

Back from 'Salwa Judum' Land

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How does the media in Chhattisgarh report the conflict between the Naxalites and the Salwa Judum, or the conflict between local communities and corporations? Quite simply, it doesn't. The pressures on journalists in Chhattisgarh are unique. They are paid not to report stories that are critical of the powers-that-be, whether they are industrial lobbies or state authorities.

This writer was in Bhairamgarh to cover a Salwa Judum rally. Bhairamgarh is a small town in the Bijapur district of southern Chhattisgarh where the State is engaged in a bloody war with the Maoists.

According to the government, the Salwa Judum is a "spontaneous people's movement" against Maoists; human rights activists call it a brutal State-created militia.

The rally was scheduled to pass along narrow tribal paths deep in the jungle where no vehicle can go. So the Salwa Judum leader Mahendra Karma very kindly arranged for this correspondent to ride on the back of a motorcycle.

The bike moved easily through the jungle, weaving in and out of several tribal groups en route to the rally. In the course of conversation with the bike rider it was revealed that he was a local journalist. Indeed, the ride turned into a crash course in local journalism for an outsider.

The journalist worked for one of the top dailies in Chhattisgarh.

"How much salary do you get?" "I do not get a salary," he replied. "Oh, so how do you earn a living?" "By not writing," was the answer.

Noting surprise, he clarified.

"Journalism here is the art of not writing," he said. "I earn around Rs 5,000 every month by not writing."

It was really difficult to make sense of what he was saying.

"Being journalists, we know who is doing what; the ins and the outs of corrupt practice, and the perpetrators," he continued. "We get a fee for not writing about the corruption. That is our salary."

He added: "Not only do we not get a salary, we spend from our own pockets to collect and send the news to the head office. It is still worth our while. There are a handful of journalists in the district headquarters who do get a token salary. But in reality they earn many times more than that."

"It is an easy profession for making money," he explained. "As we know good things about the Salwa Judum, similarly we also know all the bad things about the Salwa Judum. But we do not write about the bad things, for obvious reasons," he added, watching leader of the *Salwa Judum*, Mahendra Karma, who was standing nearby. Karma is also leader of the opposition in Chhattisgarh Assembly.

Almost every newspaper in Chhattisgarh still refers to the *Salwa Judum* as a "peaceful people's movement" even though there are numerous reports in the national press about human rights violations perpetrated by the group.

After the rally, Dhurli village become the next destination as there was a meeting between Essar and local villagers. The corporate house was seeking a no objection certificate (NOC) from local landowners to set up a plant.

But at Dhurli, a group of villagers were already agitating and said threateningly : “You must be a broker for Essar.” They lost no time to add “All journalists are brokers of the industrialists. You must leave the village. We do not want to talk to you.”

It was shocking to see the level of hatred for journalists in the village.

In Dantewada town, after hearing the story, some journalists explained in great detail how much Essar was paying journalists to “keep their mouths shut”. But they could not give any proof, unfortunately.

People in Dhurli had told this writer : “Tell the government, if they want to take our land they must first kill us. They can take this land only over our dead bodies.”

Back in Delhi, it was simply amazing to read a report by the Indo-Asian News Service claiming that the people of Dhurli had agreed to give their land to Essar. They were so happy with Essar’s rehabilitation package, the report said, that they had written a letter to the government expressing their willingness to give away their land.

The report received prominent coverage by newspapers like *The Times of India*, *The Hindu*, *Business Line* and *The Economic Times*.

It also furnished details of how many people had signed the letter and to whom the letter had been given.

The officer named in the newspaper report, SDM Ambalgam was shocked when he was informed about the report. “What letter? And which newspaper are you talking about?” she asked. “I have not got any letter, and no one has agreed to give land as far as I know.” “Have they given the letter to another officer,” this correspondent ventured to ask. “No. I am the officer in charge of land acquisition here. Even if they had given the letter to another officer it would have come to me,” she replied. “I can’t believe what you are saying,” she added.

She issued a show cause notice to Essar asking for an explanation for the news item. The article also featured a quote from the head of Essar in Chhattisgarh commenting on the “letter from the villagers”.

According to Ambalgam, Essar replied saying it had been misled by the reporter.

Ambalgam was subsequently transferred from Dantewada. No one followed the matter up with the reporter or the newspaper.

‘The Indian Express’ carried a report on the front page saying that Naxals had killed three farmers because they had continued farming in defiance of a Naxal ban on all farm activities.

But nobody heard of any Naxal ban on farming earlier!

“These people were killed because of their alleged connection with the police, not because they were farming,” said the former sarpanch of Chintagufa.

No one took notice of the article. In fact, the very next day *The Times of India* carried the same old story about Naxals attacking farmers because of the ban.

But a story about farmer suicides in Chhattisgarh is really intriguing. According to National Crime Records Bureau figures, Chhattisgarh has the highest number of farmer suicides in the country, each year.

Despite the alarming numbers, and eight years after the state came into existence, not a single journalist in Chhattisgarh had written about it!

Journalists who do not wish to be named said : “We want to write the story of farmer suicides. We can see it happening around us. But the story will go against the government and then the government will stop (publishing) advertisements in our newspapers. So we cannot write the story.”

Kamlesh Painkra’s Story

The story of Kamlesh Painkra probably best explains the situation of journalists in Chhattisgarh today.

Painkra was the first journalist to write about human rights violations by the *Salwa Judum*. Following his report, he was told by the local superintendent of police (SP) to apologise and admit that his story had been a mistake.

When Painkra refused, he lost his job. His brother, who was a teacher, was put behind bars, ostensibly for sheltering Naxalites.

The district administration cancelled Painkra’s licence to sell public distribution system (PDS) grain in the local market for no apparent reason. It was his main source of income.

Painkra was finally forced to flee his home, taking his family with him, when a friendly policeman told him that the police was going to kill him in an “encounter”. They still live like refugees.

No local newspaper reported his ordeal.

Painkra now lives in Dantewada after fleeing his home district of Bijapur.

Painkra was later hired, by another paper as its Dantewada district correspondent but the fine print of his appointment letter was interesting. The letter stated that his salary would be Rs 3,000 a month. It went on to say that he would also have to collect advertisements worth Rs 20,000 every month and that his salary would be in proportion of the amount he managed to collect.

“That means that if the advertising money goes down the salary will go down accordingly,” Painkra explained.

He declined the offer, saying: “If I have to collect Rs 20,000 every month in a town with a population of less than 25,000, you can imagine from whom I will have to collect the advertisements. How can I do any journalism after that?”

Last month, the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) bulldozed Painkra’s house in Bijapur to make room for a volleyball ground for soldiers. There were no reports in the papers about this. Painkra’s family was not informed of the demolition. Nor was any compensation paid to them.

The pressures on journalists in Chhattisgarh are special.

Some time ago, the Naxals sent an audio CD to every newspaper office in Raipur. The CD contained, among other things, a recording of a conversation, via walkie-talkie, between the same superintendent of police, Bijapur, who had threatened Painkra, and his deputy.

During the conversation, the SP tells his subordinate : “Keep an eye on the area and if you see any journalists just kill them.”

The government reacted by saying the recording was bogus. Police officials in private accept that the voice was indeed that of the SP and that the Naxals had tuned into his conversation on the walkie-talkie.

No national newspaper covered the news. The SP was reportedly sent to work in the State Human Rights Commission. □□□