

Villages for sale in Vidarbha

Debt-ridden farmers announce that their villages, and some their kidneys, are for sale. BY **DIONNE BUNSHA** IN AMRAVATI AND WARDHA

The agrarian crisis in the cotton belt has driven more than 300 farmers to suicide in the past seven months.

The surviving ones adopt **desperate methods to draw attention to their plight.**

“KIDNEY Sale Centre,” proclaims a banner sprawled across a ramshackle bamboo tent at Shingnapur village in Amravati district of Maharashtra. The farmers here are threatening to sell their kidneys. “We have invited the Prime Minister and the President to inaugurate this kidney shop. They should allow us to sell our kidneys. We are all ruined by debt. Many farmers are killing themselves. Our kidneys are all we have left to sell,” says Madhavgir Champat Giri, who sold all his land to pay his bank loan.

Residents of Shingnapur and other villages such as Dorli, Lehegaon and Shivni Rasulpur in the Vidarbha region have adopted a novel way of highlighting their plight by declaring that their village is up for sale. Farmers are no longer able to survive off the land. Every day, local newspapers report at least two cases of suicide by farmers. Since June 2005, 309 farmers have killed themselves, unable to bear the pressures of huge debts, grim poverty and loss of self-esteem. However, it is the first time that people have protested.

“Earlier, I even had money to dig a well on my field. Now, I have nothing,” says Madhavgir. “I sold my land. I can’t find work. No one can afford to pay farm labourers. There’s no food at home, no clothes. We have become hungry and are roaming like dogs. We just drink water to fill our stomachs and go to sleep.”

This once-prosperous cotton belt in eastern Maharashtra has faced the brunt of 15 years of liberalisation. Production cost of cotton has multiplied three to five times, but its market price has fallen from Rs.2,500 a quintal in 1991 to Rs.1,785 now. Prices of other crops have also fallen. Most farmers are running up huge losses and have to borrow heavily to keep afloat. Since most of them have defaulted on loan repayments the banks are unwilling to extend fresh loans. Their only recourse is to borrow from the trader-moneylender at 60 to 120 per cent interest. This has ensured that the farmers are trapped in debt.

“This year has been very bad,” says Suryopal Chavan, an All India Kisan Sabha activist from Shingnapur. “Both the soya and cotton crops were washed out by heavy rains. Worse, the government has lowered the price at which it procures cotton by Rs.500. People are worried about how they will run their homes and get money to sow in the next season,” he says.

It is the end of the harvest season, but the govern-

Dimensions of the crisis

- ▶ More than 300 farmers have committed suicide since June 2005.
- ▶ Four villages - Shingnapur, Dorli, Lehegaon and Shivni Rasulpur - are “up for sale”.
- ▶ Distressed farmers set up “kidney sale centres” in many villages.
- ▶ Cotton price has dipped from Rs.2,500 a quintal in 1991 to Rs.1,785.
- ▶ Government reduces procurement price this year by Rs.500.
- ▶ Procurement this season: 6.25 lakh quintals; last season: 185 lakh quintals.
- ▶ Number of procurement centres this year: 160; last year: 410
- ▶ Only 10 per cent of the land in the region is irrigated.



ment has not even opened procurement centres to buy cotton. Yards that were once crowded with bullock-carts loaded with cotton and where farmers waited for days to sell their produce are now deserted. Farmers now sell to traders since they offer a rate that is only slightly lower than the government rate – Rs.1,500-Rs.1,700 a quintal. “There was a time when cartloads of cotton would leave this village. This year not a single cart has left,” says Giri. Government procurement is just 6.25 lakh quintals this season where as it was 185 lakh quintals last season. Last year, the government opened 410 procurement centres. This year, there are only 160.

Once cotton was considered ‘white gold’, and Vidarbha’s black soil was perfect for its cultivation. There are 2.5 million cotton producers in eight districts in Vidarbha. With liberalisation, the ‘white gold’ became worthless. The government has withdrawn market controls, tariffs and subsidies for agriculture, leaving Indian farmers to compete with farmers in the United States and the European Union who are protected by trade restrictions and

provided with billions of dollars as subsidy. The 2002 Farm Bill in the U.S. alone gave \$190 billion to large companies growing cotton, wheat, corn, soybean, rice, barley, oats and sorghum.

“Ten years back, the international price of cotton lint was \$1.10 a pound (\$2.42 a kilo) but now it is 52 cents. The retail price of cotton then was Rs.40 a metre, and it is now Rs.80. Retail prices have doubled but farmers are forced to sell their produce at half the price,” says Vijay Jawandhia, an activist of the Shetkari Sanghatana. The government does not even provide proper infrastructure such as irrigation or marketing facilities.

The Central government can protect its producers from imports and crashing international prices by hiking the import duty on cotton. At present it is only 10 per cent. Import duty on other products such as sugar (60 per cent), rice (80 per cent) and second-hand cars (180 per cent) are much higher. “The government is willing to protect sugar farmers and foreign car manufacturers here but not cotton farmers. Imports have flooded the

market and prices have fallen,” says Jawandhia.

The U.S., the E.U., Japan and Canada restrict trade from developing countries by keeping tariffs on food products at 350 per cent to 900 per cent. India provides incentives to agricultural imports. But the ‘free market’ does not apply to all agricultural goods. Some are favoured more than others. For instance, Maharashtra’s politically powerful sugar cooperative lobby has ensured that sugar remains protected. “The Central government regulates the flow of sugar into the market so that its price is steady. Why don’t they do the same to protect cotton farmers?” asks Jawandhia. Left with no alternative, farmers in the region are threatening to abandon agriculture and to sell their kidneys.

The flashpoint in Shingnapur came when suicide struck closer to home, in the village. On the night of December 16, 2005, Jagdish Deshmukh, 40, killed himself by swallowing pesticide. “We held a meeting and decided that we have to organise people. So we started this kidney sale agitation. What other solution? People are so desperate that some would really sell their kidneys, if given a chance,” says Chavan.

Jagdish’s wife Sangeeta is left to look after their three children and repay the debt. He owed the bank Rs.11,000, but she does not know how much he had borrowed from money-lenders. “This season we got nothing, just 20 kg of cotton and no soyabean. Bank officials came to demand the loan five days before he killed himself. They also came three days after,” said Sangeeta.

Now she grows vegetables on their farm and sells them to earn Rs.10 to 20 every day. “We have an electricity bill of Rs.7,000. Yesterday they came and threatened to cut our connection if we don’t pay. If they do that, then I won’t be able to grow vegetables without the water pump. We’ll be left with nothing.” Her 12-year-old son Sandeep dropped out of secondary school. Now he goes around the village selling vegetables.



DIONNE BUNSHA

A BANNER THAT announces the “sale” of the village.

The recession has affected all aspects of village life. People are selling off their cattle. For the first time, landless labourers from Shingnapur have migrated to cities. Meet the 'Mumbai Return' gang – the eight who ventured out to try their luck in the big city. Their first adventure outside their village did not last long. "We went to a construction site at Nerul, where we worked for two days. Then there was no work and two of our friends got malaria, so we spent all our money to put them in hospital. As soon as they got out of hospital, we hopped on a train ticketless and came back home," said Maruti Ade, a landless worker.

Maruti and his wife Reena find it more difficult to get work even once a week. Those who own land cannot afford to hire people for work. "Many are shifting to soyabean, and cultivating less cotton and jowar because their prices are so low. That means less work for us, because there is no need for much labour in soyabean harvesting. Cotton harvesting gives women a lot of work, and men are needed for the jowar crop," said Reena. "Those who used to grow tur and jowar and distribute them to us don't have grain in their own homes now."

The crisis has affected all – rich and poor. Meet Anil Tatte of Lehegaon in Amravati district. He won a Krishi Bhushan award from the State government. His innovative farm techniques made his yield double that of other farmers. But, today he is sinking along with the rest of this village. They too have declared that their village is up for sale. He said: "This year I even tried Bt cotton. It is expensive. I spent Rs.80,000 on my 10 acres (4 hectares) and got only Rs.50,000."

Lehegaon, situated in what was once called India's Orange County, was once prosperous. "In the last five years there has been very little water. I have had to cut all the 2,000 orange trees in my orchard. They all dried up," says Anil Tatte. As in most places in Vidarbha, the problem here is irrigation. Only 10 per cent of land in the region is irrigated. In Lehegaon, even private wells have run dry, as the water



DIONNE BUNSHA

THE "FARMERS' KIDNEY Sale Centre" in Shingnapur village.

table has fallen. "The Upper Wardha dam is near our village, but we don't get water from it. Pipelines from there go to the adjoining Wardha district," Tatte said.

The ginning factory in the village, which used to employ 400 people, has not opened this season. Dairy has collapsed. "Ten years back we had 600 cattle. Now we have 60. The price we get for milk is too low. There is a bank here. But now only a few traders go there. Recently the government arrested many moneylenders. Even they have stopped lending. They were the only source of funds for farmers," says Nilesh Tatte, a young farmer.

Residents of Shivni Rasulapur, next to Shingnapur, has also said that they will mortgage the entire village to

pay off their debts. "The only time officials visit us is when the bank officers come to collect our loans. Or when the electricity board threatens to cut our lines. Otherwise no one has bothered," said Purshottom Bansod, a farmer leading the agitation.

"I want to sell my land. But no one has the money to buy it," says Arun Chambhare, a small farmer from Dorli, the first village to be "put up for sale". "We are living in darkness. They cut my electricity line. My daughter studies for her Class XII exam with a lantern," he says. Dorli, a predominantly Dalit village, has 47 families, of which 32 are registered as below the poverty line. Many more are sliding further downhill. And many more villages will be put up for sale. □

Past masters

The gold trade is booming in Kerala, but traditional goldsmiths are quitting in droves. BY R. KRISHNAKUMAR IN THRISSUR

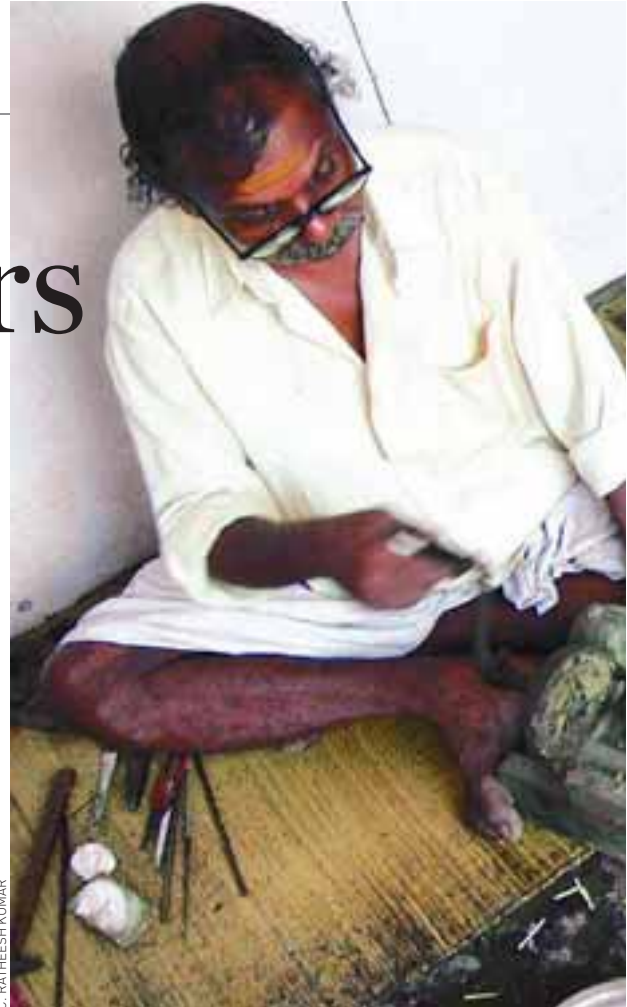
In a region known for its ceaseless hunger for the yellow metal, **liberalisation and a new horde of ornament makers** have forced them to take up jobs as drivers, painters, construction workers and so on.

THRISSUR is an unlikely jewellery hub. In a country purported to be the world's largest consumer of gold, Kerala, a State with a mere 3.1 per cent of its population, accounts for 15 to 20 per cent of its gold sales. It is in the central district of Thrissur that a major portion of the estimated 1,000 kg of jewellery sold in the State every day is crafted.

The town's peaceful suburbs belie its most famous cottage industry: jewellery-making. Its goldsmiths boast of a tradition spanning several centuries, from the days when pepper and other spices were exchanged for the metal from Roman and Arab traders. Thrissur produces a minimum of 300 kg of gold jewellery a day, according to estimates provided by representatives of the Kerala Jewellery Manufacturers' Association.

But a new horde of ornament-makers has been growing in Thrissur (as in the rest of India) from the early 1990s, complementing an abundance of retail outlets, an explosion of slick jewellery advertisements, a fund of new designs and promotional offers by international organisations promoting gold. Paradoxically, as this new tribe was growing, increasing numbers of highly skilled second- or third-generation goldsmiths were forced to seek jobs as drivers, painters, construction workers, brick-makers and hotel employees.

At Sankarankulangara, a quiet corner in Thrissur, customers have long since stopped coming to Palani Achari, a goldsmith who has received commendation from the President for his exquisite craftsmanship and whose ancestors served as official



C. RATHEESH KUMAR

ornament-makers for the Travancore royal family. "This is perhaps the best period to be in the gold business in India and the worst to be a goldsmith," he said. He is too old to seek a new trade and is forced to live on a "providential" government welfare scheme that provides him a pension of Rs.15 a day.

Rajappan Achari, official gold assayer to the Customs Department and a trusted name among goldsmiths in Thiruvananthapuram, said over 90 per cent of the ornaments sold from his shop were bought from wholesale dealers from Thrissur. He said: "I had a lot of business in the city until 15 years ago and the ornaments I sold were made under my personal supervision. Today, my son is a mere shopkeeper and does not know to make a single piece of jewellery. Many fellow goldsmiths have closed shop. Within a few years, the entire class of goldsmiths and their skills are going to be wiped out."

The plight of traditional goldsmiths began with the liberalisation in the gold sector, especially with three policy changes since 1990 – the repeal of the Gold Control Act, introduction of provisions relating to gold in the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act, 1973, and the grant of permission to non-resident Indians (NRIs) to bring in up to 5 kg (subsequently raised to 10 kg) of gold on payment of a small duty (Rs.220 per 10 gram) in foreign exchange.

As the controls were removed, there was plentiful



TRADITIONAL GOLDSMITHS AT work,
in Thiruvananthapuram.

supply of legal gold in the country. Anyone could invest in a business in gold unlike earlier when only certified goldsmiths and traders could make an easy entry into the trade. "It took us a long time to understand that through these changes the Central government was throwing traditional goldsmiths to the wolves," said R.S. Mony, a member of the Kerala Gold Workers Union.

In Kerala, this dramatic change coincided with the large-scale fall in income in agriculture (especially rubber and spices), the beginning of a trend of reverse migration of NRI Keralites from West Asia, and a sharp fall in income from the liquor trade following a government ban on the sale of arrack.

The deregulated gold trade offered ambitious businesspersons from all these sectors a comparatively risk-free and profitable option for investment. It attracted wage-earners too. "At the end of the day, even if the business did not prosper, we were sure to have our gold safely in our hands," said Roy Thattil, a post-1990 wholesale manufacturer. Initially, local goldsmiths too

sought to find a grand opportunity. The new investors had no option but to depend on their traditional skills; the demand in Kerala was still for traditional designs of which they alone were master craftsmen; and more investors only meant more work and more remuneration, they thought.

NEW SUCCESS FORMULA

But within a decade the rules of the game changed dramatically for the traditional sector. As the number of *avant-garde* jewellers multiplied beyond imagination, there was only one mantra for success. T.S. Kalyanaraman, managing director of a leading chain of neo-jewellery, summed it up: "Narrow your margin of profit, ensure the quality of gold and increase the volume of trade and turnover. Then, blow your own trumpet."

This new success formula meant that jewellers had to offer an amazing variety of innovative designs, divert an incredible part of their turnover to open more outlets and launch high-profile advertising and promotional

campaigns, and cut production costs dramatically. The price of gold being decided at the international level, reducing costs meant cutting costs on labour and production methods. It meant the mechanisation of the mundane chores, quality-sensitisation and faster production techniques. It meant cutting down "wastage" (of gold) during jewellery making and the introduction of cheaper labour.

The result? In the five years since 2000, a sharp division became evident in the gold business in the State. Over 70 per cent of the jewellery sales came to be handled by six big business groups, all of them established after the 1990s. Some of them set up their own exclusive manufacturing units (in some cases in Tamil Nadu's Coimbatore district) and advertising agencies. The rest of the business, crumbs so to say, came to be divided among the majority of medium and small outlets struggling to stay afloat.

Interestingly, the gold trade also saw the rise of an all-new class of urbane middlemen contractors who



KIK MUSTAFAH

BANGLE CUTTING IN progress at a jewellery unit in Thrissur.

found a lucrative business opportunity in ensuring that jewellers across the State got a steady supply of products on credit. They began to describe themselves pointedly as “jewellery manufacturers” (in sharp contrast to “goldsmiths” or “jewellery workers”).

Indeed, they ensured a constant supply of raw materials, fresh designs and labour. They introduced machines and trained and gave jobs to an army of unemployed men (and now, for the first time in Kerala, women too) to mass-produce jewellery in sweatshops across the State (especially in Thrissur district) where wages and working conditions are a secret and workers get to learn only part of the techniques of jewellery-making. There are allegations about the use of child labour under the pretext of sustaining family traditions and of long hours of work, and unhealthy work atmosphere.

Middlemen contractors also acted as wholesale agents for a steady supply of ornaments made in other States,

which now account for 40 per cent of the sales in Kerala, according to leading jewellers. Once they were assured of a perpetual demand for non-Kerala jewellery in the State, a few of them also began to import contract workers from West Bengal to craft North Indian ornaments. Some of them, such as Rafi Antony, president of the Kerala Jewellery Manufacturers’ Association, today employ nearly 500 traditional Bengali goldsmiths, renowned for their special skills. Kabir Hussein and Ajay Kumar Bera, migrant workers under him in the early 1990s, are now sub-contractors with over a 100 people each in their pay roll.

BENGALIS IN DEMAND

According to Rafi, Bengali craftsmen get more wages than local workers because there is an increasing demand for their skills. Hussein claimed he is able to manage an income of nearly Rs.15,000 a month and pay his workers salaries ranging from Rs.2,000 to Rs.8,000. “Local workers are paid less, about Rs.1,000 to Rs.1,500 a week. In many other sectors in Kerala, workers would get at least Rs.250 as wages a day. But such a wage structure is no longer possible in jewellery-manufacturing in Kerala. That is perhaps why goldsmiths are seeking jobs elsewhere,” Rafi said.

Traditional goldsmiths, increasingly out of business, say the “jewel factory workers” lack the skill to make a complete piece of jewellery all on their own. “They are not goldsmiths but metal cutters, wire-makers, polishing artists” is a common, derisive refrain.

But newcomers are having the last laugh. A leading jewellery group owner said: “No one cares whether a trendy piece of jewellery is made by a single craftsman over seven days or a hundred ones in half a day. The people who succeed are those who can invest more in order to buy more stock, employ more and gain maximum profit through mass production. Goldsmiths are unwilling to accept new methods of production or the need to cut margins. Traditional methods cannot keep pace

with the faster needs of the market. It is a fiercely competitive market that makes any investment by them too small to increase their volume of sales to a profitable level. The trend everywhere is towards concentration of the business in a few hands.”

Said 64-year-old V.P. Unni, an employee goldsmith: “It is not difficult to see why the skills of the local goldsmiths have become irrelevant to big business. We have lost touch with the customers. Several tiers of profit-seekers have come in between.”

Such an onrush of outsiders into the gold business within a span of 15 years has had a devastating impact on the social security customs ingrained in the craft and caste traditions of goldsmiths. But, despite the amazing volume of gold trade in the State, the plight of traditional goldsmiths have so far not figured in the State government’s scheme of things. Traditional gold workers are increasingly being forced to seek other employment options or to work for low wages for the new class of manufacturers. In recent years, several cases of suicides among goldsmiths and small jewellery owners have been reported. Many small shops have closed down.

‘NEW FACE OF COLONIALISM’

According to gold workers’ union representatives, there has been no initiative so far in the State to fix wages and other service conditions for goldsmiths and the government has left the door open for their exploitation. They have merely been included along with tree climbers, shoemakers, potters and gunny-bag collectors in the Kerala Artisans and Skilled Workers Welfare Fund scheme that has meagre provisions for provident fund, gratuity, ex gratia and funeral allowances.

“It is the new face of colonialism,” says Balasubramanian, a young goldsmith in Thiruvananthapuram. “First they pretended to be our friends. Then they created divisions among us. Then they made us fight among ourselves. Now they are the rulers, the big traders, the about-to-be owners of shopping malls and gold souks.” □

Verdict on Mullaperiyar

IT was a bitter pill that the Supreme Court prescribed for Kerala on February 27 by ordering it to allow Tamil Nadu to raise the maximum storage level of the 111-year-old Mullaperiyar dam from 136 feet to 142 feet. In effect, the court sanctioned the diversion of more water to Tamil Nadu from the Mullaperiyar, a river that originates and ends in Kerala, but had been, by a quirk of history, hogged by Tamil Nadu ever since its remarkable trans-basin diversion (through the construction of a masonry dam, a tunnel and a canal cut through the watershed) by the British rulers of India in 1895.

Surely, if vast stretches of the Theeni, Madurai, Sivaganga and Ramanathapuram districts of the arid rain-shadow region of Tamil Nadu look as green and fertile as the rain-fed districts across the Western Ghats border in Kerala, the credit goes to the effective utilisation of the waters from the dam by the farmers there, on the strength of a lease deed that the British forced the then princely state of Travancore (now part of Kerala) to sign in 1886.

Until Independence, the lease agreement gave the British the right to divert "all the waters" of the Mullaperiyar and its catchment to British territory (the Madras Presidency, now Tamil Nadu) for 999 years. Tamil Nadu continued to use the waters of the Mullaperiyar after Independence for extending irrigation facilities and, from 1959 onwards, also for power generation, on the basis of informal agreements between the governments of the two States.

In May 1970, the two States signed a formal agreement to renew almost completely the 1886 lease agreement. Surprisingly, no concern was expressed in Kerala that Tamil Nadu was

given legal rights once again without a proper assessment of future requirements of the Periyar waters within Kerala itself. When Kerala began to experience extended spells of acute water scarcity and power shortages from the early 1980s and found that its newly-built hydro-electric project at Idukki, 50 km downstream, did not get enough water from the Mullaperiyar to work at full capacity, the State began to realise as its "blunder."

By 1979, when leaks were detected in the masonry dam, there was a virtual scare in Kerala about a dam burst affecting several districts downstream. The question of the safety of the dam became another dominant factor in the dispute over Mullaperiyar. A Central Water Commission inquiry team suggested that the water level be lowered to 136 feet (from 142.20 ft at that time) in order to facilitate work on strengthening the dam, which would be carried out in three stages. After the completion of the work, the water level could be raised to the full reservoir level (FRL) of 152 ft.

Tamil Nadu was given legal rights once again without a proper assessment.

Kerala found the safety issue to be its only tool against Tamil Nadu. It argued that the measures to strengthen the dam only made it safe at 136 ft and that "on no account" should the level be raised any further.

In 2000, when Kerala began questioning the very legality of the original lease deed, the Tamil Nadu government announced that it would ap-

proach the Supreme Court for a solution ("Over to the Supreme Court," *Frontline*, November 28, 2000). The petitions to the Supreme Court provided an opportunity for the Central government to intervene in the dispute, as the apex court had asked it initially to seek a consensus solution.

Kerala had since been complaining that the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, then in control at the Centre, found in the cCourt's direction an opportunity to intervene in a manner that favoured Tamil Nadu (which was then ruled by an NDA-constituent, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) by constituting the technical committee "in such a manner as to ensure that only the Kerala representative would support the Kerala government's arguments." The report of the committee submitted to the court in February 2001, which favoured Tamil Nadu's demand for raising the reservoir level, became the basis of the court's recent decision.

While there was no overt jubilation in Tamil Nadu over the court's decision, political parties in Kerala displayed a rare unity in condemning it. An all-party meeting in Kochi decided to convene an unprecedented two-day exclusive session of the Kerala Assembly on March 14 to amend a 2003 State law on dam safety to counter effectively Tamil Nadu's efforts to draw more water from the Mullaperiyar.

"Kerala is not against giving water to Tamil Nadu. But the State cannot overlook the safety of its people," Chief Minister Oommen Chandy said.

The dam that once transformed the lives of farmers in Tamil Nadu in a region once known for recurring droughts, famines and mass migrations (to Sri Lanka) will now have to face the heat of yet another volatile election campaign before leaders on both sides seek a temporary truce once again.

R. Krishnakumar

People's war

Even as people are killed by naxalites, a popular movement against them is gaining momentum in parts of Chhattisgarh. BY PURNIMA S. TRIPATHI IN DANTEWADA

Salwa Judum has brought the ruling BJP and the Congress on a common **anti-naxalite platform.** Families of the members of the movement are shifting to special camps fearing retaliation, but they want to fight back, for the sake of their children.

CHHATTISGARH is witnessing an unprecedented and unique mobilisation of people against naxalite violence. Called Salwa Judum (people's movement), it was initiated in late 2004 and has armed villagers roaming the jungles and patrolling the roads in search of naxalites and guarding potential targets of attack. Sometimes security personnel accompany Salwa Judum members, but mostly they are on their own. The level of popular support is evident from the fact that the movement is backed by both the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party and the Opposition Congress – it is led by Congress Legislature Party leader Mahendra Karma.

An increasing number of people are associating themselves with Salwa Judum despite the threat of naxalite retaliation and the fact that once they become activists they have to leave their villages and stay in relief camps. Entire villages are being vacated because even family members of activists do not feel safe there and prefer to shift to these camps.

The exodus began after the killing of 29 villagers in a mine explosion on February 28 near Konta village in Dantewada district. The villagers were returning from a Salwa Judum camp at nearby Dornapal. According to survivors, while 10 to 12 villagers were killed in the blast, the rest were killed with swords by the naxalites. More than 50 people sustained injuries in the attack. After the attack, the naxalites abducted a villager. His body was later recovered from Inzerram near Konta on March 4,

with a letter attached to his shirt. The letter warned the villagers against participating in Salwa Judum and ordered them to return to their houses.

The incident spread panic among villagers and so far over 50,000 have fled their homes and are living in camps in Dantewada district and adjoining Bijapur district. Senior police officers and even Chief Minister Raman Singh admit that naxalite violence has increased after Salwa Judum started operations, but adds there is no other way out to fight the extremists. Raman Singh said: "The ultras drew their strength from the people. If we have to tackle this problem, the villagers themselves have to rise against them. We will try our best to provide them security but this is our ultimate weapon to fight them after all else has failed." Besides, Raman Singh said, if the people, fed up with violence over the past 15 years, now had realised that they were on the wrong side of the fence, it was a good signal. "If we lose this opportunity to root out naxalism, we will never get another," he said.

Mahendra Karma agrees. He said: "There is no other way to tackle the naxalite menace. I do not care what my critics say. This is a people's problem and being a people's representative, I have to fight for their problems." He was alluding to criticism within his own party. The Congress, as usual, is divided on the issue. Some of its State leaders have held the Chief Minister responsible for the death of many villagers in naxalite violence.

Importantly, the villagers who are part of Salwa Judum are not scared. Instead, they are full of hope that the movement will pave the way for a peaceful future for their children even if they lose their lives in the process. This correspondent visited three camps – Dornapal where 5,600 tribal people from 26 adjoining villages are staying; Errabore, where over 1,000 people have taken shelter; and Konta, where over 15,000 villagers are staying. During an extensive interaction, not even one villager said he or she was afraid of naxalites. In fact, they have become so used to violence that the fear factor does not matter now.

"Earlier too we were getting killed by naxalites. Now at least we have the consolation that we will die



AKHILESH KUMAR

TRIBAL VILLAGERS SEARCHING for Maoist rebels in Dantewada.

fighting,” said Shyam Singh Sinna of Dubbatota village at the Dornapal relief camp. Sinna, who left behind his wife and three children to join Salwa Judum, said what motivated him was the hope that it would lead to peace in the area and a better future for his children. “Even if I get killed, my children will be safer and better off,” he said. Hinga Tollai, Kutturam Deva Tatrai and Soyam Mokka expressed similar feelings. Tollai and Tatrai said they had been members of a *dalam* (the core group of naxalites) and had participated in some killings but got fed up with violence and now wanted to lead a peaceful life.

Interestingly, there were many girls too who wanted to join Salwa Judum and had come to Dornapal. Soryam Raje, like Tollai and Tatrai, was a *dalam* member and used to go around with Maoists singing revolutionary songs. She too wanted to get back to normal life and hence was in Salwa Judum. Similarly, other girls such as Madkam Adme, Kottam Chinge and Kottam Lachchi, all in their teens, had fled the *dalam* to join Salwa Judum. For all of them, it was the only hope of

coming back to a peaceful and normal life. At Konta camp too, people had similar stories to tell.

Apparently, the naxalites have been rattled by the growing number of villagers associating themselves with Salwa Judum. This is reflected in the sudden spurt in attacks. On March 4, naxalites blew up a portion of the Bhansi railway station in Dantewada district and attacked a railway engine. It was the first such attack on railway property. “This obviously shows their desperation,” said the Chief Minister. They also attacked villagers near Bansasudda in the early morning on March 5, killing eight people and injuring over 40. The naxalites took 15 hostages, whose whereabouts are not yet known. Pamphlets warning villagers against participating in Salwa Judum were recovered from all the sites of attack. Even human rights groups such as the People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) admit that the spurt in attacks shows the naxalites’ desperation to assert their supremacy. “These senseless killings are unfortunate and must stop and both sides should sit down to talk and find a way to peace,”

said Vinayak Sen, a PUCL activist in Raipur.

Raman Singh, however, remains convinced that Salwa Judum is the only way in which the naxalite problem can be solved. He has a rehabilitation package for those participating in Salwa Judum. “I have 70,000 land pattas ready to give them the moment the Centre passes the Tribal Land Rights Bill. Besides, I can give them employment for 250 to 300 days a year with help from various government schemes. Then there are other welfare packages. In three years, if I keep getting people’s support, I will change the face of Bastar,” he says. For the moment, he said, able-bodied members of Salwa Judum would be given arms training and employed as special police officers on a salary of Rs.1,500 a month. The rest would be employed as labourers. Raman Singh said that while about 1,000 pucca houses were ready for those displaced, over 2,000 more would be built in a few months so that these people can be relocated in groups at one place.

Counter-insurgency experts agree that policing or military action alone cannot solve the naxalite problem. No matter how effective such action is, it will have to be accompanied by socio-economic development. “This has to be a militarily, politically, administratively, economically and psychologically synchronised action,” said Brigadier (retd) B.K. Ponwar, who has been brought in to set up a counter-terrorism and jungle warfare college at Kanker in Chhattisgarh, on the lines of the Grey Hound Academy in Andhra Pradesh.

According to Ponwar, Salwa Judum is an exceptionally good idea because when people turn against naxalites, their main support base is eroded. Then it would become easier for the police to tackle it. “I’m here to teach the policeman to fight the guerilla like a guerilla,” he said.

He has already trained 600 Chhattisgarh policemen and 600 others from Orissa and Jharkhand, the two other States that face the naxalite problem. □