The Real Divide in Bastar

The large rally-cum-public-meeting of adivasi peasants, organised by the Bastar Sambhag Kisan Sangharsh Samiti on 1 June in Jagdalpur, opposing the construction of the Bodh Ghat dam and the privatisation of mines and river water resources was an eye-opener. In the savage war for “development” in Bastar, the wrath of the people is reserved for the state, which for decades treated them as less than human and is now busy promoting rapacious capitalism.

A
der two months of persistence, the Bastar Sambhag Kisan Sangharsh Samiti (bskss) could hold its first rally-cum-public-meeting on 1 June in Jagdalpur to protest against the displacement of adivasi peasants from their land and forest, construction of the Bodh Ghat dam, and the privatisation of mines and river water resources. As the only two “outsiders”, we looked on as streams of people, at the height of the summer, marched, raising slogans, with their fists held high. They gathered at the College Campus and then from Dharampura the rally made its way to Indira Priyadarshini stadium. The steps they took, many bare-footed, were determined and firm. After the rally, as people made their way into the Stadium, some were seen leaving in a different direction. These were people who had arrived the night before and now had to travel long distances to return home, anxious to do so before dusk. But those who remained behind for the public meeting sat under the shade provided by canopies rented by the organisers. They sat down to listen. Now was the time to hear what their leaders, their own, had to say.

The organisers claimed that 20,000-25,000 adivasi peasants came for the rally at Jagdalpur on 1 June. There were certainly more than 15,000 people in the rally, local scribes affirmed, maybe even more. Numbers apart, the turnout was nevertheless impressive, given that the administration had permitted the rally just the day before, after more than two months of prevarication, on the morning of 31 May. For so many to come at such short notice from four of the five districts (Narayanpur, Bastar, Dantewada, and Bijapur), which constitute Bastar division, was no mean achievement. Peasants from Lohandiguda walked all the way as did those who came from Abuj Madh across the river Indrawati. Others walked and then took the buses to reach Jagdalpur. They came because their very existence is under threat. Many could not make it, especially those from Kanker district, which boasts of the infamous Jungle Warfare School, which trains soldiers to become more proficient at fighting their own people.

Those who came did not come to listen to some potentate or leader from Raipur or Delhi. The bskss did not pay them to entice them there. They came to lodge their protest and listen to their own who addressed the gathering in their individual capacity, keeping their party and other affiliations aside. Many had been until the other day at loggerheads. Thus, the entire political spectrum from the right to the left, including sadhus/mendicants, addressed the gathering. Some spoke in Gondi and others in Hindi. But the message was more or less the same. All voiced their opposition to the government’s development policy, and were determined to fight for the common cause of saving Bastar from an administration which was backing the “capitalist profiteers” and “raiders”, not our words, but this is how the speakers described them.

Blind National Media

The supposedly “national” media was of course unaware of the rally and meeting since neither did their “sources” inform them nor was this a sensational incident for them to vent their outrage where Bastar is concerned. The local media of Bastar alone reported the event. And they covered it truthfully. But, the administration remained alert, which is to say, fearful, with a huge deployment of security forces. The Jagdalpur edition of Navbharat (2 June 2009) pointedly referred to the fact that this was the first time ever that such a large rally-cum-meeting was organised entirely by the local people. Haribhumi, another local newspaper, wrote the next day that the peasants who came paid for their own travel, and that the administration was caught unawares by the rather well-organised event. The local edition of Dainik Bhaskar (2 June 2009) added that throughout the rally and public meeting the officials remained busy monitoring what was happening.

In the Name of ‘Development’

Be that as it may, in their memorandum addressed to the governor of Chhattisgarh, the organisers listed various proposed projects, including that of the Tatas, Jindal, Essar and Mittal, for which memoranda of
understanding had been signed. They point out how the Tata Steel project has through “stealth and use of force” got peasants to part with their land and then forged compensation paid to them. They wrote that they were in possession of at least 100 such cases of forged compensation. The memorandum mentions that Bodh Ghat dam not only “poses an environmental threat but the submergence of thousands of acres of forest land”, which, in turn, also means loss of minor forest produce for the adivasis. They go on to refer to privatisation of mines in Chargaon, Ravghat, Kuvve, Budhiari, Madh, Amdai, and Metta among others, which will “benefit private companies, not the people of Bastar”. Finally they refer to the fall in the water level in parts of Bastar region due to the Essar pipeline meant to transport fragmented iron ore from Dantewada to Visakhapatnam. This means, according to them, destitution and the loss of livelihood for an already impoverished peasantry. They instead asked the administration to help promote agriculture, provide power, construct ponds, check dams, small industries as an alternate model of development.

The handbill which was distributed in thousands and blown up as a poster across Jagdalpur town provided more details. To cite some portions of the handbill, in our freely translated version, it reads:

Brothers and sisters, come look at the lethal pro-capitalist development of Bastar. In the name of development and employment Bailladilla mines were started. Iron ore is being exported to Japan, South Korea and China at a throwaway price. Railways were started in the name of public interest. There are tens of goods trains but only a single passenger train. In 1978 when people were demanding permanent employment they were fired upon and many adivasis were killed; thousands of huts were burnt to ashes. Thousands of adivasis were rendered homeless and left to fend for themselves. The women of Bailladilla were dishonoured and sexually abused. We want an account from the administration to help promote agriculture, provide power, construct ponds, check dams, small industries as an alternate model of development. Instead of big dams like Polavaram and Bodh Ghat why no irrigation is being promoted through ponds, small dams, check dams, lift irrigation, etc? Despite the people deciding not to give their land why is it that land belonging to 10 gram panchayats of Lohandiguda is being forcibly acquired? Why are people being threatened and warned? Why is there a lathi charge? Why are more than a hundred people behind bars? Why are doctors and doctors being used to help Tata acquire our land? Why have 300 persons in Nugaran been sent to jail? Why has Essar been given permission to transport iron ore through a pipeline? Why, despite the presence of railways, has permission been given to divert river water to the Bay of Bengal? In whose interest is it when the railways earn Rs 300 per tonne whereas it costs Rs 30 per tonne to transport the slurry through the pipeline? Is it not true that in order to benefit Essar to the tune of Rs 270 per tonne, the people of Bastar and land is being deprived of water? Why?

The organisers were queried as to why, according to them, the administration appeared reluctant to give them permission when the newly formed organisation comprises people of diverse backgrounds from as far apart as the communists to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (rss). Indeed, some of the office-bearers fought the recently held elections. For instance, the president of bskss, Subhash Chandra Maurya of Usribera in Lohandiguda block, fought as an independent candidate and polled 31,000 votes. He began as an rss activist and was in the Bharatiya Janata Party for many years before joining Uma Bharati’s Bharatiya Jan Shakti Party. So what persuaded him to traverse an entirely different path now? According to him, the Tata Steel project will affect at least 10 villages in the Lohandiguda block, mean loss of nearly 5,500 acres and deprive 9,000-10,000 families — perhaps going up to 20,000 — of their livelihood. According to him, their land is fertile with up to three crops a year. He asserted that fake gram sabha meetings were organised by the administration to elicit consent for alienation of their land to Tata Steel in Lohandiguda. He said rhetorically: “Why doesn’t Tata Steel construct its plant in Jagdalpur instead of destroying our villages if it is so keen to bring development to Bastar?”.

**Corporate Land Grab**

Bonjaram Maurya, patron of bskss, told the gathering that the administration was reluctant to issue permission for the meeting
because they feared that Maoists were behind their effort. He told the audience that he informed the administration that while they “brought his people to the roads” (meaning Salwa Judum), the Maoists supported them. He said that he asked the administration: “Why should we reject the support extended to us by the Maoists for our demands? If you are so concerned, why don’t you listen to the people?” He told the gathering that although 61 years have elapsed since the country gained independence, government still behaves like the British colonialists towards the poor, the workers and the peasants. This was the tenor as speaker after speaker – Balam Majhi, Budhram Netam, Jai Singh Dodhi, Suresh Sargam, Budhram Poyam, Rajman Benjam, Bangaram Dodhi – gave vent to their feelings. Not one spoke against the Maoists; in stark contrast, all of them spoke against the government and the corporate houses for destroying their habitat, their Bastar.

We asked many present why were they silent about the Maoists? They were in a “safe zone” with police all around to protect them from the Maoists? Did they not fear the Maoists who are supposed to have oppressed them? Subhash Maraca spoke for many when he said that he began his political life as an RSS activist and had supported Salwa Judum. But not anymore. “It is our adivasi brothers and sisters”, he supported Salwa Judum. But not anymore. “It is our adivasi brothers and sisters”, he supported Salwa Judum. But not anymore. “It is our adivasi brothers and sisters”, he supported Salwa Judum. But not anymore.

Critics of the Maoists must display intellectual honesty in admitting that the Maoists are not “outsiders” or middle class romanticists of 1960s vintage but are the underclass who have been mobilised because people are no longer willing to sit by and wait for the fruits of development to trickle down in the distant future. Some of them still swear by the politics of agitation; others are convinced that the state and society must be transformed. The people do not perceive a divide between the two. The claimed disconnect between the Maoists and the people is as unreal as the rift between the people and the State (which is carrying out a savage war for “development”) is real. In the war in Bastar, the bskss shows that the wrath of the people is reserved for the state which for decades treated them as less than humans and is now busy promoting rapacious corporate capitalism.

Sustaining the Struggle

From our conversations with bskss activists, it appears that there was much discussion and debate that preceded the crystallisation of views and the formation of the organisation in its present shape – giving it a non-partisan character, ensuring that all official posts are so divided that every view finds representation, and making sure that all are drawn from the affected community. The only disconcerting thing was the absence of women speakers (barring one) and women activists in the leadership whereas women were well represented in the gathering.

Will the bskss be able to sustain its struggle? After all the state is strong and cunning and has enormous resources at its command to weaken them, we asked? They said they were aware of this but their only strength lies in their unity. If they are able to ensure unity they will be able to force the government on the back foot. Nandigram and Singur came easy to their lips as examples of what the people can achieve.

Now, if some proof was needed about the gulf between the “reality”, as projected by the state and disseminated by the corporate media, and the ground reality as it exists, it was evident in Jagdalpur. Here was an organisation of persons directly affected by rapacious capitalism protesting against corporate-driven development.

NOTES

1 Essar transports fragmented iron ore in slurry through a 267 km long pipeline, completed in 2006. The diversion of water for the pipeline is what bskss was referring to. Ashok Putul in “No Man’s Land” points out (cgnet.in/Min/Document. 2008-07-16. 2767482423/document-view) that Tata Steel, with which the memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed on 4 June 2005, wants 25 million gallon of water daily. Essar, which signed its MoU in July 2005, first asked for the same amount and then raised it by an incredible 2.7 times. According to Putul, 4,000 ponds have dried up in Bastar.

2 Bodh Ghat dam was refused union environmental clearance in 1984 because a centuries-old Sal tree forest with rare species was threatened with submergence. This year, just prior to the general elections, it was cleared on the claim that compensatory “afforestation” had been undertaken. The impact of the dam on the local people and their livelihoods was never an issue either then or now. B D Sharma is a respected and an endearing Indi-an Administrative Service (IAS) officer-turned-activist who has campaigned relentlessly against the exploitation and oppression of the adivasis of Bastar for more than three decades. It was during his stint as Commissioner of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes that he raised many issues of concern. His opponents representing corporate interests were so incensed by his opposition to various alleged development projects and his raising uncomfortable questions about employment, which led to his humiliation when he was almost stripped naked and paraded in Jagdalpur town. He took premature retirement from the IAS and became a social activist in the service of the people.