

Dominant Development and Peoples' Alternatives Play and Interplay in Chhattisgarh

By

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After doing M.Phil in 1979 and Ph.D. in 1985 both from JNU on Population Studies, New Delhi, Dr. Iliana has been involved in the developmental field both as a researcher and practitioner of developmental work. She continued her academic interest through research on issues like 'Food Security through use of traditional food and seed basket', 'Migration from Chhattisgarh and its effects on Women'. But at the same time along with her husband, Dr. Binayak Sen, she also got involved in grass root work. She saw from close quarters and was involved with the alternative developmental work done by the Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh (CMSS) under the visionary leadership of Shankar Guha Niyogi. Based on this experience, she has been involved in a variety of policy formulating efforts including Women's Policy for the State of Madhya Pradesh, Women's Empowerment policy for the State of Chhattisgarh.

Since 1991, working with Rupantar, a Research and Study Centre at Raipur, Chhattisgarh of which she is a founder-member, she has been involved in developing creative alternatives on issues of primary education, sustainable development and gender. She has worked for several official committees including National Commission on Population, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the National Resource Group, Mahila Samakhya, GOI etc.

After Dr. Binayak's wholly unjust arrest by the Chhattisgarh Government, she along with her two daughters and other family members has bravely faced the ordeal and is determined to get justice.

Abstract

The birth of several new states in the late years of the last century and early 21st heralded for many an opportunity to put in place a different vision of development that was people centric and integrated regional traditions and sustainable, culturally and socially appropriate practices. Instead, the birth of Chhattisgarh, a state covering a mineral rich region has launched a serious discourse on the relevance of dominant development practices in a globalising environment. Not only is the development flawed but it has come at the cost of several freedoms and a sustained attempt by the state to brutally suppress even efforts at rendering desperately needed welfare and health services to the poorest of the poor left out of the dominant policies and programmes of the state.

The development path in Chhattisgarh not only spells disaster for the state, but also flags the dangerous path that may be opening up in the rest of the country in coming times. It is this debate that the ongoing development process in Chhattisgarh showcases. This text of Ilina Sen's presentation, the Second Anusandhan Trust's Krishna Raj Memorial Lecture on Contemporary Issues in Health and Social Sciences, is a lucid account of the contradictions setting in Chhattisgarh and its deleterious challenge to democracy in the rest of the country.

Dominant Development and Peoples' Alternatives Play and Interplay in Chhattisgarh

Ilina Sen

Chhattisgarh lies at the heart of India. Today, it also lies at the heart of the debate about development and democratic practice in the country.

The birth of Chhattisgarh in 2000 was meant to be a tribute to the aspirations of the people of the region for democratic and responsive governance. The state is home to a large indigenous (tribal) population with a history of self-governance and self-management, as well as natural resource management. The translation of this heritage into the legislative reality of modern India was a source of concern for the constituent assembly. The debates and varied positions on this issue --- guaranteeing the continued existence of political spaces traditionally enjoyed vs. integration with the larger machinery of elected legislative government --- are today a matter of record and reference for students of Indian polity. The sequestering of tribal heartlands into schedule V and schedule VI areas with different degrees of autonomy was an outcome of these processes.

It has been an uphill struggle to combine the pushes and pulls of 'self determination', 'tribal self government', 'national interest', 'development' and 'empowerment'. In the current context each of these terms of discourse are muddled by considerations of who sets the parameters, writes the fine script, and defines and interprets them.

I

Official Development Vision of New State

The tragedy of Chhattisgarh is compounded by the richness of its resources. One-fifth of the country's iron ore - about 2,336 million tonnes averaging 68 per cent purity is found in the Dantewada, Kanker, Rajnandgaon, Bastar and Durg districts. The Bastar region is one of the richest in mineral resources - not only in iron ore, but also perhaps a host of other unexplored minerals including limestone, bauxite, and even diamond and uranium. As Ajit Jogi remarked on becoming the first Chief Minister of the nascent state of Chhattisgarh, "We had the poorest people inhabiting the richest land". Since much of this 'rich land' was covered by forest and was difficult to reach in earlier times not much effort had gone into accessing these riches, and hence not much challenge to the control exercised by poor people over the rich lands. With increasing industrial and economic development, especially under the impact of globalisation, the hold of poor people over their resources was increasingly challenged.

The new state was launched with much fanfare on 1 November 2000. The creation of Chhattisgarh brought the official agenda of development and governance much closer to the people of the region than at any time earlier. As in other new states, in Chhattisgarh too the official discourse attempted to link the formation of the state with the people's demands for greater autonomy.

Once the nature and scope of the enormous natural wealth, in the form of forest and mineral wealth, deposited and secure in the forest areas of Chhattisgarh became clear, it became imperative for the Indian state to assert its sovereignty over these areas, that had remained relatively unclaimed by the state under the law of Eminent Domain, the principle that, in the final analysis, the state had a pre eminent right to all

land. In its turn, the Indian state could stand guarantor for the secure sequestration of these resources in the hands of the Indian international finance capital, such as, in recent years, the Tatas, Essar, Lafarge, Holcim, and other industrial houses. Land acquired from ordinary people was to be handed over to the industrial houses; gram sabha related procedures were faked, in an attempt to justify the transfer by the letter, if not the spirit of the existing Laws.

If there had been hope that the development vision of the new state would be rooted in an indigenous perspective, it was quickly belied. It soon became clear that the new state had been born in the context of globalisation, and that the political agenda prompting the policy of power devolution was in fact the opening up of third-world resource bases for first-world markets. There has been no change in this agenda in the subsequent years.

Today the state officially prides itself on its new industrializing face. One of the first institutions to be established was the Chhattisgarh Industrial Development Corporation, which immediately busied itself with negotiating development loans from the Asian Development Bank and other international financial institutions. By 2005, new industrial growth centers were established in the districts of Mahasamund, Surguja, Kawardha, Dhamtari and Raigarh.

The previous year, an industrial policy was formulated with the expressed objective of creating "an enabling environment for ensuring maximum value-addition to the abundant, locally available mineral and other forest-based resources." The policy also sought to attract direct investments, including those to "the most backward tribe-dominated areas", and to woo investors (including NRI and FDI) with a host of incentives and tariff concessions. For example, in late 2005, two MOUs were signed by the state government with Essar and the Tata group, both of which assert the commitment of the state to industrial growth through the agency of "industrial houses of repute", and affirm its commitment to make available the land, mining leases, power and water.

The land for the Tata steel plant and mining activities is proposed to be acquired around Lohandiguda and Bhansi; land for Essar's installations will be in Dhurli. In both areas, there is fierce opposition to the land acquisition, as these plants will displace the people from large tracts of tribal land. The areas are not densely populated; nonetheless the acquisition will destroy the tribal cultures and sustainable livelihood, and what they will gain in return is unclear. These areas are also covered under the 1996 Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, or PESA. An implicit assumption in this Act is that the natural resources of a region belong to the citizens of the area, and for any exploitation of these resources the village community (in the form of the gram sabha) must give its consent. Although the legislation is clear on this issue, in practice, the conduct of the district and the state level governments clearly indicates that ideas of community sovereignty are not taken seriously and that old belief in the 'eminent domain' of the state continue to hold in powerful quarters.

The process of land acquisition at Nagarnar is a case in point. In 2001, the villagers of Nagarnar, a prosperous agricultural community close to Jagdalpur, refused to give up their lands for a proposed public-sector steel plant. District-level authorities subsequently proceeded to falsify the gram sabha registers, forcibly handing over land to the National Mineral Development Corporation. In the Raigarh district large areas as well as natural resources like the Rabo river have been handed over to the Jindal Steel and Power Ltd (JSPL) for 'development', leading to destitution, justified anger, and protest.

It is a serious matter that the Vision document for the new state was written, at the request of the state government, by the management consultancy firm of Price, Waterhouse, Cooper, and not by indigenous intellectuals in the state. The Vision document, with its stress on integrating the backward areas into the national mainstream, laid the foundation for many of the state policies in subsequent years.

1. Chhattisgarh Industrial Policy (2004-09)

This, a major policy document, sets forth the tenor of other policy documents in the state. Recognizing that Chhattisgarh is a state endowed with abundant natural resources, the policy stated primary objective is the addition of maximum value to these natural resources while creating maximum employment opportunities by setting up industries in all the districts of the state. Placed within this larger objective are the secondary but important objectives of creating an enabling environment for increased industrial production; promotion of private sector partnership for the creation of industrial infrastructure in the state, and the establishment of the competitiveness of industrial investment in Chhattisgarh vis a vis other states.

The Action Plan outlines the steps that are proposed to be taken to ensure the provision of basic infrastructure; an uninterrupted supply of quality power; assessment of water availability for industrial use; ensuring road and rail connectivity, and the commissioning of BOT/BOOT projects for this purpose. Industrial areas are proposed to be established at suitable sites near district headquarters, and the document sets out its intention of carrying out necessary administrative and legal reforms to implement the policy recommendations.

The Action Plan also proposes direct and indirect incentives to investors. The document proposes the setting up of state and district level nodal agencies as 'single point investor contact' for giving necessary administrative clearances to investors and facilitating the process. Further, the document suggests that labour laws be 'simplified'. It is explicitly states that encouragement will be given to investments by NRIs and to Foreign Direct Investments.

A careful reading of the document makes it clear that the document is based on a set of assumptions that prioritise the rapid industrialization of the state based on the natural resources that exist. Consideration of ecology, equity, human development or participatory governance do not figure

anywhere in these assumptions. The Policy makers seem quite unaware of the worldwide discourse on reduction of greenhouse gases, the debates on energy and entropy, or of the emerging concerns about limits to the eminent domain of the state. There is talk of industrial employment, but no mention of people or their livelihoods. Women are not mentioned anywhere at all, and it is almost as if they did not exist. On the other hand, the Policy is unambiguous about whose interests it seeks to promote. For example, there is mention of services that the state will render to investors, but no mention of any obligations that investors may have towards the people of the state. To the contrary, section 11 proposes to give to the investment promotion committees, the power to override laws enacted in the state in the pursuance of the objectives that the policy is supposed to fulfill.

2. Chhattisgarh Mineral Policy

This Policy is in many ways a corollary to the Industrial Investment Policy. Its sole purpose is to facilitate mineral extraction for industrial development, and to find ways around the constitutional safeguards of tribal rights and other impediments that prevent free and plentiful mineral extraction. The policy objectives detailed in the document are revealing.

The State of Chhattisgarh was carved out of erstwhile Madhya Pradesh to provide deference to its distinctive historical, social background and natural resources. It is paradoxical that the State with richest natural endowments is amongst poor in the country. The basic purpose of its formation would be defeated if the natural resources are not used due to constraints of stringent forest laws and environment problems. To ease these strains and to provide accessibility in the benefit of natural resources utilization to the deprived class of the region, it has become imperative to evolve a suitable mineral policy for the nascent State.

The document surveys the mineral resources of the state, identifies known deposits and extraction sites, discusses currently operative regulatory mechanisms like the Mines & Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act 1957 and the MP Minor Mineral Rules, 1996, discusses issues of royalty fixation, before coming to its central position, viz. granting of long term leases of up to 30 years with an assured renewal clause, export promotion, and the simplification of leases and leading procedures in order to enable the abundant minerals of Chhattisgarh to freely fuel its industrial growth. The document recognizes some dichotomies in the control of mineral resources, for example, the fact that the mineral ownership rests with the states yet the regulation and control authority rests under the 7th schedule with the Parliament of India. The closest the document comes to mentioning the human interface is when it attempts, in an environmental clause, to lay down some regulations for environmental regeneration and directs that a part of the royalties be used for this and for shouldering the social responsibility on the part of the lease owner.

3. The Chhattisgarh Energy Policy (2001)

The Energy Policy compliments the Industrial and the mining Policies. The main thinking behind the Policy is thus laid down:

Availability of reliable and cheap power is absolutely essential for economic development of any developing State and consumption of electricity in a State is an important indicator of the stage of development of agriculture, industry and commerce in that State. Chhattisgarh is backward in agriculture and industrial sector due to historical reasons. Formation of separate Chhattisgarh State out of undivided Madhya Pradesh since 1st November 2000 has opened up immense possibilities for development of agriculture and industrial sector in the State. Therefore, Energy Policy which is practical and realistic is essential to realise the above possibilities.

The document further opines that Chhattisgarh State is fortunate that it has surplus electricity and offers immense possibilities for developing coal based thermal power generation. Given that several States suffer from serious power crises and considering the abundant availability of coal in the state. Chhattisgarh could be developed as a 'power hub' of the nation exporting power to other needy states. The Policy promises to ensure quality power to consumers, particularly to agriculture and industry so that the process of industrial growth in the state is maintained at accelerated levels. Towards this end, acknowledging that Chhattisgarh is currently a power surplus state, yet looking at 'future needs' the state should adopt a policy of liberally granting permission to industry to build captive power plants.

Normally Captive Power Plant (CPP) is required by industries when availability of power is not assured. Presently Chhattisgarh State is surplus in power, but looking to the future load growth in the State and with a view to meet the demand of other States. State Government's policy for captive power plants would be as given below:

A) Keeping in view the State Government's resolve to make Chhattisgarh 'Power Hub' of the nation, State Government would encourage power generation through captive power plants and would liberally grant permission for the same.

What remains unsaid is that the natural resources of the state i.e. coal, hydel and land, will also be privatised to ensure captive power generation. This is yet another policy document in which people, men or women, do not figure at all.

II Practice of and Struggle for Alternatives

Whatever has been happening in the state in terms of mainstream development in Chhattisgarh is a study in what need not have been. For Chhattisgarh has paradigmatically contained within its history the seeds of an alternative people centered vision of development that has inspired generations of socially conscious men and women on India and beyond.

The work of the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM) and its parent trade union, the Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh at Dalli Rajhara in this matter has been extremely significant. Beginning as an organisation of unorganized sector mine workers, the organisation, led by the legendary Shankar Guha Niyogi, quickly took the realm of its activities beyond mere bread and butter issues. Instead, the workers set about to create a whole new life world in which struggle for rights and equity became intertwined with creating social alternatives. These experiments were based on the understanding that struggle and constructive work reinforced each other. (Sangharsh ke liye Nirman, Nirman ke liye Sangharsh). Together with a group of intellectuals who joined the vibrant movement, the workers of Dalli Rajhara went on to create a successful and innovative health programme, a cultural group that recreated peoples' history in the villages and towns of Chhattisgarh, and a system of social solidarity that transcended ordinary hierarchies. That concept of Chhattisgarh existed in the imagination of the members of the organization long before there was any talk of new states or responsive governance in the official vocabulary.

The ferment of CMM 1970s and 1980s sustained many other experimentations in alternative development throughout the following decade and well into the present century. The work of RUPANTAR in the area of biodiversity conservation and food security; its experiments with child centered teaching

using Chhattisgarhi as the language of learning; the work in training ordinary village men and women with little formal education as health workers and address the challenge of battling falciparum malaria and the work undertaken by organizations like the Jan Swasthya Sahayog are all initiatives that come to mind. Much of this is too recent for us to offer a proper historical evaluation. However, more than individuals or individual organizations, it is the traditions of equity and sustainability in the culture of Chhattisgarh that have contributed to the alternative vision being kept alive. Traditional and sustainable food security systems that combined a rich heritage of food bio diversity, including differently eco adapted food crops, uncultivated foods, and community storage systems are an example of this.

The hollowness of the political establishment's argument for local autonomy is borne out when we see that the new state gave almost no space for the development vision of organizations like the CMM. Instead, an army of external (sometimes international) consultants descended upon us with Vision Documents, Strategy Papers and Turnkey Proposals. Those who had argued for a pro-people development strategy or for regional articulation of aspirations were quickly marginalized.

The Chhattisgarhi language and the several other tribal languages spoken in the state have found no place in the world of education or governance. Promises made in the formal structures to decentralize authority have never been kept. Large areas of Chhattisgarh are currently governed by the Panchayati Raj Extension to the Scheduled Areas Act (PESA) which is supposed to introduce significant space for village level decision-making. However, we have seen from the example of the Nagarnar case as well as the recent farcical gram sabhas meetings held in the context of land acquisitions for Tata and Essar that there are major problems with regard to the actual operationalisation of the provisions of the Act. It is also pertinent to ask whether there can be political devolution without economic devolution. In the current socio-political climate, what are the real possibilities for decentralised governance opened up through the PESA? It is a question deserving serious thought.

It became fairly clear fairly soon, that this process of the assertion of the state's decisive right was going to be a rough ride for the people of region. Land acquisitions for Essar and Tata were resisted in several places in South Bastar. While land acquisition took place literally at gunpoint in the Bhansi area, several village assemblies (gram sabhas) in the Lohandiguda area are still refusing to sign away their land for the proposed Steel Plant of the Tata's. Even as the state has forcibly controlled this groundswell of resistance at several places, the sense of outrage and popular protest has proved difficult to curb. To give an example of such protests here is an extract from a pamphlet:

Brothers and Sisters, come look at the lethal pro capitalist development of Bastar. The Bailadilla mines were opened ostensibly to provide employment and initiate development. Iron ore is today being exported to Japan, South Korea and China at a throwaway price with no worthwhile employment opportunities being created. Railways were started in the name of public interest. There are tens of goods trains but a single passenger train. In 1978 when people were demanding permanent employment they were fired upon and tens of hundreds of adivasis were killed, thousands of huts were burnt to ashes. Thousands of adivasis were rendered homeless and left to fend for themselves. Women of Bailladilla were dishonoured and sexually abused. We want an account from Bailadailla of Bastar's purported development.

Four decades ago at a cost of Rs 250 cr Bodh Ghat Dam was proposed and Rs 50 cr was spent on the project but then suspended because of popular agitation against it. We would like to record our appreciation and contribution of pro-people Dr B D Sharma. So why have they revived the same project at a cost of Rs 3,600 cr? How come the Ministry of Environment cleared the project? Instead of Polavaram and Bodh Ghat, etc. big dams why no irrigation is being promoted through ponds, small dams, check dams, lift irrigation, anicut 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 lathicharge? Why are more than hundred people behind bars? Why are teachers and doctors being used to help the Tatas acquire our land? Why is it that 300 persons in Nagarnar been sent to jail? Why is Essar company 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 Bay of Bengal? In whose interest is it when it railway earns Rs 300 per tonne whereas its costs Rs 30 per tonne 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 are being deprived of water.

The articulation of this kind of protest is not entirely new. Bastar has a long history of popular resistance to oppression; its ways of defining and asserting property rights are different from those prevalent in mainstream governance. It also has not helped that, with a few honourable exceptions, the personnel articulating the agency of state power have almost uniformly possessed a colonial mindset. A consequence of these circumstances is that in conjunction with a pervasive failure of governance, characterised by massive levels of corruption and abysmal levels of 'development', their enforcement agencies have tended to be quick on the draw. After all, let us not forget that long before the state government embarked on its current mission to rid Bastar of the 'Maoist menace', Praveer Chandra Bhanj Deo, the charismatic ruler of Bastar, who refused to trim his sails to the winds blowing from the capital of Madhya Pradesh, was killed in an 'unfortunate incident' during the Chief Ministership of DP Mishra.

The Salwa Judum was characterised by the Chattisgarh government (and echoed by its media bandwagon) as a "spontaneous adivasi response to naxalite oppression". It becomes urgently necessary to appreciate that popular resistance to state control and efforts to articulate Eminent

Domain has a history in Bastar. A history that has a far greater spread, in terms of duration, geographical extent, and political and institutional identity than the current operational entity known as the CPI (Maoist), although the latter is undoubtedly a major political entity in the region. The CPI, for instance, is a political entity with a long history of struggle on the trade union, peasant, adivasi, women's and student fronts, apart from its parliamentary and electoral identity. The term 'Naxalite' has become a catch-all attribution that includes anyone whose activities the state finds inimical to its current interests, including self confessed Gandhians like Himanshu Kumar of the Vanvasi Chetna Ashram, Human Rights groups like the PUCL, and even PIL wielding academics.

Apart from conveniently lumping all opposition into the single brand name 'naxalite' or 'maoist' (and thereby declaring them unconstitutional), the state has, in Chhattisgarh, also mounted a campaign of non attributable violence through the vigilante force of the salwa judum and the SPOs. Direct state violence was becoming increasingly insupportable and exposed before the people. Available evidence clearly indicates that the Salwa Judum was fully supported, funded and propped up by the state government through the district administration, invoking a mixture of ethnic identities, kinship networks, and property relations. This flagship programme of the new state, combined with legal initiatives like the 'Chhattisgarh Vishesh Jan Suraksha Adhiniyam' gave the state the power to hold civil society protest to ransom, even as it tried to speed up its own plans for its own version of development. Criticism became synonymous with sedition, and it is against this backdrop that our personal struggles of the last several months, as we cope with the arrest of Binayak Sen, must be understood.

The contradictions in Chhattisgarh today between the differing visions of development are simply too many. In a large measure, the conflicts all around us are the result of these contrasting development visions, of their struggles and their jostling for space. The future course of development in the nascent state will depend upon how these contradictions are arrayed, handled, and resolved.