike help? (Can starving people go on a hunger strike? And do hunger-strikes work when they’re not on TV?) Equally, guerilla warfare is a strategy that villages in the plains with no cover for tactical retreat, cannot afford. Fortunately people are capable of breaking through ideological categories, and of being Gandhian in Jantar Mantar, militant in the plains and guerilla fighters in the forest without necessarily suffering from a crisis of identity. The strength of the insurrection in India is its diversity, not uniformity.

Since the government has expanded its definition of “Maoist” to include anybody who opposes it, it shouldn’t come as a surprise that the Maoists have moved to centre stage. However, their doctrinal inflexibility, their reputed inability to countenance dissent, to work with other political formations and most of all their single-minded, grim, military imagination makes them too small to fill the giant pair of boots that is currently on offer.

(When I met Comrade Roopi in the forest, the first thing the techie-whiz did after greeting me was to ask about an interview I did soon after the Maoists had attacked Rani Bodili, a girls' school in Dantewada which had been turned into a police camp. More than 50 policemen and SPOs were killed in the attack: "We were glad that you refused to condemn our Rani Bodili attack, but then in the same interview you said that if the Maoists ever come to power the first person we would hang would probably be you. Why did you say that? Why do you think we're like that?" I was settling into my long answer, but we were distracted. I would probably have started with Stalin's purges—in which millions of ordinary people and almost half of the 75,000 Red Army officers were either jailed or shot, and 98 out of 139 Central Committee members were arrested; gone on to the huge price people paid for China's Great Leap Forward and the cultural revolution; and might have ended with the Pedamallapuram incident in Andhra Pradesh, when the Maoists, in their previous avatar Peoples' War, killed the village sarpanch and assaulted women activists for refusing to obey their call to boycott elections.)

Coming back to the question: who can fill that giant pair of boots? Perhaps it cannot, and should not be, a single pair of feet. Sometimes it seems very much as though those who have a radical vision for a newer, better world, do not have the steel it takes to resist the military onslaught, and those who have the steel do not have the vision.
Right now the Maoists are the most militant end of a bandwidth of resistance movements fighting an assault on adivasi homelands by a cartel of mining and infrstructure companies. To deduce from this that the CPI(Maoist) is a party with a new way of thinking about "development" or the environment might be a little far-fetched. (The one reassuring sign is that it has cautiously said that it is against big dams. If it means what it says, that alone would automatically lead to a radically different development model). For a political party that is widely seen as opposing the onslaught of corporate mining, the Maoists' policy (and practice) on mining remains pretty woolly. In several places where people are fighting mining companies there is a persistent view that the Maoists are not averse to allowing mining and mining-related infrastructure projects to go ahead as long as they are given protection money. From interviews and statements made by their senior leaders on the subject of mining, what emerges is a sort of "we'll do a better job" approach. They vaguely promise "environmentally sustainable" mining, higher royalties, better resettlement for the displaced and higher stakes for the "stake-holders". (The present Minister for Mining and Mineral Resources too, thinking along the same lines, stood up in Parliament and promised that 26 percent of the 'profits' from mining would go into 'tribal development.' What a feast that will be for the pigs at the trough!)

But let's take a brief look at the star attraction in the mining belt—the several trillion dollars worth of bauxite. There is no environmentally sustainable way of mining bauxite and processing it into aluminium. It's a highly toxic process that has most western countries have exported out of their own environments. To produce one ton of aluminium you need about six tons of bauxite, more than a thousand tons of water and a massive amount of electricity. For that amount of captive water and electricity you need big dams, which, as we know, come with their own cycle of cataclysmic destruction. Last of all—the big question—what is the aluminium for? Where is it going? Aluminium is the principle ingredient in the weapons industry—for other countries' weapons' industries. Given this, what would a sane, "sustainable" mining policy be? Suppose, for the sake of argument, the CPI (Maoist) were given control of the so-called Red Corridor, the tribal homeland—with its riches of uranium, bauxite, limestone, dolomite, coal, tin, granite, marble—how would it go about the business of policy making and governance? Would it mine minerals to put on the market in order to create revenue, build infrastructure and expand its operations? Or would it mine only enough to meet people's basic needs? How would it define "basic needs"? For instance, would nuclear weapons be a "basic need" in a Maoist nation-state?

Judging from what is happening in Russia and China and even Vietnam, eventually communist and capitalist societies seem have one thing in common—the DNA of their dreams. After their revolutions, after building socialist societies that millions of workers and peasants paid for with their lives, both countries now have begun to reverse some of the gains of their revolutions and have turned into unbridled capitalist economies. For them too the ability to consume has become the yardstick by which progress is measured. For this kind of "progress" you need industry. To feed the industry you need a steady supply of raw material. For that you need mines, dams, domination, colonies, war. Old powers are waning, new ones rising. Same story, different characters—rich countries plundering poor ones. Yesterday it was Europe and America, today its India and China. Maybe tomorrow it will be Africa. Will there be a

tomorrow? Perhaps it's too late to ask, but then hope has little to do with reason.

Can we expect that an alternative to what looks like certain death for the planet will come from the imagination that has brought about this crisis in the first place? It seems unlikely. The alternative if there is one, will emerge from the places and the people who have resisted the hegemonic impulse of capitalism and imperialism instead of being co-opted by it.

Here in India, even in the midst of all the violence and greed, there is still immense hope. If anyone can do it, we can do it. We still have a population that has not yet been completely colonized by that consumerist dream. We have a living tradition of those who have struggled for Gandhi's vision of sustainability and self-reliance, for socialist ideas of egalitarianism and social justice. We have Ambedkar's vision which challenges the Gandhians as well the Socialists in serious ways. We have the most spectacular coalition of resistance movements with experience, understanding and vision.

Most important of all, India has a surviving adivasi population of almost 100 million. They are the ones who still know the secrets of sustainable living. If they disappear, they will take with those secrets with them. Wars like Operation Green Hunt will make them disappear. So victory for the prosecutors of these wars will contain within itself the seeds of destruction, not just for adivasis, but eventually, for the human race. That's why the war in Central India is so important. That's why we need a real and urgent conversation between those all those political formations that are resisting this war.

The day capitalism is forced to tolerate non-capitalist societies in its midst and to acknowledge limits in its quest for domination, the day it is forced to recognize that its supply of raw material will not be endless, is the day when change will come. If there is any hope for the world at all, it does not live in climate-change conference rooms or in cities with tall buildings. It lives low down on the ground, with its arms around the people who go to battle every day to protect their forests, their mountains and their rivers because they know that the forests, the mountains and the rivers protect them.

The first step towards re-imagining a world gone terribly wrong would be to stop the annihilation of those who have a different imagination—an imagination that is outside of capitalism as well as communism. An imagination which has an altogether different understanding of what constitutes happiness and fulfillment. To gain this philosophical space, it is necessary to concede some physical space for the survival of those who may look like the keepers of our past, but who may really be the guides to our future. To do this, we have to ask our rulers: Can you leave the water in the rivers? The trees in the forest? Can you leave the bauxite in the mountain? If they say cannot, then perhaps they should stop preaching morality to the victims of their wars.

