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Where the Mahua dulls all pain

This is an extract on the Maria tribe in Bastar, Chhatisgarh, which is caught between the mining corporations, security forces and the Maoists

In Bastar, life seems to grow unshackled, wild and often wanton: seeds, chucked by insects and birds, don't wait for a drizzle. They grow into a mahua here, a salphi there; by spring, they lug the weight of juicy fruits and sticky sap. At dusk, boys camping in the groves with a picnic of spicy red-ant chutney and chicken go from palm to palm.

After a little ceremony, a kind of Maria cocktail hour, they collect and drink the frothing fluid from the leaf cups. In a perpetual state of semi-intoxication, they dance from village to village for the rest of the season.

Sowed in this wilderness is an essential restraint that they practise in their everyday lives. Birsu and Sukaru have been married for a decade and a half, but they had a child only six years ago, after many herbal concoctions and prayers. Birsu wakes up in the middle of the night, wondering what woke her up. Her stomach hurts, from the weight of her daughter's foot

Birsu shoves it aside, trying to go back to sleep, but her husband's snores keep her awake...Sukaru works a few villages away as a dutiful peon in a government office. These days, he returns home tired: the flat glassiness in his

eyes, the slump to his shoulders worry her. Waking up again with a start, Birsu reproaches herself bitterly for sleeping too long; the gruel should have already been ready before he left for work. Running her hand over his side of the mattress, she feels the last of the creased warmth. She must make him the fresh mahua flower liquor that he asked for last night; the cow has been tied in case it eats the mahua flowers before Birsu wakes up. It is at night that the tree blossoms and at daybreak, each short-lived flower falls to the ground.

It's not yet dawn, but the shadows have already lengthened by the time Birsu is in the forest. It is the time of the year when even the most ordinary-looking sal tree turns yellow, when a simple akash bel is stitched with white flowers. In her cloth bag, Birsu drops a slice of sal bark for her mother-in-law's joint pain; datun or neem twigs to clean their teeth with for the week; and a handful of tart berries as she walks over the forest mulch. Theft becomes a duty here; only a fool would leave Bauhinia vahli, which it is fat with next season's seeds; or the yams for their midday meal, and chironji, the seeds of which she will roast for the porridge tonight. When she comes to the pond, Birsu sticks a knife into the chilly shallow water to fish. But the fish is so little and the water so nice, she swims instead.

This is better than the toilet the government had built them: the bathroom floor was always slimy with dirt, and

the air thick with smell. Gudari, a hamlet near Orchha in Bastar, Chhattisgarh, approachable by a steep walk uphill, is where Birsu and her Maria tribe have lived for centuries, seldom travelling beyond the market towns around the hills. These villages, in the dense forests of the Abujmarh hills, have long been isolated from the outside world, inhabited largely by the Marias and other sub-Gond tribes like the Murias and the Halbas. They are accessible only via forest pathways that are steep treks uphill from the nearest motorable road.



The Marias have come a long way since the 1800s, when Maratha officials described them as 'naked savages, living on roots and sprigs, and hunting for strangers to sacrifice', and then in 1938, according to Grigson's account: '...the women go with breasts uncovered. Very old women

occasionally hobble about inside their huts completely naked.' It was only in the post-Independence years, when the tribes had already been introduced to missionaries and the Indian government, that younger women like Birsu started wearing blouses with saris and speaking both Halbi and Gondi. And yet, they still inhabit two worlds simultaneously, with hardly any schools, no hospitals, a megalithic culture, where for each clan there is, or was, there is a holy circle beneath a sacred saja tree, which in reality is their God, known as Bura Deo. The Marias worships hills, streams, trees and, above all, the forest, which always infringes on their backyards, where they grow vegetables, medicinal herbs and a mandatory tendu bush for tobacco.

Birsu knows that old man Ghoru's story was improbable – he had said that work on a new mine was starting deeper into the forest beyond Gudari. She knows she should not be venturing so deep into the woods to reach the hill; Sukaru's admonitions resounded in her ears. Ignoring the voice in her head, she quickly dries her hair, lugs the firewood on her head and nips along the path deeper into the forest. A short walk ahead, she sees a man and a woman farther down the stretch: They are in olive green, dirty uniforms, with guns hanging from their shoulders. Her knees almost give away; she looks at a banyan tree by the side, but the roots are too thin to hide behind.

She starts to run, but hearing the man loading the cartridge of the gun, Birsu stops in her tracks. 'Lie down. Do you have any money on you?' the woman shouts in Gondi. When Birsu shakes her head, the woman pulls the bag off her. The weasel-faced man, or maybe a boy, shorter than the woman, looks on with a scowl while the woman pulls her close, shoving a stick at her chest. She is a stiff, with a static face and burning eyes; her fire seems to come from a faraway, deep hole within her.

These are the people she has seen moving in the jungles, at the foothills of the Abujhmar hills behind her village. In the night, they move with torches, looking like fireflies. In the day, the green of their uniforms rustles against the green of the jungle. The CRPF forces and police have set up camps everywhere the roads reach, but roads hardly reach anywhere in Bastar. For miles and miles, there are thick jungles and amid its prowling cats, the Naxals have charted their own paths and their own rules. Emptying the bag on the forest floor, the Naxal woman kicks aside Birsu's forest pickings with minimal effort, lifting only a package wrapped in sal leaves, sniffing it coldly. She has probably not eaten a decent meal for hours, maybe days. 'Is that with mutton?'

Yes,' Birsu mutters. She becomes aware of a stream of water licking its way down the end of her hair and slicing over her right hip. It feels dangerous, like a cold knife across her skin. 'This is good shit!' the man blurts out,

scooping up the curry with his dirty fingers, baring his tobacco-stained teeth. 'Ah, my mother used to make it like this,' the woman says, pausing to belch. 'May the angapen rest her shitty old soul!' 'How old are you?' she asks Birsu.

'Not sure. I have a child.' This somehow enrages the Naxal woman and she slaps Birsu, pushing her to the ground. Disgust in her eyes, she spits on the ground beside her. 'Then we cannot take you to fight for the Adivasi. Your youth is wasted in bearing children.' As the splintering light that had spread before her eyes fades away, Birsu notices the woman walking back into the forest with a hurried limp; polio, maybe, or a gunshot wound. When Birsu returns home, she finds Radha, her daughter, on the path outside their home. 'They ate Krishna behen,' she sobs, phlegm and tears puddling on her chin. 'I cannot understand you, Radha,' she rubs her temples after putting the firewood away.

'Those men in green clothes ate Krishna – that urchin girl at the ghotul whose parents died last year,' shrugged the grandmother, stirring a curry in a pot on an open fire outside. 'Last night, two men and a woman had come in from the jungles and took our hens. Krishna was heard screaming,' she says. A patrolling officer who came in from that side of the jungle said that those hungry Naxals roasted her on a pit. He says it is pointless looking for them; they must have already receded deep into the jungles.'

Birsu has a sudden urge to vomit; she wipes Radha's cheeks and nose with the end of her sari. Giving her some dried fish from a rusted biscuit tin box, she stomps to the backyard, alarming the cats. Sifting through the pots, she places one on the fire; stripping the yellow mahua flowers to their usable core, she throws in the dried sugar-rich petals, stirring with anger as the flames leap up around the cauldron. She can't just sit and watch the Naxals and police play with the villagers' lives. She had to do something, even if it was making mahua. Throughout its history, the precious mahua liquor has been periodically banned, restricted, accepted as pay-off by the army and the police or stolen and snatched by Naxals.

She feeds wood to the fire, throwing in the bark and stirring the mahua pot, stirring till she becomes breathless. She hardly cried even after getting married; she had no time to. She prefers drops of sweat beading her face rather than feckless tears. As the mahua vapours rise from the open vats, Birsu's brother-in-law comes with a sirhana leaf cup and pours out some of the last of the old mahua for himself. The man – who, though a man, has no resistance – is sometimes seen chanting spells as a gunia to ward off evil spirits from his patients. But mostly, he is seen with a bottle, drinking deeply, for, he says, you need courage to sit by and watch things happen.

Birsu's own desire to drink the homemade hooch is fraught; each sip that she kisses lulls her mind, and at the

same time, boils her anger. Her first sip is a gargle: sterilizing. The second divulges the aromas. By the third, she forgets about her swollen knee inflicted by the green uniformed woman, the noisy children who make enough noise to scare wild animals away and/or even the young girl who was taken away by the Naxals. Birsu is not worried about Naxals, even though she worries about everything. They are young boys and girls, probably jobless and recruiting girls and boys from the neighbouring villages.

She is worried that fewer and fewer mahua trees grow wild. They often die too young. She is worried about the numerous storms this year that killed them. She is worried about the miners of the giant companies, which her husband says are not too far away. They will come up into her hills and kill the jungles, on which they depend on for everything, when they are finished in the valley. Even the police are powerless before them. Radha is inside, singing herself to sleep. When she was born six years ago, she was beautiful, small and fragile. Her brown skin and dark big eyes made her stare seemed to be radically attuned. When Birsu first lifted her, she felt the pure tenderness of a baby, but in Radha's eyes was a vibrating desire to take form.