Salwa Judum: Civil War in Chhattisgarh

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Dantewada district, situated at the southern tip of Chhattisgarh, has borders with Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. Of the 1354 villages in the district, 455 are wholly tribal and another 458 are more than 90 per cent tribal, i.e. 75 per cent of the districts villages are almost completely tribal.

**Socio - Economic Indicators**

The villagers are heavily dependent on both agriculture and forests. Of the total village land, barely 29 percent land is cultivated, and nearly half is designated as forest and the rest is either uncultivable or is culturable waste. The average landholding per household (2001 Census) works out to 1.01 hectare, i.e., 2.5 acres. Irrigation being by and large absent (barely 2 percent have some sort of irrigation), only a single crop is possible. Rainfall based agriculture and the collection of non-timber forest produce, is the main mode of economic life.
Literacy levels are low in rural areas at 29% for men and 14% for women, with an overall rural literacy rate of 21%. This is related to the availability and the quality of schools in the district: out of the 1354 villages, 214 do not have even a primary school and, of these, for 107 villages the school is more than 5 kilometers away. The situation is distinctly worse regarding health facilities. Out of the 1354 villages, there is no medical facility in 1161 villages. A primary health centre exists only in 26 villages; a private registered medical practitioner in 17 villages, a government subsidised one in 12 and a community health worker in 122 villages.

The socio-economic conditions are not adequately captured by statistics of land holdings and other indicators of the state of being in rural India in general.

While the people of Dantewada are extremely poor, their land is extremely rich, both in terms of minerals and forests. When the government talks of development, it appears to have in mind the development of these resources for private profit as against the development of its people.

The mines have provided no employment locally, what they have given the region is pollution of the rivers Sankini and Dankini. These efforts at exploiting natural resources have gained momentum since the formation of the state of Chhattisgarh in 2001. The new state government has entered into agreements with several industrial houses such as the Tatas and Essar to set up steel plants on land leased from the state.

Under the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act 1996 (PESA), it is necessary to consult the Gram Sabha before acquiring land in Fifth Schedule areas. To the contrary, in Nagarnar, the government used violence against protestors, and resolutions that were unfavourable to the government were simply replaced by pro-plant resolutions in the books.

Nearly six decades of official ‘development’ has little to show for it. On the other hand, there is a small minority mostly trading families, shopkeepers, members of the bureaucracy, lawyers and others living in the small towns, and some rich tribal leaders who have gained through politics or corruption involving illicit felling of trees and illegal mining who want large development projects.
Political Movement

Over the past two decades, the People’s War Group [Now CPI (Maoist)] have been making steady inroads into the tribal districts of Chhattisgarh, and Dantewara particularly. Parts of the district have largely passed out of the control of the state administration. As in some other states in India, the growth of Maoist influence is in large part attributable to the neglect of tribal interests and aspirations by the formal political and administrative system.

Around 1980, CPI (People’s War Group) started an organization in the area of present-day Dantewada district, called the Dandakaranya Adivasi Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan (DAKMS). Also important is the creation of sanghams in villages. These were intended to gradually replace the traditional structures of authority at the village level, articulate issues of the village like land, access to forests, fair wages and higher prices for Non-timber Forest Produce (NFTP) and settle disputes. By 2000, when the state of Chhattisgarh was created, the CPI (Maoist)] had created substantial bases in the forest areas of Bastar, Kanker, and Dantewada.
Emergence of Salwa Judum

In the summer of 2005, news reports started appearing of a ‘spontaneous’, ‘self-initiated’, ‘people’s movement’ against the Maoists, known as the Salwa Judum. A literal translation of this Gondi term, is not the government preferred ‘peace campaign’, but ‘purification hunt’. The district administration claims that upset with the Maoist strike call on collecting tendu leaves and opposition to development works like road construction and grain levies, people in some 200 villages began mobilizing against the Maoists, going on processions and holding meetings.

However, this picture of the Salwa Judum is far from accurate. The fact is that the Salwa Judum is being led by sections of local elites, contractors and traders, that it is officially part of anti-naxal initiatives, and that it is being actively supported by the state government.

Spontaneous or Government Sponsored

At or very soon after its inception, the Salwa Judum came under the control and leadership of Mr Mahendra Karma, the Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from Dantewada and leader of opposition from the Congress Party. Mr Karma’s initiative is being supported by the BJP Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh, Dr Raman Singh.

Mahendra Karma, MLA from Dantewada (sitting second from right) and K R Pisda, District Collector, Dantewada (sitting in middle)
at a Salwa Judum meeting in Kota, Dantewada
An official Government document - The Work proposal for the ‘People’s Movement against Naxalites’ drawn up by the Collector of Dantewara in 2005 – clearly spells out the modalities of the Salwa Judum’s operation. The document mentions the need to give the movement prominent leadership, specifies how much funding is necessary and what tasks must be conducted by which department.

Salwa Judum is clearly promoted and funded by Government, yet it is not officially listed anywhere, nor is there transparency on how much of the state’s budget has been set aside for it.

Government support for the Salwa Judum is evident in a number of ways. Printed posters are pinned to trees along the highway, and there are painted signboards every few kilometers. It would be unusual for a poor adivasi people’s movement in a district with such low literacy to spend money on printing such a huge number of posters.
Modus Operandi of Salwa Judum

“This is what happened in Bangapal, sir. On 3rd August we held a meeting in Munder village. Villagers from Munder ran away to the hills. The Naga Battalion went to the hills, caught them and brought them back, and made them join the Salwa Judum. Those who were unwilling to join were arrested. I don’t know everything — I don’t know how many people have been made to join and how many arrested.”

Lakshman Kashyap, Local leader of Salwa Judum, in an interview to PUDR fact finding team

First, Salwa Judum meetings were organized in villages that were known to support the Maoists. The audience for these meetings is transported by buses hired or procured by the administration. Often, various politicians address the Salwa Judum meetings. In the course of these meetings, the houses of villagers are burnt and their cattle, pigs, poultry and other household goods looted. Processions, called padyatras, go from the larger villages where camps are located and are accompanied by the security forces and sometimes, by the Collector or the SP.

According to figures received from the Collector of Dantewada, there have been 139 Padyatras and 47 meeting organised till January 2007.

Initially there was at least the pretense of trying to convince villagers to join Salwa Judum so that those who didn’t join the Salwa Judum were forcibly brought in by the Salwa Judum members, the police and the Naga IRB. Now, the Salwa Judum does not even stop to ask villagers to join – it simply burns and loots villages.
Leadership & Composition of the Salwa Judum

Even as the structure of Salwa Judum remains amorphous, it is clearly discernable that a new line of command is being created in Dantewada. There are at least four different levels of hierarchy in the Salwa Judum:

1) **Top political leadership:** The Salwa Judum has the political backing of both the Congress and the BJP, but Mahendra Karma is the widely acknowledged leader of the Salwa Judum.

2) **Camp leaders:** Several of the local Salwa Judum leaders, such as Ram Bhuvan Kushwaha in Dornapal, or Ajay Singh in Bhairamgarh, are non-Adivasi immigrants from UP, who have worked as contractors and traders.

3) **SPOs:** Special Police Officers appointed, paid, trained and armed by the Government have come to play a crucial role in Salwa Judum operations (please see box for detailed account). They are mostly unemployed, Adivasi youth and minors.

4) **Ordinary villagers:** Also considered part of the Salwa Judum are hundreds of ordinary adivasis - many of whom have been forcibly brought to camps by the forces. Once in camp, they are taken to loot and burn other villages and become vulnerable to retaliatory action by the Maoists and the villagers whose houses have been burnt or relatives killed.
Special Police Officers (SPOs)

The Government has appointed some 5000 Special Police Officers, pays them Rs. 1500 pm. These are not merely additional security forces, but are an integral part of the Salwa Judum movement.

Who are the SPOs appointed in Dantewara?

- Unemployed tribal youth
- Minors - boys and girls
- Criminal elements active in Salwa Judum
- Some surrendered sangham members

Under the MP Police Regulations (adopted by Chhattisgarh), the government has the powers to appoint Special Police Officers (Section 17, 18, 19 of the Police Act 1861). These SPOs are meant to be recruited in special situations of ‘unlawful assembly or riot or disturbances of the peace’, when the regular police force is not sufficient (Section 17). They are not meant to counter a long term problem like guerilla warfare. The SPOs are meant to be people of standing in the area who can ensure peace, not minors and certainly not lumpen elements with allegedly criminal pasts.

Special training is given to them in camps near the Salwa Judum camps.

Visitors to Dantewada are often stopped by people who claim to be SPOs. They appear to be bound by no rules or authority whatsoever. Cases of violence, looting, threats and extortion reported against SPOs are not registered or investigated. Not armed in the same manner as regular police officers (Many are armed with bows and arrows, or with obsolete WWII vintage .303 rifles) they take part in the combing operations and are usually the first to be killed during these operations and are also targeted during Maoist attacks.

The memorial built by the Chhattisgarh police of an SPO who died 2 months short of his 18th birthday. He must have been an SPO for at least a few months prior to that.

Young SPOs at the Maraigudem camp
Salwa Judum And Violence

The Salwa Judum has been responsible for a massive amount of violence in the district, which includes killing civilians, burning and looting their houses, and raping women.

Arson & Loot

Reports from local journalists and independent groups have time and again attested incidents of arson and loot by Salwa Judum across Dantewada. Arson is used as a practical strategy to coerce people to join Salwa Judum. Incidents of looting and pillage abound. There is a general feeling of insecurity and abandonment since there is no one to complain to.

Houses burnt by Salwa Judum
Killing

In general, a number of killings took place in the course of these acts of arson and looting. Across the district stories abound of people being burnt inside their houses and of bodies being dumped on the roadside. Killings have also taken place during combing operations by the military. The exact number is however not known.

Attempts to get an accurate and comprehensive picture of the number of deaths in the district ran into three roadblocks:

1) The discrepancy in official figures and the lack of an updated list,
2) The fact that a large number of deaths are officially unrecognized,
3) There is no detail on the circumstances of these deaths.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People Killed By Salwa Judum and Security Forces</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
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<tr>
<td>250 killed in encounters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CG Police</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005-2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Approx 500 names</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 2005-March 2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>450 villagers killed, 700 villages burnt</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPI (Maoist) press release</td>
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Impunity to Kill & Loot: No FIRs

No FIRs have been registered against the Salwa Judum for killings and other incidents of violence (senior police officials have confirmed this to some of the fact finding teams). This also means that there is no investigation and no compensation to their families. Maoist killings are however recorded and compensation paid to the victims.
Violence against Women

Reports of extreme violence against women, including gang rape, custodial rape, mutilation of private parts, murder and continuous sexual abuse in villages, police stations and the so called relief camps have been filtering in from Dantewada District for close to a year now. These incidents have been reported by villagers to local NGOs and other citizens.

There is no official record of cases of sexual violence in Dantewada District in the last year. It is shocking to see how the Chhattisgarh government has completely failed to take action in any of these reported incidents.

Summary Arrests & Missing People

Since Salwa Judum began in 2005, hundreds of people have been missing. They are picked up and taken to jail when the Salwa Judum attacks the village, or they get lost when the village is displaced after an attack. There are no lists of missing persons, no formal mechanism through which families can lodge complaints and try to track down family members, and no attempts to make this information available. Many have been summarily arrested without following due legal procedure and are languishing in jails. There is no information about most others.
Forced Migration & Internal Displacement

The biggest and most tragic fall out of Salwa Judum has been the forced displacement of Adivasis: displacement into the roadside camps, displacement into Andhra Pradesh and displacement into the interiors of the jungles of Dantewara. Villages and even families have been divided.

The lowest estimate of the displaced would be about 70,000, and a possible maximum would be 1,00,000. Nearly half of them are driven into the roadside camps where the choices are starvation or lumpenization.

According to government figures, as of 21.01.2007, there are now officially 47,238 villagers in 20 camps. It is difficult to overstate the extent to which the daily lives of thousands of people have been turned upside down and their livelihoods destroyed due to the ongoing evacuation of villages. They are unable to continue with their agricultural activities and their normal existence, and are expected to go on Salwa Judum processions and meetings in other villages and be part of other attacking parties.

Large numbers have fled into neighbouring districts and states especially Andhra Pradesh, where they camp, desperate and alone, under trees, in makeshift tents, or live at the mercy of relatives and friends, doing unaccustomed wage labour. There are, however, no figures of the number of these internally displaced people. They live precariously, under the constant fear of eviction by forest and police officials.
Life in Salwa Judum Camps

The government has set up several camps in where villagers have been brought in, forced most of the times, in classic strategic hamletting style. According to figures provided by the Chhattisgarh government, there are 47500 people living in 20 Salwa Judum camps in Dantewara.

Name of Block | Name of Camp | No. of camp residents
--- | --- | ---
Bijapur | Bijapur | 5408
 | Cherpal | 756
 | Gangalur | 1856
Usur | Awapalli | 272
 | Basaguda | 1544
 | Usur | 251
Geedam | Bangapal | 480
 | Kasoli | 741
Bhairamgarh | Bhairamgarh | 2999
 | Pharsegarh | 391
 | Matwada | 1310
 | Nelasnar (new site) | 832
 | Jangla | 1363
 | Kutru | 1312
 | Mirtur | 763
 | Bedre | 454
Konta | Dornapal | 15147
 | Errabor | 4713
 | Injeram | 3334
 | Konta | 3312
Total | | 47238

Most people are surviving on meager government rations, or on Food for Work programmes of the Central Government.
In some camps such as one in Dornapal which is proposed to be turned into a permanent village, the administration has built semi-permanent houses but no provisions for long term livelihood or even food, health etc have been made.
Spiraling Violence

The Government’s only response to Maoist insurgency has been to resort of has been to step up police operations and to pit civilians, in the name of Salwa Judum, against Maoists and against each other. By resorting to such measures, the government has seriously challenged the efficacy of democratic and constitutional means of finding solutions to people’s problems. It has completely failed to address the root of the discontent, the deprivation and alienation of Adivasis, which form the basis of the Maoist foothold in Dantewada.

What all these measures have resulted in an increasingly militarized tribal society and escalating violence as the Maoists have also stepped up their attacks on the para military forces as well as anybody they suspect as being part of Salwa Judum. Contrary to Government claims, there is enough evidence to indicate that the situation has led to conditions approaching civil war.

Maoists bomb blast

Government has ignored the fact this sort of counter insurgency operations have never worked as experiences from across the world show.
Errabore camp attacked by the Maoists

There has been a complete disruption of life in Dantewada. Village markets (haats), schools, anganwadis and health services in the villages have been disrupted. Security forces are using schools as bases, which violates international conventions. The Maoists have been blasting these schools.

The Government doesn’t even treat those not in the Salwa Judum camps as citizens and they are not provided even with the most basic amenities.

School which was used by security forces as base, blasted by Maoist
We Demand

We demand that the Chhattisgarh Government:

⇒ Disband and disarm Salwa Judum immediately
⇒ Stop appointing Special Police Officers
⇒ Stop recruiting children and adolescents below 18 years of age
⇒ Allow Adivasis to return home to their villages; wherever houses and property has been destroyed or damaged, government should re-build them.
⇒ Stop harassment and allow free access to journalists, civil society organisations, and medical and education workers to Dantewada.
⇒ Repeal the Chhattisgarh Special Public Security Act 2005
⇒ Create a conducive atmosphere for dialogue to find political resolution to political issues
⇒ Stop arrests, detention and false implication of Human rights activists, social workers etc and release all such persons.

We demand that the Government of India:

⇒ Stop aiding and abetting Salwa Judum in the name of promoting “local resistance groups”.
⇒ Institute a high level independent enquiry into all acts of violence-rape, arson, loot, murder and disappearances by Salwa Judum and paramilitary forces and initiate criminal proceedings.
⇒ Recognise the right to life and dignity of internally displaced people living outside Chhattisgarh and ensure their safety
⇒ Create a conducive atmosphere for dialogue to find political resolution to political issues

We demand that the CPI (Maoist):

⇒ Stop all forms of violence
⇒ Create a conducive atmosphere for dialogue to find political resolution to political issues
⇒ Stop recruiting children and adolescents below 18 years of age
⇒ Allow safe return of villagers to their home including Salwa Judum supporters.
Appeal to Members of Parliament

Raise this issue in the Parliament and demand a Parliamentary debate on Ministry of Home Affairs policy of promoting “local resistance groups” in general and Salwa Judum in particular. Institute Joint Parliamentary Committee to investigate the role played by the state police, political parties and Ministry of Home Affairs in creating the civil war situation.

Appeal to all concerned citizens

Please visit Dantewara and assess the situation yourself.

Raise your voice against Salwa Judum and the flagrant human rights violation in Chhattisgarh wherever you are.