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India: The Road Ahead

Mark Tully

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About the Book

As former chief of bureau for the BBC in India, Mark Tully draws upon a lifetime's knowledge of this most diverse of countries to consider an emerging superpower at a pivotal moment in history.

Twenty years after his acclaimed book *No Full Stops in India*, Tully once again travels the length and breadth of the country to discover how the ending of the economic controls which once stifled development has affected the sub-continent. What qualities does India possess today which will secure her central place on the world stage? And which traits might hinder her? Does rapid progress always come at a price?

Today, India is likely to become one of the major economies of the twenty-first century. But there are many unanswered questions about the sustainability of such growth and its effect on the stability of the nation. Tully considers whether the changes have had any impact on the poor and marginalised, and how the development of the country's creaking infrastructure can be speeded up to match its huge advances in technology and industry. With a gift for finding the human stories behind the headlines, he looks at

the pressing concerns of different areas of life such as governance, business, spirituality and ecology.

In revealing interviews with captains of industry and subsistence farmers, politicians and untouchables, spiritual leaders and bandits, Mark Tully captures the voices of the nation. From the survival of India's languages and protection of wildlife such as the tiger, to the nation's thriving industries and colourful public affairs, *India: The Road Ahead* is a testament to India's vibrant history and incredible potential, offering an unforgettable portrait of this important country.

About the Author

Sir Mark Tully was born in Calcutta, India in 1935. He was the Chief of Bureau, BBC, New Delhi for twenty-two years and is an acclaimed author and the regular presenter of the contemplative BBC Radio 4 programme *Something Understood*. He was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 2005, and was knighted in the New Year Honours list in 2002. In addition to his distinguished broadcasting career, he has written several books about India, including *No Full Stops in India*, *India in Slow Motion* (with his partner and colleague Gillian Wright), and *The Heart of India*. He lives in New Delhi.

Also by Mark Tully

No Full Stops in India

India in Slow Motion (with Gillian Wright)

The Heart of India

Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle (with Satish Jacob)

From Raj to Rajiv (with Zareer Masani)

Mother

Lives of Jesus

India's Unending Journey

INDIA

THE ROAD AHEAD

MARK TULLY



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INTRODUCTION

Yamunanagar is a town in the northern Indian state of Haryana. It's dusty and slightly down at heel - not the sort of place pilgrims driving to the historic Sikh gurudwara, or temple, of Paonta Sahib, or tourists travelling to the foothills of the Himalayas, would normally stop at unless obliged to by the railway crossing in the centre of town. In the eighties I was obliged to stop there because I had crashed into the back of a tractor that was driving in the dark without lights on a country road. I had been driving an Ambassador, a version of the late forties British Morris Oxford which had few rivals then, and survives today although it now does face fierce competition. The Ambassador had limped to the nearest village where a puncture repairer managed to separate the fan and radiator from the rest of the engine with a crowbar. He also sprinkled turmeric powder into the radiator, saying that it would stop the leaks temporarily but that I should go to Yamunanagar to get the radiator welded.

While the welder was at work the level crossing gates closed and I watched the traffic build up. Queues formed in both the left and the right lanes on either side of the gates and grew longer and longer. Eventually a seemingly endless coal train rumbled slowly by. After some time the

gatekeeper leisurely opened the crossing. Vehicles from both directions in the left and right lanes moved forward a few yards until they met head on in the middle of the track. There wasn't a policeman in sight. Every driver seemed to think that merely by blowing the horn the traffic would move. Amidst this cacophony a pony in the shafts of a cart reared in alarm, spilling sacks of grain on the road. Frustrated truck drivers revved their engines futilely and noxious black fumes poured from their exhausts. At first it looked as though no one was going to give way, but then slowly by a process of reluctant mutual give and take, the traffic started to crawl across the railway track.

I asked the welder whether this happened every time the level crossing gates closed. 'Oh yes,' he replied.

'Well, why doesn't someone do something to stop the build-up of traffic on both sides of the road?' I asked.

'Arre,' he said impatiently, as though that was a stupid question, 'who does anything about anything in this country? Why are we Indians religious people? Because we know that this country only runs because God runs it. It's all *jugaar*.' *Jugaar* could loosely be translated as muddling through, or making do. Putting turmeric in a leaky radiator was a classic example of the principle.

More than twenty years later things have changed dramatically in India and so there may well be a bridge built over the railway line in Yamunanagar. I haven't been back to see, but I have seen many elsewhere. There may even be a bypass. If there are traffic jams it's far less likely now that horse-drawn vehicles will be caught up in them. The relentless expansion of the motor industry has seen to that. But *jugaar* still flourishes.

The word came into prominence in 2010 when the preparations for the Commonwealth Games were so behind schedule and so slipshod that some countries threatened to pull out their teams. There was particular concern about the accommodation for the athletes. However, almost

miraculously everything was all right on the day. This miracle was widely attributed to India's talent for *jugaar*, rather than God, and it prompted a debate on that peculiar phenomenon's merits and demerits. In an article in *The Times of India*, the economist Swaminathan S. Anklesaria Aiyar put a positive spin on the word, attributing to it India and Indians' ability to innovate. He quoted a survey showing that 81 per cent of Indian businessmen said *jugaar* was the reason for their success. A week later in *The Times of India* the journalist Swapan Dasgupta came back with an attack on *jugaar*, saying, 'It's bleeding you,' and going on to maintain, '*Jugaar* has prompted a celebration of expediency, shortcuts and shoddiness, a penchant for taking a winding course where a straight road would survive ... *jugaar* has become an obstacle to India reaching its true potential.'

I would still support the view of that welder. To me *jugaar* seems to mean a talent for muddling through. This is undoubtedly a valuable talent. It has seen India through numerous crises which could have destabilised a country that was less adaptable - four wars, for example.

So with this meaning, *jugaar* could be seen to have served India well. But it has a downside. It has, in my view, led to a dangerous complacency, the belief that India has muddled through so many crises that there is no need for urgency in tackling the problems it faces. In 1984 there would have been no need for Indira Gandhi to send the army into the Sikhs' most sacred shrine, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, if action had been taken against the Sikh separatist leader Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale before he occupied and fortified the temple complex. That delay in taking a decision led to mutinies by Sikh soldiers in the Indian army, and cost Indira Gandhi her life. She was assassinated by two of her Sikh bodyguards. The assassination sparked off massacres in Delhi in which thousands of Sikhs were brutally killed.

Looking back over the years since 1991, and looking forward too, all this *jugaar* raises the question, is India still muddling through, and if so how does that affect its much-touted prospects of becoming an economic super-power? There is a simplistic but widely publicised view of India's history over the last twenty years which would have us believe that this unwieldy country with its vast population will definitely be very near the top of the economic league, if not right at the top, by 2050.

According to this version of history, India was held back by a particularly virulent form of socialist central planning that tied up the economy in red tape. This was known as the Licence-Permit Raj. The licences and permits were intended to ensure that investment and trade were controlled by the government in what it claimed was the national interest. In fact the interests served were in the main the politicians' and bureaucrats' who issued the licences and permits, and those of the members of the business community who paid for them. Hence the system also became known as the Neta-Babu Raj, or politician and bureaucrat raj. Then in 1991 India found itself on the brink of bankruptcy. The government had even been forced to sell gold, a devastating blow to the self-respect of a nation where possession of that shining metal is the ultimate status symbol. To complete the humiliation it was reported that the truck carrying the gold to the airport broke down.

The Congress Party returned to power shortly after the gold was sold. The Prime Minister was Narasimha Rao, an elderly politician with a reputation for indecisiveness. He was in a weak position - heading a minority government and not being a member of the Gandhi-Nehru family which had dominated the Congress Party since independence. But Narasimha Rao and his Finance Minister the economist Dr Manmohan Singh, who is the current Prime Minister, saw an opportunity in this crisis. They relaxed the controls on private sector investment, liberalised the trade rules,

accepted that market economics had their validity, and heavily devalued the rupee. From then on, according to this simplistic history of the last twenty years, India started on the path to rapid economic growth with dramatic results and is now set to grow and grow.

But what do economists make of this view of India's prospects? There is no shortage of economists in India or of Indian economists teaching and working abroad. They come from the left, the right, and the centre of the spectrum. One of them is Ram Gopal Agarwala who worked on econometric models of the British and Canadian economies before joining the World Bank and working there for twenty-five years. I would describe him as in the centre. He's certainly no market economy fundamentalist. He does see a role for the government, but he is not a leftist either. I sat with this small, earnest economist on the lawn of Delhi's India International Centre, a club which likes to be called an institution and describes itself as 'a place for the exchange of new ideas and knowledge in the spirit of international cooperation'. Ram kept apologising for talking too much although talk was exactly what I wanted him to do.

When I asked whether the standard history of the last twenty years was simplistic, Ram replied eagerly, 'Oh yes. People forget, or don't know, that India's economy started to speed up in the nineteen eighties and it did not accelerate as fast in the nineties. And by the time Rajiv Gandhi, the son of Indira Gandhi, became Prime Minister in 1984 cracks had already started to appear in the Licence-Permit Raj.' Rajiv was Prime Minister for five years, before he was assassinated in 1991.

Ram went on, 'Rajiv's rule was far less gloomy than it's usually made out to have been. For instance the telecom revolution, the precursor to the IT revolution that has done so much to boost India's economy and its reputation, took place then. There was also some relaxation of the Licence-

Permit Raj, and plans to relax its grip further had been drawn up too. Rajiv himself was very keen on technology and modernising India.'

'But surely industry started to expand rapidly as a result of the 1991 reforms?' I suggested.

'I don't think it's as simple as that,' Ram replied. 'Liberalisation was largely about industrial policy and there was no acceleration in the growth rate of industry in the nineties. It's IT which is really providing the spark in the economy and the foundations for that were laid before 1991.'

Nevertheless Ram was reasonably optimistic about the future, and he reeled off a large number of reasons for this. They included India's young labour force, which he felt could expand further if more women came into it. When I suggested that unless the labour force was educated most of the man- and womanpower would be of little or no value, he maintained that education was indeed improving. Ram also listed India's high savings rate, its need for massive investment in housing and infrastructure, which could attract Asian investment, and the services it could now export because of the internet.

India had a bad image for environmental protection and so I was interested to hear that Ram believed its carbon emission level was low.

'Yes, it is,' he said eagerly. 'We will not find our growth is restrained by having to limit our carbon emissions in the way that China will have to.'

But perhaps the most interesting reason for Ram's optimism was what he called Indians' ability to conceptualise. When I asked what he meant by that Ram said, 'We Indians are good at thinking, conceiving concepts and handling them, while the Chinese are good at doing. This will favour us because we are going to live more and more in a knowledge economy.' When I asked him if he could put some numbers behind his optimistic view of the

Indian economy, he replied wistfully, 'I would rather not. From my long and painful experience of econometric forecasting I have learnt that it is better to be vaguely right than precisely wrong.'

'So what would you say to the person who said to me we have licked the growth problem, now we only have to get the distribution of the wealth we produce more balanced?'

Ram laughed and said, 'Oh that's nonsense. It's far too definite. Growth is possible but cannot be taken for granted. There have been far too many surprises in the past. One should be cautious in making long-term forecasts.'

But no such restraint held back the British economist Jim O'Neill of the investment bank Goldman Sachs, who wrote what is known as the BRIC report in 2003. BRIC stands for Brazil, Russia, India and China. The report confidently predicts those countries will dominate the world's economy. It had such an influence in the BRIC countries that they formed themselves into an economic group. According to the report, India's economy will grow faster than that of any other major country between 2015 and 2050, and that includes China. However, in his book *India: The Emerging Giant*, the Indian economist Arvind Panagariya, who teaches in the United States, has said that '... such long-term predictions have no more validity than astrological predictions'. He pointed out that in the jubilation that greeted the BRIC report everyone forgot that in the 1950s it had been forecast that India and Africa would be the powerful economies and East Asia would be left behind, but in fact the opposite had happened. But Arvind Panagariya did not put a question mark after his title *India: The Emerging Giant*.

Another distinguished Indian economist teaching in America, Pranab Bardhan, wrote a book with a title that did raise a question about India and China's economic prospects. That title is *Awakening Giants, Feet of Clay*.

Although he doesn't use the word *jugaar*, Bardhan does quote an example of that phenomenon when he says: '... infrastructure has been for many years the bottleneck in Indian economic growth'. That had been obvious for all those years. In the late nineties the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee remarked, with his trademark humour, 'Our roads don't have a few potholes. Our potholes have a few roads.' He did introduce a plan to link the major cities of India with a road system called the Golden Quadrilateral, and this system is at last almost complete. The railways, however, still muddle on under the burden of archaic management practices, political interference, and lack of capital.

Although the weight of opinion among economists, with one or two notable exceptions, is cautious optimism about India's prospects, the business community both in India and internationally is bullish. One of the most prominent Indian businessmen, Nandan Nilekani, a founder of Infosys, India's second largest IT company, wrote a book called *Imagining India: Ideas for the New Century*. In it he described India as 'the luckiest country of the twenty-first century'. Explaining this remarkable claim, Nilekani wrote, 'India's unique combination of IT skills, its labour advantages, capital flows, and pool of ambitious, outward-looking companies is giving it a massive triple-play advantage across sectors - in manufacturing, services and agriculture.' By triple play he meant growth in the domestic market, and growth in the world economy through migration, as well as the rise of the outsourcing industry.

However, another leading businessman, William Nanda Bissell, in his recent book *Making India Work*, warned against 'a culture of short-sighted optimism both at home and abroad'. He went on, 'From the glowing references in Tom Friedman's bestseller *The World is Flat* to the *new* India to the gushing adulation heaped on its businesses by

the Western media, India is constantly fed by an establishment drunk on visions of grandeur.' William Bissell heads the retailer Fabindia, which buys its stock of clothes, furniture, and handicrafts from rural entrepreneurs, and so he knows how bemused villagers would be by Nandan Nilekani's vision of their country.

The danger of the Nilekani view is that India will continue to rely on the belief that the winds are so favourable it can simply sail ahead. That is not to say there isn't room for optimism. I firmly believe with my friend Ram Agarwala that India has a lot going for it, and if it fulfils its potential it will become an economic super-power. In this book I tell stories which will, I hope, leave the reader optimistic too, but at the same time I raise the questions which make my optimism conditional.

Whether India grows faster than any other major country, as the BRIC report prophesied, or not isn't really relevant. What does matter is that India's economy should grow sufficiently fast and in such a way that Indians of all classes, castes, and creeds have the wealth, health, and education needed to fulfil their potential, and make their country prosperous. That matters not just to Indians but to everyone who realises the threat that poverty anywhere poses.

For all the hype about India's economic miracle it is still a very poor country. According to a survey published in 2010 by Oxford University, based on a new index which takes in more indications of poverty than previous ones, if you take one dollar a day as the minimum income someone needs to be above the poverty line, 42 per cent of Indians are poor. If you take two dollars per day the figure rises to 76 per cent. Poverty like this creates problems for everyone, not just for the poor. There is the risk of disease that can

spread way beyond the boundaries of the country in which the poor live. The poor try to migrate to areas of their own countries or other countries where opportunities are better. Illegal migration is a problem, to put it no stronger than that, in almost all wealthy countries, and in India migration to the national and state capital is swamping them. Reduced to despair the poor can all too easily fall victim to religious fundamentalism or decide that crime is the way out of their dire circumstances, and crime does not recognise international borders.

There is an economic reason for caring about India's future too. Over the last twenty years there has been a sea change in international companies' interest in India. That is because it has become a market and a supplier, particularly of services. Investors see it as a growing market too and therefore a good place to put their money. The larger the Indian economy becomes the more opportunities it will provide for investment and for trade.

Perhaps most important of all, if India prospers it will be a triumph for democracy and all that democracy stands for.

One of the reasons, other than those Ram Agarwala gave, for being optimistic about India, is that all the institutions essential for a democracy to function are in place. There are legislatures right down to the village level; elections, as I have said, are held regularly; there is a civil service; there are courts; the press is free. Furthermore there are politicians, bureaucrats, lawyers and journalists who know exactly what their responsibilities should be, and how their institutions should function. There is also a great appetite for democracy, as Indira Gandhi discovered when she temporarily snuffed it out by declaring a state of emergency. But that is not to say that democracy is functioning well in India.

Here I have to be careful because there is, as Ram Agarwala pointed out to me, a temptation to blame all India's problems on bad governance alone. He believed

Indians were chronically critical of their governments because they had been ruled by foreigners for so long they considered any government alien. Having lived in India for more than forty years I have become affected by the widespread cynicism about governments and governance in this country.

The chapters in this book are all stories of my travels with my partner Gillian Wright; they are not analyses. During these travels we found plenty of evidence to suggest that governance is a major problem and that there is a need for the institutions to be reformed. In the chapter 'Caste Overturned', about Dalits or former Untouchables, both the police and the courts are shown up. In the chapter 'Building Communities', set in the desert state of Rajasthan, India is described as 'a flailing state' because of the government's weak policy implementation. The link between bad governance and India's endemic corruption is highlighted in the chapter about the success of Indian companies called 'Entrepreneurship Unleashed'.

Speaking in a debate on allegations that members of his own party had bribed opposition MPs to vote for the government in a crucial Parliamentary motion, the Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, while denying the allegations, admitted that India did need to deal with 'the malice of corruption and improve governance'. But here again Ram warned me against over-simplification:

'You know, you can't just look at corruption as a problem of governance. It has to be seen in a wider context. The private sector is often as much a partner in corruption as the public sector. Mere liberalisation, and reducing the government's role in the economy, does not reduce corruption. We've seen that here. Society as a whole needs

a moral compass to make a difference in the level of corruption.'

Indians are inevitably well aware that a high growth rate doesn't necessarily mean that the poor will benefit. There have been fierce debates amongst economists about the impact of the fast growth rate on poverty reduction and inequality. The economist Prime Minister is convinced that on neither count is India doing well enough. He has repeatedly called for 'inclusive growth' and for 'development that reaches all sections of society'. Ram believes that the slogan should be reversed, and that the Prime Minister should be speaking about 'inclusion *for* growth', making the fundamental point that if more Indians are included in development they will contribute to even higher rates of GDP. That takes me back to Nilekani's demographic dividend. If young Indians are not provided with health services and a good education as well as jobs they will become a burden on India, not an asset. The chapter 'The English Raj' discusses the impact of that colonial import on education. One reason the state is seen as flailing is the government's poor record of delivering all services, including education.

Social justice is essential if India is to have the opportunity to use the talents of every section of its population. The chapters 'Vote Banking' and 'Caste Overturned' indicate that significant changes have come about in the caste system and as a result India is becoming a more equitable country. But here again the weakness of governance proves to be a problem. Geography also hampers social justice. In a just society there should be reasonable equality of opportunity for everyone wherever they live. But India is developing in a very unbalanced way geographically. Economic growth is rapid in the west and the south and sluggish in most of the north and the east. I deliberately concentrated my travels in the north and the east to try to discover why they were not faring better. The

remotest place Gilly and I went to was the state of Arunachal Pradesh in the far north-east, a region where the failures of both the central and state governments are particularly obvious.

Then of course there is the environment. It is now widely recognised, although not widely enough, that in the end any country that develops at the cost of its environment will have to pay a heavy price. That is bound to be particularly heavy in a country with a huge population like India. Gilly and I travelled to a forest in central India to discover why the government was having such problems in preserving tigers, the animal naturalists see as symbolising a healthy environment. In the chapter 'Saving the Tiger' the state government's Forest Department, which is charged with preserving the tiger, is part of the problem rather than the solution.

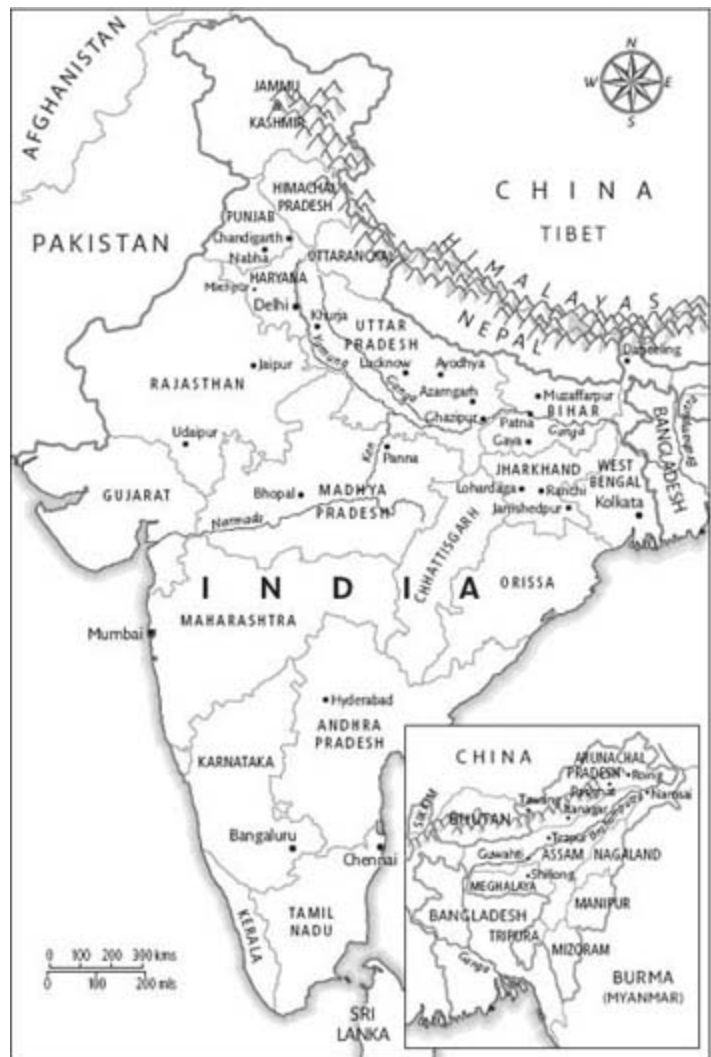
The problems of governance do come up time and again in these stories and, in spite of Ram's warning, that does seem something which is blocking the road to inclusion for growth. In the conclusion to this book I will pull together some of the threads in these stories and make a suggestion or two about improving governance. But I believe those problems can be resolved and that's one reason why I am optimistic. I even see hope in the current spate of corruption cases, allegations of corruption in the preparations for the Commonwealth Games, allegations of corruption in the allocation of spectrum for mobile phones, the allegations of corrupting MPs I mentioned, allegations of a corrupt land deal involving retired armed forces' officers, and that's not the end of it. The hope is expressed by a director of the multinational Tata in the chapter 'Entrepreneurship Unleashed' - and I share it.

There are other justifications for optimism in the chapters that lie ahead. The improved vigilance of the Election Commissioner, evident in 'Vote Banking', shows what can be done when corruption is tackled firmly. 'Caste

Overtaken' indicates that Dalits are now fighting for their rightful position in society. 'Building Communities' and 'Saving the Tiger' illustrate India's vibrant civil society. Development in the private sector is one of the reasons India is currently enjoying such a high growth rate. Indian companies have developed into global players, the governance of financial markets has improved and credit is more freely available. Some would argue that much still needs to be done, particularly to make government policies more transparent and less susceptible to the whims of ministers and bureaucrats. But the chapter 'Entrepreneurship Unleashed' shows what one Indian multinational has achieved in twenty years and what it may well be capable of achieving over the next two decades. When it comes to politics the chapter 'The Ramayana Revisited' suggests that at last politicians might be moving on from the sterile debate over the place of religion in society, and that development and performance when in power might be becoming the issues voters are interested in.

It's not just the performance of the government but also its role which will be major factors in the development of India. Nandan Nilekani is not alone in believing that the private sector should take over many of the roles the government currently performs, particularly in the provision of education and health services. But in the chapter 'Farming Futures' questions are raised about the private sector's potential.

Lastly I come back to *jugaar*. The chapter called 'Red India', about the Maoist insurgents known as Naxalites, demonstrates the dangers of not tackling a problem, just letting it drift on, because the country is managing to live with it. So perhaps the most important priority for India is to overcome its addiction to *jugaar* when it comes to the way its government functions.



1 | RED INDIA

IN 2006 THE Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh said: 'It would not be an exaggeration to state that the problem of Naxalism is the single biggest internal security challenge faced by the country.' Naxalites are communists who follow the teaching of Mao Zedong and are waging what they call 'a people's war' to overthrow the Indian state and replace it with a Maoist regime. Their strategy is to establish 'liberated zones' where their writ, not the government's, runs. They challenge the government by attacking the security forces, and essential services such as the railways. There is a corridor in central and eastern India running from the Nepal border in the north to the southern state of Andhra Pradesh in which the Naxalites are able to challenge the authority of the government in many of the more remote districts.

In 2008 the Prime Minister again felt it necessary to issue a stern warning about the Naxalite threat. But in spite of the bullish Home Minister's assertions that Naxalism would be curbed, and new plans for action against Naxalites, they still operate in large areas of central and eastern India. According to the Home Ministry, in 2010 there were 1,995 Naxalite incidents in which 937 civilians, 277 police and 161 Naxalites were killed. In that

year there were particularly serious incidents in the state of Chhattisgarh, in central India. In one of these, eighty members of the paramilitary Central Reserve Police were ambushed by Naxalites; only seven survived. Just one month later in the same state a mine planted by Naxalites blew up a bus killing over thirty people. In 2010 in West Bengal there was little short of open warfare between Naxalites and cadres of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). In 2011 the police spokesman for the state of Jharkhand told me that there was 'a good presence of Naxalites in twenty per cent of the state'. Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, with their dense forests, are the two worst 'LWE' or Left Wing Extremist-affected states, as the government puts it.

The Naxalite movement that holds sway over so many of the tribals or indigenous people who live in India's forests started from a remote village called Naxalbari, in a strategic corner of north-eastern India where the borders of India, Nepal and what was then East Pakistan and is now Bangladesh meet. There was considerable tension in the area because the landlords were evicting tenants called sharecroppers, who tilled the land for them in return for a share of the crop. There were also near-famine conditions and farmers were hoarding grain. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) had organised a peasants' resistance movement.

On 3 March 1967 three sharecroppers, accompanied by some hundred and fifty members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), attacked and looted a landlord's granary. Encouraged by the success of the Naxalbari attack, other peasants rose against their landlords, capturing stocks of grain and harvesting crops on land they didn't own. When the landlords resisted them there were violent clashes. The authorities attempted to negotiate with the peasants but during the negotiations three arrows fired by tribal bowmen killed a police officer who had come to a village to

arrest some of those involved in the movement. The next day a party headed by a magistrate on its way to the village was surrounded by an angry crowd. The police escorting the magistrate opened fire, killing ten people, six of whom were women. The uprising intensified and the local police effectively surrendered, making no effort to prevent groups armed with bows and arrows from roaming about the countryside, killing and sometimes beheading landlords.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) was in a dilemma. It had supported the peasants' movement but now it was a member of the government of West Bengal, the state in which Naxalbari is situated, and so responsible for law and order. For some time the government took no coherent action against the uprising but on the fifth of July they ordered the police to mount a concerted campaign to restore order. The campaign started ten days later. By sheer force of numbers - fifteen hundred police were involved - and by keeping the leaders on the run all the time, the movement was rapidly crushed and seven hundred people, including some of the leaders, were arrested. In his book *The Naxalite Movement in India*, Prakash Singh, a retired senior police officer, said, 'The Naxalbari movement's importance was symbolic ... from Naxalbari the sparks flew all over the country and there was political upheaval.' The fires lit by those sparks are still burning.

The flames burnt brightly for a short time but then in the early seventies the Naxalites suffered severe setbacks, and they were eliminated in West Bengal, the state where the movement began. The former police officer Prakash Singh met Charu Mazumdar, one of the Bengali leaders of the original movement in Naxalbari, shortly before he died of a heart attack in a Calcutta jail. He found 'a lean frail man ... crestfallen and also perhaps disillusioned.' According to Prakash Singh, the onetime hero of the Naxalite movement '... could see that it was the end of the road for him. He

knew that the revolution he wanted to bring about had failed.'

The Naxalites under Mazumdar's leadership certainly failed to 'liberate India', something he had told them they could achieve by 1975. He believed that the Naxalites should occupy urban as well as rural areas, and in his heyday his supporters, who included students as well as those his critics described as 'lumpen proletariat', created chaos in Calcutta. The Naxalites are no longer a presence in any city. This is not necessarily a sign of weakness but of a strategy different to Mazumdar's. Those opposed to him within the Naxalite movement always maintained that penetrating cities was contrary to Maoist strategy, which should concentrate on 'liberating' rural areas and surrounding the cities.

Mazumdar had no time for India's democracy. He maintained that 'no other path exists before the Indian people but the path of armed rebellion'. The CPI(M), whose members had escorted the three sharecroppers who began the Naxalite movement, was elected to govern Mazumdar's own state of West Bengal in 1977 and remained in power continuously until they were routed in the 2011 elections. Subir Bhaumik, the former BBC Kolkata correspondent, once asked Jyoti Basu, who was Chief Minister of West Bengal for twenty-three years, whether he thought communist parties around the world would decide to participate in democracies or attempt to overthrow non-communist regimes violently. Jyoti Basu replied, 'Wherever we communists can do our politics freely and fairly and mobilise people to come into our fold without fear, parties will resort to parliamentary politics. But where such conditions do not exist they will be forced to take up arms.'

But in spite of all Mazumdar's disappointments Naxalism has survived and spread. Currently Naxalites have a presence in fifteen of India's twenty-eight states, giving them that corridor of territory.

Of course Naxalism has had its ups and downs. It's been weakened by internecine ideological and strategic conflicts, and opposed by the mainstream communist parties who regard it in Marxist terms as 'left sectarianism'. The Naxalites suffered a severe setback in the early nineties in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, which was one of their strongholds, when several important leaders along with nearly three thousand followers were arrested, and over eight thousand Naxalites were so demoralised that they surrendered. But the Naxalites recovered sufficiently to mount an attack on the chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, who narrowly escaped with his life. Recently, a police force called the Greyhounds, specially formed to fight the Naxalites in Andhra Pradesh, had considerable success, but in their book *Maoist and Other Armed Conflicts* Anuradha and Kamal Chenoy, who both teach at Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University, maintain that Naxalite cadres throughout India increased threefold between 2005 and 2008.

The Naxalite cadres are no match in numbers or equipment to the Indian security forces. Why then have the security forces not been able to deal with them more successfully? The answer most commonly given is because the Naxalites enjoy the support of the tribal people who live in the forests and have suffered most from India's malaise of bad governance. According to Anuradha and Kamal Chenoy, 'Marxist conflicts are fuelled by primarily economic and social justice issues related to land distribution, displacements, and evictions, illegal mining, access to forest products, and oppression due to the nexus between the police, local contractors and politicians that results in the perversion of politics and governance.'

In his book *Red Sun*, a remarkable account of travels in Naxalite dominated areas of India, Sudeep Chakravarti says, 'Maoism isn't our greatest internal security threat. Poverty, non-governance, bad justice, and corruption are.

The Maoist presence in one-third of India merely mirrors our failings as a nation. The Maoist movement comprises people treated poorly, denied livelihood, justice and all the other ideals enshrined in India's constitution. Their leaders see in the country's present realities a certain futility of purpose and this fuels their belief in violent change.'

But the conversations I had on my visit to Jharkhand and the events which occurred when I entered a forest dominated by Naxalites suggested that the situation was more complicated. I came to doubt whether the Naxalite movement was popular because the tribals were alienated by the way the government treated them. In fact I doubted whether the movement was popular at all. The tribals who live in the forests do suffer from bad governance but it wasn't clear to me that they saw the Naxalites as the answer to this. It was clear that the Naxalites themselves were not always idealists inspired by Mao, and the police who are widely blamed for their failure to root out the Naxalites seemed to also be victims of bad governance.

Gilly and I chose to go to Jharkhand to learn more about the Naxalites for three reasons. First it was one of the two most Naxalite affected states. The second reason was that in spite of the Naxalites telling the tribals that Indian democracy was a sham, voters had turned out in large numbers for the recent elections to panchayats, or local councils, and the elections had been peaceful. The third reason was that I needed a local journalist to advise and guide me, and I knew one I could rely on in Jharkhand.

The journalist was Harivansh, the editor of *Prabhat Khabar* or *Morning News*, a Hindi language newspaper with its headquarters in Ranchi, the state capital of Jharkhand. Ranchi is 2,140 feet above sea level and at that height the climate is comparatively cool. Under British rule

the town was the summer capital of the province of Bihar, to which the governor retreated from the hot weather in the Gangetic plain. I remember from my childhood that Ranchi also served as a more accessible place than the Himalayan town of Darjeeling for the citizens of Calcutta to escape from the heat. The Bengal Nagpur Railway would get passengers to Ranchi overnight, and for their convenience it had situated one of its two holiday hotels there. In addition to the cool weather, holiday-makers were attracted to Ranchi by the surrounding forests with their famous waterfalls. When I visited Ranchi in 2011 I was told that people only went to a few of the waterfalls because most of them were now in areas dominated by the Naxalites.

When Jharkhand was separated from Bihar in 2000 and became a separate state, Ranchi developed rapidly, as all state capitals do. The occasional large bungalow with a sloping tiled roof, the Ranchi Club, which has seen better days, and the imposing Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church are among the few remaining traces of the town's more elegant past. The British Raj administrative complex has been replaced by a huge black-glass, multi-storey monstrosity that accommodates the District Collector and his horde of subordinates. The central parts of the city are an unsightly jumble of shopping centres and high-rise condominiums unrelieved by green space between them. The main tourist attraction now is the house of the son Ranchi is most proud of, the charismatic captain of the Indian cricket team, Mahendra Singh Dhoni. Built just a few years ago, it's a multi-coloured, modern three-storey standalone house, built on land given by the government, and large enough for the captain's joint family.

When we landed at Ranchi airport, I saw the short and square Harivansh waiting to greet us with a bouquet of flowers. An eager, bustling man, he was almost too pleased that we had come to Jharkhand because of him. At one