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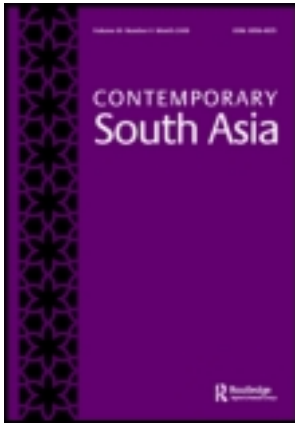Project   Hindu Nationalism and Democracy in Modern India View project

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Uday Chandra [a]

[a] Department of Political Science, Yale University, New Haven, CT,
USA
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Beyond subalterity: land, community, and the state in contemporary Jharkhand

Uday Chandra*

Department of Political Science, Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA

Subalterns, as Ranajit Guha famously argued, resist modern states on the basis of pre-existing social solidarities and an autonomous domain of consciousness. Critics of subaltern studies have argued, however, that subaltern resistance is, in fact, deeply implicated in the symbols and discourses of domination rather than simply constituting an autonomous political domain. Might it be possible to take this criticism of subalterity seriously and yet appreciate the complex ways in which adivasi subjects in contemporary India resist and negotiate their subjecthood? Can we, then, locate resistance in the process of negotiating states? Focusing on the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand, this paper takes up this challenge by probing into the tropes and strategies by which the contradictory mechanisms and meanings of modern state power have been reworked and resisted in two apparently opposed moments of resistance: the 'peaceful' Koel–Karo anti-dam movement of the 1980s and the ongoing 'violent' Maoist movement. In doing so, I show how land and community are intertwined inextricably in recent adivasi resistance such that the notion of 'community' underpins both territorial claims on the post-colonial state by Munda men and women *and* efforts to remake political selves in dialogue with statist discourses of primitivism.

Keywords: indigeneity; resistance; subaltern studies; social movements; Maoism

Introduction

Vignette 1: As I entered the museum at Ranchi's Tribal Research Institute, the familiar dank environs of a *sarkari* (government) building enveloped me. My eyes took time to adjust to the poorly lit hall of exotica before me. Slowly, I walked past clay models of Asur, Munda, Oraon, Santal, Ho, and Kharia families with their distinctive dwellings, ornaments, hairdos, and implements, each of them looking defiantly at me through the glass that encased them. These 'primitive tribes' that we find today, explained official notices below the glass cases, were vestiges of the earliest hominids that lived in India. They mattered, in other words, because they were simultaneously our respect-worthy ancestors as well as inchoate or 'backward' versions of ourselves. The Chota Nagpur Tenancy (CNT) Act, an explanatory note stated, was their 'Magna Charta', a charter of rights to lands demarcated as 'tribal'. It had, in other words, protected tribal land rights since 1908 despite its many loopholes and problems.

    Vignette 2: In July 2009, a gigantic map greeted me at the block office in Torpa, a bustling town 60 km away from the state capital Ranchi. Almost half the block, including a section of the Karo river, was demarcated for some purpose. 'What's this about?' I asked the babu closest to me. 'This is the land meant for Mittal. A big steel plant will come up

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*Email: uday.chandra@yale.edu

here. The *jungli* (wild or forested) nature of this place will change'. It took me a while to digest. Arcelor Mittal, one of the largest steel manufacturers in the world, was acquiring, with the connivance of the state government, hundreds of acres of land meant to be protected by the CNT Act. How could the state let this happen? And why? Activist Dayamani Barla eventually led a campaign against the proposed Mittal steel plant, but there remain over four hundred pending memorandums of understanding, signed by the Jharkhand government with corporate stakeholders in mining, agro-forestry, retail, and real estate.

How do adivasi[1] subjects respond to these two faces of the post-colonial state in India? Viewed as primitives trapped in modern state imaginaries, adivasis are typically treated by scholars, activists, and policy-makers alike as victims in need of protection (Guha 2007; Nigam 2010; *Outlook*, May 3, 2010) or as savages to be civilized through commercial and educational initiatives (*Tehelka*, November 2009; *Outlook*, April 30, 2012; *The Hindu*, April 8, 2012). Adivasi politics, therefore, gets interpreted vis-à-vis the dramaturgy of post-colonial tragedy or triumphalism. These contradictory images or tropes place the adivasis subject in an 'irresoluble double-bind' (Banerjee 2006). On the one hand, playing victim connects one to a wider universe of sympathetic bureaucrats and activists who are ever eager to represent 'tribal issues' in the mainstream media. On the other hand, fitting the 'savage slot' (Rolph-Trouillot 2003) offers the possibility of remaking local communities on one's terms without falling prey to civilizing missions.

In either case, the politics of adivasi self-making and community-making negotiate subjecthood in ways that are not easily captured by the notion of subalternity. Subalterns, as Guha (1983) famously argued, resist modern states on the basis of pre-existing social solidarities and an autonomous domain of consciousness (cf. Bhadra 1985; Guha and Spivak 1988; Mayaram 2003; Skaria 1999). Critics of subaltern studies have argued, however, that subaltern resistance is, in fact, deeply implicated in the symbols and discourses of domination rather than simply constituting an autonomous political domain (O'Hanlon 1988; O'Hanlon and Washbrook 1992; Sivaramakrishnan 1995; cf. Abu-Lughod 1990; Mitchell 1990; Wedeen 1999). It might be possible to take this criticism of subalternity seriously and yet appreciate the complex ways in which adivasis in contemporary India resist and negotiate their subjecthood? Can we, then, locate resistance in the process of negotiating states? Focusing on the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand, this paper takes up this challenge by probing into the tropes and strategies by which the contradictory mechanisms and meanings of modern state power have been reworked and resisted in two apparently opposed moments of resistance: the 'peaceful' Koel–Karo anti-dam movement of the 1980s and the ongoing 'violent' Maoist movement. In doing so, I show how land and community are intertwined inextricably in recent adivasi resistance to state policies such that the notion of 'community' underpins both territorial claims on the post-colonial state by Munda men and women *and* efforts to remake their political selves in dialogue with statist discourses of primitivism.

Playing victim: an anti-dam movement in the margins of post-colonial India

In 1955, the Bihar Government started surveying the villages on the banks of the Koel and Karo rivers. Soma Munda, then studying for his school-leaving examination, recalls a mix of amusement and puzzlement at the *sarkari* cars driving through dirt tracks to arrive at his village of Lohajimi. 'We didn't know why these upper-caste officials, who did not take food or water from us, had suddenly developed an interest in our area', he says. Nothing much happened until 1976. This was the year Soma returned to Lohajimi after serving in wars in NEFA, Kashmir, and Bangladesh over a 21-year career as a mechanic in the Indian army.

'In Kashmir, I remember an occasion where we needed to set up an army camp. So we simply kicked out the Dogra villagers from there and went about our business without any hassles'. This is, of course, exactly what the Government of India did in 1958 when it set up Heavy Engineering Corporation (HEC) Limited in Dhurwa on the outskirts of Ranchi. As Roylen Guria explains,

> they did not care that our *sasandiris* [burial stones] and *sarnas* [sacred groves] mean everything for us Mundas. They dispossessed the villagers, stomped all over their lands, and desecrated their ancestral faith. No one protested, no one resisted; they kept quiet because they did not know better.

Sacrificing one's today for the nation's brighter tomorrow: this was Nehru's call to his fellow citizens in the first decade after independence. He proclaimed: 'We have to make them [tribals] progress … What is good in the rest of India will, of course, be adapted by them gradually' (Nehru 1989 [1954], 125). At the same time, Nehru hoped to avoid 'dispossessing the tribal people' and causing 'the economy of the tribal areas to be upset' (Nehru 1989 [1954], 124). In the tribal margins of the fledgling post-colony, however, Nehru's message proved merely to be a cloak that concealed a fresh round of primitive accumulation. 'If you are to suffer', Nehru had told the adivasis displaced by the Hirakud dam in nearby Orissa, 'you should suffer in the interest of the country' (cited in Ghosh 2006, 65). Internal colonialism, thus, became the currency of domination of the periphery by the center (Das 1992; Devalle 1992; Sinha 1973; cf. Hechter 1975).

Soma Munda and his fellow villagers were determined not to repeat the mistakes of those who had been displaced by HEC. In 1976, the Bihar Government sent engineers and laborers to the banks of the Karo river, Soma used his traditional office as a village headman (*munda*) to mobilize people in what he called the 'inherently consensual and democratic ways of adivasi communities' to resist the proposed hydroelectric dam project in the area. A total of 256 villages in Simdega and Torpa blocks of Ranchi district were to be submerged by two dams – 44 and 55 m high – on the Koel and Karo rivers; these dams would, furthermore, be linked by a 34.7 m long canal (Ghosh 2006, 67). Initially, villagers began protesting the influx of casteist Biharis in their midst. They wanted the labor to be done by local workers who would behave decently and eat with them. When their demand went unmet, the newly formed Karo Jan Sangathan declared a *jan* curfew (people's curfew): no one would be allowed to enter or exit villages in the proposed dam area. Since the Biharis engineers and workers would not accept food or water from adivasis and dalits in Lohajimi, they were forced to ask for supplies from the block office in Torpa, over 10 km away. 'They would bring water in tanks that would stop at the village boundary, from where the junior officers had to carry it in containers into their camps. It was great fun watching them toil in the sun', says Soma. 'We were determined to resist and protest, but peacefully. No arms or violence. If we got violent, they'd brand us as extremists (*ugravadi*), kick us out in an instant, and lay claim to all our lands'.

As dam-related work proceeded apace, new methods of resistance were called for. To begin with, the Jan Sangathans on the Koel and Karo rivers were merged into a single force. Knowing that the state saw them as primitives who worshipped nature in the forests, the Koel–Karo Jan Sangathan decided to invoke adivasi custom and law to oppose the dam. Soma says,

> We told them that we, adivasis, have only three things: *sasan* [burial stones of ancestors], *sarna* [sacred groves], and the CNT Act. These are tribal lands, which are defined by our religious

customs and protected by law. We cannot allow them to be submerged. Koel-Karo *alo thalouka* [must stop].

The government asked the Sangathan if it would be possible to recreate tribal villages elsewhere and rehabilitate these Munda villages with their *sasans* (burial stones of ancestors) and *sarnas* (sacred groves). They also promised schools and hospitals. After all, dams were the bulwark of the Nehruvian model of development; electricity, employment, education, and health care would follow logically.

> In 1987, we said, choose one village along each river, and resettle them according to proper tribal rites and customs. If you can do it, we will let you proceed with your work. Otherwise, you must leave.

Of course, the government failed to keep its side of the promise. It refused to stop work or leave the area.

Everyday shrewdness and canny use of customary arrangements became the protestors' chief weapons. Faced with the government's obstinacy, the Sangathan asked villagers to plant corn around the government camps. 'They were outwitted', recalls Roylen, 'if they stepped on our corn, we could lodge a case against them and demand compensation'. Forced to tiptoe in and out of their camps, government officials had started facing the heat of protest. They were prevented from taking firewood from the nearby forests or purchasing it from villagers. According to the Forest Department, they argued, villagers enjoyed the exclusive right to such use of the forests; outsiders could not claim the same rights. Next, they were told not to defecate in the village because that would pollute the sacred *sarnas*. 'We compelled them to basically cook, eat, and shit inside their camps'. In no time, they left the area under cover of darkness, tormented and humiliated by weaponless adivasis villagers. Soma can barely suppress his smile when he says:

> We made the sarkar bend to our will with our reliance on custom, law, and non-violence [*ahimsa*]. We don't need to hold any meetings or rallies in Ranchi or Delhi. We are not like Narmada Bachao of Medha Patekar [sic]. Our politics is local. We will resist them here on our turf.

In 2003, the Jharkhand Chief Minister Arjun Munda officially scrapped the Koel–Karo project. For a movement led by and for tribal villagers, it was a spectacular success, especially in contrast to the much-vaunted Narmada anti-dam movement led by middle-class activists and celebrity cheerleaders (cf. Nilsen 2010). Not only did the Sangathan speak back to the state in its own language of primitivism, it also read the law back to the state, and thus, obliged it to protect tribal lands from alienation. This kind of strategic approach by claim-making subjects has been termed 'rightful resistance' in another context (O'Brien and Li 2006). Such resistance does not seek to negate, but to negotiate particular forms of state-making in particular contexts. Put differently, everyday forms of resistance used traditionally by peasants against their social superiors (Scott 1985) are adapted by subjects to a new context of claim-making vis-à-vis the modern state. The performance of resistance-as-negotiation deploys tribal customs in creative ways against a powerful state, yet 'off stage', participants joke about how their ancestors, who formed these villages two or three centuries ago, did not bring any *sasans* and *sarnas* with them (Goffman 1959; Scott 1990). Negotiating subjects specifically do not resort to illegality and violence in the manner of Chatterjee's (2004, 2011) 'political society'. The logic of resistance-as-negotiation is, therefore, endogenous to that of state-making, which, ironically, is what makes it effective in achieving its aims.

Fitting the savage slot: tribal rebellion in the forests of Jharkhand

The Koel–Karo Jan Sangathan's victory is little known outside Jharkhand largely because it was not led by middle-class activists who revel in giving interviews to national media houses. As Ghosh (2006, 69) perceptively writes:

> For journalists, the presence of urban middle-class activists at the heart of the NBA has been a key point of attraction, identification and communication. This presence could catch their imagination, they could relate to the middle-class leadership packaged into the familiar narrative of sacrifice where a privileged, elite person 'gives up' his or her privileges and goes to awaken and mobilize the oppressed masses. This narrative form has direct continuity with the form of the Indian nationalist biography of the nation's leaders: the unconscious, pre-political phase of life, the coming into awareness and the eventual assumption of leadership in mobilizing the people against the (colonial) state.

Yet, the Koel–Karo Jan Sangathan's success is not appreciated by everyone in the area either. Kalyan,[2] a young man from nearby Tapkara, resents the celebration of custom by older activists.

> What has the CNT Act done for us? We have been dispossessed again and again for the past century. Our elders keep acting like the *junglis* the government thinks we are: venerating ancestor spirits [*bhuts*], drinking rice beer [*illi* or *hanria*], making sacrifices of fowl at the time of sowing and harvest. You are an educated person from the city: does anyone in Delhi believe that killing a *murga* [chicken] will bring more rain to the fields?

Another young Munda man, Benjamin, points to widespread discontent with village elders in Munda villages:

> In every village, the young and the old are at odds with each other nowadays. Our tradition [*parampara*] is simply to listen to what the elders say. We must farm for them, our wives and sisters must cook and prepare rice beer for them. What is so good about such traditions?

These discordant voices shed light on the structural factors operating locally to fuel Maoist activity in the region. In rural Jharkhand today, the context for Maoist mobilization is quite different from the MCC's (Maoist Communist Centre) strongholds in central and south Bihar, where the party supported Dalit (ex-untouchable castes) assertion against middle- and upper-caste landlords (Bhatia 2005; Jaoul 2011; Kunnath 2012). Most young men in Jharkhand do not wish to farm any longer. Young women, who are prohibited by custom from even touching the plough (Sinha 2005), want to escape their oppressive patriarchal homes to see the sights and sounds of big cities. Work in cities such as Kolkata or Delhi, typically for a season, offers spaces of freedom away from the taboos and restrictions of traditional village life (Shah 2006). A Munda girl may fall in love with an Oraon boy before proceeding to marry him. This would be impossible in their respective villages. Under the traditional gerontocracy of adivasi villages, there are clear restrictions against marriages within clans (*killis*) or across tribes (*jatis*). The Maoists do not care about the ethnic and religious identities of comrades who wish to get married (Shah 2012, 24). They have a simple ceremony, without the traditional *pahan* (village priest) or *illi* (rice beer), but legitimate nonetheless. The Maoists also offer non-farming, non-traditional career alternatives for young men and women. Guns imply power and modernity. With it, comes cash from *rangdari* (literally, 'road tax' on businesses and wealthy individuals). With cash, comes *angrezi daru* (English liquor, usually whiskey, though

beer too at times) and the latest, sleekest motorbikes. Without any other sustainable employment avenues open to these youth in Khunti district, joining 'the party' is an offer too good to refuse. To the national media, these men are killers, conmen, and cannibals (*The Hindu*, January 15, 2008): 'savages', in sum (Bates and Shah 2012); yet, for local youth, they are heroes to be admired and emulated.

Once in the party, a young Munda man enters a parallel universe of modern comradeship, in and of itself a critique of traditional village society. The *bhailog* (band of brothers), as they are known locally, are both respected and feared. They participate in campaigns to raise the minimum wage, to ensure Mahatma National Rural Employment Guarantee Act funds are paid fully and in timely fashion, to help build homes for the poorer villagers, and to redistribute lands illegally held by non-tribals among the poorest. In Chatra district, the Maoists are even offering cheap loans at 2% interest per annum (*Hindustan Times*, May 21, 2009). Non-governmental organizations working in the state are rarely, if ever, stopped from working for grassroots development. The fiscal structure depends almost entirely from local forms of taxation (*rangdari*), especially on high-value forest products such as lac (Chandra 2011; cf. Suykens 2010). The need to resort to 'selective elimination' of an odd policeman, forester or local *bania* (trader) is less common than is assumed, though it certainly does exist. Fear of the gun typically works just as well, if not better, than the gun itself. Often, the greatest critics of Maoist youth are the village elders, natural defenders of the traditional Munda way of life. Soma Munda, the leader of the Koel–Karo Jan Sangathan, spoke of 'misguided youth' and the 'romance of violence'. Others such as Sukhram Hao, a retired teacher in Khunti *tola* (hamlet), were more explicit in their condemnation:

> These party people are destroying our culture [*sanskriti*]. They don't care at all for the past or for us elders. When we were young, we always listened to our parents. But our children will not do so. This is the sad state of affairs [*dukhdayak sthiti*] today.

The Maoist critique of traditional adivasi society has struck hard at the authority of the village elders. Defiance of customary law and social order comes with a valorization of youth, freedom, and money.

Massi Charan Purty is one of the best-known Maoist figures in Khunti district. His fame has attained the status of folklore after he contested the Jharkhand state elections in December 2009. A shy, intelligent boy educated by Catholic missionaries in Bandgaon, Massi went on to Ranchi to pursue a B.Com degree. However, in 2003, he found his family embroiled in a land dispute with the village *munda* (headman), who boasted of local police connections. As the risk of losing his family plot loomed, Masi found support from the local MCC unit and took on his neighbors successfully. Then, he joined the MCC headed locally by the charismatic Kundan Pahan.[3] After a stunning break-in at the women's remand home at Hatia, barely 5 km from the state capital Ranchi, Massi led an operation to rescue his female comrades as well as his soon-to-be wife Protima. Hailing from a village on the Assam–Meghalaya border, Protima found it hard to adjust to the rigors of jungle life and Maoist discipline. She told me:

> We couldn't even talk to each other like we are now. We didn't feel a personal connection with them. One day, five of us, including Massi and me, ran away from the MCC and came back to our village here in Bandgaon. We started our own group, settling old scores with the local *munda* and ensuring people like us could hold onto their land without the elders deciding everything.

This new breakaway group was named the Jharkhand Liberation Tigers, though they are now called the People's Liberation Front of India (PLFI) to indicate their national ambition. In reality, however, the PLFI operates in three blocks in Khunti district, where it enjoys an uneasy, fractious relationship with its parent organization, the MCC. Massi has been in jail since 2008; the PLFI supports his wife and two sons, paying for their daily expenses and school fees. Popular belief suggests that he actually won the Khunti Member of Legislative Assembly at the state level seat on a Jharkhand Mukti Morcha ticket in December 2009, but bribery and rigging helped his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rival Nilkanth Singh Munda win officially by 438 votes. Protima says,

> we were celebrating at the election centre at 4.30 [p.m.], and went off to the village to tell every-one. Later, we were told that cash filled in boxes meant for sweetmeats were taken into the office by BJP party workers, and the ballot boxes were subsequently tampered with.

Four hundred and thirty eight votes are a slender margin of victory by Indian standards, and popular rumors of electoral fraud say as much about how Mundas today see the state (Shah 2007) as about the actual course of events on the election day. Today, Massi is a modern Munda youth icon: he married according to his wishes regardless of ethnicity/religion; he used the power of his gun to fight for the poor; he settled land disputes extra-judicially against the interests of wily *sadan* (non-tribal) landlords and policemen in their pay; he drinks English liquor and refrains from participating in mind-numbing rituals. This is the example through which his followers wish to remake village communities in Khunti district. Despite being in jail, Massi is certain that he will fight the next state election and remains confident of an outright victory this time.

Massi and other adivasi youth in rural Jharkhand are, therefore, as much in dialogue with the state as with the elders of their own communities. Of course, it is important to remind ourselves here that the state–society binary is itself illusory: 'the state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is' (Abrams 1988, 82). Students of power and resistance must necessarily seek to transcend this binary by examining the mutual constitution of the everyday state and society (Fuller and Bénéï 2001; Migdal 2001). The logic of resistance, conceptualized as the negotiation of everyday relations of power in society, cannot thus be regarded as a purely governmental affair. It is, equally, about the constitution of and contestation in a sociopolitical 'field of struggles' (Bourdieu 1984, 244; Haynes and Prakash 1992), whether on the basis of class, ethnicity, gender, or, as in this instance, generation. The adivasi 'community' is thus not a vestige of the pristine pre-colonial past, but an artifact of the modern constitution of state and society in India with its peculiar set of intergenerational conflicts that define the nature and limits of governmentality. Accordingly, intergenerational conflicts within this 'community' map onto competing statist visions of adivasi communities as well as the different ways by which adivasi subjects negotiate the modern Indian state today.

Conclusion

To sum up, I have shown two different ways by which adivasi subjects respond to two faces of the post-colonial Indian state. They can play helpless victims for the state and civil society in order to make claims on them vis-à-vis the complementary domains of custom and law. Yet, they can also fit the savage slot by invoking the bloodthirsty image of the tribal rebel (Bates and Shah 2012). Academic scholarship and media coverage routinely

replicate, circulate, and legitimize these images, reifying them as the 'truth' about tribes as quintessential subaltern actors. Scraping beneath the surface, however, we may appreciate how the two-faced tribal subject discovered by our pundits may be a mirror image of the duplicitous state in the margins of post-colonial India (Nelson 2004). The state pledges to protect tribal land rights and empower tribal democracy, yet it also steals the minerals and forests around their dwellings and auctions off their lands to the highest bidder. Thereafter, the tribal subject is constituted as 'poor', and hence, a worthy object for the multimillion dollar poverty industry. Cunningly, the state is described as 'absent' in tribal areas (Misra and Pandita 2011), but, in fact, it may be omnipresent. It suffuses the processes of self-making and community-making for tribal subjects, causing them to mirror the two-facedness of the state.

The intergenerational struggles within Munda villages in Khunti district today blur the distinction between the everyday state and society (Fuller and Bénéï 2001). Whereas village elders resort to their customary privileges to defend an older vision of tribal community, adivasi youth are determined to remake the community in their own image. Their two-pronged negotiations with a duplicitous state lead them to articulate competing yet curiously complementary notions of ethical political action. It is easy to tell how peaceful and violent repertoires of resistance compete with each other. But it also easy for activists and scholars, forever searching for the coherent primitive subject in modern India, to miss out on how these might also be interlocking political strategies that enable subject communities negotiate their subjecthood. After all, we are not speaking here of the 'elementary aspects of peasant insurgency' (Guha 1983) in contemporary India. Instead, we are locating resistance in the process of negotiating the modern state: the contradictory tropes and images generated by state-making practices define adivasi political subjectivities recursively, thereby leading these marginal subjects to constantly rework state logics and languages and to remake their 'communities' in agentive moments of resistance. Land and community are intertwined inextricably in these moments of resistance such that the notion of 'community' underpins both territorial claims on the post-colonial state by Munda men and women *and* efforts to remake political selves in dialogue with statist discourses of primitivism.

Notes

1. In this paper, I use the terms 'tribal' and 'adivasi' interchangeably, but consistently prefer the latter since this is a self-description. For a succinct discussion of the politics of these terms as well as 'indigenous', see Rycroft and Dasgupta (2011).
2. Name changed to protect the identity of my interlocutor. All the names in this section, unless indicated otherwise, are fictitious.
3. Kundan, who is known in the Maoist party for his fiercely independent ways, was in the national news briefly in 2009 for beheading a rogue policeman named Francis Induvar. For more on this incident, see *Times of India*, October 9, 2009.

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