

## A Journey Into the Dark

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*[Chhattisgarh and Dantewada have been in the news for quite some time now, as matters have reached a climax with the state on its anti-Maoist offensive after the near-failure of its strategy to prop up Salwa Judum as a counter-insurgency outfit. All intermediate spaces stand wiped out now. Recently, Himanshu Kumar of the Vanvasi Chetna Ashram had planned a padayatra in Dantewada and around that time, a team of women's and human rights organizations visited the area apprehending trouble. This is a report of that team's experiences.]*

It was night. Four jeeps sped carrying 39 women of diverse age, class, caste, religion, faith, ideologies, from ten states across the nation, and representing 20 women's and human rights organisations. We sped from Raipur to Dantewada, on wide, smooth highways on a common journey, as part of our campaign to address the alarming reports of sexual violence and repression of women by the State, that were emerging, particularly from Dantewada, in Bastar region of Chhattisgarh. We were headed there both to get a first hand account and to show solidarity with victims of heinous crimes, who defying all threats and intimidation had managed to come forth and lodge complaints against their assailants—in this case, the State. This journey was to be an enquiry—a personal exploration and examination of the truth—of dark, dangerous, secret whispers that managed to trickle out from Dantewada and ooze into wider consciousness—tales of tortures, horror, and barbaric acts that our representatives, our own protectors and security forces meted out on a particular collective us, the weakest, most vulnerable, the voiceless adivasis of Bastar.

Over the next 22 hours, we were to find that our journey had become the goal, revealing to us far more from State's desperate attempt to hide, than in our wanderings and talkings in Dantewada. In hindering us, we found how the State had repressed civil liberties of its citizens, how democratic spaces had vanished and how the authoritarian subjugation by the State had muted all voices—not just of protest, but of even posing a question.

But first the story of this journey. The trip from Raipur to Dantewada is 380 km. After the initial excitement of a new journey, many of us settled down in slouched comfort and warmth proximity of companionship as our car sped through the dark night towards Bastar. Some of us attempted sleep, others conversed in soft voices, the music from the car's loudspeakers was now low and mellow.

I awoke around midnight as we pulled to the side at the police check point at Charama, Kanked. With sharply called orders and tapping batons on our car's windows, we were ordered to get out. We noticed the police carrying a list of our jeeps' license plate numbers that they verified. We were assured that this was part of their routine procedure – even as we noticed a lot of other vehicles whizz by the post without a pause. Personal information was noted for all individuals and vehicular papers scrutinised. This entire interrogation was being directed by DSP Neg. As we stood huddled around in the cold of the night, our drivers were ordered into the police station for further questioning. Circumstances of our

journey made us immediately protest, as our drivers were just innocent operators provided by the tour company. We insisted that we be allowed to accompany the drivers and all the questioning be directed to us. A few of us followed the drivers into the compound but were halted with shouts “Goli Mar-denge” (we’ll shoot)! Meanwhile, we were told that the police needed further information including postal address, father/husband’s names, mobile numbers as part of their routine inquiry. Our drivers finally emerged about half an hour later, silent and shaken. Apparently one vehicular registration and one set of license papers were improper – one jeep and these documents were confiscated. We finally left around 2am in three jeeps heading towards Makori to organise an extra vehicle for our further travel. On the road our drivers told us that they had been threatened with dire consequences if they proceeded further with us.

We reached Makori within half an hour to be again stopped at the check post. It turns out that the documents previously acceptable at Kankad had now become improper as they were photocopies of the original. As we deliberated our options, our drivers informed us that they could not proceed with us further. We were now getting increasingly resolved to continuing the journey, and decided to take a bus to Jagdalpur and then onto Dantewada. We squeezed into two buses headed our way still at 3 am, but our troubles were far from over. The drama of halting and questioning hounded us through the night at Keshkal, Farusgaon and finally Kondagaon, where we were finally forced to disembark at around 6am on the pretext of ID verification by SPOs. Kondagaon was still about 80 km from Jagdalpur which was a further 120km from Dantewada—we had barely covered half the distance from Raipur in eight hours.

At around 8 am, we met M Khan, SO, Kondagaon. We were informed that we had been off loaded from the bus for our personal protection since there were between four and five thousand demonstrators blocking our way between Korenar and Dantewada, in anticipation of our arrival. However, we were free to leave if we insisted on doing so – and he would even facilitate our journey by providing vehicles. Meanwhile, most of us had been in contact, via sms, with our friends and families and heard that massive support was pouring in to offices at Delhi and Raipur via telephones and faxes from all across the country and also from international well wishers . We decided to continue to Jagdalpur, on bus, speak with the SPO there, before deciding on a further course of action. We also decided to remain together and finally got a bus where all 39 of us could squeeze into and were just starting when the station manager came running, saying he had police orders that no bus was to take us. While we waited around, we were the subject of increasing curiosity by the public. Also some press had gathered there by this time. It was reassuring for many of us that we sensed no hostility from either of these groups. Meanwhile, two trucks loaded with armed and uniformed security personnel disembarked right in front of our group, and young men in orange paraphernalia cruised on motorcycles in hostile belligerence. We also received word that Shri Himanshu of Vanavasi Chetna Ashram, where we were headed was forced to call off the padayatra and was placed under forced state security i.e. house arrest. He advised us strongly not to come to Dantewada. In light of these circumstances, we had no other option but to turn back –towards Raipur again.

However, our troubles were far from over. At Kanked, our bus was stopped by a road block of 30-35 goons who yelled anti-naxal slogans, banged at the bus, windows, asked us to get off. A bunch of them entered inside with videos and took footage of us at uncomfortably close quarters. Finally, one person, who had earlier spoken to us claiming to be a part of *Hari Bhoomi*, deflated a tire forcing the bus to come to a halt. More threatening, more intimidation later, tire replaced, we were finally out of Bastar.

A press conference had been called in Raipur by our campaign in the Circuit House. Here too our arrival was anticipated and organised disruptions awaited us. Now the slogans had changed from allegations of 'naxals' to 'naxal leaders' to leave Chattisgarh. The police took a very official position on these allegations and after, once again, documenting, individual information of the entire team – we were free to go. We found that each of the group was followed, at close quarters, by people on motorcycles, who remained in vigil throughout that night and to the final departure point as we left Chattisgarh.

This is not meant to be a story of hardship or recounting troubles. It is more to reflect on how far we have fallen off a page of legitimacy, democracy, civil liberties. How the ones who we choose to govern us, have become dark powerful evil governors of our fate—have ensnared all democratic spaces of expression, of movement. How we, as a country, have slept as this systematic and systemic progression of cancerous disease sucks away at the marrow of all we hold dear—the very concept of independence and free society—for all, with equity and equality. At the press conference we were asked finally, “Did the police ‘do’ anything to you all?” It was with surprise that we answered “No, they were polite and even courteous—but they stopped us”. We were credible, acceptable, respectable bunch of women, educated, vocal, and we were stopped even in an enquiry. Was there any scope for a faceless, voiceless adivasi to exercise democratic rights? And why were we stopped? So aggressively opposed? What was the state attempting to hide from an independent inquiry, so vehemently, that they could not even afford for us to reach within 200 km of darkness in Dantewada? In thus opposing us they revealed how far Chhattisgarh had fallen—how state was complicit and therefore afraid, that what we had heard could be verified. And so, we women, we were raising our voices—in a yell, in a loud call of protest, a waking up call to face and address our failures. We were finally awake to realities in Bastar—and now we shall not sleep!