

Searching for a Third Way in Dantewada

SMITA GUPTA

The interests of both the State and the Maoists are served by reducing the complex and many-layered tragedy unfolding in the forests of Dantewada to a battle between Good and Evil. For the Maoists, the people are subordinate to the revolution; for the government, the people are a minor expendable detail in the mineral-rich territory they live in. A report after a visit to the area in January-February.

Walk into the magical wooded glades of Bastar, soak in the sun-dappled silences, slowly inhale the pristine air and then – try and picture this paradise as a war zone. For the adivasis of Chhattisgarh trapped in the crossfire between state forces and elusive Maoist guerrillas, this is the tragic reality. The Maoists have exposed the adivasis to the wrath of the State; the state-sponsored Salwa Judum (SJ) has made them vulnerable to Maoist reprisals. Civil rights activists and intellectuals, branded by the government as the overground voices of the Maoists for drawing attention to the plight of the adivasis, have been rendered ineffective. Today, the adivasis of Bastar exist in the limbo of not just an administrative void, but also a political vacuum. They have no voice.

Of course, the adivasis here are not a homogeneous lot. There are a few wealthy, privileged adivasis, co-opted by the system, many of whom occupy the reserved seats in the state assembly and the Lok Sabha; then the vast illiterate Gond-speaking majority, whose members lead lives of abject privation – and isolation; and finally, the emerging class in between. The last named have had some minimal access to education, ranging from upper primary to higher secondary, and can, therefore, speak Hindi and communicate with the outside world without an intermediary. It is this class of “educated” adivasis, who are beginning to introspect on their condition and try and forge new survival strategies for themselves and their even less fortunate brethren. They are looking for a “Third Way”, one that eschews the violence both of the Maoist credo and that of the state-sponsored SJ. Is it not possible for them, they asked me on a recent visit to Dantewada, to have schools (the adjoining districts of Dantewada and Bijapur in southern Chhattisgarh have the

lowest literacy figures in the country) and health facilities, so that they can be empowered to make their own choices?

State versus Maoists

To answer that question, it is first necessary to look more closely at the bloody battle being fought between the Indian state and the Maoists in the deep, dense forests of Dandakaranya. On the surface, the two are implacable adversaries; but beneath the rhetoric, they are in total sync – on one crucial point. Both want the world to believe that virtually all adivasis living in the Maoists’ area of operations – are committed Maoists, with implicit faith in an armed revolution. Both their interests are served by reducing the complex, many-layered tragedy, unfolding in the jungles of central and eastern India, to a battle between Good and Evil. Since both parties believe they represent the forces of Good, the Maoists as much as the State are able to justify the use of violence, and shrug off all accompanying destruction and loss of lives as inevitable. By taking the spotlight away from where it should shine most brightly – on the adivasis – violence, both Maoist and by the State, somehow becomes acceptable.

It allows the Maoists to spin the myth that they hold absolute sway over vast tracts of land. It gives the civil administration an excuse not to provide the adivasis living here educational, health and other facilities – it is impossible, they say, till government forces “regain” control of Maoist-held territories. For the Maoists, the people are subordinate to the revolution; for the government, the people are a minor expendable detail in the mineral-rich territory they live in.

The Beginning

In 2005, Chhattisgarh’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Chief Minister Raman Singh and the then Congress leader of the opposition in the state assembly, Mahendra Karma, in a unique burst of collaborative inventiveness, created the SJ, a vigilante group, to take on the Maoists. By then the State had already ceased to exist in Bastar and its representatives – corrupt policemen, forest rangers and village heads, all

exploiters of the adivasis – were at the receiving end of Maoist ire. That situation changed dramatically after the arrival of the SJ, which had the backing of wealthy tribal leaders, traders and contractors. Now ordinary adivasis, who were being forced into the SJ by the administration or the special police officers (SPOs) – drawn from among young SJ activists or ex-Sangham members (village-level Maoists) – were the targets. By placing the SJ/SPOs in the front line of the battle against the Maoists, the government succeeded in setting tribal against tribal.

When the SPOs were first recruited in 2006, they “assisted” the administration and acted as police informers for a salary of Rs 1,500 a month. Some carried bows and arrows; others carried guns. They did not wear uniforms and, being poorly trained and undisciplined, harassed people with impunity. In 2006, I was in Bijapur. The local shopkeepers had told me then that on 17 April, after Maoists attacked the Murkina police post, 15 km from the city, killing 12 men on duty and escaping with 40 guns, the SPOs went on a rampage, beating up locals. They downed their shutters for two days in solidarity with those who had been killed and to protest against harassment by the SPOs. On the third day, they said, the SPOs arrived, saying if shops were not opened instantly, they would loot them.

Today, the SPOs are far better trained, wear uniforms, and have graduated into what are known as Koya Commandos. Their salaries have been doubled. But they continue to harass and exploit people: the villages of Dantewada these days are full of terrifying tales of rape, murder and looting by the SPOs/Koya Commandos. In the people’s eyes, there is no distinction between the SJ, the SPOs/Koya Commandos, local powerful Thakurs and Marwaris – and, indeed, the administration.

The Saffron Experiment

The SJ never had any clear structure, hierarchy or functionaries barring the man who headed it, Karma. Astutely, the BJP allowed Karma to be the SJ’s public face, leading to his being known, in the early days, as “the 60th member of BJP CM Raman Singh’s cabinet”. Interestingly, the plan had actually been hatched by the BJP’s Brij Mohan Aggarwal, a former state home

minister. “Raman Singh and Mahendra Karma discussed Aggarwal’s scheme and decided that a bipartisan ‘non-political movement’,” a senior Vanvasi Kalyan Kendra leader told me, “would make it easier to get funds from the Centre”.

They were right: the SJ experiment received the centre’s tacit support. “Efforts will be made to promote local resistance groups against Naxalites but in a manner that the villagers are provided adequate security cover”, read a union home ministry document at the time. That the SJ was largely government sponsored was confirmed by the Dantewada district magistrate’s “Work Proposal for Salwa Judum, 2005”. “It is imperative”, it said, “that the campaign receive administrative support ... adequate security must be provided to the participants so that they can overcome pressure from the Naxalites...villagers must be provided transport, food and a place to stay at government expense.” Clearly, the SJ was not the “popular people’s uprising against the Maoists” as government propaganda had it.

The BJP divided the tribal population, used the SJ as an entry point, destroyed Karma, who has failed to win a single election since then, either to the state assembly or the Lok Sabha – and wiped out the Congress base. Today, the BJP, which used Karma as a pawn, rules the roost in Bastar. Indeed, Manish Kunjam, a respected Communist Party of India (CPI) tribal leader, accuses the BJP of systematically destroying the political process in Bastar. “The Salwa Judum was created deliberately”, he told me recently, “to help the BJP enter a region where the Congress and CPI had a base. It used the political vacuum to make inroads through its sister organisations.” In 2006, when I first visited Bastar, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) had virtually no presence there. Today, the roads are dotted with signposts pointing to Saraswati Shishu Mandirs, Bajrang Dal offices and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) hoardings announcing the Gau Gram Yatra timetable. VHP posters in the few government-run ashram schools that still exist indicate the inroads the Sangh parivar is making in these parts. Simultaneously, children, who have lost one or both parents, particularly from the Bijapur area, from where

the first recruits to the SJ were made, are being brought up in RSS-affiliated orphanages across Chhattisgarh, on a diet of hatred and Hindutva.

Emptying the Jungles

In 2005, when the SJ was created, the Maoists were already active, but, at least, the adivasis had their homes, their land. But once the local police, with the help of the SJ/SPOs, began to force the adivasis to abandon their villages for the dubious comforts and “security” of government camps, the process of emptying the jungles of their population began.

In early 2006, when I first visited Bastar, the forced exodus from the villages was already visible. I recall meeting Marvinda, a middle-aged tribal, deep in the jungles, a few kilometres off the dirt track that runs between Bijapur and Gangalur, in the village of Irullipallan. It was almost noon. Marvinda and his family had just arrived from a refugee camp at Shevnaar, about 10 km away, to inspect the scorched remains of their home before cooking and eating lunch. A few hours later, they trudged back to the camp, completing what had virtually become a daily ritual since October 2005, when the administration forced them to leave their village. “I didn’t want to leave”, Marvinda told me, “But the police beat me, tied my hands and hung me upside down from a tree. Then the Salwa Judum burnt our huts. They said if we didn’t want to leave our villages, we must be Naxalites.”

I returned in 2010 to Dantewada, venturing closer to the Andhra border, near Sukma. Here, close to 700 ghost villages stand testimony to the continuing tragedy. Approximately 2,00,000 (the official figure) adivasis have fled to neighbouring states, especially Andhra Pradesh. Locals told me that some had fled their villages to escape attacks by the SJ, others to evade Maoist wrath. Maoist victims ended up at the Dornapal refugee camp, the SJ’s targets found shelter in Andhra Pradesh. Now, some were returning to their villages, reluctantly, in the hope of reclaiming their land. At Gorgondarengapur, a desolate Markam Ganga, who had just returned from Andhra Pradesh, told me he had just been re-elected sarpanch, unopposed. He first showed me the ruins of the brick

house he once lived in, till the SJ murdered his father and burnt it down. Today, the hovel in which he lives with his family, as he tries to rebuild his home and life, gives you no inkling that he is actually the owner of 100 acres of fertile land, lush with mango, tamarind, mohua, and tendu trees.

Life in the War Zone

For those who continue to live in the forests, life is very hard. Even as I write, I received a phone call from the resident of a village I had stayed in recently. Apparently, a truck carrying 200-odd quintals of public distribution system (PDS) rice, plying between Dantewada town and the village of Potali, was stopped at Aranpur by Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) men. The truck was forcibly emptied and turned back. Upset, the adivasis waited for 31 March, a Wednesday. That is the day, when local Marwari and Thakur traders – who, the villagers say, are hand in glove with the CRPF/administration and who have been contracted to transport PDS grains – descend on Potali for the weekly *haat* (market) to purchase forest produce. When they arrived on 31 March, the adivasis told them that if they were going to be starved out, they did not want to sell their produce to the traders. In protest, they set two trucks on fire and broke a third vehicle.

This episode is not uncommon in Chhattisgarh, and underlines the dire straits the adivasis are in. Deprived of educational and health facilities, subjected to physical violence by both Maoists and state forces, they are now also being starved out. Indeed, when I was in Dantewada earlier this year, no foodgrains were coming in to feed the children in the anganwadis or ashram schools. The administration defends this by saying these foodgrains end up with the Maoists. But that argument is thin. There is a humanitarian crisis brewing in the jungles of Bastar – and no one in Raipur or Delhi seems to care.

In October 2008, the Supreme Court had asked the Chhattisgarh government to act on the recommendations of the National Human Rights Commission to compensate and rehabilitate all victims of SJ and Maoist violence, to ensure the safe return of all displaced persons, whether in camps, Andhra Pradesh or elsewhere, to their villages, to remove security forces from

schools and civilian buildings, to identify the large number of missing persons and freely register first information reports (FIRs) on complaints. Till date, Chief Minister Raman Singh has ignored the directives of the highest court in the land.

Narrowing of Choices

Today, in Bastar, there is no mainstream political party willing to address the aspirations of the adivasis, no organisation allowed to take up their cause, no journalists permitted to function freely, no civil administration prepared to take care of their basic needs, no justice system ready to respond to the crimes being committed against them. And at election time, the polling booths are located so far – as they were during the recent panchayat polls – from their villages, that it is difficult to vote without fear. So, what are the options before the adivasis?

It is this narrowing of choices that has forced the few “educated” adivasis to look within for strength. In the few days and nights that I spent in a village in Dantewada’s Kuakonda block at the end of January and in early February, I was able to experience the sense of siege first hand. It was there, sitting up late into the night with my hosts and their guests – people from nearby villages also came there to talk to me – that I began to understand the crisis better. They told me that they knew that the Maoists could not solve their problems. They said they had lost faith in the local administration which, they said, was in cahoots with their traditional oppressors, wealthy Thakur and Marwari traders and contractors. They were frightened of the SPOs and the Koya Commandos. The CRPF men, they said, with rare exceptions were not humane. They mentioned a CRPF CO called Bruno. While he was posted in the area, the villagers told me, he would visit them often, listen to their problems, take sick children to hospital, explain why the Maoist ideology would not work for them – and, most important, punish any policeman who had harassed them. “But then he was posted out”, the government schoolteacher, who was my host, told me, “and the harassment began again. To counter it, H (one of her fellow villagers) became a sangham member and saved our village. We are very grateful to him.”

What about non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the civil rights activists? “No, didi”, they said, “the government does not trust them; we don’t know where their money comes from. It’s no use looking to them for help.” In fact, so desperate is their condition that many of them, who had once been acolytes of Himanshu Kumar, said they felt betrayed by him: “He should have built a tribal leadership”, they told me.

So, who are they looking at for help? “There must be someone powerful in Delhi, in the central government”, they said, “who can help us. We need the civil administration back here. If the government wants to wait till they finish the Maoists, we’ll all be dead.” Their sense is that if schools and medical facilities are started in these areas, the Maoists will find it hard to attack them, without losing whatever little support they have. Thus far, the ashram schools which have been targeted by the Maoists have been those where the children have been sent home to make place for CRPF camps. And the Maoist leaders I met in Dantewada all stressed that while they had no intention of giving up violence, they would not attack functioning schools and medical facilities. Which begs the question: why is the government not setting up schools and medical facilities? The administration will tell you that no one is prepared to work in a war zone – but these jobs can always be incentivised (in the army, special allowances are given to those who accept hardship postings). And while the people do want the SPOs to be removed, they have no objection to the presence of paramilitary troops.

If the Maoists score over the state at all, it is only in one aspect, at least in Dantewada, located in the heart of Chhattisgarh’s battle zone. The Maoists here are regarded as relatively “more trustworthy” than the representatives of the state, providing rough and ready justice in an area where the government has only been seen as an oppressor. But this faith in the armed rebels as more reliable guardians than state police/paramilitary troops, my conversations with ordinary villagers indicated, does not extend to their ideology or methods. And in that, I believe, lies hope for a positive resolution of the tribal crisis – if the government wants one.

Postscript

The horrific deaths of 76 jawans of the CRPF on 6 April in a Maoist ambush near Sukma in Dantewada district only point to the futility of the battle the State is engaged in against the armed rebels. At the time of writing not much was known beyond the fact that the jawans were attacked while returning from a “mission” in the jungles.

Clearly, apart from the fact that the CRPF is not trained well enough to take on the Maoists and it had violated various Standard Operating Procedures, the fact is it had no intelligence at all. Why? Union home secretary G K Pillai was perhaps most candid when he said there was no intelligence lapse, because the government does not expect to get any intelligence

from within. Security experts I spoke to pointed out that as long as the tribals who live in the war zone are not won over through fulfilling the Supreme Court’s directives, by sending the civil administration in, and PDS grain is allowed to reach the villages, the Maoists will always have an advantage when it comes to intelligence about the other side’s movements.