

Who Is the Problem, the CPI(Maoist) or the Indian State?

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The adivasis regard the Maoists as their friends for it is these rebels who have stood by them. All the normal channels of redress are closed for them. The police beat them. The political parties – be they the Congress or the Bharatiya Janata Party – are with the Salwa Judum. The courts do not give them a hearing. The media does not care. Where else will they go except to the Maoists? When the police attack them, it is the Maoists who save them. In these 17 years Himanshu Kumar has been in Dantewada he has seen how the Naxalites have worked among the adivasis. This is the fight of the poor. If the centre thinks it can crush these people, it is mistaken. Sometimes extreme oppression can embolden those who are fighting.

* As reported and translated by Jyoti Punwani (jyoti.punwani@gmail.com), this is a summary of a talk by Gandhian activist Himanshu Kumar on 31 October 2009 at the Press Club, Mumbai, on the situation in Dantewada, Chhattisgarh, followed by a question-answer session.

Seventeen years ago I went to Dantewada following Gandhiji's belief that the real India lies in the villages, and young people must go there to rejuvenate them. The villagers gave me land to build my ashram. Under the Fifth Schedule, the gram sabha was empowered to do so. But the government demolished the ashram this year, sending a force of 1,000 policemen, anti-landmine vehicles... That is when the adivasis finally acknowledged that I was like them! My home could also be demolished.

In the forests of Dantewada, people live like aboriginals used to, in tune with nature. Natural justice prevails there. In the jungles, there is no police, no crime. I went to Dantewada a month after my marriage. My wife and I built a hut without any walls, just a roof. I would leave my wife to travel all over Madhya Pradesh, for five to six days at a time. She never felt afraid.

Forcibly Emptying the Villages

In 2005, the Chhattisgarh government started feeling the Maoists in Dantewada were a danger. It started the Salwa Judum, which means Collective Peace Campaign. They knew the Maoists had support among the adivasis, so they decided to empty the villages. They forced the villagers out of their villages and tried to shift them into camps near police stations, at the edge of the village road. They got together a force of goondas who along with the police, would pounce on the villagers and force them into camps.

But adivasis are used to living in the midst of nature, near a stream, on top of a mountain. Each adivasi house is far away from the other. Here, the government had built sheds; you step out of one and face the next; behind yours is another one. When the adivasis tried to run away from these sheds, this "patriotic" force would

shoot on them, catch them and put them in jail, rape them.

At one point, there were 54,000 people in the camps, from 1,000 villages. The government claimed it had "sanitised" 644 villages. Fifty thousand adivasis had run away to the jungle. That is when the Chief Minister (CM) Raman Singh declared that those who have come to the camps are with us, and those who have run away are with the Naxalites.

I wrote an Open Letter to the CM – as the chief of the state, you are saying that those citizens who choose to stay in their own homes are Naxalites! And will you give orders to shoot them? That is exactly what he did. There would be attacks on the same village again and again. The adivasis would try to come back and cultivate their land; every time they would be caught and terrible atrocities inflicted on them. Their harvests would be burnt. In such a situation, it was the Naxalites who supported the adivasis. That is why they regard the Naxalites as their friends.

The Salwa Judum forces want liquor, chicken, mutton, women; and they want these every day. They take these from the adivasis. We are blind to that. But when the adivasi picks up a lathi to oppose the police, we cry foul.

The State talks of the violence of the Maoists, but it is the State which is violent. The home minister keeps on talking about peace. But how can peace come when you are all the time attacking the adivasis? Then you expect me to tell the Maoists, stop your violence. The situation has now reached a point where every outsider is looked upon by the adivasis as an enemy. The State has created a situation in which the adivasi looks upon his own fellow countryman as an enemy.

State Opposition to Rehabilitation

The Supreme Court has ordered the government to rehabilitate the villagers, compensate them. Not one village was rehabilitated, nor one adivasi compensated. On 10 June 2008, the Supreme Court gave instructions that the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) investigate the conditions in Dantewada in the wake of Salwa Judum. Our activists took tribals

from Dantewada and some of those who had fled to Andhra Pradesh (AP) to meet the NHRC team. On 11 June, when the villagers of Nendra were returning, some Salwa Judum people stopped the jeep and beat up the tribals. We phoned the director general of police, asking, is it a crime to talk to the NHRC? Nothing happened. Those adivasis were made to sign a paper saying that they were forced to give statements to the NHRC.

As a Gandhian, I got furious. In front of me people are being assaulted...only for talking to an official fact-finding team. I decided we will not move from this village. If they want to burn the village, let them burn me first. We persuaded the villagers to come back. On 1 July, we formed a human shield around the village. We stayed in Nendra for six months. We sent volunteers to bring the villagers back from AP. To their credit, they came and stayed. For three years they had been unable to cultivate their land. They had no seeds; their cattle had run away; their village had been burnt repeatedly. We arranged for their rehabilitation. That is how the first village was settled. Nearby villagers gathered courage and approached us. Our activists began repeating the same experiment there.

When the collector came to know that adivasis, escorted by our activists, were on their way to Lingagiri village, he called me up. It was a Saturday, 4.30 pm. He knew the next day, Sunday, every government office would be closed. He said all the forces were busy with elections. He would not be able to provide them with any security. I told him, when did I ever ask for security? Under the Constitution, you cannot stop anyone from going home. But when they reached the bridge, the police stopped them. The police had not been able to cross that bridge for three years. I called up the collector and asked him – are you going to allow people to go back home? If not, we will have to take them to the Supreme Court and tell it that you were not allowing its orders to be implemented. Everyone crossed that bridge that evening.

But the administration did not give up. They confiscated my vehicle; we had to go to court to get it released. We found that the police had taken away half the rations meant for the villagers. Who can save a police force that acts like this!

The adivasis began cultivating their land again. But once more, the police started attacking the rehabilitated villages. Still we kept on trying. Now, peace reigns in these 30 villages. Anyone can go and visit them. We have told the government – use these as a model. The people are comfortable there, so they are not interested in fighting. But the government goes on attacking them with a single aim: they should run away and then the government can give their land to industrialists for mining.

The adivasis then decided that their youngsters would guard the village from the Salwa Judum forces. They started patrolling their villages with whatever they had – lathis, field implements. They began hiding their grain in the mountains. Now Home Minister P Chidambaram has started describing these youngsters as Naxalites, saying they have taken up arms against the government.

The government does not want peace; it wants land. It is so arrogant; it does not want to accept the crimes it has committed. We have tried to file 1,000 first information reports (FIRs) – all serious crimes such as rape, abduction, setting fire to homes. They were not registered. The superintendent of police (SP) said the police would not register them because they are false complaints. The Supreme Court said a police officer cannot decide if a complaint is true or false, especially if the complaint is against the police.

Administrative and Judicial Bias

A girl came to us saying she had been gang-raped for two days in the police station. The SP did not register our FIR. We went to the Supreme Court, which asked the state government to reply. The SP said in his reply: “We asked the accused, have you raped this girl? [The accused were Salwa Judum leaders] They said, No. She’s slandering us.” So that is how our police investigate rape complaints – they now ask rapists if they have raped, and decide on the basis of their answers.

When we campaigned for the release of Binayak Sen, we also wanted an end to Salwa Judum, the release of all those in detention under the Chhattisgarh Special Public Security Act, and the scrapping of the Act. Nothing happened. Now, in fact,

the Act is being used against all villagers. “You gave water to the Maoists, you showed them the way – you too are an accused”, the authorities allege.

Your judiciary, your administration, your democracy – you yourselves are destroying them all. Then there is not much left for the Naxalites to do! Once writing and talking become crimes – Binayak Sen was only writing, I was only talking – what do you do? Can you blame the adivasis who pick up guns in sheer helplessness?

In January, 19 adivasis were killed. Four girls were raped. We went to court. The government pleader keeps taking adjournments. The judge keeps changing. The special police officers (SPOs) killed three adivasis, and their widows filed a writ in the high court. The government replied that they were killed by Naxalites, and the women were forced by the Naxalites to file a writ against the police. The judge swallowed this.

Ordinary villagers are killed and passed off as Naxalite commanders. All we have asked for is a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) inquiry and ex gratia compensation. But the judge tells the villagers – “choose which camp you want to stay in; the government will look after you”!

Operation to ‘Hunt’ Adivasis

In the first phase of Operation Green Hunt held in September, the forces had attacked an entire family. First, they stabbed the father, then the mother, then the young daughter. With rifle butts, they broke the teeth of her two-year-old son and chopped off a part of his tongue. I wanted the press to hear their stories, so I decided to take them to Raipur. The Raipur Press Club asked me for proof that they were not Naxalites. I told them even the government is not calling them Naxalites! They decided not to allow me the use of their premises. So now adivasis cannot go even to the media. Who will they go to?

All roads are closed for them. The police beat them. The political leaders – be they Congress or Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – are with the Salwa Judum. The courts do not give them a hearing. The media does not care. Where else will they go except to the Maoists? When the police attack them, it is the Naxalites who save them. If you really want peace, put an end

to the root cause of the popularity of the Naxalites.

We have tried to create conditions in which violence comes to an end. But in an atmosphere where the police cut off breasts of old women and stab old men, and rape... You can imagine what would be the fate of any policeman who falls into the villagers' hands. The State should not create such conditions. The political leaders must ask why the Naxalites are popular. Why are our democratically elected governments not popular? If an adivasi goes to the police and says, the *patwari* took away my money, will the police go and investigate?

The day your police's guns are raised to defend the rights of the poor, Naxalism will end. If my child is creating havoc, would not I try to find out why he is acting like that? Cannot the prime minister ask the Maoists: why is there so much violence? The Naxalites have been preparing the adivasis for decades, telling them there will be a big fight. The other day as I was walking, an old man lying under a tree called out to me and asked me, *Ladaai hogi, na?*

That is why I tell political leaders of the mainstream parties, do not enter this area. The adivasis are waiting; you will be trapped, I have been telling them. These adivasis are not like people in Uttar Pradesh. They can jump on you and snatch your bodyguard's AK 47. In Operation Green Hunt the forces will be killed in greater numbers than they have in Jammu & Kashmir. In September, they began Operation Green Hunt. They could not kill a single Maoist. But six COBRA jawans got killed. All they could kill were old adivasis and children. A six-year-old was stabbed; an 85-year-old was bayoneted and killed in his bed... The police are committing cold-blooded murder. Then the government asks – are you with us or with the Naxalites? I can openly say – we are not with your police. We are with those adivasis who are being killed.

Digvijay Singh wrote an article on how development is the counter to the Naxalites' influence. I wrote to him, putting forward four demands. The first is – withdraw your forces. Seven hundred villages have been cordoned off. The villagers cannot go out; no outsider can enter. If the

adivasi goes to the weekly bazaar five km away, she knows the SPOs will catch her. So she goes to a bazaar that is 85 km away. It takes two days to go and two days to come back. So four days of every week was spent walking. I told her, why do not you buy enough rice for a month? She replied: "we can buy rice worth only as much as we get for our mahua. If our mahua sells for Rs 20, we can bring rice worth Rs 20."

This situation is because of the State, not because of the Naxalites. Characterising those areas as liberated zones is part of the State's strategy. They can then complain that the State is not allowed to function there. It is actually the Salwa Judum that has stopped the functioning of the State. No institution of the State functions there, nor does any law. Even Article 21 – the right to life – does not exist there. The adivasis are being hunted. Sometimes violence grows of fear and helplessness.

In these villages that are cordoned off, everything has been closed down by the government. There is nothing there – no schools, no doctors. The government told the high court these are all Naxalites. The police kept saying there is no point distributing rice through ration shops because the Naxalites will loot them. So for the last five years, there is been no distribution of rice. Has any Naxalite died of starvation?

The medical officers tell me, if their doctors go to treat patients in the jungle, the CRPF beats them up. If teachers go, they beat them up. They are furious – they tell the teachers, you do not get blown up when you go in, why do we? You must be in league with the Naxalites. I tell them, teachers and doctors do not go in with weapons like you do!

The Dantewada collector is merrily giving permission to non-tribals to take over tribal lands. The government itself is taking over the land and giving it away. But it is because of the presence of Maoists that these companies are not able to start their projects.

Driven to the Wall

The picture we constantly get is that the Naxalites are awful, but the State is good. Ask the adivasis of Dantewada. I told some politicians, do not talk to the Maoists, talk to those you call their victims, to the adivasis. You are their democratically elected leaders. The public is supposed to love you; you are supposed to love the public. If the public has stopped loving you and started loving the Naxalites, you must find out why.

My personal practice is non-violence. My work in the last 17 years has been to strengthen democratic institutions, to create awareness among the villagers about the constitutional rights guaranteed to



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them; about welfare schemes, how to fight for their rights in a democratic way. Because the Naxalites had taken up guns, we went there to strengthen non-violence! But the government called us Maoists! That is how the state works – they drive you to the wall, they harass you, and then call you a Naxalite.

Vinoba Bhave used to say about the Naxalites: “these youth are motivated by compassion for the poor. I salute them.” When he began his Bhoodan movement, he set back the Naxalites by 30 years. In these 17 years I have been in Dantewada I have seen how the Naxalites have worked among the adivasis. For carrying one bundle of firewood, the forest guards would punish an adivasi woman by raping her. If they did not pay a three-rupee fine, the guards would extort Rs 300.

Then in the 1980s, the Naxalites came there. They would capture a forest guard and tie him up and ask the adivasis to beat him. That was the first time the adivasi realised they too had some power. The State should have empowered them by punishing the guards! The State never fixed a minimum price for mahua; the Naxalites did.

The adivasis had never been violent. But whenever they tried to raise their voice, the State would send the police. Why is it that the Naxalites have never been violent against me? For me they bring out the cot and give me water and say come, guruji, sit. In the beginning, the Maoists had declared that there will be no government programme in our zone. But we carried on with our work. Now they have sent a message – we will not interfere in Himanshu’s work, because he has no political ambition.

People talk about Maoist violence against the police, against innocent citizens. You must go to the depth of the violence to understand it. If an SPO is killed, the government declares that an innocent was killed and the media goes to town. If an old adivasi is killed, the police say a Maoist area commander was killed. The adivasis live in perpetual fear. If they feel, this man will inform the police where we are hiding... If you are continuously hunted, made to flee your home, and you find a place to live away from the police, then someone comes who you suspect might inform the police about your whereabouts... It happened to me once. The government

had requested me to help them trace the survivors of a helicopter that had crashed in the forest. They were too afraid to go in. The families of those on the helicopter were frantic. I negotiated and went in. But the police cheated me. They promised they would not follow us, but they did. And in their typical style, en route, they looted chickens, liquor... The Maoists thought I had brought the police. They tied me to a tree and would have finished me off had they not learnt the truth. They would finish off any of their own who betrays them.

I stayed three days in that village. There was no one above 40 years old there – they just do not live longer than that. Children were typically malnourished. There was an eight-year-old guarding us. He had a cap and a whistle, both of which he was very proud of. I asked him, when did the police last come to your village? He said, two years back. What did they do? They burnt 40 homes, killed three people, raped that woman standing there. This village was just behind Bailadila; it was covered with coal dust. There was no school there. This is the Indian model of development.

Only Justice Can Bring Peace

The government tells democratic rights groups – you tell the Maoists stop the violence. But we tell the government – you tell your forces to stop their violence. Just register the FIRS the human rights groups have filed against your police. You do not do even that much and you keep asking them to spell out their stand on violence. What do you want us to say? We live there; we know the situation. Some incidents look terrible when viewed from the outside. It has happened that a group of SPOs have gone around burning village upon village. And the villagers managed to surround this very group and killed them.

In the last five years, no leader has come to Dantewada to ask the adivasis what are their problems. So I thought I would take the adivasis to Delhi. I thought there would be a huge *hungama*. I took these wounded adivasis to the Constitution Club. Nothing happened. Such is the condition of city-dwellers today; they do not care what is happening in the villages. They are the ones who want peace, they who are living comfortable lives. They

want peace so that their comfort can carry on uninterrupted. But those who are bearing the attacks – their priority is justice. Vinoba Bhave had said: “Where there’s injustice there cannot be peace”. But the government will not talk about justice.

Why have lakhs of citizens taken up arms? We middle class people find it inexplicable. We live in cities; the police are for us; the government is for us. We are on one side. On the other side are those for whom there is no police, no government. They have nothing to eat. They are the ones who have picked up arms. These people have been deprived for years. There is a structure. Those who are outside this structure – this is their fight. If you were to ask – whom does all the land on this earth belong to? The answer would be to all of us. Yet, the reality is that some have more land, some less. You live in the city, so you have more. You are a brahman, so you have more. You are educated, so you have more. The child who is born in Marine Drive can demolish the home of the child born in Dharavi. Why not vice versa?

Inequality is inbuilt into the system. All these notions about who can command more resources have become part of our value system, and then our political system. Both are supported by our economic system. These constitute the basic structure of the society. It is this structure that keeps the poor poor and the rich rich. We are content with this structure. But what of those who bear its brunt? They want to break it. This fight is against structural violence. This would not end till the structure changes so that all become equal.

The man who is in distress will fight. This is the fight of the poor. The Naxalites have just tagged on. If there had been no Marx, no Gandhi, would not the poor have fought? They do not need the Naxalites or the Gandhians. But sometimes a Vinoba, a Gandhi, or the Maoists join them in their fight. If the centre thinks they can crush this fight of the poor with the army, they are mistaken. Sometimes extreme oppression can embolden those who are fighting.

If the centre really wants peace, it can be got in a week. They should go and spread happiness among the adivasis. Aanganwadis, health services, schools – open all these again. Instead, you think you can kill them slowly by inflicting

suffering upon suffering on them. If you put a rug on fire, the rug gets brunt. You send your COBRA forces and they stab an old man in his bed. You are doing exactly as the Maoists predicted you would do. They have been telling the adivasis for years that the State is an oppressor.

Today, the world over, the poor are being looked upon as a burden who are depleting the resource base. They should now be finished once and for all, so that the rest of us can lord it over the earth. The adivasis are the most vulnerable. What our government is planning is genocide of the adivasis. This is the direction in which our modern civilisation is going. Will we support this? Will you be able to kill lakhs of people? You will try. But when they rise up and kill you, you would not be able to save yourselves.

There are three types of poor – (i) those who survive on your riches – the balloon-seller, the domestic servant, construction workers; (ii) those who feel they are unworthy of being rich; they feel they are low caste, uneducated; they can never be rich; and (iii) those like the adivasis who were living happily in the forests till you invaded their land to make yourself richer. That is why they have taken up arms. And you are running to Chidambaram. Once the other two categories join the third, everything of yours will be destroyed. What is our stand in this? Vinoba used to say: “To accept injustice is wrong; I will instigate the poor against such acceptance”. What is happening in Chhattisgarh is not without the middle class’ consent.

You are sowing the seeds of violence and mayhem. Before Salwa Judum,

Maoists numbered only 5,000. After Salwa Judum, the Maoist strength grew to 1,10,000 – a 22-fold increase. After Operation Green Hunt, every surviving adivasi will become a Maoist full-timer. And when the Maoists increase in number, they expand their base. They will reach Mumbai, Delhi. I feel sorry for the young men in the forces too. They lose either way. If they do not join the paramilitary and police, they will die of hunger. And once they join, they will die too, for sure. Why are you sending these young men to their death so that the wealthy corporations will benefit? You are making young people fight other young people so that those corporations may accumulate more wealth.

I appeal to you, come to Bastar; stand with the adivasis.