

# The Forbidden Wood

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THE Indian state has an odd way of observing anniversaries. The anniversary of the Indravelli killing was observed this year with yet another killing of a tribal in Adilabad district, with the difference that this time there was no possibility of blaming the 'extremists', and secondly the killing took place, not in the moderately forest-covered western part of Adilabad but in the substantially deforested coal and cement producing east.

Indeed the killing took place within a couple of hundred yards from a big cement company located at the village of Devapur and owned by the Birlas. Though, to be fair to them, they did not have much of a hand in the killing except through the incidental fact that but for their cement unit at Devapur, no government of Socialist India would have laid a motorable road to that god-forsaken village, and then perhaps the divisional forest officer and the policemen who conducted the raid of April 24 and killed the 25 year old Naikapu tribal youth Cheneni Bhim would have had second thoughts about going all the way along a cart track just to recover a lorry load of logs of teak wood 'stolen' from the forest.

The Naikapu or Naikpod tribe is a tribe that rarely catches the news headlines. It is relegated to the third place by the Gonds, who are said to be numerically the largest tribe in the country, and the Lambadas, who are certainly the most successful community in tackling what the tribals would perhaps call the 'non-tribal problem' if they used the same logic that we use when we talk of the 'tribal problem'. In comparison with the Gonds who have a proud sense of their own history that includes the kingdom at Aheri, and their own language and culture complete with a whole community of bards, the Naikapu people are a miserable lot. They live on the fringes of the Gond settlements, possess no language of their own and speak mainly Telugu and a little bit of the Gond tongue, have never had a history worth recounting to other people, and eke out a living on petty cultivation and lately wage labour. Their names and clan names

resemble closely those of the Gonds—for instance Bhim is the most common name for men—and indeed there is little sense of alienness between the two communities. They are thinly spread out in the upper reaches of the Godavari forest; in AP the forests near Asifabad in Adilabad district and the Mahadevpur forest of Karimnagar district.

Cheneni Bhim belonged to the hamlet of Maddimada in Devapur panchayat. The Naikpods of Maddimada are a rare instance of 'civilised' Naikpods. The sole reason is the cement factory at Devapur that has given them employment as unskilled labourers in compensation for the lands taken over for the construction of the factory. From there some of them have even graduated to the status of mine workers at nearby Bellampalli. And today, in a rare reversal, they even look down upon the Gonds of the other hamlets who have not had the privilege of losing their lands to the cement factory and therefore did not acquire civilisation in recompense.

It was the Gonds of neighbouring Jaitugudem who were first attacked by the raiding party on April 24 this year. The men had mostly gone out to work and the women were at home. The time was about 2 pm when the raiding party led by the divisional forest officer (DFO), Mancheri, and consisting of about a dozen forest department employees, and double the number of armed policemen and hired labourers, reached Jaitugudem. Farlier in the day and during the previous two days they had raided Salegudem, Sarpanchigudem, Peddapuram, Sonnapuram and Lalagudem and seized about seven lorry loads of teak wood. They had even collected fines from the errant people at Devapur. But now at Jaitugudem they encountered resistance for the first time. The news of the earlier raids had been filtering down into this hamlet over the previous 48 hours, and they were enraged and prepared to resist the seizure. The police have even alleged a prior conspiracy of the Gonds to attack the raiding party, but when questioned about it the tribals have a simple and convincing reply: 'if

there had been such a conspiracy, there would not have been only one casualty, and it would not have been only on our side.'

Conspiracy or no conspiracy, their resolution to defy is understandable. Other things apart, in a situation where it is illegal to take teak wood from the forest and where one has to walk long distances to find any teak wood at all, it takes a couple of months of tedious collection of wood to get enough for one house. The limestone and coal deposits of Adilabad start just about here and spread to the east. The semi-circular arch of the Singareni Collieries starts at Bellampalli, about 20 kms to the east, and lime stone quarries abound all over, cement being produced right at Devapur, and then at Mancheri 27 kms to the east, and again at Takkellapalli, further to the east across the Godavari river. Thus one has to trek long distances to the west to find any teak wood at all. And so when the forest officials seize the wood it is not so much the wood as the tedious labour of months that is seized.

And then there is the injustice of it all; first they are told that their forest is now reserved for other people and they cannot use it even to gather wood for their huts; then they are told that an Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) is set up to look after their welfare, including housing; along come the ITDA officials to tell them that houses have been sanctioned for them, that ITDA will supply them with tiles, and deposit money with the forest department so that they can collect wood from the forest for rafters and pillars. By this roundabout method they are again given access to the forest wood that never belonged to any body but them in the first place. But there is a rider to this benevolence: the forest department allows them to collect only an inferior variety of wood that will rot within nine months; and hence they collect the forbidden teak. What upsets them is that they are punished for collecting the minimum amount of wood necessary for building a *one-room* or two-room hut, whereas 'big people' get away with massive smuggling. They point out—without any prompting—to the prominent Congress leader of Adilabad district, Sudhakar Rao, an immigrant landlord by descent, an engineer by training, a minister once upon a time, and a polished man whom even the well-intentioned anthropologist von Haimendorff regarded with respect (though the Gonds would not know this) as the kind of leader who could do justice to the tribals. Some years ago, the Gonds point out, teak logs worth about 3 crore rupees were discovered in his backyard, and the

papers made a to-do about it; what has been done to him? Nothing, of course.

And so, all things put together, they decided to resist the seizure. The DFO must have suspected that some such thing would happen, for he requested the superintendent of police for armed escort, and he got a sizeable party. They were armed with machine guns, say the tribals, and it is believable since automatic weapons have become the common playthings of the policemen in NTR's kingdom, but the circle inspector of Mancherial denies it and adds that the stupid tribals would not know an automatic weapon from a 12-bore gun. He is probably being truthful but there would certainly be no occasion for surprise if the police did carry automatic weapons. The police of the district have generally been vary of the tribals—especially the Gonds—ever since Indravelli. The memories of that incident have never been eradicated from the minds of the policemen. Two years ago, just before the anniversary of the firing, the police dynamited the massive red-coloured memorial built in commemoration of the martyrs of Indravelli, and blew away a part of it. However, the district had a reform-minded collector with a notoriously pro-tribal bias, and he insisted that the government rebuild the memorial. He argued that it should not be seen in the context of suppression of the naxalite movement, but rather as a matter of tribal pride and sense of injury done to them. It is a remarkable feat that he prevailed upon the government and got the monument rebuilt, hammer, sickle, red flag and all. The police, of course, could not stomach this. Notwithstanding the fact that it was rebuilt at the instance of the district collector who is also the district magistrate and the putative head of the law and order machinery of the district, they set about undoing it. In a burst of patriotic perversity, this April, they painted the monument white and replaced the red flag with the national tricolour. But Nature is having the last laugh, according to rumours. The policemen naturally used an inferior quality of paint, and the white is slowly fading in the sun and the rain, to reveal the resilient red underneath.

Anyway, a sizeable posse of the District Armed Reserve, led by a head constable, accompanied the DFO and his men to Jaitugudem on the afternoon of April 24. The hired labourers who had been brought expressly for that purpose, started pulling out the wood from the huts. The women of the houses gathered around and protested, and soon men from Maddimada joined them. They pleaded with the DFO

not to take away the wood they had collected. The DFO tried to take advantage of the communal difference and told the men of Maddimada that the seizure at Jaitugudem was in any case complete and they had no intention of invading the Naikpod hamlet. This did not work, and all the tribals demanded in one voice that all the seized wood must be returned. When the officials refused, the Gond women became restive and 'assaulted' the policemen with their hands and broomsticks. The policemen then fell on them and thrashed them savagely with lathis and rifle butts. Six of the women were very badly injured and laid up for nearly ten days.

It was then that the men from Maddimada reacted and threw stones at the policemen. Later the police were to claim that the tribals threw explosives at them but even on record they have not seized a single explosive nor a single fragment of an explosive. The circle inspector of Mancherial explains this by saying that the explosives contained only stones, which is as ridiculous an explanation as any one can conceive. In any case, the government doctor who treated the injured policemen—just one of them had a gashed lip and

a couple of broken teeth—is categorical that none of them had injuries caused by any kind of explosive known to civilisation. Notwithstanding this, 16 tribals now stand charged with having assaulted government servants lawfully doing their duty with explosives causing grievous injury to them.

The police then opened fire, of course. There was no one present at the spot—neither an executive magistrate nor the sub-inspector of Devapur police station—authorised by law to order the opening of fire to control the 'riotous mob'. A head constable of the Armed Reserve has no such powers, and much less does a forest official. But order fire the head constable did, and Cheneni Bhim fell almost instantly. Two Gonds bent down to pick him up and take him away, and the police fired at them and injured them severely. They were hospitalised for a long time with bullets lodged inside them. Knowing full well that the firing was illegal even by the kind of legality the Criminal Procedure Code believes in, the police have been forced to fall back on the 'self-defence' thesis. And that is why the stones thrown at them had to become explosives.

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