

BACK FROM NARAYANPATNA

A Report from Ground Zero

[A team of students from DU, JNU and IGNOU belonging to the Democratic Students' Union --(DSU) visited Narayanpatna Block in the Koraput district of Odisha from 11 April to 16 April 2011. The objective of the visit was to study the ground situation at present in the region where a militant mass struggle is going on for the last few years, and according to the media reports, has faced extreme forms of state repression. The aim was also to study the socio-economic aspects of the social life of Narayanpatna region, and to look into the factors that have contributed to the emergence of this important peasant struggle in contemporary South Asia. Following is a slightly shortened version of the preliminary report.]

Narayanpatna is inhabited by sixteen tribal communities including Kui, Parija, Jorka, Matia, Doria and others, of whom the Kuis are numerically predominant. The adivasis, who constitute more than 90 percent of around 45,000 people of Narayanpatna block, are interspersed with Dalit communities such as Mali, Dombo, Forga, Paiko, Rilli, etc. Dominant castes such as the Sundis and Brahmins are numerically small but are powerful and influential. Though the incursion of non-adivasis has a long history going back to the establishment of the Narayanpatna Raj centuries back, the Sundis have entered the district after they were driven away from Coastal Andhra during the Srikakulam armed struggle in the 1960s. The Sundis as well as a small section of Dalits from the Dombo and Rilli castes too have made money by exploiting the adivasis and selling them liquor. The non-adivasis are around 5000 in number, and the ruling elite of Narayanpatna belong to this group. It was also clear that the identities such as that of landlord, liquor trader, money-lender and politician are not separate or mutually exclusive, but usually coexist in the members of the dominant classes of the region.

Over the last few years, the poor and landless peasants of Narayanpatna, Bandhugaon, Simliguda, etc. have organised themselves under the banner of *Chasi Mulia Adivasi Sangha* (CMAS), and fought back their tormentors—the Sundi-Sahukar-Sarkar nexus. Even though CMAS was working in the region for more than fifteen years, it was only in the last three to four years that its anti-liquor movement took a decisive turn. It reached a flashpoint in January 2009 when the rural masses of Narayanpatna not only drove away the liquor traders from their villages, but mobilized themselves in thousands to pursue them to their stronghold, the towns. Four thousand people went to Narayanpatna town and destroyed liquor factories and wine shops, including shops selling foreign liquor. By late 2010, only two liquor shops were running in the entire region, and that too in the block headquarters of Narayanpatna and Bandhugaon where state's armed forces are stationed. In January 2011 more than 3000 CMAS members destroyed the shop in Bandhugaon town as well. In villages like Baliaput, Mahua trees from which cheap liquor was produced were destroyed under a political programme of CMAS and BAMS (Biplabi Adivasi Mahila Sangha), and today not a single Mahua tree is to be seen in Narayanpatna's villages. The prohibition in the sale and consumption of liquor was almost total by 2009. The mass upsurge led to the fleeing of landlords and liquor traders from the region, leading to the collapse of this parasitic trade. The villagers narrated how Jairam Pangi, the incumbent BJD MP from Koraput, tried to dissuade the people from the anti-liquor agitation by claiming that it was a part of adivasi culture, custom and worship, to which the people retorted that the very instrument which destroyed their lives cannot be a part of their devotion and sacrifice that is conducted for their common well being.

The success in the anti-liquor movement encouraged the masses to intensify the land struggle. The CMAS led the reclamation of agricultural land from the landlords and sahuks which were tricked out of the adivasis. Within months, the team members are told, more than 3000 acres of such land were recaptured and distributed among the villages. As a reaction to the growing tide of mass struggle, 'Shanti Committee' was formed by the landlords and liquor traders with the active support of the state administration on 4 May 2009. After the successful culmination of the anti-liquor struggle and the intensification of the land struggle by 2009, and particularly after the NALCO raid by the Maoists in April that year, the state repression on the people and their movement was also scaled up. One such incident of state repression was the murder of Wadeka Singana and Nachika Andru at Narayanpatna

police station on 20 November 2009, followed by wanton attacks, raids and combing operation in the region, establishing a reign of state terror. Entire village populations are often forced to take shelter in the forests and hills as fugitives. The government has now virtually imposed a siege of Narayanpatna by deploying more than 5000 paramilitary troops including BSF, IRB, CRPF, and hundreds of Special Operations Group commandos, Odisha police personnel and Shanti Committee vigilante forces and closing off all the important entry and exit points to and from Narayanpatna. Rather than addressing the demands of the people, it is mobilising more and more troops to crush the movement.

Team members interacted with the residents of above twenty villages spread out in the adjacent blocks of Narayanpatna, Bandhugaon, Simli-guda, Lakhmipur and Potangi. Kondahara Kasi of Kabribani panchayat who was arrested in 2010 for allegedly being a Maoist is still in jail. The plea of his wife to meet him in prison has been repeatedly turned down. 14 persons associated with CMAS are presently in jail from this locality alone. Ratnal Madhava of Silpalmanda village was arrested in March 2011 by the Bandhugaon police and a false kidnap case was slapped on him. Village Karaka Itiki under Borgi panchayat was the first village team members visited in Narayanpatna, where people told their stories of atrocities committed in the region by landlords, liquor traders, the police and now the Shanti Committee. Eight out of the thirty houses in Masarimunda village were burnt down by the CRPF in January 2011 after an encounter with the Maoists in the vicinity of the locality. Just a month before this, CRPF personnel destroyed houses in Goloknima village as well after another battle with the Maoists, and looted Rs 8000 from the villagers.

The team could also talk to villagers from Jangri Walsa village. Madan Merika, Poala Malati, Polla Bhima and Seena Mandangi described the attacks from 'Shanti Committee'. They attacked their village in thousands wearing police uniforms and with firearms on the suspicion that the villagers have started to align themselves with the CMAS Narayanpatna Area Committee under its president Nachika Linga. Nariga Poala, Aashu Pirika, Bhima Kedraka, Kasi Kondagari, Muga Poala, Penta Kondagari, Acchanna Poala and Enkanna Poala of this village, many of whom are teenagers, were arrested by the police later that year for allegedly being Maoists, and kept in prison for almost two years, and only recently were they released on bail. K Suhabsh and K Raman of Keshbhadra village of Bandhugaon block testified to the atrocities committed by the police, the Shanti Committee as well as by the CPI-ML (Kanu Sanyal) led by Arjun.

The land reclaimed by the CMAS in Manjariguda village under Borgi panchayat was shown to members, where the villagers have collectively cultivated 14 acres of irrigated land. In this village individual plots have not been distributed to the landless peasants so far, but will be done in the near future. Subbarao Somu, Sitala and Kanta from Langalbera village who belong to the Dombo Dalit caste, testified that poor people from both adivasi and dalit communities have benefited from the people's struggle against liquor and for land. He said that dalits inhabit two of the nine panchayats of Narayan-patna-Borgi and Langalbera panchayats. They said that there was no truth in the misinformation campaign that the struggle has harmed the dalits, and that there has been an exodus of dalits from villages in the wake of the movement. Somu said that around 50 families from only two villages of Gumandi and Podaradar have fled after the land struggle started. He said that most of them were involved in the liquor trade and were working against the interests of the adivasis. Dinabandhu and Simadri from Borgi village informed that the six landless Dalit families in their village have received 3 acres of land in March 2011 from CMAS, and have irrigated the land by putting community labour. Simadri said, "Those among Dalits who have garnered wealth and become politicians tried to instigate a contradiction between adivasis and dalits, but the poor have no contradiction. The poor dalits of entire Narayanpatna supports CMAS". Gumpa Vidika, a dalit worker who is presently the spokesperson of CMAS and is hiding from the state in fear of arrest, also talked of the class unity between the adivasis and dalits forged by this struggle in spite of the repeated attempts to pit one against the other.

171 villagers connected to the CMAS have been arrested so far, out of the 637 adivasi political prisoners jailed in entire Odisha. The police entered Dakapara village on the night of 4 April 2011 and beat up villagers including Sirka Sika and Sirka Rupaya. They looted Rs 5000 and Rs 2500 respectively from the two villagers. On a previous occasion, the government's forces attacked Sirka Bina's house on 1 January 2011, detained him and forcibly took him to the police camp, tortured for many hours and released him the next day. His wife's gold ornaments were also taken away by them. The team members interviewed Sonai Hikoka of Dumsili village whose husband Sitanna Hikoka was taken away by policemen from Lakhimpur police station in November 2010 along with two others.

While Kaila Taring and Sodanna Himbreka, the other two villagers have been released by police, there is no trace of Sitanna as yet. The police denied that they arrested him. She filed a Habeas Corpus application in the Odisha High Court, but her plea has been rejected recently by the court reposing full trust on the police's affidavit. Sonai says that her crops, grain, and cattle were looted by the goons of Shanti Committee when she went out to attend the court hearings. In Baliaput village dilapidated houses of Nachika Linga and Nachika Andru were burnt and destroyed by Shanti Committee goons. Members met Nachika Taman who spent more than a year in jail for allegedly being a Maoist, and was released in bail just a week ago, while Nachika Sanjeeva of his village is still languishing in Koraput jail. In addition, two of the undertrials were killed by the police through third-degree torture, and later it claimed that they committed suicide! Other prisoners are being subjected to regular beating and harassment, and many have sustained grievous injuries at the hands of the police and paramilitary forces. And these are only a few instances which were told by the villagers of the region during the six days of interaction.

The team interviewed Nachika Linga, the president of CMAS Narayanpatna Area Committee, and the 'most wanted' person for the police at present. He said that the movement has moved beyond the narrow limits of fighting for economic demands, and have held the present political system to be responsible for the marginalization of adivasis and the poor peasantry.

In truth the Maoist movement started in Koraput from 2003, and soon garnered support from the poor peasantry of the district. The movement has grown to the extent of giving shape to embryonic forms of people's power to take place of the exploitative state power by forming Revolutionary People's Committees (RPCs) covering two panchayat areas of Narayanpatna block. The RPCs are presently concentrating their energies in three heads: self-defence, agricultural development, and health & education. The Maoist party seemed to have roots among the working masses, and have so far been successful in withstanding the armed assault of the state. The state, alarmed by the spread of the movement, has sought to use brute force, and thereby further isolating itself from the people.

The Narayanpatna struggle, is one of the most important but least known movements of present times, and the corporate media as well as the statist academia has played their roles in presenting it in a distorted form. □□□