

So as to lay the ground for a counter-insurgency offensive

Manmohan Singh admits Indian state has failed tribal peoples

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Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has conceded that the Indian state and establishment have abused and exploited the country's more than 80 million tribal people.

"There has been a systemic failure in giving the tribals a stake in the modern economic processes that inexorably intrude into their living spaces," Singh, who heads India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government, told a conference of the Chief Ministers of India's states earlier this month.

"The alienation built over decades," continued Singh, "is now taking a dangerous turn in some parts of our country. The systematic exploitation and social and economic abuse of our tribal communities can no longer be tolerated."

India's Prime Minister said the country's authorities "must change our ways of dealing with tribals" and give them a "healing touch."

It is "highly important," declared Singh, to integrate the tribal peoples "into the development processes... But this should not become a means of exploitation or be at the cost of their unique identity and their culture."

This sudden interest in the wellbeing of India's tribal population comes amidst intense preparations on the part of the Indian government for a massive military offensive aimed at crushing a growing Maoist-led insurgency in India's tribal areas.

This insurgency has gained support from growing numbers of impoverished tribals over the past decade, particularly in a region of east India stretching from the Nepalese border in the north to Andhra Pradesh in the south.

The Indian state has long neglected the tribals. But in recent years the remote jungle and highland areas in which they live have become of increasing interest to the Indian bourgeoisie

because they are rich in resources—forests, rivers, and, above all, mineral deposits. In the name of development, Indian governments, particularly the state governments of Orissa, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, have turned over large tracts to Indian and foreign capital and brutally shunted aside the people who have historically lived on these lands. Meanwhile, the tribals, like other poor Indian toilers, have been adversely impacted by the Indian bourgeoisie's post-1991 neo-liberal reforms, including the dismantling of price supports for agricultural products and public spending cuts.

Singh told the Chief Ministers, "There are a host of issues related to the losses suffered by tribals displaced as a result of acquisition of land for various purposes. It cannot be said that we have dealt sensitively and with concern with these issues in the past. It is not just the displacement and disorientation caused by separation from the land that is at issue. One can only imagine the psychological impact of seeing the cutting down of the vast very forests that have nurtured the existence of these communities for centuries."

Singh confessed that the government's administrative apparatus in the tribal areas is "either weak or virtually non-existent." Furthermore, the "heavy hand of the criminal justice system has become a source of harassment and exploitation," with hundreds of thousands of criminal cases registered against tribal people for trying to exercise their traditional land rights.

Singh's speech was a hypocritical ruse, meant to provide a political cover for the government's long-planned military offensive. By acknowledging that the Indian elite has failed the tribal people in the past, Singh hopes to obscure the predatory designs that the Indian bourgeoisie has on their lands and that are driving his government's anti-Maoist counter-insurgency campaign.

"No sustained economic activity," Singh insisted, "is possible under the shadow of the gun." Referring to the Maoists, who are commonly known in India as the Naxalites, he said, "Nor have those who claim to speak for the tribals offered an alternate economic path that is viable."

Singh's speech was a calculated response to concerns expressed by some media commentators and even some figures in the national-security apparatus that the government is placing too much emphasis on a military solution to the Maoist insurgency and that the militarization of much of India's tribal belt could backfire, feeding, rather than smothering, the insurgency.

The Indian government's anti-Maoist military offensive is planned to be a multi-state, multi-year offensive involving, at its outset, close to 100,000 paramilitary and special police forces.

The Indian army is playing a crucial role in the coming offensive. The army has set up a new special command to work out strategy and help coordinate the offensive and it is providing counter-insurgency training to the paramilitary forces that are to do the fighting.

For the first time ever, the Indian military will deploy air power against the Maoist insurgency. Although the Indian government claims to have only authorized the use of military helicopters for surveillance and evacuating casualties, it has also made clear that their crews will "defend themselves" if fired upon.

There is no doubt that the government's anti-Maoist offensive will result in the slaughter of hundreds and, in time, thousands of tribal men, women and children. India's security forces are notorious for their wanton disregard for human rights. Their tactics include disappearances, summary executions, and torture.

The Maoists are a retrograde, nationalist-Stalinist tendency that champions the "armed struggle," including exemplary violence against petty local oppressors, while striking all sorts of opportunist alliances, including currently in West Bengal with the Trinamul Congress, a partner in Singh's UPA coalition. The Maoists have no progressive strategy for linking up the struggle of the tribal peoples with that of the Indian working class. Indeed, while they make occasional ritualistic references to the working class, their program insists that India's workers will play only a secondary role in the coming "democratic"—not socialist—revolution. In practice, they leave the working class under the political tutelage of the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the parliamentary Stalinist parties that for years have functioned as part of the bourgeois political establishment.

That the Maoists have nonetheless been able to win growing support—the insurgency is reportedly active in 200 of the country's 600 administrative districts—is testament to the Indian

bourgeoisie's criminal neglect and abuse of the tribal peoples.

India's estimated 82.5 million tribals, who are spread across 187 districts, live in the most impoverished conditions. Hardly any schools or hospitals exist in tribal areas. Few tribals have ready access to clean water or modern sanitation. Most have to fend for themselves, eking out a living through small scale agriculture, the sale of homemade crafts, hunting or by working intermittently as wage-labourers in nearby villages.

According to the Indian government, in 2001 the literacy rate among tribal females was a miserable 32.4 percent and for males 52.7 percent, as compared with 47 and 71 percent respectively for females and males in the general population.

Even by the low standard by which the Indian government defines poverty (eating less calories per day than the minimum required to perform a full day's productive labor), at least 46 percent of the tribal population is classified as poor. This definition, long in use, makes no provision for shelter, clothing, healthcare, or other essential needs.

This stark socio-economic reality, coupled with the fact that Indian government has stood by while state governments have terrorized much of the tribal population out of their lands, is the primary reason why the insurgency mounted by the Communist Party of India (Maoist) and other Naxalite groups has grown in intensity.

India's tribal population is particularly concentrated in the eastern Indian states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, the south-western state of Maharashtra, and the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. These are the areas that are to be subjected to the coming counter-insurgency offensive.

There is considerable nervousness within the Indian ruling elite about the wisdom of unleashing such a large-scale offensive, one that is by no means guaranteed to succeed. However, the Indian bourgeoisie and its servants in the UPA government are determined to exert full control over the mineral-rich tribal lands. While Manmohan Singh speaks of providing India's tribals a "feeling touch," he and the Congress-led UPA government are in fact readying to deliver them a mailed fist.



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