

Police States, Anthropology and Human Rights

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Ujjwal Kumar Singh, Professor of Political Science, Delhi University, and I have just returned (1 January 2010) from a visit to the police state of Chhattisgarh. Ujjwal had gone for research, and I had gone for a combination of research and verification purposes to assess the livelihood situation of villagers for our case before the Supreme Court,¹ both entirely legitimate activities. Indeed, to restrain a petitioner or witness from ensuring compliance with the Court's orders amounts to contempt of court. In Dantewada, we had checked into Hotel Madhuban on 29 December at around 2 p.m. without any problems, only to be told later that night that the management required the entire hotel to be instantly emptied because they were doing some *puja* (prayer ceremony) to mark the death anniversary of the hotel owner. We refused to leave at night, and were told we would have to leave at 6 a.m. instead because the rooms had to be cleaned. As expected, other guests checked in the next morning, *puja* notwithstanding.

At Sukma, we were detained by the police and Special Police Officers (SPOs) at the entrance to the town from about 7.30 till 10 p.m., with no explanation for why they had stopped us, and no questions as to why we were there or what our plans were. We were denied lodging – all the hotel owners had been told to claim they were full and refuse us rooms, and the Forest and Public Works departments had been advised not to make their guesthouses available, since 'Naxalites' were coming to stay. Indeed, the police told us that these days Naxalites had become so confident that they roamed around in jeeps on the highways. Since everything was mysteriously full in a small town like Sukma, the police advised us to leave that very night for Jagdalpur, the Bastar district headquarters, some 100 kilometres away. We decided instead to spend the night in the jeep, since we did not want to jeopardise friends by staying in their homes. Later, we contacted friends and they arranged for us to stay in the college boys' hostel, since students were away on vacation.

At midnight on the 30th, six to seven armed SPOs burst into our room at the college hostel, guns cocked, and then spent the night patrolling the grounds. Evidently, the SPOs have seen many films and know precisely how to achieve dramatic effect. They were also trying to open our jeep, presumably to plant something. We spent the night wondering whether they were going to take us to the *thana* (police station) the next morning and texting friends: “FYI: we are surrounded by SPOs”. It wasn’t clear what the proper etiquette was in such situations – were we sounding unnecessarily alarmist or was this what such police behaviour required of us?

The next morning, we were followed by seven armed SPOs with AK-47s from Sukma in an unmarked white car; this was replaced at Tongpal by 12 SPOs, in two jeeps. None of the SPOs had any name plates. Two women SPOs had been deputed especially for me. The SPOs also intimidated our jeep drivers by photographing them and the vehicle, and since very few people are willing to drive into the badlands of Dantewada in the first place, this is an effective way of ensuring we get no private transport in the future.

At Tongpal, I could see people I knew staring at the spectacle of my little police procession, but what could I say to them? Given that we could have had no normal conversation with anyone, we decided to do all the things one normally postpones. In 20 years of visiting Bastar, for example, I have never seen the Kutumbsar caves. Everywhere we went, including the *haat* (farmers’ market) at Tongpal, the Tirathgarh waterfall and the Kutumbsar caves, as well as shops in Jagdalpur, the SPOs followed us, one pace behind, with their guns poised at the ready. In Kutumbsar, four of them stood in line behind us, patient but determined. Strange that at that moment, I was more worried about the fall-out of a stampede down the narrow steps caused by squawking children and eager tourists, than the fact of the police following us. There was even a brief moment of camaraderie with the cops, as we emerged silently from the cave, tourist sight unseen. They were disappointed that we did not go in – after all, how often do you get to go touring with ‘Naxalites’ – but also perhaps bewildered, ‘Surely Naxalites are made of sterner stuff’.

The state Director General of Police, Vishwa Ranjan, claimed over the phone that it was for our ‘protection’ that we were being given this treatment since there was news of Naxalite troop movement; he went on to tell *The Indian Express* (3 January 2010), “Anything can happen. Maoists can attack the activists to put the blame on the police. We will deploy a few companies of security forces for the security of the activists”.

Clearly all the other tourists in Tirathgarh and Kutumbsar were under no threat from the Maoists – only we, who have been repeatedly accused in print and in court of being Naxalite supporters, were likely targets. As for the police ensuring that we got no accommodation and trying to send us from Sukma to Jagdalpur in the middle of the night, such pure concern for our welfare is touching. The Dantewada Superintendent of Police (SP), Amaresh Misra, was somewhat more honest when he said he had instructions from above to ‘escort’ out ‘visiting dignitaries’. The Additional SP shouted at us for not being more ‘constructive’ – not surprisingly, though, with 12 swaggering SPOs snapping at one’s heels, one is not always at one’s constructive best. Indeed, I later regretted not turning the moment to ethnographic advantage by interviewing the SPOs about their lives.

The SPOs in their jeeps followed us some way from Jagdalpur to Raipur, the state capital, even when we were on the bus. In addition, two armed constables and a sub-inspector (SI) were sent on the bus to ensure we got to Raipur. We overheard the SI telling the armed constables to “take them down at Dhamtari”, but fortunately this plan was abandoned. This sounded so preposterous that we naïvely believed he could not be referring to us, and looked around the bus for the ‘real’ Naxalites they meant to ‘take out’, casting suspicious eyes in particular at a hapless passenger in the seat next to us, who spoke with what seemed to us was a Telugu accent. (In the local version of profiling, vehicles with Andhra Pradesh number plates and speakers of Telegu, the language of the state, have had a particular problem with the police in Chhattisgarh since 2005, when the Salwa Judum started.) Such is the atmosphere of terror that a police state creates that even those who know better become complicit in its demonic fears. The poor SI narrowly missed getting a medal for bravery. As the good DGP tells the readers of the *Indian Express*, it would have been passed off as a Naxalite attack. On reaching Raipur, the SI was confused. Shouting loudly and forgetting himself, as bad cell phone connections are wont to make us all do, he said, “The IG [inspector-general] and SP had told me to follow them, but now what do I do with them?” The voice on the other end told him to go home. We flew out of Raipur the next morning. In real terms, this was a rather pointless exercise for the Chhattisgarh government, since we were scheduled to come home the following day anyway, bound by the inexorable timetable of the university and classes. But, symbolically, it allowed the SPOs to gloat that they had driven us out.

The Chhattisgarh government obviously wants to ensure that no news on their offensive or even on the everyday trauma of villagers reaches outside. Many villages have been depopulated in the south, both due to the immense fear created by Operation Green Hunt and the failure of the monsoons this year. All able-bodied adults are migrating to Andhra Pradesh for coolie work, leaving only children and the elderly in the villages. There are sporadic encounters – the day we were in Dantewada (29 December 2009), two ‘Naxalites’ were killed in the jungles of Vechapal and three arrested. A week before, seven people had been killed in Gumiapal. Who is getting killed and how is anyone’s guess. Combing operations have intensified and ‘Cobra’ battalions have been flown in. A month ago, people were rushing to get identity cards made to show their bona fides, spending a scarce Rs. 100 on getting their photographs taken, before the police decided this was an avenue the Naxalites could misuse, and stopped it. People are confused – should one run or not? If you run, you will get shot. The Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) deployed in the area repeatedly asked us, “Why is it that people run when they see us, and don’t run when they see you? It must be because they are guilty” Or, they conclude from this, we are escorted in by the Naxalites. The simple fact that our being unarmed is the reason people talk to us, escapes them. But equally, if people stay in the village, there is no safety in numbers or public presence. A toddler in Gompad has lost his fingers, following a combing operation. There is complete terror, fear and hunger throughout the district. On the other side, the Maoists are killing ‘informers’ and mobilising villagers to ‘defend’ their areas with trees and trenches. Young men from newer areas are going off to get arms training. The college students we stayed with said a whole generation

had missed out on coming to college because of the displacement and death caused by the Salwa Judum since 2005. Even those who graduated earlier have no future – there are no jobs. A student in our department lost his brother-in-law in a landmine blast – he was working with the Central Industrial Security Force at Bailadilla. His sister is bereft. The war is coming closer – it is no longer something out there in some ‘field site’, it is around me.

While the Chhattisgarh government is busy providing us ‘protection’, it has refused to restore the armed guard taken away from Communist Party of India (CPI) leader Manish Kunjam. He has had credible reports that his life is under threat, and he may face a replay of the Niyogi murder,² because of his opposition both to forcible and fraudulent land acquisition by multinationals like Tata and Essar, and to the Salwa Judum and Operation Green Hunt. Manish Kunjam is the single most important mass leader in the area who has been independent of both the state and the Maoists, and has taken a stand on various issues. Despite Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Raman Singh assuring the CPI leadership that he would be protected, the DGP has refused to act. I have known Manish for many years now – he is brave about himself in a way that I cannot be about him.

It is also remarkable that a government which can waste so many armed SPOs for an entire day and night on two people who do nothing more dangerous than teach and write, has been unable to catch the SPOs responsible for raping six young women, who have later moved court against them. Despite the trial court finding the SPOs and Salwa Judum leaders *prima facie* guilty of rape and issuing a standing warrant for their arrest on 30 October 2009, they are still ‘absconding’ two months later. Some of them actively and openly participate in *dharnas* (protest demonstrations) to block visiting activists, but they are invisible to the police. Earlier in June 2009, the Dantewada SP told the Supreme Court that he could not find one of the victims, even though she had deposed in the trial court the day before. Therefore, he said, he had asked the accused for an explanation, and they had assured him there was no basis to the charge and the women were only trying to malign them in their brave fight against Naxalism. In December, when local activist Himanshu Kumar, who was instrumental in helping the women come to court, reported that the rape victims were detained without cause for three or four days in Dornapal *thana* and generally terrorised, the chief secretary’s response was to accuse him of running an “ugly motivated campaign”. All good men these, good fathers, good husbands, good citizens. Unfortunately for these adivasi girls, they are not middle class, so there will be no media campaign for them, as was launched in several extensively publicised cases over the last few years.

Bastar can no more get rid of me than I can get rid of Bastar. In 1992, because I attended meetings to observe the protests by the villagers of Maolibhata against the steel plant that was proposed to be sited there, the government denied me access to the local archives. But the government then fell, and my book on Bastar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*, was published by 1997. In 2004, four of us doing a survey of the Lok Sabha polls were stopped in a village by local Maoist sympathisers. They retained activist Ajay TG’s video camera. The brilliant Chhattisgarh police later arrested Ajay because the Maoists apologised and wanted to return the camera. In 2005, Salwa Judum activists stopped us as part of the

People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR)-People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) fact-finding team on Salwa Judum; in 2006, as members of the Independent Citizens' Initiative, Ramachandra Guha, Farah Naqvi and I were stopped and searched in Bhairamgarh *thana* by out-of-control SPOs, and Ramachandra Guha was nearly lynched inside the station while the *thanedar* (station superintendent) was too drunk to read the letter we carried from the chief secretary. My camera was taken away by a Salwa Judum leader, and returned only months later. In 2007-08, the then SP, Rahul Sharma, fabricated photographs of me with my arms around armed Maoist women and showed them to visiting journalists and others to try and discredit my independence. He later claimed, when challenged, that the photographs were of one 'Ms Jeet', and it was he who had verified the truth. In 2009, historian Ajay Dandekar, anthropologist JP Rao and I narrowly escaped a mob of around 300 Salwa Judum leaders, police and SPOs, who, however, took away JP Rao's mobile phones, a camera charger and vehicle registration documents from the parked jeep. The police refused to register our complaint and detained us for questioning for a few hours, even though we had got the consent of the district collector and the Mirtur CRPF contingent to visit Vechapal. In January 2010, a team of 15 activists from the National Alliance of People's Movements and other organisations was pelted with stones, eggs and cow dung in Dantewada. The Salwa Judum lives and flourishes under the new name of the Ma Danteshwari Samanvay Samiti, and the more organised label of 'SPOs', encouraged by the cover of impunity granted by the Centre and its operations.

For anthropologists, our professional life is often difficult to separate from our personal – our research depends on developing deep friendships with the people we 'study'. In the 20 years that I have been visiting Bastar off and on, I have acquired a range of acquaintances, friends and people who are like family members. In many ways, their concerns are my concerns, though I can always run away, and they cannot. But while friendships make it harder to do systematic research (the pressure to hang out and drink with people is much larger than the drive to 'survey' them), they do not diminish one's commitment to independence and objectivity. The relationship between anthropology and advocacy has long been a subject of debate within the discipline, and, within India, people like NK Bose, SC Roy, AR Desai and many others have raised the question of the anthropologist/sociologist's social commitment. I have myself come down on both sides of the divide, recognising that good research requires the kind of whole-time dedication that advocacy takes away from. On the other hand, it is the generosity of people who are suffering, in sharing their time and pain with us, that enables us to raise new and relevant questions for research. Ultimately, as Michael Harner said in 1966, when the American Anthropological Association was debating whether to pass a resolution against the war in Vietnam, "Genocide is not in the professional interests of anthropology".

Editor's Notes

1. *Nandini Sundar, historian Ramachandara Guha and retired civil servant EAS Sarma have filed a petition in the Supreme Court challenging the Chhattisgarh state government on the Salwa Judum, a vigilante movement it launched in 2005. The Salwa Judum civil militia is armed and sponsored by the state to fight Naxalites, adherents of Maoist ideology, active against the government in the states of Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal and in parts of Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, among others. The Supreme Court petition contends that the state government has, under cover of the Salwa Judum, unleashed extrajudicial killings and atrocities upon the adivasi (indigenous) people of Chhattisgarh. In the course of its hearings, the Court has expressed disapproval of the state's arming private persons, terming it an abetment of crime. It has also directed the government to act on the recommendations of the court-appointed National Human Rights Commission investigation that confirmed claims of widespread atrocity, and called for compensation and rehabilitation for victims, among other things. Further atrocities are also reported to be under way, primarily affecting the region's adivasi people, in the course of Operation Green Hunt, an anti-Naxalite offensive the Centre launched in late 2009.*

2. *Trade union leader and civil rights activist Shankar Guha Niyogi was shot dead at his home in the mining town of Bhilai in the early hours of 28 September 1991. The industrialists and hired men accused in his killing were convicted by a trial court but acquitted in the Supreme Court in 2005, 14 years later.*