

Vol:27 Iss:04 URL: <http://www.flonnet.com/fl2704/stories/20100226270408800.htm>

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DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

Behind the concern

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In the name of national security, a FICCI report makes a thinly veiled argument to open up central India for exploitation by corporations.



Adivasis in a camp run by Salwa Judum at Dornapal of Konta tehsil in Dantewada district of Chhattisgarh. A file picture. According to official statistics, 640 villages were laid bare, burnt to the ground and emptied with the force of the gun and the blessings of the state. As many as 350,000 tribal people were displaced in Chhattisgarh.

JUST as on climate change, everyone has an opinion on naxalism these days. The latest to join the chorus is the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI). On November 9, FICCI released a report of its Task Force on National Security and Terrorism. The report takes on the question of terrorism from outside India and the internal security threats brewing in central and northeastern India. The report refers to naxalism as a “war in the heartlands” and is unequivocal in its stand that everything must be done to defeat the forces of internal destabilisation represented by Maoist groups. But while clothing its analysis in the garb of national and local security, the report is actually a thinly veiled argument to open up central India for exploitation by corporations.

Noting that “Maoist insurgency” has spread from 55 districts across nine States in 2003 to 192 districts in 16 States, the report presents an alarming picture of a situation going rapidly out of hand. It minces no words in describing the failure of the state to contain this spread, pointing to a thoroughly unprepared security force, untrained police forces, communication lapses and other such factors. But it also notes that naxalism has an enormous mass base, in no small measure owing to the failure of governments to deliver on development promises and the growing alienation of tribal populations. This makes the task of tackling the threat much more complex

than, say, the challenge posed by “extremists” from forces external to India.

FICCI’s diagnosis of the problem is relatively well nuanced and not restricted to the security failures of the state. The report talks of “our long neglect of development in tribal areas, which has created large pockets of alienation against the government”, “criminal neglect of the rural economy, scorched earth policy in the rural agrarian sector with feudal lords in command, unemployment, poverty and unbridled exploitation of the poor”. It notes that “people living in remote village clusters, where there is no tangible presence of governance, nor developmental activities and are subject to rampant corruption by the government officers and exploitation by the landlords and loan sharks, gradually start looking up to the Maoists for protection”. It admits that the state’s response to naxalism, in the form of coercion and force not only against Maoists but also against “innocent villagers”, only alienates people more.

It even notes that the Salwa Judum drive in Chhattisgarh, a widely criticised state-sponsored attempt at generating people’s resistance to naxalites, is self-defeating in the way it has violated human rights. Because of all this, the hold of Maoists on local people is clearly much greater than the legitimacy of the state, it says.

So far so good. But the report soon betrays FICCI’s real interest in stopping the “war in the heartlands” of India. The very first paragraph of the chapter dealing with naxalism reveals the bias, when it talks of central India as “mineral rich heartlands”. Later on it argues that “the growing Maoist insurgency over large swathes of mineral-rich countryside could soon hurt some industrial investment plans”. All pretence of concern for the people of the region is thrown away when it asserts: “Just when India needs to ramp up its industrial machine to lock in growth and just when foreign companies are joining the party, the naxalites are clashing with the mining and steel companies essential for India’s long-term success.”

So development in India is a “party”. Never had corporations had it so good in the country’s history. Even the most culturally and ecologically sensitive areas are being opened up in the name of rapid growth and globalisation to mining, industries, ports, expressways and the like. Profits of companies have skyrocketed, what with cheap raw materials and labour, tax breaks, relaxation of land and environmental laws, and all kinds of incentives offered by the Central and State governments. The so-called ‘free market’ is actually able to show remarkable progress because the state heavily subsidises it. And it does so at the expense of millions of people whose land and resources and water are taken away to be handed over to corporations. The state even backs this up with the use of force against anyone who resists. A March 2009 report by a committee set up by the Union Ministry of Rural Development (www.rd.ap.gov.in/IKPLand/MRD_Committee_Report_V_01_Mar_09.pdf), made public in October, called the process in central India the “biggest grab of tribal lands since Columbus”.

The FICCI report itself admits to “the grievances of the rural peasantry, especially against their displacement due to development projects and cornering of the benefits of natural resources by a few”. It further says, “Judging from their past experience with development, the tribals have a right to be afraid of the mining and constructions that threaten to change their environment”.

And yet, in the same breath, it rues the fact that naxalism is making such projects difficult to execute. This schizophrenia becomes acute in one particularly revealing paragraph: “The other reason for sounding the alarm stems from the increasingly close proximity between the corporate world and the forest domain of the naxalites.... India’s affluent urban consumers have started buying autos, appliances, and homes, and they’re demanding improvements in the country’s roads, bridges and railroads. To stoke Indian manufacturing and satisfy consumers, the country needs

cement, steel, and electric power in record amounts.... There is a need for a suitable social and economic environment to meet this national challenge. Yet there's a collision with the naxalites.... Chhattisgarh, a hotbed of naxalite activity, has 23 per cent of India's iron ore deposits and abundant coal. It has signed memoranda of understanding and other agreements worth billions with Tata Steel and Arcelor Mittal (MT), De Beers Consolidated Mines, BHP Billiton (BHP), and Rio Tinto (RTP). Other States also have similar deals. And U.S. companies such as Caterpillar (CAT) want to sell equipment to the mining companies now digging in eastern India."

So, naxalism is bad because it is spoiling the "party" for India's "urban affluent consumers". Is this the real reason for FICCI's concern?

If the report of the Ministry of Rural Development committee referred to earlier is to be believed, corporations are primarily interested in emptying the central Indian ruralscape so they can easily get access to its enormous land, minerals and forest resources. Here is what it says: "The first financiers of the Salwa Judum were Tata and the Essar in the quest for 'peace'. The first onslaught of the Salwa Judum was on Muria villagers who still owed allegiance to the Communist Party of India (Maoist). It turned out to be an open war between brothers. 640 villages as per official statistics were laid bare, burnt to the ground and emptied with the force of the gun and the blessings of the state. 350,000 tribals, half the total population of Dantewada district [Chhattisgarh] are displaced, their womenfolk raped, their daughters killed, and their youth maimed. Those who could not escape into the jungle were herded together into refugee camps run and managed by the Salwa Judum.

"Others continue to hide in the forest or have migrated to the nearby tribal tracts in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. 640 villages are empty. Villages sitting on tons of iron ore are effectively de-peopled and available for the highest bidder. The latest information that is being circulated is that both Essar Steel and Tata Steel are willing to take over the empty landscape and manage the mines."

Hollow and dangerous

It is in this light that FICCI's recommendations to contain the problem sound not only hollow but dangerous even though at first glance they may appear balanced. The report provides detailed suggestions on enhancing the operations of the security forces and also argues that "the development approach is even more important than the military approach". It asks for "national and state policies, including accelerated economic development, social justice, security and media policies", that "employment, land reforms and development of road infrastructure in tribal areas must be given the highest priority", and that "tribal areas have to be developed on a crash basis". It even mouths the usual platitudes of "involvement of the people in... governance and development".

Sounds good, except that nowhere does FICCI acknowledge the need for very different models of development than what have been practised elsewhere in the country. Many of India's leaders around the time of Independence recognised that the cultural and ecological contexts of Adivasis were vastly different from those of others and that development or other inputs must respect this. The Indian Constitution provided for this different approach. But large-scale mining, industrialisation and infrastructure are hardly going to be sensitive to the ethos and lives of communities that are intimately connected to the land, forests and water in ways that urban decision-makers do not understand.

In all tribal areas of the country, and indeed in most areas with traditional pastoral, peasant and

fisher communities, such ‘development’ has been environmentally and culturally devastating and has hardly benefited these communities. This partly explains the massive exodus of people out of such areas, the growing economic disparity between them and urban elites, and the rapidly increasing movements of mass resistance. In such situations, all talk of land reforms and participatory governance is meaningless. It is worth noting that the report has no mention of Adivasi rights.

Corporate leaders of Indian and foreign companies are hardly the legitimate flag-bearers of sustainable and equitable development. The track record of most of the companies that the FICCI report names, which have signed MoUs with the Chhattisgarh government, is not pretty. Some are globally known for their unethical practices and their lack of compunctions in depriving indigenous peoples of their traditional territories and rights. FICCI’s recommendation of tribal areas being “developed on a crash basis” really entails the crash of Adivasi economy, ecology and culture.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the report, in its recommendations on “what corporates can do”, has nothing on building on responsibility and ethical behaviour towards Adivasis and the environment. All the suggestions are on how the corporate sector can work with the government and on their own to improve security. No mention of leaving alone areas that are crucial for food, water and ecological security. No hint of facilitating communities to develop their economic base building on their own knowledge and cultures, moving towards sustainable patterns of energy and food production, or simply leaving alone Adivasis who do not want to enter industrial modes of production (yes, they exist, and they are not anachronisms in a world that is desperately seeking sustainable ways of living). It is as if FICCI has decided that it knows what is best for Adivasis and forest areas, and that there is only one way to develop: massive industrialisation. Anything that is a hindrance to this has to be dealt with by the state.

This is not to argue that naxalism (in its many variants) is a solution or is to be condoned simply because it may be slowing down the destructive ‘development’ of central India. If at all Maoist groups have a coherent vision of human and social welfare or of economic development, it is not clear from the activities they engage in. Nor is violence to be supported. But FICCI’s vision of the security and future development of central India is only a recipe for further devastation and alienation and is violent in a different way.

A bold alternative would instead encompass paths of Adivasi well-being that are ecologically and culturally sensitive, that respect the enormous diversity of local situations, and that promote localised economic strategies based on the sustainable use of local resources. It would recommend the clear assigning of land and resource rights, along with conservation responsibilities. It would promote true decentralisation, empowering communities to decide their own future. There are in fact many civil society initiatives of this nature across central India from which to learn. Provided they are not bulldozed by the current approaches that the Indian state and Indian corporations are taking or propose to take.

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