

They Are Indians Too

Himanshu Kumar

[On March 9, 2010, activist Himanshu Kumar gave a talk in Kolkata at a public meeting organised by Ekhon Bisanbad, speaking about his experiences in Dantewada over 18 years, and about the ongoing "Operation Green Hunt" being conducted to ostensibly root out left wing extremists. The following is his speech, transcribed and edited by Sanhati members Ishita Das and Suvarup Saha.]

My wife and I went to Dantewada trying to follow Gandhiji's guideline. My father had worked with Gandhiji before, he had set fire to the station in Muzzaffarpur (which is where we are from) in 1942 and absconded. He had then corresponded with Gandhiji and who invited him over to Sevagram, where he lived till 1946. He had also participated in the *Bhoo Daan* movement led by Vinobha Bhave. So working for the true development of the country runs in the family. That was inspiration enough for us to go and live with the adivasis.

What we found there, talking to the adivasis, bewildered us. The adivasis were in dire straits. They didn't know what country it was that they were a part of. Didn't know its name or of its existence. It looked to us that the British occupation had never reached them, they had continued to live in their own world right through the period of colonization of our country. Then we had got our independence, set up our government and unilaterally declared that the adivasis were now Indians to be governed by people who were as ignorant about them as the adivasis were about the government.

The only way our government actually reached them, was as police. To take away their land. I remember now, there is a village called Dhulli, where Essar wants to install a steel plant. We have a law in the Bakhtar area, which is a scheduled area, where in case there is any work to be done by outsiders to the village –you need to occupy a piece of land or anything–the adivasi gram-sabha makes the decision. But the gram-sabha turned out to be CRPF patrolling in front of every house. Villagers couldn't even go to bring water for their children. If they ventured out, they were caught by their necks and brought to the school in the center of the village. This was overseen by a collector, SP and the MLA from Congress Mr Mahendra Karma. The adivasis were expected to come through one door, leave their thumb print on a paper that dispossesses them of their own land and exit through another.

Now, if I were an adivasi and was in the same situation, it would seem to me that the only reasons for losing my land and my resources were because the "government" agents were not on my side and that they had guns. So the only way to oppose them and save my resources, would be to have guns of my own.

If we had brought the constitution to the adivasis and taught them to respect the law, in a lawful manner, they could have respected them both. But they weren't taught that, they were taught the power of the guns.

We saw that the ration shops had no rations, there were no teachers in the schools and no transportation. We started to interact with the ladies of the village to tell them that the constitution provides for all of that for them. But if they asked for any of that, they were Naxalites. If we wanted progress, even then we were called Naxalites.

When the Chattisgarh state was formed, the government wanted to use the land for mining and they got many MoUs. Then as an afterthought they remembered there were many Naxalites in the area. One of my friends had gone to a CII meeting. The businessmen there were saying that while we have a license to do work, the Naxalites are not letting us progress.

An MoU was signed between the government and a very big iron company. Within a day they started Salwa Judum. In Salwa Judum the government said that the villagers were supporting the Naxalites. The adivasis were told to leave their homes and live in the camps around the police station, in order to cure the evil of Naxalites. These adivasis are not used to living in confinement, they live in the open forests.

Many government officials would go to them, carrying guns, to persuade people to leave. People who didn't want to go to the camps were coerced using guns. Guns were given to a gang of hooligans who would fire at fleeing adivasis. Many girls were raped. Little children were killed. People who ran away were labeled Naxalites. Their homes were burned. The poor adivasis tried to come back and rebuild their houses but they were burned again and again.

When that happened we went against the government. Our ashram was promptly demolished. Our workers were arrested. Seven hundred villages were burnt, about three- four lakh population, 50,000 were taken to the camp, 50000 fled to AP and Orissa or Maharashtra, 3 lakhs fled to the forest where they are still under attack. Our representative, Nandini Sundar went to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court ordered the government to rebuild all the villages. Not a single village was rehabilitated by the government. The Supreme Court ordered the government to give compensation to the adivasis, not a single adivasi has received any compensation.

Finally the SC asked NHRC to send a team to Dantewada. This team had a hundred policemen. There is a village called Nendra which had been burned four times. The adivasis from there went to give affidavits to the NHRC, there were four girls missing from that village and ten people had been killed. When these adivasis were trying to go back, they were held up in a Salwa Judum camp for a whole day. They were beaten all day and forced to place their thumbprints on papers stating that they had been forced to give the affidavits, and that they had

nothing to say against *Salwa Judum*. The village was burnt yet again four days later.

We told the NHRC team about the atrocities the adivasis were facing, because they had dared to come give their affidavits against Salwa Judum; they refused to be of any help, saying that their job here was only to take the affidavits.

When I saw the state of the burned down village, I felt their deep sorrow and that became my empowerment. It is true that we are Gandhivadis, who are non-violent by nature. But I thought that attachment to that tenet was not as important as rebuilding the hopes and lives of villages full of innocent people, who are also citizens of this democratic country, but are not being treated as such. I decided that we will help rebuild their village. If the government says that anyone who is not with Salwa Judum is a Naxalite then that is fine.

Then we started living in Nendra. When we addressed the villagers in a gathering, telling them that we were going to live there and do whatever we could to help them re-establish their homes, one villager in the gathering got up and said that they could rebuild their homes themselves, the only thing they asked from us was to make sure that once they did start living in those homes and farming, no one would come and kill them. To an open letter to the Chief Minister I wrote that even now, the only thing these adivasis want from us, is to spare their lives. Nothing more. When asked if there was anything more we could do, one old man got up and said my daughter was kidnapped two years ago by Salwa Judum and the police, she is still being held in the house of one of the leaders of Salwa Judum, can I bring her back home?

In the same letter to the CM, I asked, is his heart or mind also not bound to our great Nation as our anthem says it is for all Indians? *Jana Gana Mana Adhinayak Jaya he?* Are all these people in their tattered clothes and burned homes not one of "We, the people of India"?

Our number one priority was to bring back the daughter of the old man. What scared me was she was taken not by the dacoits, but government officials on government duty. For a minute I thought, can my daughter also be taken forcefully by law officials? But then the constitution of India gave me some consolation, as I knew and understood the constitution and my rights and its power, perhaps no one could take my daughter in the same way. Since the officials know that the adivasis don't know the law, they do as they please with no respect for humanity or people's lives.

While two girls had been killed with no trace of their bodies, two girls were still alive in the Salwa Judum camp. We were able to bring the girls back to the village, back to her father. The next day a tree trunk lay on the road, blocking the way into the village. When we saw that we went around asking why, the villagers had uncharacteristically resorted to something symbolically linked to Naxalites.

It turns out that one of the girl's father had cut the tree to prevent the police to come back to the village and take her again.

A lot of these mis-happenings there are linked to innocuous reasons. Kopa Kunjam is our associate from the adivasi groups who has helped rebuild thirty villages, like Nendra. He is a young adivasi who is not with the Salwa Julum or in the other camp. He is absolutely neutral. He works for the adivasis.

Then one day we were sitting in a village, a young girl came towards us, hiding something from us. When we asked her what it was, she showed us a wooden pistol. She was carrying it to scare the Salwa Judum's SPOs —police officers when they attacked her. Girls that carry wooden pistols to preserve their virtue are being called Naxalites by the government, which is actually supposed to be protecting them.

Today, no activist can go to any tribal village. No reporter can go to any such village. Why? What are you doing in those villages that needs to be hidden away? This has happened many times in history. We all know of the old tales when the gods defeated the dark devils, originally living in this land. The dark devils described seem a lot like the adivasis of today, who are in danger of being robbed off their land. In this day we need minerals for progress and wherever the adivasis live there are minerals. So now the adivasis are the enemies of progress. Just like killing Muslims is justified by calling them traitors, we find excuses to condone the atrocities committed against the adivasis. The only way we know of solving a problem is to kill the enemy. Though all over history we have seen that killing anything has never solved the problem or ended anything. Modi thought that the Muslims were an enemy for all Hindus and decided to commit genocide against all Muslims. Which didn't really solve the problem but actually increase communalism. Mr Chidambaram now thinks that all the adivasis are Naxalites and they should also be killed.

When seven hundred villages were burned during *Salwa Judum*, the number of Naxalites had more than doubled. When they had burned the village, they had burned the schools, aangan badis, ration shops, villagers were not allowed to go to the bazaar to buy food. In the hope that they would be forced to go move to the camp, to avoid starvation, leaving their land. So a woman who lives close to a bazaar, which she cannot go to because if she does, she is likely to get recognized. Then, she could be raped or forced to go to the camp or possibly killed. What she does is, walks to a bazaar eighty kilometres away. Takes her four days per week, just to bring back rice. We asked her why she wouldn't just buy the ration for a whole month. She said, that we don't have money, we only have *mahua*, which we barter for food. We carry as much as we can on our head and then bring back whatever we can in exchange for that.

Right now, any adivasi living there, feels that the Naxalites are their protectors and the government and its police their enemy.

This false democracy is not going to last, it doesn't need Naxalites to fall on its face. We are the last people trying to save it. We are trying to tell you that if a war is fought against eighty percent of the people of the nation, that is not going to be acceptable to the people. Democracy is not just the observation of parades at India gate, the speeches, the Parliament, Members of Parliament or the Supreme Court. If people don't get justice, there is no way of fighting poverty, no one listens to the people's problems, then democracy based just on the structural forces cannot last. We need the real values of democracy to be implemented. Unlike what our Prime Minister said, Naxalites are not our greatest threat to internal security. The government itself is.

If democracy is not applied to the grassroots level, then there is no alternative to large-scale unrest. I even met Mr Rahul Gandhi. Today he is very powerful. I asked him to come to Dantewada. He asked me to meet someone else. No one wants to meet the tribes. If some politician wants to go there, he will not be allowed to go. No activist can live there, leaving no avenues open for the adivasis to express their problems or their frustration. The outcome of all this suppressed angst can only be violent. □□ [abridged]
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