

ROMANCE OF THE GUN

This forest district of Maharashtra is the scene of a virtual war between the armed Naxalite squads and the police. Most of the squad members are local tribals, helping in the Naxal dream of a "guerrilla zone".

A first-person account of five days with two PWG *dalams*

BY GURBIR SINGH

THE jungles of Gadchiroli in Maharashtra are the scene of a grand design taking shape among the Naxals of the People's War Group. The aim is to develop the 2,000 km stretch of the Dandakaranya forests spanning nine districts in three states—Gadchiroli and Bhandara in Maharashtra, Balaghat north and south Bastar, Rajnandgaon in Madhya Pradesh, and Malkangiri in Orissa—into a guerrilla zone.

Currently operating with about 35 armed squads, some of them in platoon strength of 25-30 fighters, the PWG's growth plan is to link up with Bihar's Naxalite outfits, and finally move to forge a military alliance with the north-east insurgencies.

Their efforts have reached a stage where they are now engaged in a "mobile war", as the Naxals call it, with the police. In other words, more direct assaults rather than guerrilla tactics. And the manpower is coming from the villages of Gadchiroli district. "Earlier, the squads were from Telengana. Now, most of them are local tribals," said Satyapal Singh, DIG of Police in charge of anti-Naxalite operations based in Nagpur.

Gadchiroli is predominantly a tribal district inhabited by the Raj Gond and Madia Gond tribes. Of the two, the Raj Gonds are more educated. The PWG targets the land owners, whom they call the 'exploiters', to draw the adivasi hamlets and rural villages into their fold. They do this through the *gram rajya samitis* they have set up as a parallel government to administer the affairs of the locality, organise resistance to police campaigns and collect taxes.

According to the police, there are six armed *dalams* in Gadchiroli operating in Ahiri, Charmoshi, Etapalli, Pirmilli, Tipragarh and Sirpur divisions, while three squads are operating in Bhandara district in the Devri, Darekasa and Tanda divisions.

Four journalists spent five days with two of these armed *dalams* for a first-hand experience of the civil war in Gadchiroli.

DAY ONE: We set off from Nagpur in a Tata Sumo in the late afternoon to establish contact with the PWG squads in the jungles of Gadchiroli. All we have is a small scrawled note of introduction and instructions to contact Satyana (name changed) between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. at Talwada village.

Crossing Chandrapur, we enter Gadchiroli district, whizz past Allapelly town, and are almost immediately into thick forested terrain. Talwada is 10 km from Allapelly on the Bamragad Road. We reach the village exactly 15 minutes before the 9 p.m. deadline. There is no electricity. The Sumo's headlight picks up a cattle herd. Yes, he knows Satyana.

Satyana is visibly nervous. He puts out *charpoys*, and disappears. The sultry, dark night is full of mosquitoes. In the eerie silence, even the occasional croaking of the frogs is welcome. After a long time Satyana appears and takes us down a dirt path. It's pitch dark and we can barely see our own hands.

We are a kilometre down the path when suddenly two flashlights stab us on the face. Two olive-green figures with .303 rifles appear. The red stars in their camouflage caps tell us we are face to face with Naxals. They tell us to identify ourselves. Satisfied,



PICS: HEMANT. B



they hand us a note, signed by their political commander Karan, which directs us to accompany the armed PWG unit to an undisclosed place.

We return for our knapsacks and retrace our steps down the same dirt track. This time a group of villagers accompany us into the jungle. A short march, an owl hoot-signal, and we reach a clearing. Waiting for us here are three more members of the armed squad with a giant lizard (*ghorpad*) that has been cooked to a nicety. We don't know whether it is the hunger or the tension, but the *rotis* and *ghorpad* are delicious and over in a jiffy. The leader of the armed unit—Vishwanath—chats on amiably and our wire-taut nerves slowly relax.

Vishwanath tells us it is a three-hour slog before we reach the main camp. The walk seems endless as our knapsacks drag us down and soon we are breathless. We cross the main road again and realise we are barely three kilometres from the village; we had taken a circuitous route to avoid police night patrols. Seeing our plight, the unit decides to pitch camp for the night in the jungle. It is well past midnight, and we pass out on the plastic sheets the squad members lay out for us.

DAY TWO: At daybreak we resume our trek. Two squad members move ahead as an advance reckee unit so that they are not taken unawares by the police. After over an hour's walk, we sight a hamlet in the distance. We skirt it and settle down for our first long halt. Two of the squad members disappear towards the nearby Kasampally village.

Viswanath, a Raj Gond tribal, looks about 28 years old and is the deputy commander of the Ahiri *dalam*. While we are talking to Vishwanath the two squad members return with a few village boys in tow bearing water and utensils for cooking. We learn that the squad, with a mere Rs 2,000 allotted a year for all expenses, depend on the villagers for food and water.

A meal of rice and *daal* is being cooked and suddenly we have more

"Our military forces (left, a *dalam* unit performing a drill) are being developed to protect the organisation and the masses," says Karan, political commander of the PWG in Gadchiroli.

company as five *dalam* fighters appear from nowhere and greet us warmly. Their chief Prabhakar, a 25-year-old Madia Gond, carries a self-loading rifle (SLR), and is the military commander of the Pirmilli *dalam* (named after Pirmilli village in Bamragad taluka).

Karan is down with malaria, he informs us, and we will have to go further north to meet him. You just can't beat the mosquitoes in the bamboo jungle. Even coats of 'Odomos' on the skin fail to deter the swarms. Despite the two Cloroquins every week, the squad members are frequent preys to malaria.

After the meal and a short nap, we resume our trek, now under Prabhakar's command. After two hours of trekking we are exhausted and plead for a cup of tea. The *dalam* members are amused but oblige. After the enforced tea break we resume walking until we reach the outskirts of Pendigunda village. It's the twilight hour when we halt in a clearing, and a couple of squad members leave to make contact with their comrades.

The haversack of a colleague has given way, but expert hands of a squad member stitch it up with a giant needle in double-quick time. With back-up cloth inside for good measure, it's better than the street-corner

recruitment of women in the PWG network. As against a 25 per cent average in Telengana and the rest of the Dandakaranya, in Gadchiroli 32 per cent of the fighters are women.

At the camp the members greet us individually. One of them is Karan, the political commander, who announces that we are now under the protection of the Ahiri and Pirmilli squads. His SLR bears the legend—Rajnandgaon 1—the Madhya Pradesh police unit where it was picked from. "The enemy (police) is our source of arms," remarked Karan. Tea, endless discussions and dinner follow.

Karan, a young man of about 32, is a recent entrant to the Gadchiroli division. Karan says he started off with the student-movement in Warangal in Andhra Pradesh, before he became a hardcore PWG activist. His knowledge of military tactics is phenomenal. We later learnt that he is married to a local Gond squad member Sumitra.

The women squad members we talked to told us how their families and the police had tried to stop them

from joining the squads. In fact, a poster issued by the Gadchiroli Superintendent of Police warns Gonds and village youth not to join the PWG. The poster also warned parents against allowing their young girls to join the squads as they were used as sex objects.

Novina, who had studied up to class IV, is the youngest, but one of the most agile members of the Ahiri squad. She does not carry a gun because she is still 'under probation'. In her faltering Hindi and Gondi she told us she was from Bangarampeta village in Ahiri taluka, her father was a drunkard and beat her mother often.

Then the *annas* came and she was drawn to the PWG. When police got word about the new recruit they summoned her father and asked him to get her married. They even came up with a groom. Novina then informed the squad members, who whisked her away. Sunanda and Jaywanti before her had joined the PWG in similar circumstances.

But Parvati, a mahila samiti member of Novina's village could not join

The Naxalite's life is neither romantic nor easy—round the clock sentry duty, early morning drills, frugal meals and hours of trek through tough terrain.

cobbler's job. The armed unit also carries a well-equipped medical kit and most members are trained to give injections. But it struck us as strange that the otherwise well-equipped *dalam* members wear PVC moulded shoes. "We have army-regulation boots but we use them only for raids," explained Karan when we met him. "Army shoes leave distinct footprints. The PVC shoes are safer because every villager wears these."

Contact is established and we are on the move again. Soon we pass two women sentries in olive-greens, who raise their fists in greeting. We are finally at the camp which is at the bottom of a hill and surrounded by thick undergrowth. The members of the armed unit stand in line; many of them are women. Incidentally, Gadchiroli accounts for the largest



the squad because, according to Novina, her family with the help of the police forcibly married her off. As were five 18-year-old Raj Gond girls at Metpalli in Ahiri. According to the Naxals, families of two other girls in the same village are now resisting police pressure. DIG Satyapal Singh neither confirmed or denied cases of forced marriages.

Besides forced marriages, the police tactics included killing villagers in fake encounters, claimed some village activists. The case of Hanumantha of Bangarampeta was startling. His brother had joined a *dalam* and when the police could not trace him they picked up Hanumantha and took him to the jungle. When he overheard police plans of killing him he feigned knowledge of an arms dump in another forest, led the police there and managed to escape. Hanumantha's tale was tape-recorded at Baba Amte's ashram at Hemalkasa.

DAY THREE: We are up at five in the morning. A sentry accompanies us—two at a time—and watches over us relieving ourselves in the open. The mosquitoes sing under our seats. Using the plastic bag of water handed by the sentry is quite a feat.

A peep into their routine and we learn that a Naxal's life is neither romantic nor easy—early morning drills, frugal meals and endless treks through tough terrain. Each fighter is allowed two uniforms every year. The only cosmetic is the half-a-cake of Lifebuoy soap, for men. Women are allowed the luxury of a full cake.

After tea and biscuits, the camp is dismantled and we are off by seven. Karan barks an order and guns are rapidly cocked into firing position. Hiking for about an hour in single file, we pass a hamlet called Dhondur. We move another kilometre north before Karan calls a halt. A reckee party moves off to find a suitable camping spot on the hilly terrain.

A *dalam* fighter lights a fire and puts damp leaves in it so that the resulting smoke keeps the mosquitoes away. A quick order and the unit falls into drill formation. "We are giving military training utmost importance," said Karan.

The morning routine of exercises includes cleaning and oiling the guns. The squad member lives with the weapon. Radha Akka, the military commander of the Ahiri squad, who was the first local recruit of the PWG in Gadchiroli, has an AK-47. The others hold up an assortment of weap-



ons—SLRs, .303s and 12-bores.

There are military dos and don'ts that the squad members religiously follow. The PWG has a separate newsletter called *Jung* with detailed instructions for its armed units. Karan also admitted that ex-LTTE explosive experts trained their units in 1987, and the PWG, too, had been providing training to militants in Bihar.

After the exercises the unit is dismissed and squad members get down to putting up tents and organising the kitchen. We wonder what made Radha join the Naxal movement. In her broken Hindi, Radha explained: "My father worked for a landlord, Bathapallivar Rangia, who owned 100 acres in Rajaram village. The villagers hated him but could do nothing. Then one day the squad came to our village. I liked what the commander said and joined them. The village rose in revolt and Rangia ran away to Ahiri town. He still controls the land through sharecroppers."

As the camp takes shape Sumitra unwinds the wire for a Claymore mine northwest of the camp while one

member is posted for sentry duty. No squad camps without a sentry and units with more than 20 members have two sentries.

"Our military forces are being built to protect the party organisation and the masses," said Karan. "Our offensive is aimed at demoralising the enemy's repressive tactics against the people." The strategy is to keep the police on the back foot and keep their mass base intact. For instance, when the police killed five villagers in an "encounter", the PWG retaliated by targeting Pandu Daroga, the police officer responsible for the incident.

"In another incident last year, we massed 60 fighters to take the Tadegaon police station in the Bamragad division," said Karan. "But the police detected our movements, so we diverted the unit to ambush a police commando patrol at Kardi. Five of the police party were killed."

These tactics have pushed the police into a 'garrison mentality'. Patrolling is mainly on the main roads in the forests, and that too after constantly checking the culverts for



Novina (back to the camera), a PWG recruit, was whisked away by squad members after she realised that she would be forced to marry. Her comrade in arms, Sumitra (holding rifle), is married to Karan.

of development. The people don't use them and there is very little public transport. They are to make the interiors more accessible to the police. The Maharashtra government has inducted the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) for road-building in the jungles of Gadchiroli. This is being opposed by the Naxalites and work is known to have been stopped forcibly in many areas.

For the assaults, the PWG has raised regular, mobile units of 11 green-uniformed fighters, and irregular local guerrilla squads of villagers that can merge quickly into the adivasi hamlets. In Gadchiroli and north Telengana two platoon strength squads of 25-30 fighters with light machine guns are already operating. The fire-power includes grenades and Claymore mines. The Pirmilli squad has a Claymore mine fitted into a tiffin carrier and designed to be set off with

mines. Karan claims that between 1980 and 1998, only nine *dalam* fighters have actually been killed in 'real' encounters.

"We are telling the people that the government has no money for drought relief, but it has just sanctioned funds for setting up another 15 police stations in Gadchiroli district," Karan remarked. "In 1980, the district had just seven police stations. Today, there are 50."

The recent drought and a failed crop gave the PWG's *gram rajya samitis* a major issue to mobilise public opinion. To beat the ban on their front organisations, the PWG coopted the support of local Congress leaders like Joga Madavi of Allapelly and Bogami Malu of Bamragad, held rallies all over Gadchiroli a few months ago and demanded 40 kg of rice seed per family per acre. When the government did not relent, the Naxals looted shopkeepers and moneylenders for rice and seeds for the tribals.

The miles and miles of excellent roads which run the entire district, the Naxalites contend, are not a sign



Vishwanath, commander of the Ahiri *dalam*, is a Gond tribal who like many others had been recruited locally.

a camera flash-gun!

DAY FOUR: We have just settled in for another round of talks with Karan when a messenger appears. They withdraw for confabulations. Karan is distracted and tense. There is a security problem. The camp has to be disbanded and the journalists moved out from the forest as fast as possible. An early, silent lunch follows and we were ready to move.

We set off with a six-man armed escort. After marching for an hour at a blistering pace under the noon sun, we reach our first halt on a dry streambed. Karan finally explains the position. Word had reached from Kasampalli that the police informer network had been tipped-off about the unit's movement. The presence of civilians had also been noted. He was not taking risks with our safety and had decided to cut our itinerary short. The main armed unit had moved north where they would deliberately create a diversion and expose themselves. As police units moved north, we would move south towards Allapelly to be returned back to civilisation. A two-man reckee unit had moved close to some villages to get information about police commando movements.

DAY FIVE: We are roused at five in morning after a restful sleep at the farm shelter in a jungle clearing. A hot cup of tea and we bid goodbye to the squad members. They line up, and clench their fists in a final salute. Vishwanath leads a party of three to the edge of the jungle where two village youth take over. We reach the main road after an hour-long trek. After a long wait, the state transport bus lumbers up to a stop. We jump on and find that we have a heavily armed contingent of police commandos for company. One of them is holding a grenade-launcher. Our unshaven, city faces stick out in the village crowd in the bus and there is a queasy feeling in the stomach. We wait for them to begin asking questions. The bus is stopped at a road block. Commandos are

checking another bus ahead of us, but they waive our driver through seeing their uniformed colleagues inside. We reach Allapelly and civilisation. The Naxal dream firmly out of our sights. ■

INTERVIEW: SATYAPAL SINGH, DIG, ANTI-NAXALITE OPERATIONS

It's a battle of the mind

THE SUREST indication that the Maharashtra government means business in tackling Naxalite insurgency in the border districts of the state is the recent posting of Satyapal Singh as Deputy Inspector General of Police (Anti-Naxalite Operations). The affable cop, who took charge last month, was earlier additional commissioner of police overseeing one of Mumbai's suburban districts. In Mumbai, Singh made a name for himself by tackling the mafia, including various extortionist gangs operating in the western suburbs. Accused of civil rights violations and dubbed an 'encounter expert', he supported the policy of police officers shooting first and giving explanations later.

What is not generally known about the police officer is that he served as a superintendent of police of Gadchiroli district from 1987 to 89, and later went on to do his doctorate from Nagpur University on the Naxalite problem. Entitled *The Extremist Challenge: An Administrative Problem*, the thesis is likely to be published as a book in the near future. Excerpts from an interview with Singh in Nagpur:

QUESTION: Have you been selected to lead anti-Naxalite operations because of your understanding of the subject?

ANSWER: That is what they say. How serious is the problem?

Press reports in Mumbai say the problem has been contained. I don't think so. In 1989, when I was in Gadchiroli, Naxalite violence claimed only two civilians. In 1998, already there have been seven encounters, and more than 50 personnel and 112 civilians have been killed over the last decade in Gadchiroli. Earlier, their recruits were from Andhra Pradesh. Now, 70 to 80 per cent of their recruitment is from local tribals. This is a matter of concern. In Gadchiroli and Bhandara, the PWG has nine active *dalam*s, as well as one 'military *dalam*', with 25-30 people. The area is a battle zone and it is spreading.

How would you compare the tackling of the mafia in Mumbai with the Naxalite insurgency?

Both are different. The armed gangsters are criminals with no commitment. The Naxals are not criminals, they are motivated. They are more difficult to deal with.

Since you have studied the problem, how do you view naxalite insurgency?

Some people view it as a socio-economic problem. It is not that simple. The insurgency is basically born out of a political ideology. All other things are by-products. In the diaries of the squad members we found, they refer to the police as *dushman* (enemy).

Why is there so much support for the Naxalites among the tribals?

There is a certain 'romance of the gun' among the

tribal youth. When these people were cutting the forests to increase their cultivable land, the forest officials used to come after the tribals. Then these squads came and drove off the officials. For tendu leaf collections, the government rate in 1995 was Rs 46 every 100 bundles but in Naxalite areas the contractors were forced to pay Rs 110-116. This year, the government rate is Rs 65, but in Naxalite areas it is Rs 132-135 per 100 bundles. This has earned them credibility.

Have policing operations improved with the setting up of the Joint Police Command between the three states Maharashtra, Andhra and Madhya Pradesh?

Though there is some exchange of information and

experience at a centralised level, the actual ground level policing is carried out by the respective state police force. But more than the joint command, the government's response must be at the district level. In the village there is no doctor, no diesel for the pumpsets. There is very little support from the forest and revenue departments. The police is left to face the music.

(Even as the interview was on, Singh received a call and was heard berating an official for having returned tribal welfare funds as 'unspent'. When quizzed, Singh said the amount returned was Rs 2.5 crore by the tribal welfare officer.)

How do you intend tackling the Naxal squads?

In all respects, we are better than them. Our training is better. Our physical fitness is better. And we have far superior firepower. I keep telling our people that ultimately it is a battle of the mind. We will pursue them in their own terrain. In the jungle... and on foot. More important, we have to cut off their funds. Each tendu leaf season, their collection is around Rs 10 crore. They force the contractors to pay. And because they have got a good rate for the adivasis, they collect one day's wages from them too. I have been telling the government to remove the contractors and put tendu leaf collections under a government agency. That way there will be no middleman to extort money from. We did it with road-building. Construction of roads was earlier with the Public Works Department, which in turn was allotting it to contractors. The same thing was happening there till road-building was handed over to the Border Roads Organisation.

Is there support from the Central government?

Yes. They have allotted 50 per cent subsidy for all Central sanctions spent on anti-Naxalite operations.

How long do you think this insurgency will continue?

The way things work, it is likely to go on. It is not something that can be solved easily.

