

Future in a job card

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One justification for the bifurcation of Madhya Pra-desh and the creation of the predominantly tribal Chhattisgarh state in November 2000 was that nobody in Bhopal had appeared particularly bothered about the fate of tribals in remote corners of the erstwhile state. The jury is still out on whether an elected government in Chhattisgarh has made life any better for its tribals. The Raman Singh government now finds itself battling its Maoist shadow by taking recourse to shotgun measures like unleashing the Salwa Judum or locking up human rights activists like state PUDR general secretary, Binayak Sen. Yet one of the major reasons why ordinary people swell the ranks of Maoist groups is because elected representatives have failed the people in terms of basic governance.

It is against this background that a model emerging in Chhattisgarh's own backyard of Surguja — long regarded as one of India's poorest districts despite its considerable forest and water resources — needs highlighting. Consider Surguja's profile, and the reasons for its endemic poverty emerge starkly. According to the 2001 census, 64.6 per cent of Surguja's population was tribal, 90 per cent was dependent on agriculture or minor forest produce, while only 7 per cent could be termed as urbanised. It also had a pathetic work participation rate of around 50 per cent, and was extremely poorly served in terms of road/rail infrastructure. According to statistical details provided by the Chhattisgarh government, the only railway in the district was built 80 years ago — a branch line from Anuppur, about 47.36 km in length. What little infrastructure it has in terms of irrigation and power is concentrated in its central plains. Being forgotten is truly a state of mind in Surguja, except as P. Sainath has reminded us in *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*, when recurring drought brings in government contractors by the truckload.