

Days and Nights in the Maoist Heartland

GAUTAM NAVLAKHA

Who are these Maoists who, according to the government, constitute the “single biggest threat” to India’s internal security? What is their politics? Why and how do they justify violence? How do they perceive their “people’s war,” their political goals and themselves? How did the Maoists establish themselves in the Dandakaranya region of central India? How do they now live and operate in the “base area” they have constructed? How does their “Jantanam Sarkar” function in the guerrilla zone of Bastar? First-hand reports of the functioning of the CPI (Maoist) in central India have been rare. Based on a two-week long visit to the Maoist heartland, this article attempts to answer some of these questions.

I would like to thank a number of friends for their valuable comments that helped me improve the quality of the text. However, I alone am responsible for the content.

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Email: gnavlakha@gmail.com

We must be compelled to try to answer some fundamental questions about the Maoists. Who are they? What is this “single biggest threat” to India’s internal security? What is their politics? Why do they justify violence? How do they perceive their “people’s war”, their political goals and themselves?

Twice I came close to making a trip to their heartland in Bastar to learn first hand about what the Maoists have been doing in their “base areas”. I was not going to miss out on a third opportunity. The following is an account of what Swedish writer Jan Myrdal and I saw, heard, read, discussed, debated, and argued about during a fortnight-long journey in January 2010 through what the CPI (Maoists) describes as a “guerrilla zone” where the Maoists run their Jantanam Sarkar (JS) or “people’s government”.

In the Guerrilla Zone

The first thing that struck one on entering the guerrilla zone in Bastar was the form of greeting. Everyone – old and young, men and women, villagers and party members – shook hands, raised fists and greeted you with a “*Lal Salaam*”. What struck next was the considerable number of women in the JS, in every platoon or company of the People’s Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA) and Jan (people’s) militia. Many platoons had women commanders, and the one that came to escort us was no exception. They were not only in command but also carried out risky tasks, while men shared all responsibilities equally with their fellow-women – collecting wood or water, lighting fires and cooking. Indeed, it was quite remarkable to see how women and men behaved with each other in the platoons. Each of them carried up to 20-25 kg, made up of their weapons, rations and kits. They were also adept at stitching and sewing, and made

their own kits in which they carried their clothes, toiletries, books, ammunition, and such. Once, the strap of my backpack broke and it was neatly fixed by one of the young men in the platoon. Their uniforms were tailored in the guerrilla zone though shoes and toiletries were bought from markets outside. Another interesting feature was the emphasis on hygiene and cleanliness. Drinking water was boiled. For latrines, they dug a hole, some distance away from the camp site, and my travel companion Myrdal was impressed because it reminded him of the Swedish military design for field toilets.

Most impressively, no sooner were chores done, be it night or day, almost all the PLGA members took out their books and read, or wrote in their notebooks. In all, 25 magazines were printed and distributed regularly within the Dandakaranya (DK) region. I witnessed leaflets being screen printed for a three-day bandh from 25 to 27 January 2010 a whole week before the event.

Everyone took turns at doing chores, from sentry duty to cooking. We were guests and therefore had more leeway. The first thing they did was boil water. Once they were done with their morning rituals, it was time for physical training. By 8 am, they had breakfast, which varied among *poha*, *khichri* (rice and linseeds), and the like mixed with peanuts, followed by tea. Lunch and dinner were rice with dal and vegetables. The food was simple but nutritious. Once a week they cooked meat; sometimes more often if fish or pork was available, both provided by the Revolutionary People’s Committee (RPC). (An RPC is an elected body which governs three to five villages; 14 to 15 RPCs make up an Area RPC (ARPC); and three to five ARPCs constitute a Division.)

On occasion, as when we travelled to Abujmaad, khichri with peanuts was all on offer. But it was simple, tasty and nutritious. Of course, with every meal we were offered fried green chillies, which are considered a rich source of vitamin C. Milk being scarce, milk powder was used for tea. Fruits such as bananas and papayas grow in abundance in the JS areas. There was no fixed time for sleeping but invariably by 10 pm everyone would retire

for the night. Camps were never in the same spot but kept shifting. A plastic sheet was spread and people covered themselves with blankets before they slept. For us, their guests, a shawl was also spread on the plastic sheet and another plastic sheet was spread over our heads to protect against the heavy morning dew.

The guerrillas watched selected movies – when we were there, *Rang de Basanti* and *Mangal Pandey*, both reportedly on popular demand. However, this was possible only when some relatively senior party man who had a laptop visited them. Laptop? But how did they charge laptops? Well, every company, if not platoon, had solar panels, which were used to power lights and computers. Television programmes and debates were downloaded from You Tube before being copied and circulated, mostly among PLGA companies. The radio was also highly patronised, with PLGA personnel wanting to listen avidly to a radio programme which carried special Hindi film songs requested by the *faujis* (soldiers). But the all-time favourite was the BBC news in Hindi which was heard by everyone, morning and evening. The local radio news was followed to monitor “negative reporting”. Books were mostly hard copy, downloaded and printed from the internet. Yes, there were places where the internet could be accessed.

What about alcohol and smoking, you might wonder. After all, the tribal people in Bastar are used to brewing their own drinks; *sulfi* and *mahua* (tropical trees) being quite common. It was interesting to note that while the party did not allow opening Indian-manufactured foreign liquor (IMFL) shops in the JS area, it did not prohibit people from brewing traditional drinks. But party members are expected to refrain from drinking and smoking. Although the party does not prohibit smoking, and tendu (tobacco) leaves are available in plenty, it actively promotes kicking the habit. Not one person in any camp, or the platoon that accompanied us, smoked or drank alcohol.

Perspectives on Conflict

Talking to adivasi peasants in the guerrilla zone as well as in areas adjoining it, we came across three perspectives on why the conflict had escalated in Bastar. First,

that the war launched by the government was being waged on behalf of big corporations to grab adivasi land. They, the peasants, were being warned that if they did not consent and take the compensation being offered, they would not only lose their land but also might never receive any compensation. Second, a common query was how could the land that had not only sustained them all this while, but also was the next generation’s only guarantee of securing a livelihood, be compensated for in monetary terms? Besides, it was pointed out that it was not just bare land, trees such as sulfis, mangoes and tamarinds that gave them food and drink while also fetching them an income. Third, the development that the government talked of was bunkum (*bakwas*) having seen what was done in Bailadila. All these years, the tribal people had fended for themselves, receiving paltry help from the government, and now, when their land was wanted by corporations, the government talked of “development”. They wanted the government to just let them be.

What about the Killings?

I told them that it was said that the Maoist party killed people after branding them “informers”, and burnt their houses. But they protested in unison, “We do not kill, loot or rape”. A young PLGA soldier, Sukhlal, said, “I come from south Dantewada, where the Salwa Judum (SJ) did not spare girls and raped them. They pick on helpless civilians. Why don’t they come and fight us instead of killing villagers?” He said that his younger brother was in jail and kept in what is known as a *gola* – forced to remain in a sitting position with chains on his ankles and wrists. His crime was that he was in the Dandkaranya Adivasi Kisan Mazdoor Sanghata (DAKMS).

Did this mean they never killed at all? They denied saying so and made it clear that only “enemies of the people” were killed. Who were these enemies of the people, I asked. Is anyone who opposes the party an enemy of the people? Denial again. It was not important to them whether someone considered the party an enemy or opposed or criticised it, they pointed out. But if someone took sides with the government forces and worked with them, then that person was an enemy of

the people. I asked, okay, what punishment would you give such people? They said that they did not kill everyone who was considered an enemy and the party stopped its members from killing informers. It was only when they did not mend their ways despite repeated warnings that such persons were killed.

I remembered what the CPI (Maoist) general secretary had said in an interview to Myrdal and me,

In one of the extension areas, there was an incident where in collusion with an inspector general of police, 33 members belonging to two villages became agents of the enemy ... Our comrades went and handled the issue. While the villagers wanted capital punishment for the main agent of the police, the party interceded to give a chance to that person to realise his mistake.

Could there be a difference in the way in which the party worked in DK where it had its own JS? Or was it merely a selective citing of cases where capital punishment was not awarded? Or was it my scepticism that left me wondering?

Sukhlal asked me, “Do you see the high-tension wires?” “Yes”, I said. He went on to explain that when the people’s militia in the area blew up some towers last year, the party called a meeting, criticised them and told them it was wrong. What had been the party’s argument, I asked. The party told them that by doing so they were affecting the poor in the cities, who suffer more than anyone else because the rich have generators, he replied. “So, what did the members of people’s militia say in response to that?” Sukhlal said they had tried to justify it, saying that they thought it was a good way of enticing the police to come in with a repair team, thus presenting a good target for an ambush. Did this mean that the people’s militia could undertake ambushes on its own, I pressed on. It did not, he said, they would have informed the PLGA.

So does the party avoid ambushes? What about frequent news of ambushes here and there, land mine explosions and so on? I posed this question to a PLGA commander. He said, “Of course, we do organise ambushes but each is carefully planned, which takes time because we are weaker than the enemy. We cannot afford to strike at will and be reckless. We generally avoid engaging the enemy unless we

are prepared. Also, we believe in focusing on attacks which yield weapons.” He added that two people were allegedly killed for joining the army a few days earlier (21 January 2010), according to Union Home Minister Chidambaram speaking in Raipur, but that had nothing to do with the party. “We do not know if such an incident occurred in the first place.”

What did that mean, I inquired. He said that the party always owned up actions carried out by it even if the outcome was not the desired one, which is why “people like you criticise us”. He added that it considered this to be “positive criticism”. But they could do little about incidents which were not their doing. He pointed to the plight of Himanshu (of Vanvasi Chetna Ashram).¹ “All these years we were accused of harassing him. Now it is the state which has demolished his ashram. When we do wrong, we apologise for it, but how can we be blamed for killings which have nothing to do with us?”

What about incidents of beheading or the use of detonators on a train in Jharkhand, I queried. Were they planned? That was not good for us, he conceded. And the party has admitted its mistake. I pointed out that each time the party committed a mistake and apologised, it could not help advance the movement forward. Did this not raise issues about discipline? “Look”, he said, “I know about DK but cannot speak about other areas”.

I raised questions to a senior Maoist leader about whether it was necessary to kill CPI(M) party workers. If the urban middle classes was perturbed over such killings, how did the Maoists intend to win them over to their side? The leader said that he could not satisfactorily answer all these questions without having read the report of the state committee. But I did note that he did not dismiss my criticism. When I told him that the party ought to rethink whether its forces were politically equipped to fight a “people’s war” if it was unable to maintain discipline, he inquired if this was just my opinion or one shared by others. When I said that I was sharing what many felt, he nodded.

But I wondered later who had approved the Jamui massacre of 17 February 2010?² Or the use of detonators in the Tata-Bilaspur passenger train on 27 November 2009?³

And why did the party fail to restrain people from carrying out executions if it was opposed to them. I was listened to and they insisted that the party acted rather firmly against those responsible for acts of indiscipline or reckless violence. Regrettably, I did not get any wiser as far as specific instances were concerned. But they were of the opinion that there was no need to engage in a DK versus Bihar-Jharkhand comparison and said that it would not be wise to jump to conclusions. Indeed, some of them appeared quite upset that I persisted with bringing up these incidents.

However, I was given a copy of the public apology circulated by the DK Special Zonal Committee party on 28 April 2009, addressed to the families of those killed in a land-mine explosion on 16 April 2009. The poster-pamphlet said,

We know by saying sorry your dear departed will not return nor our apology wipe out your tears. But we wish to tell you that our party had no animosity with your dear ones. It was an accident. Government servants, including policemen and ordinary police personnel posted with paramilitary formations, are not our enemy ... You can then ask us why do we attack police and paramilitary forces? Why do we put land mines? Or why do we have to use “violence”? In reality the system is responsible for this ... You know very well that every peaceful agitation and struggle faces lathi charge and bullets. We are neither extremists nor terrorists as is being propagated by this government of exploiting classes. We are children of workers, peasants and middle classes ... We are organising people in the backward tribal areas against their exploitation and oppression so that they can fight for their rights.

It went on to point out that in and around Singaram in south Bastar on 4 January 2009, 19 adivasis were killed, four of them women. The women were gang raped and then murdered. In west Bastar’s Minkapalli, six adivasis were killed. It said that since 2005, at least 1,000 adivasis had been killed, hundreds of women raped, 700 villages burnt:

All this is being done to hand over mineral wealth of DK forests to multinationals and foreign capitalists. It is against this violence that we have been compelled to answer with “violence.” Had we not resisted, they would have succeeded in their objective. Of course jawans in police and paramilitary forces belong to ordinary peasant and worker families or middle-class families but they

have become tools in the hands of exploiters and are attacking those amongst whom they grew up. Killing, looting, raping, making illegal arrests, taking bribes...this is the common practice of the police force ... Many a time we have distributed pamphlets appealing to them not to attack poor and exploited people. This is the context in which we use land mines and attack police and armed forces.

Being a mass movement, mistakes were bound to occur and crimes could be committed. The questions, however, were whether they were willing to learn and how fast they were learning from their mistakes.

Why They Are Not Afraid

I asked nearly everyone I met if they were afraid about the huge deployment of troops with camps set up in such a way that the guerrilla zone was being encircled, imposing a virtual economic blockade. One answer I came across was, “We have to fight to establish people’s power” (*apni rajya satta ke liye ladna padega*). But were they not scared? “If we get scared”, the reply was, “*sarkar*” (government) will “try to scare us even more”. From where did they derive their confidence? I asked Sukhmati, a young woman guerrilla, when she went to survey a road flanked by two security force camps and was the last person to cross the road. Was she not scared to undertake the riskiest part of the job, the first to reach the road and the last to leave it? She smiled and said, “I have seen police since I was a child enter my village and threaten us. I do not fear them”.

When I posed the same question to Sonu, in charge of DK, he said that when the SJ was launched in 2005, the same question was raised for six months.

We were asked what will you do now that villages are being attacked and burnt, and party members and sympathisers are being hunted and killed. Some told us to pull out. Many *mukhias* (headmen), traders and teachers began to believe that the government would win this time and began to spread this line. However, within six months, the tables were turned.

So what happened? By February 2006, the party responded and was able to rally the people. First, it did its utmost to rehabilitate those who were displaced within the forests. They were told about the struggles led by the party against the forest department, forest contractors, the

police and their own chiefs. Also about the Bhumkal uprising against the British, reminding them that without putting up a fight they stood no chance of securing the gains made by the people.⁴ It exhorted them to join the people's militia to resist the SJ. It appears easily said, but protecting those escaping SJ hoodlums, providing them shelter, rehabilitating them, and giving them hope and courage took a lot of doing at a time when the party was being singled out for annihilation and simultaneously faced a vilification campaign by "neutral" activists.

Sonu said that the SJ period saw a huge jump in recruitment to the militia and the PLGA. He also pointed out that twice earlier, in 1990-91 and 1997-98, when the "jan jagran campaign" was launched by local exploiters, the police and the administration, the movement had grown stronger. I asked if this meant that the party expected the same thing to happen now when it was confronted, according to its own claim, by a force of hundreds of thousands. The analogy drawn to a "honey beehive" by the general secretary in the interview to Myrdal and me was recalled.⁵ If millions rose in revolt, then even this force, a few 1,00,000 strong, would be no match. But would people respond to the party's call? Judging by the mood of its members, the party believed that the people would put up a fight even though they had suffered losses in the form of a large number of arrests of leading cadres and the deaths of scores of activists.

So, what sustained them through thick and thin, despite unfavourable publicity and the loss of comrades? A pamphlet brought out by the Dandkaranya Special Zonal Committee for a three-day bandh during 25-27 January 2010 contained an appeal to police and paramilitary forces, inviting them to ponder why the government had launched "Operation Green Hunt." After saying that they were fighting a war in the interests of capitalists and foreign multinationals, and that they were being asked "to kill and get reward, or get killed and receive compensation", it also reminded them of their class origins and exhorted them not to use their weapons against their own brethren, thus earning the people's hatred. Another pamphlet, as part of a PLGA recruitment drive from 2 December 2009 to 10 February 2010, appealed to

unemployed boys and girls of Bastar to not join the government's armed forces.

Another leaflet told the personnel of the government armed forces that their war was akin to those waged by foreign aggressors against our own people. And then reminded those joining the government armed forces that the, "Government does not regard you as anything more than animals. Indeed no better than slaves. Sometimes you are called dogs (Greyhounds), sometimes snakes (Cobras) and sometimes cats (Black Cats)."

The confidence among the cadres, to a large extent, stemmed from the fact that most of them were indigenous. With such widespread appeal, did the party not want to function openly? Murali, an activist, told me that mass organisations of the party may not be registered but they were there alright and functioned to the extent that these unregistered organisations spear-headed struggles and entered into negotiations, as and when the situation warranted.

Preparations

The general secretary of the party said that it is important to guard against getting bogged down in legalism and economism and forget that masses have to be prepared for seizure of power. In the interview, he delved on the various trends within the Naxalbari movement and how, one after another, various sections began to move away from the path of "area wise seizure of power" and began speaking about preparing the masses for armed insurrection and/or exposing Parliament from within, but without having either an underground structure or armed squads and without doing much of exposing. He spoke about how partial results or reforms were ignored earlier and all emphasis was placed on ultimate seizure of power and therefore the need to combine the immediate with the ultimate was overlooked. That is why so much of the time is devoted to strengthen what they describe as the "peoples economy".

Would there not be a different response towards reforms in areas where the JS writ ran and areas where it did not? We were told that the Maoists were not against any pro-people reforms such as those being introduced in areas where their own movement was not strong or in control, which made them unable to provide succour to

the people. There, they would fight for implementation of these reforms. I recalled reading about an invitation extended by the Maoists in Jharkhand to a Planning Commission team to meet their state leaders to discuss rural poverty. However, where they run parallel administrations and were strong, they would undertake their own reforms by "strengthening the people's economy by encouraging the co-operative movement". That is undertaking reforms in such a way as to harness the collective energy of the people in improving their material conditions, rather than waiting for someone to come and bail them out. I was reminded of what the report of the Expert Group constituted by the Planning Commission to look into "Development Challenges in Extremist Affected Areas" had to say,

The purpose of the report (is) to see how the government may eliminate the causes of unrest by constitutional and legal means and restore faith of the affected population in the system of governance, established by the constitution and law.

In contrast to the benevolence of the state, as expressed by the Planning Commission, the Maoists planned to pursue a line that enabled people, the most oppressed taking the lead, to struggle and realise their aspirations by participating in making their own lives. Between the two lies a seminal difference.

I was told that government reforms are part of counter-insurgency operations, which means first terrorise people so that they begin to see reforms as a relief and to believe that something is being done for them. A senior party member said that it was significant that it was the government which was propagating that it was necessary to use violence to save the people from perils of communism and eradicate the Maoist menace. This was a way, he said, to prepare the Indian people to get used to violence and to accept it as something necessary. This was also meant to send a message that the Indian state is very strong and it is only a matter of time before it rids the country of this "menace". But, he said, the party was prepared; it saw the SJ for what it was, namely, the first phase of an all-out offensive.

Sonu pointed out to us that when they earlier used the term "fascist", people

could not understand what it meant. But with the SJ, communication became clear as it helped clear up the confusion. Many opponents of the party changed their views when they saw large-scale displacement, accompanied by burning, looting and raping. Others realised that the SJ was meant to get rid of the movement so that something that had served them well, the JS, was destroyed, their organised strength whittled down, and/or their forest land could then be handed over to corporations.

All this ignited my desire to know how the movement took roots here. Sonu told us that throughout history, the people of this area have fought against exploitation and for their land and livelihood. Between 1825 and 1964, there were 10 or 11 recorded uprisings under various tribal leaders. Approximately 15 years before the party entered this area, in 1964, the people of Bastar rose against the then Congress-led government. It was "after a lull of 15 years, we entered this area in 1980". Two squads of People's War (PW)

members entered DK in 1980. That is how it began.

The Beginning

Murali was a member of the first squad to enter DK in 1980. According to him,

After the setback of Naxalbari, in 1978, the Karimnagar and Adilabad peasant movements were started in Andhra Pradesh. In 1977, the party decided to organise a 'Go to the Village Campaign'. Accordingly, in 1978, in Telangana and the coastal areas of Andhra Pradesh, youth and students from the Andhra Pradesh Radical Students' Union and Radical Youth League along with party professionals organised political schools for 10 days to prepare for the 'Go to the Village Campaign'.

They were taught how to carry out a class analysis of the area. It was evident from their survey that in Gadchiroli

there was not that much exploitation from moneylenders, but it came from the forest department. Alongside there were other contradictions, but the primary one being the state versus people. In Bastar, there was a land problem ... There was a class society here, but due to the tribal traditions, unlike

in the plains, the *mukhia/majhis* exploitation did not appear sharp.

What about the language barrier? In the areas where they first entered, Telugu was understood and spoken, both on the Bastar as well as Gadchiroli sides. However, as part of the Naxalbari movement, learning to speak the language of the people, for example, Gondi, became a priority. It took some doing to learn the language but, as Murali said, if you were fired by a desire to live and work among people, you picked up a language easily.

How was people's trust gained? The first struggle launched in this area was against the forest department since the primary problem was that of land and forest produce. The forest department had huge tracts of land under its authority and also exercised control over forest products from *tendu patta* (tobacco leaves for making bidis) and tamarind to bamboo. Therefore, in the initial years, said Sonu, they took the adivasi population versus the forest department as the main issue. The party concentrated on mobilising the

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E-mail: director@atree.org

poorest among the tribals. The mass organisations that were initially built were peasant organisations in which women also took part. Later separate women's organisations were set up to take up issues. One of the prime issues around which the party mobilised the people was the labour rate for tendu leaf collection and for cutting bamboos. In this largely underdeveloped area, contractors used to pay extremely low rates, lower than even the rate decided by the government. Against this, from 1981 onwards, the party began to mobilise the adivasi peasants.

It was in the course of this struggle that the people gained confidence in the party, especially when they observed how party members worked in the movement against the forest department and contractors. Murali said that in the Gadchiroli area, where Ballarpur Paper Mills had the lease for the bamboo forests, it used to pay Re 1 for six bundles (each bundle had 20 sticks) of bamboo. He said that the earlier practice had been that the company's agent would meet the mukhia and fix the rate in a private deal with him. Ordinary adivasis had no say in the matter. This lasted up to 1983 when the party began an agitation which saw the rate rise to Re 1 for three bundles, then in 1984 to Re 1 for two bundles, and right now, Rs 7 for one bundle. Similarly, a bundle of tendu leaves (70 leaves to a bundle) used to fetch 3 paise, whereas it is now more than Re 1 a bundle. These struggles and successes helped the party win over the people. These were in the nature of a wage struggle. Today, said Murali proudly, in most parts where adivasis have been organised by the party, they earned higher than the minimum wage.

How was it dealing with the company managers or contractors, I asked. Murali said that it took some years before the managers became convinced that they could not bypass the "party" or negotiate with someone else to get a better deal for themselves.

These achievements laid the foundation for the party's consolidation and expansion. Sonu pointed out that when the adivasis join, they do not join in a trickle, but entire villages get mobilised and this is where the tradition of collective activity among tribals acts as an enabling factor. It was then that the people began to share the problems they faced from their tribal chiefs. By 1984,

a forest liaison committee was formed in DK for the coordination of the movement. In 1987, a state committee was elected, but due to the absence of a central-level committee, it worked under the Andhra Pradesh state committee. It was in 1989 that a DK-wide adivasi peasant organisation was started in the name of the DAKMS. Today, it boasts more than 1,00,000 members. Under this organisation, men and women demanded, with the slogan "land to the tillers", that land rights be given to landless peasants.

The Issue of Land

The land problem was the most serious issue. Not only did the adivasi peasantry face illegal and extra-legal exactions by the forest department, they also, internally, suffered from the domination of their chiefs. This meant that they had to labour on their chiefs' lands and only on completing this could they tend their own fields. The *majhis*, *patels*, and *sarpanchs* owned more land and this had to be tilled first. Any failure to obey meant that they had to pay a fine in the form of alcohol, goats or in some cases, being ostracised. This meant that the adivasis depended on a single crop, but could tend to their farms only after caring for the fields of their chiefs. Thus, by the time they came to tend theirs, the monsoon would be receding, making their already precarious existence even more uncertain. Moreover, the paucity of land and low yields forced many to work as agricultural labourers. They worked either for a seasonal wage or as attached labourers with a large landowner, getting food in lieu of wages.⁶ Further, *penda*, or shifting cultivation, had been banned, except in Abujmaad by the forest department, without a commensurate improvement in settled cultivation, which also contributed to low yields, pushing people into servitude.

Sonu claimed,

There is almost no landless peasantry here today. However, initially there were in considerable number. Three lakh acres of forest land were won over. So the first struggle within the village was launched around the land movement. The tribal chiefs had a lot of land under them. But once that was acquired, along with the forest land, the standard of living in this area took an upward turn. In the early years, there was dearth of food as well, but now they get food twice a day and they also possess land. The struggle against

the forest department was thus combined with the struggle against the tribal chiefs.

Significantly, in the entire Bastar and Gadchiroli region only 2% of the land was irrigated. The movement took it upon itself to start building irrigation tanks at the village level. Along with this, there was a new phenomenon in the form of the development of a cooperative system. Three to four families began jointly ploughing their land. Even for building houses or doing other work, cooperative teams of 11 members were constituted. The Js is expected to

encourage collective work through mutual labour cooperation of the peasants in levelling the land, tilling, transplantations, weed removing, harvesting, growing vegetables, raising fruits, fish, cattle raising and other such agricultural and agriculture-related works. ...The collective lands, collective plantations, collective ponds, fish cultivation and other such things shall be under the control of this (agriculture) department.

Patriarchy

To the issue of land was tied that of women's emancipation. Women did not get any share of landed property, and after marriage, could not freely participate in ceremonies or rituals, and move from one village to another. During menstruation, they were forced to remain outside villages, and their attendance in meetings was discouraged. The emergence of the Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sanghatana (KAMS) meant that these injustices began to be aired. It was the KAMS which raised the issue of Ghotul and began a debate to end a system that had degenerated into one where women serviced men. It took six years of relentless propaganda to end the licence young men had to consort with women of their choice. Also, of the exploitation of young women by tribal chiefs or rich peasants (*dhani kisan*) among tribals, as well as later, forest department and police personnel. The point was that the party did not decree anything. Instead, what it did was that it backed the debate and propagated its views and, over a period of time, brought about acceptance of the reforms being envisaged.

It is significant that women comprise by far the most articulate members of the movement and their number has grown (though in some cases less than what the party claims), with young women commanders

and leading cadres of the JS constituting 40 to 45% of the total. Not all women's problems have been addressed nor have all demands raised by them been met. As women cadres themselves said, the difference is that they were encouraged to raise issues, to take on responsibilities. For instance, one of the issues is that the JS constitution mandates the agriculture department under its Article 3c to "release joint patta [title deed] in the name of families and in the name of wife and husband". This has met with opposition but they are trying to push it through. In any case, one cannot fail to observe the prominent role of women in the movement in the JS areas.

Health and Education

It was interesting to learn how the JS was trying to get around the problem of lack of hospitals and trained doctors. I was told that doctors working in the guerrilla zone conducted workshops where elementary training was provided to members of RPCs. Since malaria, cholera and elephantiasis were the three most dreaded illnesses, their symptoms were taught and the medicines

for each identified by their colour. Some treatment was offered to people who were unwell. What if the new "barefoot" doctors mixed up medicines? Well, there was no guarantee that this would not occur but it could be ensured that incidents of this nature were brought down by conducting workshops or by sending a team comprising a couple of the new trainees.

Education was in the process of being prioritised. Four textbooks have been prepared by the JS for students up to the fifth standard (mathematics, social science, politics and Hindi) and four more are being prepared (history of DK, culture, biology and general science). There were mobile classes, which were in the nature of school camps where children attended classes for anywhere between 15 and 30 days, depending on how tense the situation was in a particular area. Classes for each subject lasted 90 minutes, with four subjects taught in a day. There were between 25 and 30 students and three teachers in each camp, who had begun employing teaching aids such as globes, torches and CDs to teach history and science. In

teaching science, they encountered problems because people's beliefs about evolution, the universe, the sun and the moon were different from what modern science taught. But children are coached using everyday things as teaching aids or CDs.

How Does an ARPC Function?

I was told that elections to the RPCs were held every three years. The elected RPCs select members for the ARPCs. I learned that, on an average, up to 15 RPCs constitute an ARPC. Each RPC holds a general body meeting where accounts are shared and reviewed. Similarly, an ARPC's accounts are discussed in extended meetings of all the RPCs that come under it. In both the RPCs and ARPCs, members have the right to recall any office bearer if he or she is found wanting in any respect. I wanted to know what an ARPC budget looked like. In the area where we were, there were 14 RPCs, each with roughly 160 households. There were 15 members in the ARPC. Each ARPC has a standing committee in which the president, vice president, finance department and defence department heads are members. I



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requested them to show me the budget for 2009. This is what it looked like.

On the income side, it showed Rs 10,01,000, made up of Rs 3,60,000 in taxes on contractors, Rs 5,00,000 allotted by the JS and Rs 2,50,000 collected through work days or *shram daan* by households in the area. On the expenditure side, the budget showed that Rs 5,06,935 had been spent on defence, Rs 1,40,250 on agriculture, Rs 1,00,000 on health, Rs 10,000 on education, Rs 60,000 on trade and Rs 5,000 on public relations. Why was the expenditure on defence so high and that on education so low, I asked. Niti, a party representative in an ARPC, explained that since 2004, when the decision was taken to shift the responsibility for the PLGA and the people's militia to the JS, the expenditure incurred for kits (three pairs of uniform, oil, soap, toothpaste, washing soap, comb, gunpowder, bows and arrows and food) was borne by the ARPC. As for education, Shivnath said that it was only because they had not been able to find a *guruji* (teacher) for the schools run by the JS. When party cadres filled in as teachers, they did not have to spend more than what was needed to run evening schools. I asked them if I could be shown details of how the money was spent on agriculture. The expenditure comprised money spent on fisheries, plants, seeds, papayas, lemons, mangoes and guavas. Fisheries and seeds and plants were meant for the development of pisciculture (this ARPC had four ponds and seven wells for fish) and for providing seeds to poor peasants who could not afford to buy them. Trade mainly meant buying forest products for re-sale.

The ARPC had a justice department as well. Land disputes among family members, especially brothers were the most common kind of cases referred to it. The earlier practice was that an elder brother got a larger share than his younger siblings. All women got less than any of the men. Not anymore; the ARPCs now go by the principle of equality. They also intercede in matters to do with superstitious practices.

I was told about the murder of three traders, who had gone from "L" to "T" with Rs 20,000 among them to buy goats. First, a complaint that the men were missing was made to the local police. When that failed to yield any result, the family of the missing

traders approached the RPC. Their remains were found after three months. The justice department, after investigation, discovered that they were robbed and killed and a story spread that wild animals had killed them. But the people accused of the crime were brought before a people's court, attended by 1,500 people, including 115 of the victims' family. The family initially wanted to kill the accused. After much to-ing and fro-ing, they were willing to settle for 60 bullocks, 40 goats, 15 pigs, 20 chickens, and 10 *kandi* (a *kandi* is 30 kg) of rice. However, the matter was finally settled by making the accused pay a compensation of Rs 80,000, and the remains of the dead were handed over to the family for a proper burial. I asked why such leniency was shown to the accused. I was told that Rs 80,000 was a large amount in the forest area and that even this was in inverse proportion to a peasant's class. Thus a rich peasant had to pay Rs 20,000, a middle class one Rs 15,000, and a poor one Rs 10,000. Besides, they said, that they did not follow the principle of "death for death". Article 5(h) of the policy programme of the RPC says, "Except for counter-revolutionary crimes, it will send those indulged in murder, attempt to murder, atrocities on women, informing the exploiting police and other such things to the labour camps." And 5(i) says, "In each and every case there must be voting among the judges and verdict must be given according to the opinion of the majority. It may be given with slight majority also. But in critical cases the verdicts must have 2/3rd majorities."

What were "counter-revolutionary crimes"? From what I gathered, they were crimes such as enabling security forces to carry out ambushes that resulted in a loss of lives. Capital punishment was not awarded to every informer.

Cooperative Farms

When we visited Bastar, we were told that the JS had begun to experiment with cooperative farming. This was a step in the direction of strengthening what is called the "people's economy". The JS distributed seeds, extended credit to the farmers, and even in the midst of severe repression, carried out land reforms. I recalled reading in a *People's March* supplement of July 2007 how 768 acres of land were seized from adivasi

and non-adivasi landlords in 2006-07 and distributed by the JS in Bhairamgarh block of Dantewada district in Chhattisgarh, which was one of the main centres of SJ terror. Thus I saw in cooperative farms a continuing effort to improve the "people's economy". They rank a notch higher than land distribution and cooperative work teams in terms of socio-economic development.

On the RPC's initiative, land that belonged to it was cleared by villagers. It was cultivated by the villagers who spared the time to work on the land and the harvest was then shared. This cooperative farm was an experiment towards collective farming, where land is collectively owned through the RPC, cultivated by village households and the harvest shared. This was introduced in the Maad area about two years ago. The first thing which struck me was the sight of green chillies. About 25% of the land where vegetables were grown was taken up by chillies. Red and green chillies are consumed in large quantities by everyone. But they had also planted aniseed, onions, brinjals, gourds, lady's fingers, cauliflower, bananas, maize, spinach, tomatoes, and pumpkins. I asked Kumma Baba how much labour went into it. It took 28 villagers one day to clear the land. From each household in the village, one member came to sow the seeds, and two every eight days to water them. And each day and night, two persons took turns to stand guard against wild animals destroying the farm.

Narsimma, another ARPC agricultural expert, showed me a 1.5-acre field where paddy was sown. It was ready for harvest and in a few days, he said, the villagers would come to reap their reward. This, he felt, would go some way towards making them self-sufficient and reduce their dependence on *haats* (markets) outside. What is more, in times of need, he said, the JS had to provide food to the people. How was the produce of such farms divided? They followed class lines with poor peasants getting their share first and then the others as one went up the class ladder. Was the vegetable grown for the villagers' consumption or for the market? The plan was to sell some of the produce in *haats* but with *haats* now shifting to security camps, this was no longer possible. So, maybe even vegetable plots would switch over to grain cultivation.

In Maad, I was told that each RPC had at least one such cooperative farm; in some cases, even more. As centres for developing food security, these farms played a very important role. It was also significant that some of the party members were discussing deficiencies in the soil of Bastar and the need for ammonia, urea and zinc to improve it. Obviously, they were grappling with concerns even in the midst of the gathering war clouds. Or perhaps it was only to accelerate the pace of development to meet likely food shortages.

Collateral Damage

The Ramakrishna Mission (RKM) runs five schools, called Vivekanand Vidya Mandirs, in the Abujmaad area of Bastar. These are in Akabeda, Irrakbhatti, Kachchupal, Kundla and Kutul. They also ran health centres and fair price shops in these places. The schools operate as of now, but the fair price shops have been closed and the health centres now provide only a skeleton service. A doctor used to visit each of the health centres every Wednesday but this was discontinued after 2005 because the administration alleged that their services were also being made use of by the Maoists. I asked if seniors in the party had not informed the administration that it was not only a crime to not treat anyone, sinner or saint, and also that a Supreme Court order says that no one can be denied medical help simply because he or she is accused of being an extremist or terrorist. The wry response was that that may be true but there was a distance of several thousand kilometres between the Supreme Court and where they were. From the government departments in Raipur, to the district police and now the armed police camps, everyone accuses the RKM of helping the Maoists. The impression one got was that they would much rather close down the RKM schools as well and were merely looking for an excuse to do so.

In practical terms, this means that there is an economic blockade and no supplies, that is, rations or medicines, can enter without the permission of the authorities. To ensure that rations and other supplies are controlled, the weekly haats that were earlier held in civilian areas have been shifted to armed camps. This meant that the entry and exit of civilians

was regulated. I was told that a special pass authorised and signed by the Superintendent of Police, Narayanpur, was required for travelling since September 2008. On approaching a camp, villagers reportedly had to walk in a single file through a fenced corridor. RKM personnel said that they too had to alight from their vehicles even when travelling with their *maharaj* (spiritual teacher). On exiting a checkpoint, everyone was obliged to record their name, where they were headed to, and why. At the camps, where they bought provisions, they had to record how many family members there were before the rations were provided. They were particularly vulnerable in the camps, which were frequented by the dreaded spos, who merely had to say that so and so was a Maoist supporter or sympathiser for that person to be picked up, beaten, thrown into jail, and released maybe after paying a bribe. I was told of an incident in which two milkmen were picked up at the behest of spos. The officer in-charge asked them for Rs 2,000 to set them free. They had only Rs 500 between them and, in a show of magnanimity, he took that and let them go with a warning that they must henceforth behave as "good citizens".

Why did they not complain, I asked. The answer was that if they ventured to do so, they would be told they were talking like Naxalites and asked to shut up. If they persisted, they would be told everything was known about their links with the Naxalites, and they better had not act too smart. On the slightest pretext, villagers had been reportedly harassed and jailed after being declared as Naxalites. When I asked more questions, they pleaded with me not to ask too many things because I would leave while they had to live there. I asked whether the Naxalites did not scare them. They asked me to remember that the Naxalites were mostly adivasis and encouraged them to educate their children. Therefore, after the initial years, they had not been bothered by them again. The guerrillas had even stopped visiting them after learning they were being accused of being Naxalites by the authorities. But did they not ask you for help, I persisted. No, they said, because they know our provisions have been slashed and the health centre and fair price shop have closed. The

party had told them that it would not interfere as long as no armed police were allowed to camp in the school's premises.

They said that one of the charges levelled by officials was: "How come the RKM schools operate but not the government-run schools?" I said I too was intrigued. They asked if I had seen what the government schools looked like. Some of them were not even fit to be called schools, they alleged. "Just see what they are like and remember that most of the teachers draw their salary even when they stay away from school." I asked whether this meant that the Maoists did not threaten them. Nothing much could be done if a person could draw a salary by doing nothing, by simply using the excuse that the Naxalites threatened him or her, and the administration found this useful fodder for its propaganda against the party, they said. But they added they would not blame the teachers alone because some of the schools were only schools in name. I asked if it was true that 385 residential schools had been destroyed by Naxalites in Bastar in the last four years. One of them smiled before turning away, "I did not know there were that many schools in Bastar". I was no wiser but did not pester them further. However, I was reminded of a story I had read in *The Indian Express* (5 December 2009, New Delhi edition). This cited personnel of the Naga Armed Force deployed in Tamar (ST) constituency during the recent Jharkhand election who said,

We had heard that this area was a den of Maoists. We did not see them anywhere. But the schools where we were lodged were full of mosquitoes. There was no potable water. We used to drink water from the hand pump after boiling it, but (even) this did not help.

If this was the condition of schools in which children went to study and were also used as camps for military personnel, where lay the responsibility?

Answers Needed

Talking about land grab, displacement and the party's role in opposing this, inevitably led to a question – in opposing corporate land grabbing, were the guerrillas not opposing industrialisation because minerals surely need to be exploited and mineral-based industries are needed for progress? Precisely because of this, said

Raju, the party would soon be coming out with its own mining policy. What would be its salient points, I queried. Wait till it is released, he said, but one thing is certain – the royalty of approximately Rs 10 to 50 per metric tonne (mt) of iron ore, depending on its quality, was too low when the international iron ore price at one point had touched as much as Rs 7,000 per mt.

What about the advantages of scales of production, energy saving, restoration of land after excavation, and so on? Raju said that all these issues would be addressed and that the party was not against local industries. He added that his party was, however, firmly opposed to big industries, and believed that forest-based product manufacturing such as amla, bamboo and wood should be given preference. When I asked if this stand meant that mines could be leased to local parties, Raju insisted that I would have to wait for the mining policy to be announced. What was nevertheless significant was the need felt by the party to go public with its own version of a mining policy. One also got the impression that it had deliberated on the matter.

Did they have an income of Rs 1,400 crore or more a year, as the government claimed, I continued. Raju laughed and said if they had so much, they would have been able to do so much more. If there was “social peace” and they were able to carry out their various programmes, they may be able to reach that revenue figure. Most of the money was now collected in the form of royalty on tendu patta, bamboo, tamarind, and other forest produce. Revenue from looting banks or confiscating wealth was far less. They did tax some of the companies and contractors who operated in what they describe as the guerrilla zone. In any case, their sources were indigenous and not external, which even the government was forced to concede.

It is worth recalling that 30 years of the party’s intervention has brought about a sea change in wage rates as evident in the significant hike in the remuneration for picking/cutting tendu leaves, bamboos, tamarind, and the like. Thus, the levy charged by the party from adivasis is not a burden. There is some anecdotal reference made to revenue generated from, for example, fish cultivation. In south Dantewada, it was said

that an RPC earned Rs 5,00,000 a year in income from fish cultivation. This could mean that other RPCs are also earning an income of around this amount. In the ARPC I visited, the income from fish cultivation was less than Rs 1,00,000. So, there appeared to be some income generation. However, because of the restrictions imposed on entry and exit of people and goods, it is likely that many of the goods, which otherwise could have been sold in haats to generate income were being consumed inside.

What Do I Believe?

I am convinced that this is one rebellion which will test the resilience of the Indian state as never before. Precisely because it is a rebellion in which people are fighting to save their land, forests, water and minerals from being grabbed and they are convinced that they have an alternative vision.

The Maoists are certainly not saints or sinners, but as mortals they show what an unflinching commitment to bringing about social transformation actually means and how far even limited resources can go to help people. Here was an alternative development model being put into practice by the Maoists in the course of which many aspects of social relations have been democratised quite significantly. However, it is a small step considering the vast canvas that is India.

The war on the Maoists is not because they want to overthrow the Indian state, an endeavour they have been engaged in for nearly half a century. By their own admission, it would take them 50 to 60 years more to succeed. As Prime Minister Manmohan Singh himself put it, the Maoists possess only “modest capabilities”. It also has nothing to do with the party being guilty of wanton acts of violence. The reason for launching “Operation Green Hunt” on jungle bases is because the Maoists offer formidable resistance to implementing hundreds of memorandums of understanding for mining and mineral-based industries in predominantly tribal India where they enjoy considerable support. Without weakening this resistance, the government of India’s mining policies will remain unrealised.

That the Maoists pursue a different path sets them apart from every left formation in India. For this reason, they are under a microscope. It is true that today’s

critics can become tomorrow’s admirers. Nevertheless, to reach there, the Maoists will have to work out how they negotiate their way through the diversity and plurality of India.

People need more than rhetoric to believe that change is not only possible but also that it will result in real democracy, where people can participate in making their own lives.

Political plurality has become as much, if not more, a hallmark of India as its cultural diversity. Thus, they will have to accept and respect the fact that they may become a leading force but not the only force. And accept that democracy is not a tactical question. More than 100 years of struggle has won India’s working class, rural as well as urban, a variety of freedoms. Much of these freedoms have been legislated and are today under attack. If the Maoists have to win over the working people in areas where they have no or little presence, how will they go about doing it without advancing these freedoms?

NOTES

- 1 On 17 May 2009, a force of around 500 CRPF, STF, Chhattisgarh Police, and SPOs, accompanied by bulldozers, demolished the office and residential premises of Vanvasi Chetna Ashram at Kanwalnar on the grounds it was an encroachment on forest land. The ashram was being continually harassed by the government for standing up against the Salwa Judum.
- 2 The Jamui massacre involved the killing of 12 people, all of them tribals, including women and children, and the wounding of 50 others on 17 February in Phulwaria-Korasi village of Jamui district of Bihar allegedly by the CPI (Maoist). The massacre was reported to have been in retaliation for the killing of eight Maoist cadres on 1 February, who were allegedly taken into custody and then killed by the police.
- 3 On 20 November 2009, eight bogies of the Tata-Bilaspur passenger train were derailed, near Manoharpur railway station in West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand, by the armed cadres of CPI (Maoist), in which two persons, including a two-year-old, died and 51 were injured. The derailment, allegedly using detonators, was caused in the course of a two-day bandh on 19-20 November when, according to local Maoist leaders, they were demanding that one of their arrested leaders be produced in the court. According to Samarji, secretary Bihar-Jharkhand-Orissa regional committee of the CPI (Maoist), the “mistake” occurred because of “overzealous new recruits”.
- 4 The Bhumkal rebellion of 1910 affected more than half the parganas of Bastar. It symbolised the struggle of tribals against an alien rule attempting to remould the tribal pattern of life. The rebellion was ultimately crushed by the British but the post-Bhumkal British policy in Bastar was forced to be more sensitive to the tribals and their traditional way of life.
- 5 See <http://sanhati.com>
- 6 See in particular the chapter entitled “Background” in *When the State Makes War On Its Own People; Violation of People’s Rights During the Salwa Judum*, January 2006, brought out by the APDR, IAPL, PUCL and PUDD. www.pudr.org.