



In Conversation with Bela Bhatia

What, in your opinion, are the implications of the systematic marginalisation of tribal communities, not just for them but for the nation?

Well, it is a big loss for all of us. And, a big failure. Loss because what we have been witnessing in the last decade in Bastar is the death of a civilization. Failure because like in other parts of the world, in India too, we have not been able to appreciate or respect the indigenous peoples, their way of life, their knowledge, histories, and aspirations. The government, the public, and often even the rebel groups have tended to relate with them out of relative ignorance. Our "nation" is not fully conscious of itself. It does not know of its own richness. It does not know, for example, that a place like Bastar is not only rich in minerals and forests but that the tribal world holds within itself rich human resources and knowledge systems.

The tribal people of Bastar may seem to be "underdeveloped" to someone who understands "development" only in material terms. Who may have only one idea of what being modern is about, and, therefore, the "mainstreaming" of modernity -- the *mukhyadhara* -- to which all who are judged aberrant or seen to be lagging behind need to be brought to. In this imagination, the aberrant is not acceptable unless s/he desires to be part of the *mukhyadhara*. It is often not understood that a society and a people may have less in some respects, and be able to benefit from scientific advancements in some ways, and yet in other ways they may be far more advanced than their 'developed' counterparts, even those who belong to the 'higher' castes and classes. This imagination aims at a kind of economic homogenisation of society where its members desire the same consumer goods, resulting in similar habits and lifestyles. But this homogenisation is only at the consumer end of the bargain, and does not question structural inequalities even remotely. The continuing concentration of wealth and power in a few hands and the resultant widening of inequality is not seen as a problem.

Increasingly, the *mukhyadhara* involves an imagination not only of economic homogenisation but also of cultural homogenisation, with the hindutva ideology at its core. Since this imagination is being propagated by the dominant sections of society, it excludes other plausible ways of life including those that have been practiced by the tribals for centuries. This way of life has proved in its simplicity to be sustainable, environment friendly, and one that depends on cooperation and mutual aid and therefore keeps the community alive. Tribal economies have also proved to be largely self-sufficient and the extent to which they are able to be self-reliant is awe-inspiring. Unfortunately, all that is getting lost. The tragedy is that in this process, where the talk is of their 'development', what is happening is that whatever they had is also being wrested away from them. For the adivasis, this process hides a greater loss -- a loss of self.

Do you think that the indigenous knowledge base (especially their systems of resource management and organisation) have the potential to be developed into sustainable models that can be implemented at the macro level? How?

To my mind, it would be useful to study these systems of knowledge for the understanding that we can acquire, and while doing so try to also observe the values and principles that informs them, not with the idea of replicating the same as "models" at the macro level but in order to be able to appreciate what worked in their specific context. Trying to see models and replicate them would be falling into the trap of centralised thinking. The tribal way of life invites us to think in a decentralized, context specific, and freeway.

How much scope for development do the people caught in the crossfire between the state and insurgent groups have?

The tribal residents of the war zone live as though in a cage. Their movements have become severely restricted in the last decade. Many of those who had run away across the borders to Telangana during the height of the first phase of the counter-insurgency (2005-2006) have become permanent settlers there. Families have got divided and communities dispersed. For many years, these displaced families could not cultivate their lands or could do so only furtively. Their unoccupied homes fell apart; in many cases they were also burnt by the security forces or the Salwa Judum. Their belongings were looted and their greatest wealth, in the shape of cattle and livestock was lost, died or became feral. During these years, the government had also withdrawn all welfare services (schools, health centres, the public distribution system) from the conflict areas and restricted these services to those who were in the camps. Many schools were also demolished or blasted by the Maoists, who did not want them to be occupied by the security forces. Most of these villages in the interior regions are not electrified and road connectivity is poor. Thus, what the people had by way of public services, in any case, was quite minimal and even that was no longer available to them. Those who had run away to Telangana were not eligible for these services there either. The war, therefore, has caused much hardship to people. Over the years, even though many families have returned, rebuilt their homes and resumed farming the situation is far from normal. Armed actions by Maoists as well as counter-insurgency operations continue. While the rhetoric of development continues, in reality their survival is at stake. The tribal residents of the war zone have become prisoners of state repression and class war.

How practical, in your opinion, is the state's proposal to link the PDS with Aadhaar? What would be the impact of linking the same with mid-day meal scheme?

This latest development (ie, linking of welfare schemes to Aadhaar) shows yet again the extent to which our government is out of touch with ground realities. Aadhaar is turning into an all-powerful biometric identification system. In a region where a large proportion of the adult population is illiterate or semi-literate and there is very poor internet connectivity, this is not only impractical but quite dangerous. It is an unnecessary invasion of people's lives which has a high potential for causing damage. A technology should be such that it is within the control of the user. It should increase rather than decrease the freedom of the people, and decrease rather than increase the power of the state because a state by its nature is coercive. Aadhaar magnifies state power because it is a tool of mass surveillance. The government has been denying these charges and maintaining that Aadhaar is not compulsory but the recent linking of Aadhaar card to basic services like the PDS and mid-day meals exposes its

duplicity in this respect. Moreover, both these schemes are crucial for ending hunger and improving people's nutrition. What this move of the government shows is that people's food security matters less to it than "national" security. Here, 'national security' seems to mean maintenance of the status quo.

Can you tell us, from your experience, about the lesser known instruments deployed by the state to oppress and exploit the communities at the periphery?

Besides fake encounters, sexual violence, use of draconian laws like the UAPA (Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967) and CSPA (Chhattisgarh Special Public Security Act, 2005), there are other methods deployed by the state, which are more "everyday" in nature. For instance, during the searching and combing operations by the security forces through the villages, it is very common to find them helping themselves to rice, cooking oil and other edible items like poultry. Cash and ornaments have been stolen. When women have demanded money, they have been beaten and even raped (as happened in the mass rapes in Bellamlendra village of Bijapur in January 2016). Beatings are very common. This may happen while people are being questioned, or when they protest. Illegal and wrongful confinement is very common. Individuals, especially youth, may get picked up from public places like the market, or from the forest, and family members may not know about their whereabouts for a few days and may spend their time going from police station to police station looking for them, which in these areas is difficult since a lot of travelling has to be done on foot. Generally, people from the interior villages considered to be strongholds of the Maoists are viewed with suspicion. Arbitrary arrests, and false charges under Naxalite cases, are common.

You have been helping women from tribal communities who have been sexually exploited by the state forces to come forth and protest. How would this experience be different had these women belonged to the relatively privileged, mainstream parts of the society?

Because of the on-going decade-old war, the women of these villages have been at a receiving end in myriad ways. Except one or two, most of the women who were raped and sexually assaulted were illiterate. The villages where these women reside are also quite inaccessible, and at a considerable distance from the police stations and district headquarters. These women were also not familiar with government offices, police stations and courts. Moreover, since people from the interior region are looked at with suspicion if not hostility by others, because it is assumed that they are with the Maoist organisation in some capacity, it becomes all the more difficult for them to overcome these biases and be regarded by the authorities as citizens who are also entitled to a legal recourse and due process. Had these women been from relatively privileged sections of society, some of the hurdles would not apply. However the more common experience that women, irrespective of caste, class or community, face while getting the police to admit a complaint of rape or sexual assault is much the same everywhere in India.