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State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2011 - India

Recently, India has assumed new prominence in the international arena, demonstrated by the country's ambition to gain a seat on the United Nations (UN) Security Council (which received the backing of the United States in 2010). But a number of serious issues remain that must be addressed if the envisaged economic growth is to continue and if this growth is to benefit all segments of the country's vast population.

The biggest human rights issue in India during 2010 was the spread of the Maoist movement (known as the Naxalites) and the security forces' response. The Maoists claim to be giving voice to the frustrations of India's marginalized communities, among them landless labourers, tribal groups and Dalits, and appear to advocate that the only way in which the current pattern of exploitation can be terminated is through the use of armed force. While, according to statements made, this force is aimed at the state (leading to fatalities among security forces), the movement has been implicated in serious abuses of the population, including the destruction of schools and hospitals, accompanied by extortion, torture and killings of civilians.

The government has identified the Maoist threat as the number one priority for its security forces. With the conflict now rampant in 200 of India's 600 plus districts, a nation-wide strategy has been launched (Operation Green Hunt) to curb its impact. The government has admitted that support to the Maoists has grown due to the failure of development to benefit the most marginalized, and has launched a two-pronged strategy of 'security and development' in response. However, through its provision of federal paramilitary assistance to state governments, it is clear that the 'security' aspect is most prominent. One of the most noted events in 2010 was an incident involving the vigilante Salwa Judum, evicting villagers from their homes in Chhattisgarh and into government camps, accompanied by a campaign of killing, rape and arson.

The Indian government runs the risk of undermining its own legal and moral stance if it violates human rights in its attempt to defeat the Maoists. At the same time, it risks acting as a recruitment tool for them. The population in affected areas are among the most marginalized in Indian society, and are now caught in an additional layer of danger: they are intimidated by Maoists demanding food and shelter at gunpoint, and penalized by security forces for associating with the Maoists. Adivasis, Dalits and landless labourers face regular pressure from militants, and often succumb to it: not necessarily as an expression of genuine support, but as a result of the grave physical threat against them if they do not.

Beyond the response to the Maoist uprising, there are other indications that the human rights situation in India is deteriorating, while the poor socio-economic situation of minorities – and minority women in particular – shows little signs of improvement. The year began with the launch of the 'Leadership Development of Minority Women'

programme, a government scheme aimed at increasing minority women's awareness of their rights in regard to education, employment, health, hygiene, immunization and family planning, as well as improving access to microcredit. But it ended with the suppression of a protest organized by minority women calling for those very rights. The events that took place at Barwari, in Madhya Pradesh on 28 December 2010 illustrate the extent to which freedom of speech and association has been curbed in recent years. The protest, called by a grassroots organization of Dalits and tribal communities, consisted of about 1,000 tribal women. They were protesting against the poor quality of health care that had resulted in nine deaths at a maternal hospital the previous month. Overall, there were 25 maternal deaths at this hospital between April and November 2010. In breaking up the protest, police used colonial-era sedition laws to arrest the organizers and others, at the same time as the Indian government was celebrating membership of the UN Commission on Information and Accountability for Women's and Children's Health. It may be recalled that, according to a 2007 UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) report, nearly 60 per cent of maternal deaths in six northern states occurred in what could be classed Dalit or tribal communities. Elsewhere, minority women's rights activists called for a 'quota within a quota' for Dalit women and women from religious minorities to be included in the Women's Reservation Bill (still under discussion at the end of the year). Without this, they argued, the right to political representation of Dalit women and women from religious minorities would not be protected by the proposed 'women's quota'.

Elsewhere, medical practitioner and human rights activist Dr Binayak Sen was arrested under the sedition legislation, and an attempt was made to prosecute award-winning author and public commentator Arundhati Roy. The allegations against Roy and others are based on speeches they are purported to have made on 21 October 2010 in New Delhi, supposedly in support of Kashmiri secession. The original attempt to use sedition laws was stymied by the Home Ministry, who admitted that such a course of action would be inappropriate since no violence was incited.

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