

Dantewada Bus

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[Ganesh Singh runs the only bus that traverses the dreaded Maoist route between Chintalnar and Dornapal in Dantewada. Bizarrely enough, this is the third time he has tried to make a living in a terror zone—in Assam during the Ulfa strife, in Punjab just after Op Blue Star, and now in Chhattisgarh]

Around 7 AM each day, the fragrance of incense sticks fills a white bus stationed in Chintalnar village in Dantewada district of Chhattisgarh. In the driver's seat, Ganesh Singh, 60, softly chants a prayer and garlands a photograph of Hindu deities placed on a ledge below the windscreen.

'Each day, I just take Gods name and drive the bus out of Chintalnar. I never know if it will return in the evening', says Singh, the owner of the bus. For several years, he has been plying the only possible vehicle between Chintalnar and Dornapal town, a distance of 45 km. Even vehicles from the six CRPF camps which dot that stretch don't dare hit the broken road. In Chintalnar, a savage death can come to anyone any moment.

The bus run by Singh and his three sons is the only mode of transport available to those going to Dornapal town. The distance isn't much; it would perhaps take just an hour to traverse this even on a potholed Indian road. But this stretch takes four hours.

The road on which Singh makes a living is about five feet wide and has been dug up at several points, leaving huge boulders scattered around. Maoists often park fallen tree trunks on the stretch to obstruct passing vehicles. If a CRPF vehicle halts to remove the log, it gives the Maoists enough time to launch a full-scale attack. Worse, the road is layered with several hidden landmines that the Maoists can trigger at will. They have strategically positioned themselves in the deep jungles on either side of the road.

The bus leaves Chintalnar at 7 am and picks up passengers mostly adivasis along the way and reaches Dornapal by 11 am. It begins its journey back around 3 pm.

Interestingly, by some quirk of fate, this is the third time Singh has managed to land up in a troubled zone to earn a living. Originally from a village in UttarPradesh, he went to Assam as a young boy in search of a job in the tea gardens. What followed is a truly remarkable series of coincidences.

'A few years after I was in Assam, the Ulfa (United Liberation Front of Assam) launched its agitation against outsiders. There was no point going back home because repeated cycles of bad weather had made farming untenable for me. So I headed for Punjab. But then came Operation Blue Star. So I came to Chhattisgarh. I would buy vegetables from the adivasis living here and sell them in Dornapal. Now it seems to me that I'll be thrown out of here too. But this time I guess the destination would be up there', Singh laughs, 'pointing to the sky as he sips mahua, the local alcoholic beverage'.

The adivasis are not his only passengers. Often, Maoists board the bus, dressed in fatigues. They introduce themselves in Hindi but don't harm anyone.

The family has had to ferry other passengers as well. On April 6, 2010, when 76 CRPF jawans were killed during a three-hour Maoist ambush, Singh was summoned to carry the bodies from the site, five km away from Chintalnar and the CRPF camp. The bodies were then taken away by choppers for identification and the last rites.

'We'd heard the gunshots around 6 am and I instantly knew that something was wrong', recalls Sajan, Singh's second son. 'A few hours later, we were asked by the CRPF to transport the bodies in our bus. While I was picking up one body I noticed a landmine next to my feet. I was very scared. The sight of all the bodies in our bus still haunts me'.

A witness to the violence unleashed by both the Maoists as well as the CRPF, Singh is now tired of waiting for the day's bad news. Ever since *Salwa Judum* (the people's militia) was launched five years ago by the state government, this locality had no electricity. The children haven't been to school since then either. The only school running here was occupied by the CRPF and it was then bombed by the Maoists. Moreover, only the elders in this village have voter ID cards; there is none for the youth. The elections are rigged. Where is democracy? People only have anger, and perhaps only the Maoists understand this anger, says Singh.□