

Of Violence and MoUs

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A couple of months ago, a fleet of Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) vans suddenly landed up near a stinking by-lane of Delhi's East Nizamuddin area and earnestly began clearing off months of accumulated garbage and cleaning up the sewer lines.

As the neighbours looked on in amazement, the assembled crew walked up to a nondescript home and rang the doorbell.

No sooner had the dhoti-kurta clad old gentleman opened the door, the officers began apologising. "We had no idea that you lived here sir. We are cleaning up the area completely," they told him with folded hands.

Indeed, if you walk into the same neighbourhood today—you'll notice with surprise that the MCD brigade—for once—kept its promise.

Till the arrival of the MCD vans on their doorsteps that fateful day, hardly anybody in the locality gave the 81-year-old former IAS officer BD Sharma a second glance.

But overnight, the man had not only become a messiah for residents in this locality—for bringing about a 'clean' revolution—but had also shot to fame in the national consciousness for being the key man behind the release of Sukma collector Alex Paul Menon after 12 days in Maoist captivity.

Interestingly, it was the Maoists who had handpicked Sharma to be their interlocutor with the government for mediating the release of the abducted Sukma collector.

But why Sharma? More pertinently, why do Maoists have a soft spot for this feeble elderly gentleman?

The answer to that question is Sharma's decades of work among the tribals of the region, first as the Collector of the undivided Bastar district of Madhya Pradesh and then as a social activist.

The 1968-69 Bailadila incident is particularly famous wherein Sharma forced non-tribals working in nearby mines to marry 300 tribal women - whom they had been sexually exploiting for years.

Ever since, he is looked upon with immense admiration among the tribals of the region, and has also campaigned extensively for their cause. In conversation with this correspondent he spoke at length about the potential solutions for unrest in Maoist affected areas.

Excerpts from the interview :

- Red terror is on a rise. How can the menace be tackled?
- The tribals are raising some important questions, which have to be discussed. Before independence, all tribal areas were treated as secluded parts where no rules were followed.

According to Tribal Act 1935, only the Governor was vested with the power of deciding the laws to be implemented in the respective tribal areas. But of late, Governors have forgotten to use their discretion. As a result, almost all laws are enacted in tribal areas. Since tribals have for centuries followed their own rules, obviously there will be a clash with the State.

- But what are naxals demanding now?
- The tribals want to have ownership of all natural resources in their areas. The resources, they feel were theirs to start with. Their long standing demand is that natural resources should be owned by the people and not the government.
- But are guns the solution?
- Well, this may continue till such time as the ownership issue is resolved. This was also the reason for Tana Bhagat's revolt.
- You adamantly refused to sign any mining lease during your tenure as the DM of Bastar. Why?
- I never sanctioned any mining lease because I knew that it would be against tribal interests. You cannot do developmental work in a tribal region solely on the basis of money. I wrote this on every file that I rejected.
- Why did you resign from the IAS?
- It was due to my differences with the government over the Bastar Pine Project. At that time, I was the Secretary, Tribal Affairs in MP. The government wanted to set up 15 industries by taking a loan of Rs 200 crore from the World Bank. I had protested and so the project was cancelled. This led to my resignation.
- You were the last SC/ST commissioner who worked at a notional salary of Re 1 per month. How was the experience?
- Money was not my reason for taking on the responsibility of welfare of the SC/ST communities. Just 18 days before her assassination, Indira Gandhi had asked me to take the responsibility. I handled the charge from 1986 till 1991. Only after a thorough study of the issue did I finally submit the 28th report on SC/ST to the President.
- You now lead the Bharat Jan Andolan. What is the movement about?

- This movement was started with an aim to fight for free water, forest and land to tribals. It has huge support from tribals. This is why the government was forced to bring in the PESA - Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) - Act. Sadly, this act has not been enacted in its true spirit. Even the Forest Act 2006 has not been implemented honestly.
- How can we prevent Maoists from indulging in violence?
- If we stop signing MoUs that allow major companies to take land on lease for setting up industries, violence will automatically stop. It is sad but there is hardly any talks held with Maoists. Only dialogue can get a solution. Fortunately, some initiative in this direction has recently come from social activists. □□

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