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Ground beneath their feet

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It is dangerous to be a tall girl in Nadia. On August 14, 2007, a woman six foot tall was seen to be part of a Maoist gang in Nadia's Chapra. On August 19, Putul Haldar, a student equally tall, disappeared on her way home from college. The Chapra police refused to take her father's complaint. Only when Nadia's chief judicial magistrate ordered an inquiry on August 23 at Putul's father's behest did the police respond. They said the girl had been arrested in Chakdah on August 23—the day the CJM asked for the inquiry—and that she had 3 kilograms of *ganja* on her.

There are words, such as terror, suspicion, arrest, interrogation, torture, that appear to represent definite actions or particular states of being. That is what the logic of institution requires. It is only when that logic is overturned that their essential content of violation becomes visible—in the form of a disorder that throws relationships into disarray, that between the State and the individual as well as that of the individual with himself. A girl going home may not be thinking about the protection of the State that makes this action of hers possible. She may not be conscious of her height, or her identity as daughter or as student. It is at the moment that the State reverses the relationship construed so far as "natural", and turns from protection to assault, that all these unarticulated categories come into play. Then Putul is compelled to redefine her sense of self, to shift the bases of her identity on to new and, perhaps, less stable, or never-thought-of, premises. She is suddenly vulnerable, as if without the skin she has grown up

What happens to a person's sense of self when the State regards him as its enemy?

with and grown into. Because the State 'suspects' that she is its enemy, she is now an 'outsider', and the unselfconsciousnesses clothing her identity are stripped away.

The State declares war on its presumed enemy by withdrawing her rights. No one knows when she has been arrested, she is not produced in court within 24 hours, she is untraced till the CJM intervenes,



and she is charged with possessing drugs since the drugs law prohibits bail.

Putul was granted bail, months after her arrest, because the court felt that the prosecution failed to prove her guilt. The State did not bother to bring out its entire arsenal against her, as it did against the human rights activist and doctor, Binayak Sen, in Chhattisgarh. He had shown that some 'Maoists' killed in an 'encounter' were just defenceless *adivasi* villagers. He remains in custody since May last year in spite of worldwide outrage. The building of charges against him, of helping extremists, follows the same principles

as those used against Putul, only in his case the State is far more deeply engaged. And his incarceration follows the same logic as that of the death of the *adivasi*.

Sen, though, must have known what he was dealing with, while Putul, it seems now, had no idea that she was dealing with anything at all. When such a person enters that unexplored battlefield where the State treats her as enemy, what happens to her identity?

For some, the new premises it must seek to build itself on may seem non-existent, and total vulnerability the only truth. Avijit Sinha, a customs official and the son-in-law of a policeman, was arrested for suspected links with Naxalites on July 5, 2002 and was released on July 6 after interrogation. He committed suicide on July 7. His telephone had once been used by an alleged sympathizer of the People's War, which is not a banned outfit in West Bengal. The police denied torturing him, while his family alleged mental torture. What do these terms really mean? Could it be that Avijit felt betrayed, irredeemably, in some raw core of his sense of self, which he may have built on a belief in work, dignity, honesty, a peaceful life, and the trust a law-abiding citizen has in the State? He served the State, as did his father and father-in-law. Perhaps his identity was dismantled in a way he did not know how to put together again.

The police had violated 11 norms of arrest set down by the Supreme Court, it was found. Had he been arrested according to those norms, would he have been able to continue living? Or, maybe, he would not have been arrested at all?