

# BASTAR

## AN INVESTIGATION INTO AN 'ENCOUNTER'

PEOPLE'S UNION FOR CIVIL LIBERTIES (MADHYA PRADESH)

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PEOPLE'S UNION FOR DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS (DELHI)

JUNE 1985

## INTRODUCTION

In Bastar, as in other parts of the country, slowly the forest dwellers are getting awakened and organised. They are raising their voice against the increasing encroachments on their lands and rights by the forest department, against the harassment by forest officials and guards, and are demanding a fair share in development. The deployment of a Special Armed Force (SAF) battalion in the district and the killing of a political activist in an alleged 'encounter' gains significance in context of this situation. Hence the members of People's Union for Civil Liberties (M.P.), Committee for the Protection of Democratic Rights (Nagpur) and People's Union for Democratic Rights (Delhi) went on a Joint Fact Finding Team to investigate the actual facts behind the alleged 'encounter' of Ganapati and the reasons for the deployment of SAF in the district in the context of the backwardness of the people of the region. The Team consisted of Om Prakash Rawal, former Education Minister, Madhya Pradesh, Anil Trivedi, Lawyer, and K. Suresh, Social Worker of the PUCL (MP) ; Ramesh Billorey Social Scientist, Joseph Mathai and Ashok Prasad, students, Delhi University, from PUDR (Delhi); Anuradha Ghandy, Lecturer in Sociology, Nagpur University, from. CPDR (Nagpur) ; M.J. Pandey from The Times of India, Bombay and Janaklal Thakur, MLA, Dalli Rajhara. From June 1 to June 4 1985, the Team visited Thadveli where Ganapati was shot dead, adjoining Bengali and tribal villages, Kanker which is the centre for North Bastar, Sukma, Kondagaon and Jagdalpur which is the district headquarters. The Team spoke to villagers both tribal and non-tribal, administrators, police officials and also met a cross section of people-journalists, lawyers, political workers and students. The following is the report of the Team :

## I. SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

Bastar district is located in India's densely forested region and more than 50% of its area is under forest cover. It is situated in the southern most tip of Madhya Pradesh. It shares boundaries with Maharashtra in the West, Andhra Pradesh in the South and in the East, Orissa. With an area of more than 39,000 square kilometres it is the second largest district in India, larger than the state of Kerala. Prior to its integration into the Union Territory of India, as part of M.P., Bastar consisted of two feudatory states of Ranker and Bastar. The former state of Bastar, lying south of the Chattis-garh plains, was ruled by the Kaketiya Kings, who are said to have migrated from Warangal, A.P., in the 15th Century A.D.

The district is prominently rural with only four towns. The present population is 18.43 Lakhs, 94% of which live in villages. Majority of the population of Bastar is tribal. Marias, Murias, the Dhurwas, the Halbas are among the major tribes of Bastar. The proportion of scheduled tribes in the total population has been declining from 72% in 1961 to 66% in 1981.

Bastar is one of the most backward regions of the country. The average literacy rate is 14% while that of the entire State is 28%. Female literacy is only 7% while male literacy is 21%. Scheduled Tribe literacy, is even lower, only 7% of the tribal population is literate and out of this only 17% are female. The principal occupation of the people is agriculture, but by and large, land holdings are uneconomical and the meagre agricultural income has to be supplemented by collection of minor forest produce. Cultivators and agricultural workers constitute 96% of the working population. But only 8.2 lakh hectares were sown in 1982-83 which was less than the area sown in the previous year. The area of irrigated land is negligible, the main source of irrigation being tanks and wells. Agriculture is mainly practised for home consumption and commercial crops are rare. Sugarcane is grown in Jagdalpur and some other areas in South Bastar, while jute is grown around Pakhanjur area in Narayanpur. Both sugarcane and jute are exported out of the

district.

Bastar has some mineral resources. Its annual average production of Iron ore is 4.6 million tonnes, which is exported. Tin ore, corundum, bauxite and dolomite deposits are also to be found. Industrial development in Bastar is restricted to 81 factories registered in 1982, employing 1,700 persons—0.33% of the working population.

In their state of utmost economic deprivation tribals are often forced to part with their land. The 1981 Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribes Commissioner's Report states that even in tribal areas, tribal farmers are being pushed to hilly and unproductive areas and most fertile lands have been taken by non-tribals. The Madhya Pradesh Land Revenue Code 1959 provides clauses to prevent land alienation of the tribals, but it remains on paper. A survey of Jagdalpur area itself shows 2,000 cases of illegal land transfer. The SC/ST Report describes the situation quite accurately when it states, "The 'tribals of Bastar have been exploited by Zamindars, Mahajans, contractors and officials. They have lost their land to outsiders. All 'pucca' houses belong to non-tribals... vast forests were destroyed for Bailadila Iron Ore project (and in other 'development' programmes too). Most employment went to outsiders. Social tensions have increased."

## II. FORESTS AND PEOPLE

Having lived in the forests since centuries tribals enjoy a symbiotic relationship with them. Though an over-whelming majority of tribals are no-longer shifting cultivators and are settled cultivators, agriculture on its own is not sufficient to maintain them at subsistence levels. Therefore the forest dwellers depend heavily on forest to supplement their meagre diets and income. They collect roots, edible leaves, fruits, honey etc. and hunt wild animals. Their huts, agricultural implements and crafts are made from bamboo and wood obtained from the forest. They depend on forests for fuel wood. Collection of minor forest produce like tendu leaves, harra, cosa, sal seeds is an important source of income. Thus the whole socio-economic frame work of the tribals is

intimately connected with the forest.

Till the last century the tribals were the *de facto* owners of the forests. During the British period gradual encroachment on their rights began. With the new Acts passed by the government of India their rights were further infringed. The tribals now find themselves at the mercy of the forests department and revenue officials.

In Bastar 20% of the forest area is under reserved forest category and the rest under protected forests. While cultivation is not possible without permission in protected forests it is completely banned in Reserved forests. These restrictions are considered to be inevitable and justified on the grounds that tribals practise shifting cultivation and destroy precious forests, while in any case they are said to be indiscriminate in their use of forest resources.

The fact is that the tribals do not use the forests for commercial purposes but for their necessities and centuries of their existence have not posed a threat to the forests. Instead the forests cut for developmental purposes in the years between 1956-1981 covered an area of, 1,25,483 hectares. In the near future another 30,992 hectares of forests are expected to be wiped out. The extensive use of forests for commercial purposes by the Government itself emerges from the fact that in the fifth plan a budget of Rs. 93.20 lakhs was sanctioned for forest expenditure in Bastar while annual profits ran to the tune of Rs. 25 crores. Apart from this ruthless exploitation of the forest resources by the Forest Department and Forest Development Corporation, a short sighted and commercially oriented policy of afforestation has also led to conflict with the interests of the tribals. The multipurpose traditional trees are being replaced with commercial plantations like eucalyptus and only a nation-wide protest stalled the World Bank funded pine plantation.

The tribals are now dependent on the forest department for their every need. The land belongs to the forest department and clearing by tribals for agricultural holdings becomes illegal encroachment. For their basic needs like fuel wood and bamboo they have to avail what is given

to them by the department at *nistar* depots. This policy does not solve the tribals problems as was discovered by the team on its tour. It was found that the depots are too far away from the tribals and all of them cannot afford a bullock cart for transportation. They are also cheated and made to pay more than the fixed price and often the wood that is provided is of such inferior quality that it does not serve the tribals purpose. The tribals are forced to help themselves from the forest thus getting into the trap of forest officials.

*Nistar* concessions extend to the right of villagers to take head loads of fire wood, fencing materials, herbs, fruits, gum bark, roots, thatching material etc. Yet villagers talk about and number of lawyers and journalists confirm the corruptness of forest officials who extort bribes in the villager's exertion of traditional and *Nistar* rights of the forest dwellers.

The M.P. Government states that a number of forest villages (which are established to supply labour to the forest department) are being converted into Revenue villages. There are at present 160 forest villages in Bastar district and the district Collector has admitted that none of them have been converted into revenue villages so far. The DFO at Suktna Mr. Ansari said that Revenue villages are being converted into forest villages in Kutru area. The dwellers of the forest village have a 15 year lease over the land which they are permitted to cultivate. For giving this right the forest department lays first claim on the tribal's labour. This appears to be another form of bonded labour.

The crux of the problem facing the Bastar district lies in the adverse effect of the intervention of the forest officials on the relationship between the forests and forest dwellers. An advocate in Jagdalpur aptly put it thus : "The history of the district is but the history of encroachments on tribal rights."

### III. DEVELOPMENT AND PEOPLE

The culmination of the forest policies practised by the State has

resulted in the erosion of the traditional economic base of tribal society. Faced with increasing impoverishment and starvation in the district the government has found it necessary to pump vast funds for developmental purposes.

Till the fourth plan period the development strategy centered around tribal development blocks, formed as a direct analogy to the community blocks. This was revised and a special scheme of area development, with its focus on tribal communities, was prepared as a sub-plan under the fifth plan. According to this Tribal Sub- plan, Bastar district has been divided into seven integrated Tribal Project areas— Ranker, Kondagaon, Konta, Narayanpur, Jagdalpur, Dantewara and Bijapur—under the Tribal Development Authority. The Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP) acts as a coordinating body between various departments for tribal developmental work. The ITDP undertakes survey of the socio-economic conditions of various sectors, and in consultation with the relevant department formulates a project. Each project is jointly funded by the State, Central assistance and by financial and developmental institutions.

Some of the projects taken up under the ITDP are providing drinking water to villages, irrigation projects (canals, tanks, wells), laying of connecting roads, building schools in villages etc. Facilities for easy rural credit have been set up. Tribals are given 75% to 80% subsidy to set up cashew nut or fruit plantation. Under a housing programme a grant of Rs. 1500/- is given to those tribals unable to construct homes on their own. Concessional and other benefits are provided for tube wells. Anganwadis have been set up in villages and dalia is provided free of cost to children and expectant mothers.

In the sixth plan the combined expenditure under all the departments for schemes undertaken by the Tribal Development Authority came to a staggering Rs. 6500 lakhs, that is an average expenditure of nearly Rs. 3,000/- per tribal household. For irrigation alone the expenditure was Rs. 1,492 lakhs, approximately Rs. 40,000/- per village of Bastar.

Against these colossal investments, the statistics of achievements presents a bleak picture. The total irrigated area was only 1.29% of the net cultivated area (1981) and has not risen significantly since. Of the total irrigated area, nearly 80% is still irrigated by the traditional method of tanks.

The 1981 SC/ST Commissioner's report states that according to a survey, 40% of tribals are indebted, and the average debt was Rs. 100/-. The same study in a survey of Jagdalpur gives the average annual family income as a measly Rs 543.20, with an annual expenditure seven rupees over and above the income.

The vast majority of the tribals still continue to live below subsistence levels of nutrition. The crores of rupees spent ostensibly for their benefit have left them untouched.

Narayanpur Tehsil, which is also a separate project area, presents a worse picture. Only 0.45% of the villages were electrified and 7.6% of the villages had pucca roads till 1981. There were only 15 medical centres, which comes to an average of 1 centre per 200 sq. kilometers.

The actual implementation of the development schemes was revealed to the fact-finding team which visited tribal villages Chota Betiya, Rengewahi, Tadbali, Marh Pakhanjur and Uliya and Bengali refugee settlement villages PV (Project Village) No. 92, PV No. 96 in the Bande region of Narayanpur Tehsil.

In the tribal villages nearly every family owns land. The land holdings varied from 3 acres to 30 acres in one isolated case. However, soil is infertile and there is no provision for irrigation. Every villager we met, tribal and non-tribal, told us the same story of dried up wells and insufficient water from the Junavar river. Even the Patel of Chota Betiya with 30 acres of land could not support himself from agriculture for more than five months. For villagers with land of 3-10 acres, this period is a maximum of three months.

Despite ambitious statements by the development authorities of

providing interest free loans to the tribals very few had been able to obtain them. Those who were given these loans did not get the full amount. One tribal we met had taken a loan of Rs. 1,600/- for buying buffaloes but got only Rs. 1,000/-. The inhabitants of PV 96 told us that they were refused Bank loans even on the production of pattas on the ground that their village was too far away from the Bank. The tribals had not heard a word about the ITDP project, Irrigation Scheme, or Agricultural minikits. As one of them put it, "They (the officials) don't even look this way." The only officials they recognised were the anti-malaria team and doctors for family welfare programme. That the villagers of Chota Betiya, two kilometers from Bande, have not heard of the ITD Project is an eloquent comment on the 'success' of the development programmes. This in spite of the fact that in Narayanpur Tehsil Rs. 18.8 lakhs were spent on irrigation and Rs. 7.2 lakhs on public health during 1984-85.

The people of these villages are in desperate condition because of the last year's drought. In Rengewahi the people told us that they had been living on tendu fruits. Otherwise the staple diet of these villagers is Pej, a gruel made of rice husk, ground rice if any, mixed with water. Thin legs, deformed bodies, bloated bellies, especially of the older tribals greeted us in village after village.

The tribals supplement their meagre agricultural incomes by collection of minor forest produce and working as labourers for Forest department and landed persons.

The villagers are being paid Rs. 8 to 9.50 for 100 bundles of tendu leaves by the contractors. The minimum collection rate fixed by the Government is Rs. 7.50. The Forest Department pays Rs. 10.35 as wages for a day's labour and Rs. 10 for cutting bamboos.

Collection of tendu leaves is important to the villagers as entire families participate in it and in one season, given good picking conditions, a family can earn upto about Rs. 2,500/-.

Drinking water is a major problem in these villages. There are

hand-pumps in every village, but villagers complain that while those which work are irregular, many do not work at all.

The nearest hospital is at Bande, which is 35 Km. from Tadbeli. The members of the team were told of a few instances where patients have died due to the delay in taking them to hospital.

The one unanimous complaint of the villagers was against the Forest Department. There were no nistar depots nearby and the one at Bande, the tribals allege, supplies inferior quality wood which cannot be used for building houses. If they cut wood from the forest they have to pay bribes of Rs. 10 to 300 to the Forest Guard. Allegation of corruption were also made against the Deputy Ranger.

The situation in the Bengali villages is no better, though the Bengali settlers admitted that they were marginally better off than the tribals since they get work from the forest department. The Bengali settlers have been given pattas of 5 acres land but as the land is scattered it becomes difficult to cultivate them. Some of the land allotted to these Bengalis is in thick jungle while some was being cultivated by tribals, leading to conflict with them.

It was only after the 'encounter' in Thadbeli village that for the first time top officials visited that village and listened to the villagers problems. Even then, when the villagers told one of them of the shortage of food and the need for a ration shop at Rengewahi village, he replied that they could always go to Bande for ration (which is 35 Kms. away) or if that is not enough they could go to Pakhanjur (55 Kms. away).

Meanwhile, as starvation is facing the villages of Rengewahi, Betiya, Marh Pakhanjur etc. the Department of Tribal Welfare will be spending 75,000/- on providing Chinese Checkers, Snakes and Ladders and Carrom boards for the Ghotuls of the Abujmarh region.

The irony is that the State is spending crores on so called development programmes of the people whom their own forest policies

have displaced. Needless to say these crores are fattening the pockets of many a government official in Bastar.

Caught in the nexus of the Forest Department and the contractors, and made a fool of by development programmes from which they do not benefit, the tribals in Bastar are being made strangers in their own land. Progressively alienated from the forest which once belonged to them and with no new avenues before them, they are being forced to adopt the path of struggle.

#### **IV. TENDU LEAF STRUGGLE**

It is only when we started travelling within Bastar that the importance of the tendu leaf in the economy of the region struck us forcefully. An important share of the economy of the region comes from the picking and trade in this bright green leaf that grows wild in the shrubs and forests and is used in the manufacture of bidi. The leaf is important not only for the forest department, but also for the villagers and contractors who deal in this leaf. In a matter of six weeks leaves worth crores of rupees are collected and sold. The Forest Department earns crores in the form of royalty paid by the contractors. The contractors earn crores in the sale of these leaves picked, tied into bundles and dried by the villagers, and the villagers—both tribal and non-tribal,—are able to supplement their meagre income during this lean period for agriculture. And hence, it is during this picking season of April-May that gradually a struggle has been building in this region.

The fruit of the tendu plant serves as food for the tribals and the leaf picked and dried is used in rolling bidis. The picking season extends for barely a month and half in April-May. The lucrativeness of tendu leaves, both for the forest department and contractors, can be seen from the following : in Ranker circle next to timber, the tendu leaf is the main source of revenue for the forest department. While the income from timber and tendu leaves was Rs. 94 and 52 Lakhs respectively in 1971-72 the corresponding figures were Rs. 11 and

2.7 Crores in 1981-82. The income from tendu leaves in 1982-83 was Rs. 4.6 Crores ! If this is the royalty that the forest department in Kanker circle alone earns the amount the contractors earn can only be guessed. Aside from the lawful means of making money contractors are known to earn money from many illegal means such as underquoting the number of bags collected with the connivance of forest officials, filling the bags with more than the prescribed 1000 bundles, encroaching the picking on other units, cheating labourers in innumerable ways etc.

Many of these contractors who come from Rajnandgaon, Gondia and Andhra Pradesh are themselves bidi manufactures, while the rest have close relations with one or two bidi manufacturers. The lobby of bidi manufacturers is extremely powerful in the politics of Bastar district and form a close nexus with contractors, corrupt politician and forest officials. For instance Cong. I.M.P. Mr. Arvind Netam is said to have very close connections with bidi manufacturers. This nexus results in manipulation of tenders, acceptance of lower royalty rates etc. A Committee consisting of MLAs, MPs, Commissioners, representatives of bidi manufacturers and contractors, officially called "growers", meet every year to decide the official rate to be paid to the labourers, for picking tendu leaves. While the official picking rate was Rs. 5.25 per 100 bundles with 50 leaves each in 1983, it is Rs. 7.50 in the current year.

The labourers over the years are being paid extremely low wages for picking leaves, the wages being kept depressed partly through bringing labourers from other districts and even from Maharashtra. It is estimated that in the Northern part of Kanker circle there are about 3,000 persons from Maharashtra. These labourers have no facilities of shelter, drinking water etc. They are brought in trucks from their home but not taken back when the picking season is over and payments are also delayed.

In March-April 1984, for the first time Ganapati and his companions visited the villages and organised meetings to demand a

raise in wage rates. As a result of several such meetings and the activity generated the contractors in the Bande–Thadbeli area paid Rs. 11/-per 100 bundles, an amount much higher than the official rates. This year too the villagers had refused to go picking when they were offered Rs. 7.50 to Rs. 8.00. Due to scarcity of rains and precarious economic conditions the people were forced to pick leaves at rates lower than last year.

It was the attempts of Ganapati and his companions to organise the tribals and get higher wages for them that resulted in the-stationing of a SAF camp in the villages last year. This attempt to terrorise the people and the killing of Ganapati should be viewed in the above context. The budding movement sad adversely affected the vested interests of contractors and corrupt officials.

## **V. THE INCIDENT**

On March 5, 1985, Ganapati an activist of Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) faction was shot dead in an 'encounter' in Thadbeli village, Narainpur Tehsil in Bastar on the M.P. Maharashtra Border. The various reports of the circumstances leading to Ganapati's death are different.

### **The Official Version**

The official version of the incident as gathered from interviews of Police officials by the members of Joint Fact-finding team are contradictory. The SAF subedhar Mr. Rathore and the ASI Mr. Nayak have given the following account. The police had been cultivating informers since the deployment of SAF in May 1984. On March 5, 1985, one of the informers reported at the Uliya camp of SAF that a naxalite squad was holding a meeting with the people in Thadbeli village. The SAF contingent was immediately sent to Thadbeli. On reaching the meeting place, which was about a furlong from the village, the SAF contingent was fired upon. The SAF jawans fired back in self-defence. In the cross-fire one of the naxalites got shot in the head and was killed. The other

naxalites could escape unhurt. No policeman was injured. One 303 rifle with Indian Army marking, one 12 bore gun, some literature and receipt books were recovered from the dead person. The dead man's name was confirmed to be Ganapati from the diary among the literature seized.

The version related by SP of Bastar, Mr. Pandey, at Jagdal-pur is some what different. According to him the naxalites were having a meeting amongst themselves in Tadbeli village. On receiving this message from an informer the SAF jawans from the nearest camp set off to the village. The sentry of the naxalite group sighted the SAF party and on his alarm the group took positions. The SAF jawans also took their positions. One of the SAF jawans had his rifle trained at Ganapati. In the tension of the moment another SAF jawan let out an exclamation 'Ye Ustad', on which the jawan with his aim at Ganapati let the trigger go. The bullet hit Ganapati on his head and killed him. The SP has completely ruled out the possibility that Ganapati was shot while in lying position. The rest of the naxalites ran away and they were allowed to escape without a chase. The SP further told our team members that the killing of Ganapati was not intended. He said that the aim of M.P. Police is not to kill the naxalites but to make sure that they do not enter Bastar to escape from the repression of adjoining Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra Police.

### **The Version of the Villagers**

The people of Tadbeli village had a completely different version to narrate on how Ganapati was killed.

Our team was told by the villagers that on March 5, when Ganapati and his four companions came to Tadbeli, most of the adults were not present in the village. The elders of the village with those of Rengewahi had gone to Indur, a nearby village just across the border in Maharashtra, to settle a dispute arising out of the second marriage of that village Patel. The rest of the villagers had gone out to work.

Ganapati and his companions went to the fields about a furlong from the village. They requested two young girls Deve and Irpe, who

were in a Ladhi (field hut) to bring them some Pej (a gruel made from a mixture of powdered rice husk and rice). It was late morning. After drinking the Pej Ganapati lay down under a tree in a nearby field and was reading while his wife, Sushila, and others were washing at a well.

The dispersed group was surprised by the arrival of about 8 SAF jawans who came on a tip off by an informer. Ganapati was shot while he was still lying down. He got up and attempted to run but fell and was shot by a Jawan in the head. Meanwhile, other members could run away. Hearing some commotion Irpe and Deve ran out of the Ladhi only to see indiscriminate firing by the SAF jawans and Ganapati's companions running. They were pushed into the Ladhi by SAF jawans and when they tried to come out they were slapped hard.. According to the villagers, a news report of rape by Jawans was not true. Two young boys, Laxman and Peka, who were grazing buffaloes nearby also saw the firing and ran away. The villagers were emphatic that Ganapati and his companions did not fire and in fact Ganapati was shot from close range as he fell down. The boys ran to Indur village to call their elders. The police herded all the villagers to the spot to identify the body. The villagers refused to identify the body—claiming no knowledge of the dead man. They' saw a rifle and some literature next to him. The said that they saw a country gun, personal belongings, a transistor and some books near the well.

Later on many more SAF jawans and police came to the village. All the villagers were abused and threatened. Laxman, Peka and his father were badly beaten. The Sarpanch and Patel were threatened with torture to make them state that they had a meeting with Ganapati and his companions. According to the villagers the intervention of the Rengewahi police, who knew that they had been to Indur, saved them from a beating.

All senior police and government officials visited the village after the incident. A SAF camp was set up in Tadbeli itself. A reign of terror engulfed Tadbeli and surrounding villages,

The tribals are being prevented from moving about freely, all their activities and visitors are spied upon. Though it is almost three months since the incident the villagers are still under constant watch of SAF jawans. The villagers had no specific complaint about misbehaviour by the jawans but the fear and suspicion was intense enough to make it impossible for them to talk freely with us. The presence of a SAF jawan in our midst while we were talking to the villagers prevented any conversation on the incident. It was only when we managed to go with the Madia tribals to an adjoining village that the events were recounted to us by the people.

The differences between the official and peoples' version of events leading to the death of Ganapati are evident. The team was refused permission to see the copies of either FIR or post mortem report. The official versions in themselves are self contradictory, while the SP states that Ganapati was killed accidentally and unintentionally, the SAF officials say that he was killed in an exchange of fire. No jawan was reported to be injured. It has been reported in the press that the jawans who killed Ganapati will be rewarded (Deshbandhu, 15th March). The informer, Khagan Namashudra, was awarded with a job in the Police force. There was a SAF camp in his village, PV 100, to protect him until he left with his family for Jagdalpur. A hasty Magisterial inquiry has been conducted at Pakhanjur, 55 km. away from the actual incident, in front of which only SAF jawans have deposed.

From the analysis of the events it appears to the team that Ganapati was killed in cold blood by the police without a shot being fired by him or his companions.

## **VI. PEOPLE'S PERCEPTION OF THE ACTIVISTS**

In our trip we have talked to villagers, officials, journalists, advocates, political party leaders and students about their perception of the Naxalites.

We were told by the villagers that far from harming them the

political activists have been helping them in getting higher wages for collection of tendu leaves, receiving full payment of the wages promised, protecting them from the corrupt forest officers etc. This was confirmed in so many words by officials, journalists, advocates and others. Likewise, there is not a single instance of violence against the officials. However, corrupt officers were said to be either threatened or roughed up.

The villagers of Narainpur tehsil address the activists as 'dada' and the fact that the villagers provide them with food shows that the villagers have affection and respect for them. The villagers of Thadbeli were very sorry over the death of Ganapati and one of them said, "Our tears have not yet dried". The villagers told us that they were provided with medicines by the activists whenever anyone was sick. They also said that the *dadas* never extort anything from them and whenever they take anything they pay for it. On the other hand, it is the forest officers and police which harass the villagers and take bribes, chicken etc.

According to one journalist, corruption has come down after the naxalite activities began. An advocate observed "when the issues of fair wages, rising prices and corruption are raised elsewhere by opposition party members it is considered all right, but when the same issues are raised here in Bastar by some political activists they are termed as naxalites !" Manku Ram Sodhi, the Cong. (I) M.P. from Bastar opined that the naxalites were doing the work of Government, though he did not approve of their method. He said that the naxalite 'problem' cannot be solved by arms. According to a senior CPI Leader there is not much of naxalite activity and a naxalite scare is being created to justify deployment of armed forces to protect the vested interests of corrupt forest officials. The District Collector Mr. P.P. Mathui had admitted that the presence of naxalite activity in Bastar was an indication of the failure of the administration in taking the benefits to the tribals. The Superintendent of Police Mr. S.P. Pandey said that in the present system every educated person holding radical views is in a sense a naxalite. He added that the fact that naxalites were doing the right thing did not justify their taking law into their own hands. One police official who was

with SAF for few months said that the naxalites were well behaved towards villagers. However, all the officials found fault with naxalites taking law into their own hands, beating up officials, resisting the forest officials move to evacuate tribals who have encroached on forest land, encouraging tribals to cut forests, extorting money from businessmen and contractors, etc. The S.P. claimed that they had receipts to show that naxalites extorted money from businessmen but what ultimately was produced before us was membership fee receipts of Adivasi Ryutu Coolie San-ghatana of Gadchiroli, Maharashtra, with their objectives on the back of it.

## **VII. STATE'S RESPONSE**

The 'naxalites' are not a law and order problem to the villagers. What appears is, surprisingly even from the discussion with police and government officials, that they are a threat to corrupt officials and greedy contractors. The S.P. himself said that the villagers do not need police instead they need development and welfare services like health. Cases of complaints registered against some naxalites are using abusive language, preparation for dacoity, looting threatening to kill by arms and attempt to murder. They normally move in groups of six and it is estimated that there are not more than 50-60 of them in the whole of Bastar.

Despite this, the response of the State has been of repression. It has created a 'menace' of the so-called naxalites and proclaiming the inadequacy of the already existing police force (in 31 police stations and 22 chowkies) has created a Special Armed Force, the 30th Battalion at an annual cost of Rs. 7 Crores. Furthermore, top police officials of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, and Orissa held a meeting at Puri in May this year to undertake a joint action programme to wipe out the naxalites. In this context it should be noted that the Maharashtra Government has stationed 30 companies of CRP in Gadchiroli district for the present tendu leaf picking season, and is incurring expenditures of over a lakh day a order to crush the movement among the forest dwellers for higher wages. Last year contractors paid

about Rs. 17/-per 100 bundles of tendu leaves, but this year the Forest Department is discouraging contractors from bidding for some units, which it intends to take up itself, and pay only Rs. 10/-per 100 bundles in order to try and crush the movement among the tendu pickers. The Forest Department is willing to bear a loss of one crore rupees in order to crush the movement.

In spite of private admission to the contrary, the M.P. State is following the same policies. Upto this date there are SAF camps in the villages of Tadbeli, Rengewahi, Uliya, Irpanar and Paringa, where the villagers still live in fear. In Rengewahi the villagers provide cooking fuel free of charge to the SAF camp stationed and were forced to provide free labour for the Construction of the SAF Camp. Some days back a forest guard was badly beaten up by SAF Jawans (who were later suspended).

It has come to the notice of the team that this is not the first time an 'encounter' killing of a political activist took place in Bastar. In south Bastar SAF Jawans shot dead Shiv Kumar, (17 years, Jod) on February 7, 1985.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

The present tensions in Bastar are to be found in the backward socio-economic conditions of the people, their exploitation by various agencies coupled with a government policy that emphasises enhanced revenue while paying lip service to people's welfare. Crores of rupees that have been pumped into the district in the name of development have gone to benefit, not the poor and backward tribals but the commercial vested interests bent on exploiting the vast mineral and forest resources. . The tribals have become from owners of these forests into encroachers under the control of forest department. The political backwardness of the tribals all these years has helped to maintain this state of affairs.

The activists of Communist Party of India, (Marxist-Leninist) have

been working among the tribals to awaken their consciousness and mobilise them against exploitation, whether it be of tendu contractor's or corrupt forest officials. These activities are a challenge to the existing exploitative socio-economic conditions and the nexus of contractors, politicians and official who benefit from them. A government which failed to provide justice to the tribals is spending huge amounts of money on police to crush their struggle for basic rights.

The people have the right to organise themselves and to choose the ideology they wish to follow. The government has no authority to impose the choice on the people. Any unlawful activity has to be dealt with due process of law. The police have no right to take the law into their own hands. The cold blooded killing of Ganapati is a crime. Those who claim to be the protectors of law are themselves breaking the law.

The administration should take steps to eliminate the corruption in its own ranks and solve the basic problems of the people in the forests and villages of Bastar.

We demand that a judicial inquiry be conducted into the killing of Ganapati, 'immediate' withdrawal of the SAF and the right of the people to organise themselves be acknowledged.

We feel that in any democratic country if voices of dissent are violently repressed and if popular movements are met by the barrel of a gun the basic fabric of fundamental rights guaranteed in the constitution will be ripped apart and the remaining democratic processes will be shaken to bits.