

India: Bastar: Children Caught in the Crossfire Between Maoists and Security Forces

Saturday 3 February 2024, by [GOSWAMI Prasun](#), [SHIVHARE Raunak](#) (Date first published: 25 January 2024).

The failure to address these grievances of the native Adivasis of these regions has eroded the trust between the villagers and security forces.

The war in Bastar has escalated multiple folds after the swearing-in of a new government in Chhattisgarh. Both the parties in this war have intensified their deadly warfare against each other. While improvised explosive devices IEDs are being planted and operated, vehicles burnt, and Adivasis are being maimed and killed by Maoists, the state is having regular face-offs, combing operations, and been building camps across the forests of South Bastar region, primarily in the districts of Sukma and Bijapur. This violates both the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) guidelines, which require consultation and consent by the local community.

This comes after the Adivasis of Bastar wholeheartedly participated in the 2023 assembly elections. An 8% increment in vote share in comparison to the 2018 elections has been registered in Konta constituency which is one of the worst Maoist-affected regions of Chhattisgarh. Polling booths in Elmagonda, Tarrem, Silger, and Minpa were set after a gap of around 3 decades.

It is to be noted that in 2018, primary schools that had been demolished were re-opened in collaboration with community members and the district administration of these villages along with 89 other schools in utterly sensitive regions of the constituency. These schools further paved the way for health care services to reach these villages.

The Adivasis community also frequently organised themselves to protest against multiple issues like killings of innocents in Silger and the setting up of security forces' camps in Elmakonda. Though a retired IPS officer has attributed this development of democratic consensus to the setting up of camps, the voting pattern of the villagers suggests otherwise. Around 26% of votes in Silger, 51% of votes in Minpa, and 91.5% of votes in Elmagonda were cast in favour of Manish Kunjam, a Communist Party of India (CPI) leader who has been active in anti-mining and democratic protests for decades in the region.

Around 46% of the population in Bijapur district, another hotbed of the Maoist conflict in the South Bastar region, has voted in the 2023 assembly elections. Though the overall percentage has dipped by 2% in comparison to the 2018 elections, multiple media reports have covered how Adivasis in Bijapur have participated in the electoral process even after multiple threats by Maoists. About 110 schools that had been demolished were re-opened in Bijapur in 2021 and restoration of health infrastructure followed.

But both the parties to this war have been ignoring this pro-democracy and pro-constitution voice of

Adivasis that they have asserted by participating in electoral polls against all odds. The parties have deepened their maelstrom of violence, and caught between this violence are Adivasis and their children.

Child rights violation

On January 1, 2024, [a six-month-old infant in Bijapur district's Mudvendi village was shot](#) and died on the spot. The security forces have previously asserted that it was a Maoist bullet that hit the infant but are now claiming that they acted in self-defence in response to Maoist firing. However, the villagers have been vehemently opposing the forces' claim and asserting that the firing was unprovoked. As per the villagers, the security forces had fired on the infant and there was no confrontation of Maoists with the forces. This incident has further exacerbated the already fragile relationship between the security forces and Adivasis.

Forces were deployed in the region to secure the construction of a road that was built without the permission of the Gram Sabha in violation of PESA. It has been alleged that huge trees of economic and cultural importance to Adivasis like *chhind*, *salfi*, *mahua* were being cut. Adivasis of the region had gathered on December 27, 2023 to protest the felling of these trees. The villagers had no idea that a new security forces camp was about to be constructed in the village. The protest continued for three days and had been growing. Security forces had opened fire in the air to scare off the villagers. However, their counterparts stationed away from the location misunderstood these warning shots as firing by Maoists and started firing relentlessly which claimed the life of an infant girl. Hunga, a resident of the village along with two other villagers had raised an alarm after which the firing was stopped. It has also been alleged that after realizing the blunder committed, the villagers were offered some cash and liquor.

Soni Sori, an Adivasi rights activist, has pointed out the inconsistencies in the security forces' versions. She said, "It has been claimed that two of their soldiers were also injured in the encounter, however, they've not released their details or photos yet. The infant's mother Masa is also injured but the injury is not so severe that she needs to be hospitalized for long. She has been virtually imprisoned in Jagdalpur Dimrapal Medical College on the pretext of treatment and is not allowed to meet anyone."

Advocate Bela Bhatia was present with the villagers who were on the way to Bijapur Collectorate on January 16 to demand justice for the child. The villagers were stopped amid heavy deployment of forces before reaching the Collectorate. Bhatia told the local media how the administration was reluctant to register an FIR about the incident. She further discussed the legal aspects and apathy displayed by the administration in this case.

Adivasis walking to participate in democratic protests against the killing have alleged police firing at unarmed and innocent protestors while they were crossing a hill in Belam Gatta region of Bijapur, killing three people on January 20, 2024. It has also been alleged that two out of the three slain are children. Security forces have alleged an encounter with Maoists resulted in the deaths. Advocate Bela Bhatia who has been to the village has alleged that three killed are Soni Markam, Nagi Punem and Kosa Karam. Kosa was a farmer and a father to five children and Soni and Nagi were 14 and 15 year old children. The villagers lodged an FIR in Basaguda Police Station in Bijapur on January 24.

An 8-year-old girl was also severely injured in an IED blast in the Cherpall-Palnar region of Bijapur district on January 5, 2024. The IED was planted by Maoists to target security personnel. The child was studying in the third grade at a government residential school in Bijapur. She was walking back to her village with her mother after completing some errands in the nearby town when the incident happened.

All these severe violations of child rights by both parties of war in armed conflict zones come after the UN has certified the state to have implemented all their recommendations to secure child rights during armed conflicts in a report released by them in June last year. The [report](#) has claimed that the state has no more armed conflict affecting children.

It is high time that the state undertakes efforts to secure Adivasis and their children from becoming collateral damage. The lack of accountability displayed by the state in these regions fosters a culture of impunity, where security forces operate without their actions being questioned. The failure to address these grievances of the native Adivasis of these regions has eroded the trust between the villagers and security forces, fuelling resentment among them and exacerbating the current crisis. Addressing these unresolved cases is crucial for rebuilding trust and fostering a sense of justice and democracy within the community. Maoists further exploit this distrust to garner sympathy and support from the aggrieved population, complicating efforts to bring stability to the region.

The state needs to understand how positively the Adivasis dwelling in the sensitive regions of Sukma and Bijapur have responded to its initiative of restoring the education and health infrastructure in the sensitive regions. This is evident by their robust participation in the electoral process.

The state needs to now focus on creating more job opportunities in education, agriculture, and health sectors for the local Adivasi population and initiate peace talks. They should stop the violation of FRA and PESA through large-scale militarisation of the region. The Maoist leadership should hear the pro-democratic and pro-constitution voices of the Adivasis and understand how detrimental their failed experiment of armed revolution has become for the community.

Prasun Goswami

Raunak Shivhare

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French.

P.S.

The Wire

<https://thewire.in/rights/bastar-children-caught-in-the-crossfire-between-maoists-and-security-forces>