

Caught Between Salwa Judum and Maoists

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Lingagiri / Dantewada : December 29, 2006. Lingagiri village in the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh, about 600 km from Raipur, close to Andhra Pradesh border.

Gantal Raju, 30, was at his village home with father, Gantal Kanhaiya, wife, young son and 20-year-old sister, Sreedevi. Suddenly, in the wee hours, a group of armed security personnel barged into their house. The uniformed men entered neighbouring houses and dragged people out. Unprovoked, they began beating Raju mercilessly. When his father tried to object, they dragged him out and started hitting him on the chest. "When he resisted and tried to argue that we were innocent villagers and not Maoists, they stabbed him to death right in front of our house," Raju said.

The barbaric acts did not stop there. They beat up Raju's mother and fractured her thigh bone. "They dragged my sister by her hair towards a pond in the nearby jungle where she was raped and murdered. Her body was found four days later. The CRPF and Special Police Officers or SPOs, (State-armed local villagers) also robbed the family of all our belongings."

It was during the same assault that Gantal Baby, Sreedevi's closest friend, had to run to the forest to save her honour. Nine months into pregnancy, she delivered her baby boy in the forest while on the run. Avadu Ramadu, now three years old, literally means 'born in the jungle.'

After that day of horror, Raju escaped with his family to Cherla in Andhra Pradesh, about 70 km away. Gantal Baby's family and many others from Lingagiri and neighbouring Boreguda and Basuguda villages, too, ran away to Cherla. Others were forced to go to a nearby camp run by the *Salwa Judum* ('peace campaign'), a State-sponsored militia, touted as an adivasi movement against the Maoists in Chhattisgarh.

While the BJP-led Chhattisgarh government claims that *Salwa Judum* is a spontaneous civilian movement of tribals against the atrocities of Maoists, there is overwhelming proof that its members indulge in organised brutality against poor tribals and are a law unto themselves. Other villages—Pichepara and Pakela on the other side of the Basuguda, Mahapara, Doleguda, Kumarpara, Dharampur, Nayapara and Pathanpara—also faced the same horror.

Once the inhabitants were forced to flee, these villages turned into a wasteland by the end of 2006. A fact-finding team from Delhi recently visited the region (this journalist was part of the team). Villagers informed the team that Basuguda was a thriving village till three years back. It had lush green fields, orchards, a rippling stream, school, rice mill and a bustling marketplace that would draw people from neighbouring Andhra Pradesh. Mango trees, sal, tendu, mahua, teak, jackfruit, neem and many other indigenous species still dot the abandoned landscape.

Now, there is a community square amidst ruined mud houses, broken roofs, but wall writings still intact. Serpentine kuchcha lanes and heaps of earth and wood lie scattered. "Kalamu Masal kab bana Mahendra Karma, jawab do," (How did Kalamu Masal change his name to Mahendra Karma), reads a

graffiti, referring to Mahendra Karma, Congress leader, popular as the godfather of the *Salwa Judum*.

About 20 percent of the villagers have returned after three years of suppression. According to Gantal Raju, people still fear for their lives. The other day, some uniformed men told him that they were behind the killings of his father and sister and that they would kill him soon, too. Raju lives under a shadow of fear. They long to return home to Lingagiri. But, whenever they made the attempt, they were coerced into staying back. Police officials told the fact finding team that the tribals were "quite happy in these camps watching television".

Chhattisgarh is witnessing a complex and dangerous war inflicted by the State on its own people. On both sides of the road from Dantewada to Bijapur, a stretch of 170 km, *Salwa Judum* camps are visible. These ghettoised camps comprise permanent cement/bamboo structures, tin sheds, plastic sheet tents stuck to wooden poles. These are not conducive to tribals who have historically lived amid lush green fields and forests.

The people living here, most of them food gatherers and small farmers, have been forced to give up their indigenous way of life and are denied any means to earn their livelihood. They depend on frugal meals provided by the administration. Pushing its own warped version of relief and safety, the administration is making them dependent and subservient, herding them into these camps, seen by many as an excuse to capture land only to be sold to multinationals later.

"The key to get rid of Maoists is Salwa Judum," read identical, fading signboards on either side of the road from Dantewada to Lingagiri. Huge tracts of forests on the same route have been destroyed and the operations are still on. Laced with sarcasm, a local human rights activist said, "Maoists hide in these forests and attack police vehicles. So, this is a solution devised by the State to counter the Maoists. Destroy the forest because Maoists hide there." The forest department is maintaining a deafening silence.

While passing through this beautiful landscape, one is greeted with surgical scars in the middle of the road dug out by Maoists to stop any security vehicles from entering what they describe as their liberated zone. Maoist slogans are painted on the roads and houses allegedly burnt by *Salwa Judum* activists.

The Chhattisgarh administration and the *Salwa Judum* launched the experiment of uprooting tens of thousands of villagers from their homes claiming it as a means to save them from the Maoists and sever the underground outfit's connection from its grassroots base. While many of the tribals are said to have come to *Salwa Judum* camps voluntarily, others are believed to have been forced to join these camps to escape the wrath of the administration and the armed forces.

Local residents and journalists informed *Hardnews* that the sentiments against the *Salwa Judum* run high. Most villagers trapped in these camps desperately want to go back to their villages. But, they fear retaliation by Maoists. Many of these tribals are sandwiched between the *Salwa Judum* and the Maoists who use typical guerilla tactics of hit and run, using land mines to kill 'the invading enemy', and creating physical blocks including armed attacks to stop the security forces to enter their territory. Clearly, this is a deadly war on the ground, and the people are the ultimate victims.

The fact-finding team visited the site of the demolished Vanvasi Chetna Ashram (VCA) at Kanwalnar near Dantewada that is run by Himanshu Kumar, a noted Gandhian and a committed social activist. He works among the tribals in Dantewada and Bijapur districts, pushing the agenda of peace against all odds. The team met the superintendent of police, Dantewada, and Chhattisgarh Governor ESL Narasimhan.

It appears that the Chhattisgarh government is ready to commit yet another mistake by choosing military means to tackle Naxalism. Anyone who is not with the state (read Salwa Judum), runs the risk of being branded as a Maoist sympathiser. Any space for dissent and the middle ground for civil society to function are eroding fast.

Authorities make it clear that they will make special attempts to 'reclaim' the area under Maoist influence. There are rumours of anti-LTTE type of "flush out" using the Sri Lankan military model. The violence perpetrated by Maoists on hapless citizens is deplorable. Violence becomes a vicious loop, outside any political engagement and solution. But, that should neither distract attention from the genuine struggles by adivasis nor should this justify a war on its own people by the state and central governments.

VCA

Over a dozen tribals—old, young and children—huddle together in a makeshift house under a huge tree. A broken signboard, cabinets with soiled files, musical instruments, broken furniture, bicycles with deflated tyres, a laptop computer on the cot and other personal belongings are scattered outside. This is the temporary residence of Gandhian activist, Himanshu Kumar. He had to move to the fringes of Dantewada with his wife, Veena, and their two young daughters when his Vanvasi Chetana Ashram (VCA), about 12 km from Dantewada, was demolished by the police on May 17, 2009.

While human rights activist Dr Binayak Sen's release on bail last month came as a relief to thousands across the world campaigning for him, the demolition of VCA gave a rude shock to those acquainted with its work in the backward Bastar region.

The VCA was demolished on the pretext of encroachment. The matter is sub-judice. Hundreds of structures erected on encroached land in and around Dantewada continue to stand tall.

"In the Bastar region, land belongs to the government. The entire village has no land pattas. The ashram is also on the same piece of land. So, the encroachment allegation should apply to the whole area and not just to the ashram. Nearly 90 percent villages in Bastar are located in forests. Will the administration then demolish and destroy all villages in the forest areas?" asked Himanshu.

Established in 1992 by Himanshu and his wife, VCA worked among poor tribals of south Bastar on empowerment, took care of their health, education, made them aware of their rights and was also involved in natural resource management. After the emergence of *Salwa Judum* in 2005, the VCA incurred the wrath of both the State and the Naxalites. Of late, Himanshu and his team were involved in documenting human rights violations and providing legal aid to victims of torture, robbery and displacement in the wake of atrocities by the *Salwa Judum* and the police forces.

They were working meticulously on documenting atrocities and getting FIRs registered when the State struck with all its might.

On the day the fact-finding team visited Himanshu, he had around him over a dozen people from tribal village of Kamaram. They had come to get their cases registered with the help of the VCA team.

"The other day, Salwa Judum people came to our village and took away everything from 19-year-old Sukmat's house including the perfume she had bought from a nearby market. Sukmat was about to get married," complained Vimla, 25.

Pratham Singh, 28, sarpanch of Kamaram village, said, "On May 3, 2009, around 400 people came to our village with the police. They were part of the Salwa Judum. They beat up several villagers and tried to take away one of the village girls with them. Everything in her house was looted. Luckily, her father came in and she was saved. Many of these people were drunk and ate our chickens. They looted the whole village. But, we have not deserted our village. We have come here to lodge a police complaint with the help of Himanshu. Our village is about 85 km away. They came only to loot."

Singh is not sure what their motive was. "Maybe, they want to terrorise us into leaving our village. Why should we? This place belongs to us and we have our houses and land here," he said.

For the Chhattisgarh government, Himanshu had become a problem as he was engaged in redressing cases of human rights violations and development work. The VCA filed about 500 FIRs on behalf of locals in the last two years. Of late, Himanshu and his team were involved in resettling people who had been forcibly displaced by the *Salwa Judum* from their villages. □□□

[source : <http://www.countercurrents.org/dobhal060709.htm>]