

# CounterPunch

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ALEXANDER COCKBURN AND JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

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***“Emptying the water  
to catch the fish”***

## **Terror in Chhatisgarh**

**By Marina Forti**

**I**t provoked only a brief mention even in Indian newspapers. In early September 2011, the police in Dantewada, a mountainous district of the Bastar region in the central Indian state of Chhatisgarh, arrested a local contractor working for the industrial group Essar. Police said he was caught red-handed in a village market, paying a substantial amount of money to a young man, Lingaram Kodopi, “a Maoist operative” (or Naxalite). According to the reports, the police had finally intercepted the flow of “protection money” that the industrial group pays to the Maoist militants to ensure that its mining operations in the area do not come under attack. The police added that a third person escaped arrest that day, a woman, Soni Sori, a “Naxal associate.”

Seen from New Delhi or Mumbai, it was just another echo of a distant, obscure, chronic conflict in the remotest mountains of central India. Indeed, with few exceptions the story quickly faded. Besides, it was a little embarrassing for Essar, one of India’s biggest industrial groups (whose manager in Chhatisgarh was later arrested in connection with the presumed payments to the Maoists), and Essar vehemently denied “the baseless allegations of payments” to the militant group that the prime minister of India, Mr. Manmohan Singh, has branded as “the biggest internal security threat” to the country.

Some human rights groups and a few media outlets were left to investigate what was missing in those reports. And the truth was completely different: it was a story of two so-called “tribals” of Chhatisgarh (this is how India

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***Dioxin, Dow and the EPA***

## **Dow Chemical’s Endless War**

**By Peter Lee**

**T**he dioxin war is an interesting test case as to whether the chemical companies have crossed the line from amoral (making the strongest case on behalf of their shareholders) to immoral (deliberately compromising the ability of the government to implement legitimate public health objectives) in their determined and expensive effort to delay the introduction of meaningful dioxin standards.

Maybe Dow Chemical has crossed that line.

On February 18, 2012, after twenty-seven years, the EPA issued its dioxin non-cancer hazard reassessment report, which established safe limits on the ingestion of dioxin: 0.7 picograms/kg/day. It may take another twenty-seven years before the full spectrum of meaningful dioxin regulations are issued by the EPA

(for water, air, and soil levels), the USDA (beef and poultry), and the FDA (other foods). That’s because the chemical and food industries are determined to make the process of policy formulation, review, and promulgation as painful and costly as possible.

Dioxin is not the usual carcinogen, or toxin. TCDD (Tetrachlorodibenzodioxin) the most toxic molecule in the dioxin family, is different from botulism and other virulent toxins, which directly attack and disable vital human functions—such as the nervous system. (When measured by the biological standard of lethality, TCDD is around eighth on the list, behind threats like inhaled polonium, botulism, VX nerve gas, and the venom of Belcher’s sea snake.)

The toxicity of TCDD is a considerably more subtle and difficult to pinpoint. The

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***Shards From a Broken Road***

## **God and Cars in Kokomo**

**By JoAnn Wypijewski**

**I**t is cold in Kokomo, cold in the whole Midwest, cold in this motel room: 8 below with the wind, and that was in the sunny afternoon. The 1963 Plymouth Valiant started hard this morning. Cold, too, I thought, but the sound was wrong, an achy, wounded sound. Twenty minutes later the engine sounded better, but it cut out when I punched the button for Drive – and out and out and out, every time. I punched Reverse and drove around the lot that way, making turns, gliding carefully into the motel’s second lot, all the time in reverse, curving around the little island of trees and the cars parked there.

This is not a new problem. My theory is that if the car warms to the idea of driving, even if in the wrong direction, eventually it will shoot forward when I punch the Drive button and not cut out. Mechanics take a dim view of this theory but have no better explanations, and mine has the virtue of being true, or so it was until today.

I must have backed my way around the parking lot for ten minutes. A crazy woman, the Indian manager’s children probably thought, watching from their bedroom window. But the Valiant did rush forward when I punched Drive, only to die at the first red light, and the

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dioxin molecule displays a very high affinity for a cellular chemical messenger, the AH (Aryl hydrocarbon) receptor. The AH receptor controls the activation and deactivation of hundreds of genes. What exactly happens when an AH receptor takes a TCDD molecule along for the ride is not perfectly understood, but the implications for humans are demonstrably adverse, affecting developmental and reproductive biology. TCDD's toxicity varies in unknown ways within as well as across species. Tests have shown it kills some strains of rats with much lower doses than others. It seems to promote tumors rather than cause them. The gross presentation of exposure to high levels of dioxin in humans is a disfiguring skin lesion known as "chloracne," such as Ukrainian strongman Viktor Yushchenko suffered when he was poisoned with a large dose of TCDD.

Conclusions concerning TCDD toxicity in humans rely to a considerable extent on studies of a cohort exposed to a large release of dioxin from a chemical plant explosion in Seveso, Italy Italy, in 1976. Long term studies of the residents revealed significantly decreased sperm counts, elevated TSH, and other complications, and enabled the EPA to develop

and defend the 0.7 picogram "Reference Dose." That hasn't stopped the chemical industry from attacking the standard relentlessly on a number of arcane fronts.

In 2008, James Ridgeway reported in *Mother Jones* magazine about the surveillance and information-gathering campaign conducted against Greenpeace in the 1990s by a security firm, BBI, allegedly on behalf of Dow. At the very least, secured areas adjacent to Greenpeace's offices were broken into for repeated episodes of dumpster diving. Based on some documents turned over to *Mother Jones* by a whistleblower, it looked like BBI was not limited to rummaging through dumpsters in gaining access to Greenpeace documents. (Greenpeace filed a RICO suit against Dow, which was dismissed in September 2011; Greenpeace is preparing another legal action.)

Greenpeace was in Dow's sights because of its campaign against chlorine chemicals and dioxin contaminants.

In a 1998 report titled "Dow Brand Dioxin: Dow Makes You Poison Great Things," Greenpeace presented information on Dow's less than distinguished record on dioxin, beginning with its suppression of information on dioxin contamination in Agent Orange, the herbicide used for defoliation in Vietnam.

Dow knew about its dioxin problem in 1965, but apparently withheld information from the government – both as its regulatory overseer and its customer – for six years. Dow presents itself as an advocate of "sound science" – as opposed to the "junk science" allegedly practiced by its regulation-happy detractors. Nevertheless, Dow's own secret efforts to crack the dioxin toxicity puzzle were less than inspiring exercises in the scientific method, or medical ethics.

In 1983, the *New York Times* reported on a program funded by Dow in 1965 to dose 70 prisoners (volunteers who were paid, albeit meagerly) at Holmesburg Prison in Philadelphia with dioxin to determine the threshold to produce chloracne. The tests were conducted by Dr. Albert Kligman, a dermatologist at the University of Pennsylvania.

Dr. Kligman conducted "non-therapeutic" experiments at Holmesburg for over two decades. A critical account by Allen Hornblum of his years there was titled *Acres of Skin*, from Kligman's reaction when he entered the prison for the

first time: "All I saw before me were acres of skin. ... It was like a farmer seeing a fertile field for the first time".

After the initial doses yielded no acute effects, Kligman apparently got carried away and exceeded his instructions on dosage limits with a rather gruesome relish. Per the *New York Times*:

"Dr. Kligman's message [to Dow] was that, with a 'new panel of 10 subjects,' he had increased the total application to about 7,500 micrograms. The first test, he wrote, 'encouraged me to proceed more vigorously'.

"Eight of 10 subjects showed acne lesions usually beginning in three to four weeks,' he reported after the second round of tests. 'In three instances, the lesions progressed to inflammatory pustules and papules. These lesions lasted for four to seven months, since no effort was made to speed healing by active treatment.'"

The long-term fate of Dr. Kligman's test subjects would be of considerable interest to researchers, since the precise level of exposure was known and the long-term effects of dioxin at different levels of exposure could be studied. Unfortunately, according to Dow, it doesn't know anything about this very relevant cohort:

"[Kligman] said he had given all his test records to Dow. 'I believe that included the names,' he said. A Dow spokesman ... said the company had never had the names. Health officials for the City of Philadelphia and Holmesburg, as well as Dow and Dr. Kligman, have told the environmental agency they have no records to help identify the men."

Meanwhile, the EPA was working to define and communicate dioxin hazards, with little help from the scientists at Dow.

In 1977, an EPA study showed a link between a dioxin-tainted Dow herbicide and miscarriages in Oregon. According to the Greenpeace report, "Dow challenged EPA's decision and the validity of the EPA study, and the issue was tied up in legal and legislative battling for the next six years. Only in 1983, when scientific documents were leaked which clearly established the role of dioxin in the Oregon miscarriage studies, was Dow forced to retreat."

During the same period, a study by EPA Region V identified Dow's Midland Plant, home to the production of Agent

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Orange and a host of other chlorinated chemicals, as the major source of dioxin contamination in the adjacent Tittabawassee River, the Saginaw River, and its outflow into Saginaw Bay.

The acting administrator of the EPA in Washington, John Hernandez, intervened before the report could be released and made it available to Dow for review and comment.

According to testimony before Congress, Dow staff were soon on the phone with the report's author, critiquing the report line by line. Dow suggested, and the EPA headquarters agreed, to delete all conclusions; all references to Dow in tables or tables of contents; references to Agent Orange or the dangers of eating dioxin-contaminated fish (the Tittabawassee is apparently a sports fishing locale of some renown); summary of Dow's own study of the fertility of workers' wives; and all references to a study indicating that dioxin was causing miscarriages in Oregon.

Hernandez and others were subsequently forced to resign when their apparent activity on behalf of Dow was revealed.

The area downstream of the Dow Midland Plant is now home to several Superfund sites, extending like a string of poison pustules along 50 miles of rivers and floodplains, some with dioxin concentrations as high as 1.6 million parts per trillion (ppt), the highest reading ever recorded in the United States (the current EPA interim standard for residential areas is 72 ppt and 950 ppt for industrial and commercial properties).

The Greenpeace report speculated concerning the resources of the Chlorine Chemistry Council (CCC), the industry mouthpiece that lobbies on behalf of Dow and other companies producing chlorine chemicals. Greenpeace concluded that the Chlorine Chemistry Council's official budget of \$12 million (in 1994 dollars) was leveraged ten to one by in-kind contributions.

Indeed, when one looks at the full court press that the industry exerts on behalf of its interests, from slick websites to research funding to political lobbying and agitation (by its own estimation, the CCC generated a million letters to the White House decrying the Clinton administration's putative desire to "ban chlorine"), the effect is somewhat overwhelming.

The EPA called for the establishment of a Community Advisory Group (CAG) in the Midland area to serve as the voice of local inhabitants impacted by the dioxin contamination.

A frustrated member of the group wrote to the EPA about the domination of the CAG by people tied to the local chambers of commerce (strong Dow partisans) and foundations funded by Dow.

"Frankly, I am exhausted with EPA and Dow Chemical. So much talking has gone on and so little progress has been made in the past decade, and I have little hope for the future. In an attempt to present the concerns and problems plaguing the resident of Saginaw, I submitted my name and was placed on the CAG. I cannot believe the CAG the EPA assembled; could Dow be any happier?"

"It is undeniable that most mem-

## **One member of the Community Advisory Group was the president of a Lions Club chapter that at one time sold hats embroidered with the taunt "Dioxin My Ass".**

bers have an affiliation with and bias for Dow. ... Most members of the CAG have attended a yearlong leadership school established by the local Chamber of Commerce in Saginaw, Bay City and Midland. Do you have any idea how much the Chamber of Commerce has worked against cleanup and on behalf of Dow? Did you know or does EPA even care that the person chairing this Chamber of Commerce leadership group is Dow Chemical's local legal counsel?"

One member of the CAG was the president of a Lions Club chapter that at one time sold hats embroidered with the taunt "Dioxin My Ass"; the chapter runs a yearly Walleye Festival sponsored by Dow along the dioxin-tainted Tittabawassee and Saginaw rivers.

The state legislature is home to several enthusiastic promoters of Dow's interest. When Governor John Engler was in office, Dow also had a particularly sympathetic ear in the governor's mansion.

In 2002 – when Governor Engler was about to leave office – the governor and

Dow allies in the state Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) tried to conclude a consent agreement between Dow and the state that would increase the permissible dioxin contamination in Michigan from 90 ppt to 831 ppt – an increase that would relieve Dow of its obligation to remediate most of the contaminated residential properties. The bill was blocked by the state attorney general, who noted:

"You should be aware that Dow's own counsel has told us that the negotiation of the proposed agreement is being driven by Dow's express desire to have the DEQ commit itself in writing, by the end of 2002, to an alternative cleanup standard for dioxin in Midland soils (and/or a narrowly circumscribed process for adjusting it in the future). Mr. Robinson explained that Dow is concerned that depending upon the results of the November gubernatorial election, future DEQ management may not be as receptive as the present administration to Dow's 'scientific' and regulatory arguments."

Dow's views on dioxin frequently found a sympathetic hearing in Washington.

The 1994 EPA draft reassessment on dioxin was, in Greenpeace's opinion, significantly undercut by the presence of two chemical industry partisans on the EPA's Science Advisory Board (SAB) who challenged the health risk assessment in the EPA report. One of the SAB members subjected to Greenpeace's critical attention was John Graham. Per Greenpeace:

"John Graham serves as director of the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis. In the month prior to the SAB meeting, Graham's Center organized a high-profile conference on drinking water and health risks, 'financed by a grant from the Chlorine Chemistry Council and the Chemical Manufacturers' Association.' Graham's Center has also received unrestricted grants of funds from Dow Chemical in the years 1990, 1991, 1992 & 1993."

The Harvard Center for Risk Analysis (HCRA) is funded by an immense roster of corporations and seeks to recast government regulation by focusing on the risk/benefit trade-off, and has been accused of predictably reaching the industry-friendly conclusion that the economic harm of government regulation exceeds its benefits.



Though not a scientist, Graham continued to serve on SAB panels looking at dioxin. In 2000, he scandalized some scientists on the board by suggesting that dioxin might be an “anticarcinogen.”

In 2001, Graham entered the Bush Jr. White House as administrator of the Office of Management and Budget Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. In a 2002 interview with a representative of the HCRA, the *New York Times*'s Claudia Dreyfus reported: “Dr. Graham is now the administrator of the O.M.B.'s Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. During his confirmation hearings, Joan Claybrook, president of Public Citizen, said he was unfit for the job because of ‘his history of conducting research that places anti-regulatory policy objectives before academic accuracy and integrity.’” Joan Claybrook was apparently not alone, as reaction in the EPA to Graham's tenure demonstrates.

The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) surveyed 1,500 scientists at the EPA. One hundred respondents commented that interference by Graham and the OMB were a major impediment to the EPA's regulatory mission.

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One commentator wrote: “OMB, with John Graham at the helm, seemed intent on rendering EPA and every other regulatory agency (Food and Drug Administration, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Mine Safety, Consumer Product Safety Commission) utterly powerless with its ‘information quality guidelines.’ And although the administration chose Steve Johnson (a career scientist) as EPA administrator, it sent Graham henchman Marcus Peacock over to keep a close eye on EPA as deputy administrator.”

Another commenter told the UCS, “OMB and the White House have, in some cases, compromised the integrity of EPA rules and policies; their influence, largely hidden from the public and driven by industry lobbying, has decreased the stringency of proposed regulations for nonscientific, political reasons. Because the real reasons can't be stated, the regulations contain a scientific rationale with little or no merit.”

One service that Graham performed was rejecting the conclusions of EPA scientists and requiring additional layers of scientific review by outside parties. A commenter complained, “Get OMB out of the risk assessment business. They aren't qualified and do their best to compromise EPA's process and drag out actions based on EPA's determinations. Demanding that things be referred to [the National Academies], which inevitably slides any decision out 3-4 years, is one of OMB's favorites.”

The National Academy of Sciences (NAS) review indeed became a part of the dioxin reassessment odyssey. There was perhaps some tag-team operation going on between Dow's defenders in the legislative and executive branch in order to achieve this outcome.

In 2003, Representative James Walsh introduced a rider to the EPA budget appropriation mandating a National Academy of Sciences review of the dioxin reassessment, if the White House IntraAgency Working group could not achieve consensus. Consensus proved unattainable; over a year and half later, in November 2004, the NAS began its review. In 2006, the NAS report emerged.

Graham moved on in 2006. His successor at OMB, Susan Dudley, came to the government via another anti-regulatory shop, the Regulatory Studies Program of the Mercatus Center at

George Mason University. Mercatus was founded in the 1970s by a conservative, regulation-averse outfit now very much in the news – Koch Industries.

Before Graham left the OMB, he seeded the EPA with alumni. Marcus Peacock, a.k.a. “the henchman,” had followed Graham from the HCRA in 2001 before parachuting into EPA as the agency's number 2 man in 2005. Also in 2005, George Gray, who had served as Graham's successor as head of the HCRA, was appointed the EPA's top scientist, the assistant administrator for Research and Development.

Peacock was blamed for one of the Bush EPA's most blatant gifts to Dow Chemical on the dioxin issue: the firing of Mary Gade, the EPA administrator for District V, which includes Michigan, in 2008. Gade, corporate lawyer and advisor to the Bush campaign who had been appointed to the post in 2006, told the *Wall Street Journal* that she had been presented with an ultimatum to resign over dioxin contamination near the Midland Plant: “It's related to the ongoing discussion between me, my region and [EPA] headquarters about Dow,” Ms. Gade said. She declined to specify what she and her superiors had disagreed about but added that ordinary citizens ‘should be concerned’ because ‘this may be some of the worst dioxin contamination’ in the U.S.”

For its part, Dow primly observed:

“John Musser, a Dow Chemical spokesman, said the company never asked the EPA to relieve Ms. Gade from her duties. He added that the company found out about her placement on leave from the media. He said the company doesn't know what led the EPA to do that. ... Dow's Mr. Musser said that Ms. Gade's office asked Dow ‘to do things that were not consistent with national guidelines or national policy.’ He declined to elaborate, saying discussions with the EPA were confidential.

“After the negotiations [on dioxin cleanup] fell through, Dow met with EPA officials in Washington to discuss what the company perceived as unfair treatment by the local office, said Mr. Musser.”

Dave Camp, the congressman representing Midland in the House of Representatives and a fervent defender of Dow Chemical (his wife previously worked as an attorney for Dow), was somewhat less gallant in commenting on Gade's ouster: “In 20 years of public

life, I have never encountered a more unprofessional, vindictive and insulting government official.” It transpired that Gade’s transgression was that she invoked emergency powers to counter Dow’s foot-dragging, started dredging one of the most contaminated waterways, and, in January 2008, cut off negotiations with Dow.

After Gade was removed, EPA management, in a series of closed-door negotiations with Dow and Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm, tried to negotiate the transfer of Dow’s cleanup responsibilities from the purview of the state’s hazardous waste permit regime and shift to the EPA under a Superfund Alternative Site (SAS) program. The SAS route was criticized by activists as insufficiently transparent, and the negotiations were halted by the new EPA management after President Obama took office.

Governor Granholm subsequently joined Dow’s board, a position that pays somewhere from \$150,000-\$200,000 annually. She left after seven months, to join former Vice President Al Gore’s television network.

President Bush’s other 2008 gift to the chemical industry was the requirement that the EPA response to the NAS study itself be subjected to further review by the EPA’s Science Advisory Board of outside experts.

The change of administrations and installation of a new team of appointees at EPA, led by Lisa Jackson, apparently put an end to the more egregious political shenanigans on behalf of Dow and other chemical manufacturers.

The EPA negotiated an Administrative Order of Consent (AOC) agreement with Dow, and a plan for the cleanup of the Segment 1 – three miles of the Tittabawassee River immediately downstream of the plant – was fixed in November 2011.

On February 16, Dow also announced a plan to purchase fifty homes and lots near its plant, and remediate 1,400 residents – while giving the residents the option to relocate. And finally, after another year’s delay, the dioxin non-cancer hazard reassessment was released. It would seem that the good guys and gals won, and Dow is finally doing something after decades of foot-dragging, thanks to the aggressive approach of the Obama EPA.

However, the devil is in the details, and there are plenty of details ... and po-

tential devils. The remediation work is all being done in Dow’s manufacturing center and political base: Midland and its environs. The work, remediation or buyout, will benefit Dow’s employees and voters in the city. In Segment I, there is little dioxin involved in the cleanup; most of the dioxin is spread along 50 miles of river and floodplain between the plant and Lake Huron.

The cleanup of residential properties will take place if the soil content is 250 ppm, not 72 ppt (the EPA’s emerging standard) or 90 (Michigan’s mandated state standard for residential areas). The justification, based on science that activists haven’t seen, is that higher concentrations are OK in certain soil types. The re-

## **The Harvard Center for Risk Analysis is funded by an immense roster of corporations and seeks to recast government regulation by focusing on the risk/benefit trade-off.**

mediation is quite low tech: twelve inches of topsoil is removed and replaced, and the tainted soil trucked off for landfill at Dow or disposal in the city dump.

The big detail is time.

The EPA’s remediation goals for soil dioxin levels are still preliminary. As to dioxin in the food supply, the dioxin non-cancer hazard reassessment establishes a foundation that must serve as the basis for regulations issued after a drawn-out public process by the USDA and FDA – government agencies that are well known for their institutional sympathy to the industries they regulate.

A few things are certain. First, in five years at most President Obama and his team will be out of office. But Dow will be around, ready to mix it up with a new and possibly more sympathetic regime. And dioxin will probably still be in the rivers and floodplains and fish and people of the Midland area. **CP**

**Peter Lee** is a frequent contributor to *CounterPunch*.

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second, and so on like that until, finally, it refused to progress at all, and strangers pushed me out of traffic. When the tow truck deposited the car and me at Automotive Specialist, *Creflo Dollar Ministries* was talking abundance through faith on a dusty DVD monitor, and *Christian Christmas* radio was playing carols I had never heard. I have been to this shop five times in two weeks now, and the mechanic, Larry, looks worse every time.

He told me business was bad the first time I came in, to replace a shredded defroster hose. Not the ordinary bad that every other small business is experiencing. His loss of trade represents a different kind of bad, and no cyclical upshift in the economy can make it right, because he’s not right with God.

When he first opened the shop a few years ago, he hadn’t advertised or even got the sign up, but cars were flying into the lot. He’d never been so busy, or made so much money. He became one of his church’s biggest tithers.

“You’re a good mechanic,” I said, hopefully. “I’m not that good,” he said, and maybe I betrayed the mix of letdown and angst because, instantly, he said, “I’m honest, and I know old Chryslers.” But no, that fat time of prosperity wasn’t his doing; pastor said he’d found favor with the Lord. Failure, loss, those *are* his doing: all of the projects undone, being done, almost done; the uncertainty of present days and the question marks about whether there will be work tomorrow. That he should ask such questions, that he can’t just trust in the Lord, now confronts him with an evil so large. The Devil has a hold on him. Larry struggles with that knowledge in the deep night, sleepless, reviewing Scripture and his own unworthiness, praying for a way out of darkness and back into light.

“You know,” I said, “whatever issues you have about your faith, that’s your business, but ... I mean, Larry, there’s 24 per cent unemployment in Kokomo. Everyone’s work is drying up.” (Kokomo’s pulled up somewhat since that awful trough.)

“That’s got nothing to do with this. People from church, they’ve come up to me, ‘You better work on your faith, boy.’” And he wagged his finger in imitation of their strictures.

It made me hate them, and, in that in-

stant, replacing my defroster hose – an hour’s labor cost – wasn’t just a necessity, a small job, some cash from hand to hand: it was an offering to Larry’s God, a faint blow against his accusers. I was offended for him, but he pushed back against my offense. Those people were sent by the Lord, he said, as warning, a reveille for his return to righteousness.

They are just like Larry, trying to pass through a time of turmoil, striving to live their every day in the Lord, and to heed their pastor’s lessons on “How to be Content in a Discontented World.” The first Sunday I went to the New Covenant Christian Center to hear Pastor Rick Burgei, he quoted Matthew 10: the story of the sparrows, two for a penny, but still the Father watches that none will fall to the ground, and how much more valuable is Man, ... so ... don’t be afraid.

Larry is afraid. And every day that he is afraid, every day he is a discontent, he is in defiance of the Lord and his wonder-working power. New Covenant’s God is a busy God, matter-of-fact, with a high level of involvement in every life that’s pledged to Him. He likes cars. He knows just what’s wrong with them when human powers fail. A member of the church told me a story about a Pontiac that had caused him no end of trouble and flummoxed every mechanic in town. One day, after it wouldn’t start yet again and he was on the highway in a rental, vowing to ditch the Pontiac forever, the Lord spoke to him, “When you get home, crank up the car. If it doesn’t turn over, open the hood.”

“He showed me a picture of my car under the hood,” the man recalled. “It was all spread out before me in great detail. And then He pointed to one specific place, and He said, ‘Tap this right here and then try to crank it up again.’ When I got home, I found everything exactly as the Lord had shown me, and I did what He said, and the car started. You see, the Lord had noticed a place where a connection was weak; tapping it, He made contact. You couldn’t see the gap with the human eye. That was why the problem was intermittent, because when the mechanics were working, they would push those contacts together, but they didn’t know it. So then, on the road, with the vibration and all, that gap would open up again. The Lord knew what was wrong.”

New Covenant is a church of car nuts. Every summer it holds a car show in the

parking lot. Rick Burgei retold the congregation’s foundation myth that Sunday. There was this 1968 Camaro, so beautiful in shiny yellow, and Rick loved that car.

No sooner had he bought it than the Lord said to him, “Rick?”

“Yes, Lord.”

“Rick, will you sell that car?”

“Why, Lord, I just bought it.”

“I know, Rick, but one day I’m going to ask you to sell that car, and what will you say? Will you sell the car?”

“Ye-yes, Lord.”

And the Lord was satisfied. Ten years later, He said, “Rick?”

“Yes, Lord?”

“It’s time to sell that car, and build my church.”

So began New Covenant, and the transformation of Rick Burgei from a ne’er do well, former drug addict and Catholic to the coiffed and burnished, prosperous pastor and regional televangelist that he is today.

Larry helped pastor rebuild his ’67 Nova. Larry has also rebuilt his own ’73 Roadrunner and ’71 Dart. The pride of his collection, theoretically, a ’74 Dodge Charger with a 440 engine, last of the big block cars, occupies a corner of the shop, awaiting resurrection.

I brought the Valiant to Larry a second time because it was running rough, cutting out, and it was time to change the points before continuing farther down the road. Larry’s friend and church brother, Stanley, the man who sent me to Larry in the first place, was at the garage that day. Stanley is the only person I know who calls losing a job a blessing. He was an engineer at Delphi for 22 years before being laid off and following the hand of the Lord to school to retrain as a crisis counselor. It is, he says, what he was always meant to do, what the soft life of good pay in a secure job had prevented him from doing. In a town of long faces, Stanley beams.

At the garage that day the three of us – Larry, Stanley and I – held hands, ringed before the engine compartment, gazing at the ignition system while Stanley prayed, “O Lord, O Jesus, give this man the wisdom to fix JoAnn’s car and guide his hands, O Lord, guide his hands as he works in praise of your almighty power; and give her the patience, Lord, as she waits for her car, and thank you, Jesus, for bringing her to Kokomo, for we know all things happen by your will.”

I drove off at the end of Larry’s labors that day, a few hours of grace, and I have been coming back ever since: the car suffering, Larry tinkering; he and the Valiant and I in this mortal coil of need and doubt, and an ignition system that refuses to maintain a predictable spark.

Today Larry’s eyes were ringed black with exhaustion, his skin pasty white, damp despite the biting cold. He didn’t get to sleep until 4 this morning. After the long hours wrestling with the Word and listening to videotaped evangelists, he finally passed out watching a hunting show. On his desk in the shop the pages of a booklet marked “Faith” had oily fingerprints. Larry fooled some more with the Valiant’s points, but it was no good. He is a punching bag now. I left the car with him, no closer to a fix. Kokomo’s motel managers, gas stations and restaurants – every business that runs my debit card, except Automotive Specialist – are grateful to a loving God.

And so I wait. Larry sweats and rubs his weary eyes and listens, when the phone rings, to Stanley’s prayers for light and fortitude. He appears to be in no hurry to solve the riddle of the Valiant, but then it’s not his only, or even most pressing, riddle. It is mine, right now: how to solve this problem with minimal extra cost in minimal time to get out of Indiana, out of the Midwest, and away from the snow and cold or threat of snow and into the South. Larry has the riddle of the Jeep Cherokee and the Liberty and the Jimmy up on the lift to solve, and more cars than I bothered to identify in the lot. He has the riddle of his brother, Stevie, his partner until last Thursday, when he left for lunch and never came back. Now Stevie barely answers the phone. He tells Larry he’s “done.” Done? Larry will leave the garage tonight, go home for supper, and then to church for guidance. Stanley will take some people to Stevie’s place to lay on hands. Without Stevie, Larry has the riddle of figuring out how to get all of these cars done in time by himself. And he has the riddle of God, of his faith or faithlessness, of how to be true enough and strong enough so that the Lord will bless him again, and maybe there will be fewer riddles. **CP**

**JoAnn Wypijewki** has been driving America’s roads in these hard times for three years. She’s been reporting in regularly to *CounterPunch*.



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defines its native population, the adivasi, literally, “first inhabitants”), both well known in the area for their social work and both long harassed by the local police. The accusations against them were false.

Soni Sori was finally arrested on October 4, 2011, in New Delhi, where she fled in search of legal protection, and was brought back to her native region in the custody of the Chhattisgarh police. Here the story became ominous. She explained to friends that she was in fear for her life. Indeed, when she was brought to the court in Dantewada on October 10, she was unable to get down from the police van: her detention was confirmed without a magistrate even seeing her (or raising any objections, as the police claimed that her bruises came from a slip in the bathroom).

Only later, with the help of renowned Gandhian human rights activist Himanshu Kumar, could she file an affidavit to the Supreme Court of India, stating that in the police office she was stripped naked, brutally beaten, given electric shocks, and raped with some objects. Only then she was transferred to a civil hospital in Kolkata – the medical report submitted on November 25 to the Supreme Court stated that “two stones had been found in the vagina and one in the rectum of the woman” and removed, plus confirmed damage to her spine and black marks on her body suggesting electric shock. [At the time of writing this in early January 2012 Soni Sori is still in detention].

The story now looks quite different. Not only a shocking case of police brutality, but the glimpse of a conflict, which now grips a region of great economic importance and a population of 90 million adivasi. The story of Soni Sori is just a small sign that extensive areas are subjected to a de facto state of emergency, where legal and constitutional rights have all but collapsed in the name of the “war on terror.” It also reveals how opaque the dealings between police, contractors, big industrial groups and the Maoists themselves are.

Soni Sori is not a guerrilla. She is a teacher and social organizer from a politically active tribal family; she has led a campaign to raise the minimum daily wage for tribal laborers, from 60 rupees to 120 rupees, as it should be by law.

Lingaram Kodopi had studied journalism in New Delhi, and went back to his village because he wanted the tribals “to have their own voice.” Lingaram had reported an incident which occurred in March 2011 in the Dantewada district, when three remote villages were raided by the security forces – a news story that broke when reporters managed to reach an area cordoned off by the police. The raid had lasted five days and involved 350 men of the Cobra Battalion, an elite police force, and the Commandos Koya, a militia recruited among “renegade Maoists” and young tribals. Three villagers had been killed, three women raped, three security forces were also killed. Lingaram filmed extensive eyewitness accounts on his video camera in their own tribal language. In consequence, a storm of accusations assailed the security forces.

Paramilitaries, militias, and their accompanying atrocities – rapes, extrajudicial killings, torture – it sounds like the

## **The mineral belt and the tribal belt of India overlap almost exactly. And it is across this “overlapping map” of minerals, forests and tribal people that the conflict is raging.**

chronicles of a war. And it is, indeed, a war. This explains the extraordinary density of military encampments I saw on a recent visit, along the roads approaching Dantewada town, or across the plateau and around Jagdalpur, the region’s main town with 80,000 inhabitants, barracks housing the Central Reserve Police Force and other paramilitary forces – elite corps with exotic names like Greyhound, Cobra, or Snake Battalion.

Yet a look to the map is revealing. Along with neighboring Jharkhand and parts of Orissa and West Bengal, this is the core of the mineral belt of India, a region across many states holding most of the country’s mineral resources. At the same time, these mountains and plateaux are also in the tribal belt, the region where most of the “tribals” of India live. The adivasi are a minority forming 8.6 per cent of the Indian population and

belong to a variety of ethnic groups. But the “scheduled tribes,” to use the bureaucratic definition, continue to share with the “scheduled castes” (the very low or outcast) the unenviable position of the most marginalized and impoverished strata of Indian society.

The mineral belt and the tribal belt of India overlap almost exactly. And it is across this “overlapping map” of minerals, forests and tribal people that the conflict is raging. An old conflict – going back over decades of the dispossession of the tribals and marginal peoples – and yet very modern, for the rush to exploit the natural resources remains high in spite of the global economic downturn: iron ore to transform into steel, bauxite, coal to feed energy-hungry India’s thermal plants. So, the pressure on these lands, paddies and forests will grow, souring old conflicts, exasperating deep injustices and igniting new revolts.

The last 60 years have seen a slow, constant push of forest contractors to cut timber, open new roads, colonize the best agricultural land and register it in their names – while the adivasi and other rural groups have adapted to life on the margins, or withdrawn to the remotest areas.

For many years, the Communist Party of India (CPI) led mass movements against rural displacement in Chhattisgarh. Or, it took the form of an armed guerrilla war waged by the Communist Party-Maoist (illegal), a reincarnation of the movement started in the late ’60s in West Bengal, known there as “the Naxalites,” and which re-emerged in these remote mountains in the last decade. “We spoke the same language,” recalls Manish Kunjam, president of All India Adivasi Mahasabha, the tribal front of the CPI. “They denounce the state that takes the common lands from the farmers to the advantage of multinational corporations, just as we do. But we continue to fight a political battle with mass actions. We believe in politics. They believe in guns. And once guns have taken the floor, every other voice is silenced.”

Perhaps the most vicious feature in this conflict is a dirty war of militias. It started in 2005 with the creation of the Salwa Judum: gangs, armed and trained by the security forces with the help of the state of Chhattisgarh, according to dozen of testimonies gathered by human rights groups. The militia started to raid

**return service requested**

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the villages where some Maoist presence was noted (or presumed), terrorizing the inhabitants into denouncing the “terrorists.” Soon news began to spread of atrocities, killings and rapes. Entire villages were forced into “rehabilitation camps” set up by the police close to the main towns (and barracks) of Dantewada or Jagdalpur. At the peak of this dirty war, 644 villages had been razed and 350,000 people crammed into 23 “rehab camps” under surveillance by the police. “It was the strategy of ‘emptying the water to catch the fish,’ clearing the people from the forests to wage their war against the Maoists,” noted Sudha Baradwaj, a trade unionist and civil rights lawyer in Chhattisgarh. In April 2006, a group of independent jurists denounced the “self-defense force” as a militia promoted by the state. It was ruled illegal.

But the militias did not disband – they were just reincarnated. The government of Chhattisgarh enrolled 15,000 men of the old militia as Special Police Officers (in theory, citizen volunteering as auxiliaries in civil roles).

In June 2011, the Supreme Court of India intervened again, ruling that

the SPO be disbanded, but to little effect. The dirty war continues.

Meanwhile, the “war on the Maoists” has targeted social activists, Gandhians, trade unionists, human rights advocates, or independent reporters like Lingaram Kodopi, with no evidence that they were Naxalites. The phrase “Naxal associate” is applied to the most unlikely suspects. In the Bastar region, a rural ashram was razed by the security forces. Its founder, Himanshu Kumar, was forced to flee the region, and many social workers associated with him jailed as “Maoist supporters.” Binayak Sen, president of the People’s Union for Civil Liberties, was convicted for life in Chhattisgarh under the accusation of cooperating with the Maoist leadership. Against his conviction many voices raised in India and abroad, and in April 2011 the Supreme Court of India eventually suspended the sentence.

“All this is possible under a draconian Chhattisgarh Special Security Act,” notes Sudha Baradwaj, saying that a network of civil rights defenders is campaigning to repeal it. “The state has a legitimate duty to combat a threat to

the constitutional order. But here a wide spectrum of society is simply labeled as ‘terror supporters.’ Under the ‘war on terror,’ the state is criminalizing any dissent.” The rule of law has collapsed. The story of Soni Sori is the latest case to illustrate this collapse.

Doctor Binayak Sen says this has a rationale. “The Salwa Judum and its reincarnations are basically a tool for clearing the forest to make it easier to exploit the natural resources,” Sen told me, when I met him last November in New Delhi. “The point is that the state became the supervisor of a massive displacement of rural peoples and the grabbing of land, water, forests – the natural resources upon which these people survive. Instead of being the guarantor of the public interest, the state is handing over public resources to private interests. Now, cases of resistance multiply everywhere. This resistance has many colors, but the government likes to depict it in only one color, so it will just repress it, militarizing the process.” **CP**

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