Chapter V

A ‘Barbed’ Life: Exploring Life in a Salwa Judum Camp

Introduction:

This chapter is an attempt to look at everyday life of people living in the Kasoli camp in Dantewada district since the launch of the counter insurgency campaign Salwa Judum in the year 2005. For residents of Kasoli camp, conflict continues to be a part of their daily lives. The context which surrounds these people plays an integral role in shaping their everyday lives and personal responses to this conflict. An attempt is made here to study the everyday life of the residents with a focus on children which in case of Kasoli is characterised by a restricted barbed camp life. An attempt is made to analyse relationships and interactions between the residents of the camp, between children and their significant others, amongst children themselves and also between the residents and the omnipresent security force personnel, within the context of conflict and camp life.

Reflection on children’s everyday lives, their ideas, feelings, and ways of coping with the conflict, interactions with and influence of the significant others is closely juxtaposed with the attempt to study their everyday life in the camp. The context of conflict is seen through their eyes and the sense they make of this conflict and of camp life and how these are further leading to the development of their social roles. Byatt (2000) states that we need to study ‘the relation between dailiness and the rupture of dailiness’ as it affects children in order to understand children in conflict times in totality. Hence, children and their everyday life which is still marked with presence of conflict and its varied manifestations is closely explored.

Drawing from the words of the residents of this camp, this chapter attempts to bring forth how this camp has now become a part of the social, cultural and political lives of these adivasi people. The residents of Kasoli camp have gone through a phase of violence and displacement during the times of Salwa Judum, however, the present reality leaves a bleak chance of them returning to their villages. Gradually with years, this camp has become a meaningful place for them, their new abode.
The layout of this chapter is as follows. The *first* section highlights the present camp under study, the Kasoli Salwa Judum camp. It is a by-product of Salwa Judum. Although the campaign was declared unconstitutional in the year 2012 by the Supreme Court of India, but the camps continue to exist and its aftermath can still be felt. This section gives a brief introduction of Kasoli camp and then tries to draw its contrast between three other Salwa Judum camps of district of Dantewada and Sukma. The intention behind drawing this contrast is to bring out how Kasoli camp, which is often highlighted as a model camp by the state government, cannot be taken as the sole representative of all the camps in the region. However, one is not attempting to underestimate the life being led by the residents of Kasoli, their hardships and everyday challenges. The *second* section closely looks at the everyday life of the residents of Kasoli and the *third* and the last section looks at the lives of children of this camp for whom this place is not only a site of displacement, but now also a home away from home.

1. Kasoli Salwa Judum Camp: A Brief Overview

This Salwa Judum Camp is located in a small village called Kasoli. The natives of Kasoli say that their village has not been the same since 2005. It has undergone drastic change ever since. It was the launch of government’s counter insurgency campaign, Salwa Judum, against the Maoists in 2005 that led to a total disruption of socio-economic fabric of life of hundreds of *adivasis* of this village. Kasoli is now a home to hundreds of people who were displaced from their villages and brought here.

Kasoli village, now, is better known for the presence of a camp at its center. However, the native families of Kasoli village are now confined to the peripheries of this camp. The families living inside the camp are the ones who were either forcefully displaced by the government or those who claim to have chosen to participate actively in the counter insurgency campaign against the Maoists. There is no estimation of the extent to which the lives of hundreds of these *adivasis* has turned upside down and their livelihoods destroyed completely. Many camp residents informed how they had to leave their full ripened crops back in the village during Salwa Judum and since they have not been able to go back, the land would be lying uncultivated.
Most of the camp residents came from villages in Abujhmaad- a thickly forested area stretching across fourty thousand square kilometres in Chhattisgarh’s remote south, and is the hotbed of Maoists’ activities. Abujhmaad region falls across river Indravati which is at a distance of around eleven kilometres from Kasoli. People say that the river divides the world of Bastar into two. The villages falling on this side are under total government control of which camps are an integral part now. On the other side of the river, the villages are still untouched by the state machinery and are under the total control of the Maoists. Barring a few that fall right at the bank, other villages are completely cut off from any form of development and presence of state machinery. During one of my visits to a village called Paunaar, five kilometres across Indravati, State and its symbols seemed absent. The motorbike had to be parked at the riverbank and river had to be crossed on foot due to absence of a bridge (reportedly, during monsoons reportedly the river crosses the danger mark). Across the river there were no traces of school, health centre, anganwadi, police station, panchayat office or even a ration shop. However, with such experiences, one is often forced to think whether the strong Maoist presence in these areas is actually a cause or an effect of the absence of State? It was only after crossing the river on foot and walking for little over five kilometres that I saw the first primary school that too in a dilapidated condition. A lot of children from these villages have been sent to Kasoli to study.

The camp residents of Kasoli are all from remotely distanced villages in this region. Kasoli camp is home to approximately two hundred families with a total population of around eight hundred. These families have mostly hailed from the thickly forested region of Abujhmad from villages namely Chingair, Palleywaya and Orssa. Other than the make- shift homes provided by government, Kasoli also has an ashramshala (residential school for tribal children) for around five hundred boys from first to eighth standards and a Pre- Metric Boys hostel for seventy boys from ninth to tenth standard. This ashramshala not only caters to the children residing inside the camp but majorly to children coming from distant villages in the neighbouring districts of Bijapur and Sukma.

The camp portrays a highly rigid and securitised character as it is thickly surrounded by a web of concertina wires from all sides in a circular manner, with two Chhattisgarh Force (CF) check posts, at entrance and exit, heavily guarded at all times. Chhattisgarh Force (CF) has had a permanent presence in the camp since the year 2006.
Sense of insecurity and vulnerability prevails all around the area wherein people are leading a life characterized primarily by high restriction of movement. People are not allowed to exit or enter the camp without being questioned by the security force personnel at the check post. It is only the Special Police Officers (SPOs) and CF personnel who roam around freely without any hesitation. Most of the families have at least one member serving as SPO, who are now regularised under the Chhattisgarh Force and are now called Sahayak Arakshak (Assistant Constable). The camp is also home to Nandkishore Pawar, one of the influential erstwhile Salwa Judum activists and now a brooding leader of a major political party. He had been a driving force behind many to join the campaign as SPOs. He is also said to be one of the prime targets of the Maoists due to his involvement in the Salwa Judum and hence, whenever he steps out of his home, one sees him guarded by four armed men carrying Self Loading Rifles (SLRs).

Ironically, Kasoli Salwa Judum camp has always been showcased as the model camp wherein it is projected as being the representative of all such camps in the region. The district administration is also seen highlighting the handful of its development initiatives inside the camp, like that of setting up of a bamboo processing unit, a small dairy, community farming, construction of more educational structure and hostel for children, etc. Government or non-government teams from Raipur, New Delhi and Mumbai etc. are made to visit this camp. Just to highlight this situation, I would like to briefly mention how during my stay in Kasoli, a two day visit was made by a team from the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to Raipur and Dantewada. The team visited Kasoli camp on 10th April, 2013 and interacted with a handful of residents and came out with the following report.

"On 9th and 10th April, 2013, a seven member delegation of the National Human Rights Commission...visited Dantewada and a relief camp near Dantewada to assess the relief and rehabilitation measures undertaken by the State Government for the affected persons. The inmates of the camp expressed satisfaction over the facilities, but they desired the commission to impress upon the State Government to check naxalism to enable them to return to their homes"  

(NHRC 2013: 2)

With a personal exposure to other Salwa Judum camps like Jagargunda and Dornapal in Sukma district, it was difficult to accept the observations brought forward by NHRC at its face value. It rather highlighted how government views and agendas get
catered to by these planned and organised visits. The camps visited by the team gave an entirely different picture of the after-effects of Salwa Judum and camp life. One cannot generalize the picture of Salwa Judum today by looking at only Kasoli as a camp site. One feels the need to look beyond what is being offered by the State machinery. As part of the fieldwork, three other Salwa Judum camps, in Dantewada and Sukma district were briefly looked at in order to bring out some ground reality that prevails in these camps.

1.1. Kasoli and Other Salwa Judum camps: A Contrast

The other Salwa Judum camps visited were Chitalanka camp in Dantewada district, Dornapal and Jagargunda camp in Sukma district. The prevailing conditions of these camps were relatively worse. With no proper housing, sanitation, livelihood opportunity, the residents of these camps are leading a difficult life. Chitalanka camp is located on a major road close to National Highway (NH) 16 around three kilometres from Dantewada, Dornapal camps is located in NH 221 around thirty five kilometres from district headquarter of Sukma and Jagargunda, one of the remotest camp is located on NH 221 around eighty five kilometres from Sukma, deep into the forest. These camps can be argued to be highly underdeveloped in comparison to Kasoli.

1.1.1. Chitalanka Salwa Judum Camp, District Dantewada:

With currently around twenty five to thirty families residing in the camp, the camp is much smaller in terms of population as compared to that of Kasoli. When Salwa Judum started, initially around fifteen to seventeen families fled from a village called Satwa in Bhairamgarh Block of district Bijapur, across river the Indravati and settled here. Most of Satwa’s young men became SPOs and are still serving as Sahayak Arakshak. Gradually, people from other villages also came to Chitalanka. The housing and living conditions did not seem feasible for the residents. The camp is cluttered and has severe water and sanitation issues. The camp is in close vicinity to Dantewada district headquarters. However, this has not given it the kind of infrastructural development that one would expect. Due to non-availability of schools nearby, most of the families have sent their children to either Kasoli ashramshala or other ashramshalas in Dantewada. This has come out as a double loss for many residents who, on one hand, got displaced and had to leave their village, land and livestock behind and on the other hand, had to
separate from their children who are sent to far away ashramshalas now. Many ex- SPOs are now posted to distant areas. Shyama (35 years old woman) shared,

“My husband is an SPO. We came from Satwa. A lot of people came from there when Salwa Judum took off. I was pregnant with my second child that time and I almost delivered on my way to Dantewada. My son studies in Kuwakonda which is around 30-35 kilomtres from here. There was no school nearby and so we had to send him there. My husband is posted somewhere in Sukma. I do not know where. He comes once in six months. I am on my own here. As a woman I feel unsafe. I have no family support here. Only a few women from the nearby tents talk to me. There is no land here to do farming, no cattle, no forest, no tendu, no mela mandai {fair and festivals}, no mahua...”

(Shyama 35 years old woman, resident of Chitalanka Camp)

Shyama is one amongst those hundreds of women in Chitalanka who have similar stories to share. The camp has taken away their livelihood and has also disrupted their socio-cultural lives too. She, like all other adivasi women in Dantewada, misses her ‘close to nature’ life, the fun and frolic during melas. Chitalanka camp is located very close to the residence of the District Collector and Superintendent of Police of Dantewada. But poorly guarded, the camp has already been attacked once by the Maoists in the year 2008. During my visit to Chitalanka, I observed that there still were no proper security measures taken by the government for these people. Women feel insecure in the absence of their husbands and children, however, these insecurities and fears are not accounted for by anyone. Women are facing the challenge to run the family without any concrete employment opportunity available at their disposa. This has made them economically vulnerable and at the mercy of the State for any sort of assistance. Although, the families of these ex-SPOs are relatively better off economically but are living under a constant state of fear. Women in the camps not only face the challenges of economic security and vulnerability but also experience isolation in terms of having minimal socialisation opportunity and socio-cultural activities available around.

Tulsi, a teenaged girl and daughter of a Chhattisgarh Force personnel also resides in the camp. Her family hails from Cherlapal village, in district Bijapur. She shared her experiences of camp life, of how it feels being the daughter of a security force personnel and how their camp was attacked by the Maoists.

“Our camp was attacked at around twelve at night. We could hear gunshots throughout the night. It was a sleepless night for all of us. I used to think that bombs were big in size but what my father got that day after the encounter was small. I saw grenade and tiffin bomb for the first time. Grenade is small and tiffin bomb even
smaller. These days they [Maoists] use tiffin bomb and petrol bomb. My father took it away next morning to the police station...During the Tadmetla attack on CRPF personnel in Sukma district, my father was posted somewhere there. We were very scared. We could not establish any contact with him...My mother kept crying the whole day and gained senses only once he called from there after two days. Those times were unimaginably scary. Here at the police line, coffins used to be made even before the dead bodies arrived. It is very risky to have someone in the force now. This camp is also not safe. I do not feel safe here. Back in my village, it is not as fearful as it is here. A lot of my family members still stay there. Although even my village has a camp now. We are instructed by our father not to visit the village ever. Life here is very uncomfortable. Our house leaks during monsoons and there are craters on the road that get filled with mud. The camp smells bad.”

(Tulsi, a teenaged girl. Daughter of a Chhattisgarh force personnel and resident of Chitalanka Camp)

The narrative here highlights the sense of insecurity and constant fear that prevails in the lives of children and families residing in Salwa Judum camps. Although, being a daughter of a security force personnel, Tulsi has her own shares of thrills and fears. The sharing regarding the bombs and its specification were done by her with a sense of thrill and pride for having being able to see and touch a bomb. However, such thrills are short lived and they bring with them an inherent sense of fear and risk as well. In the present day context, families of those who joined the security force are at a high risk. There chances of returning to their villages are bleak. They are confined to camp life and are restricted to visit mela etc. too. Being from a family of security force personnel has brought them economic security but there is inherent sense of insecurity that has come along with it. It was also informed that especially during the times of Salwa Judum, death and dead bodies were spoken about routinely by everyone, including children. Conflict situations like that prevailing in Chhattisgarh also brings out the element of unpredictability and risk involved in life wherein practices of 'making coffins before the death' were observed.

A number of students in the Kasoli ashramshala had their families settled in Chitalanka camp. Gulori, (Laxman’s mother, a student studying in 10th standard in Kasoli), resident of Chitalanka shared,

“A big incident took place in Satwa and our lives have changed ever since. Our sarpanch was killed by the naxals in full public view. They tied him to a tree and cut him into pieces. His family was locked in a room. Naxalites started visiting frequently after that incident. After a couple of years of the sarpanch’s death, his younger brother became the new sarpanch. But as expected, even he was attacked. He was brutally stabbed on his back. By God’s grace he somehow survived. He and his family
were now left with no option but to escape. All their belongings, ration, livestock, money even utensils were taken away and distributed. Villagers were too threatened to extend any help. No one could raise their voice in their support. They, in their one pair of clothes, had to leave Satwa. He then came to Dantewada. Salwa Judum had also started by then. He settled with his family in Chitalanka camp and this former sarpanch became an SPO. Salwa Judum was at its full bloom and almost all families from Satwa had fled to different Salwa Judum camps. Even our family moved here. There are a lot of families from our village here, but this can never become our village. But we have no option. We know that we cannot go back now.”

(Gulori, middle aged woman, resident of Chitalanka Camp)

This narrative, other than highlighting the plight of many families in camps, also depicts some of the structural issues pertaining to this conflict. During the course of fieldwork and also drawing from the literature, it can be argued that a large number of killings carried out by the Maoists back in the village were from headmen’s family. Usually the sarpanch is considered to be a powerful individual in the village in terms of socio-economic and political status. Referring in the context of the present fieldwork, it was observed that almost all the headmen were relatively wealthier than the other fellow villagers. This inequality and social contradictions were targeted by the Maoists and a violent *modus operandi* was adopted to address the issue. Although, it was criticised by many people, however, in the same breath a lot many people did share about how those families deserved such a fate. However, there was passive resistance to the Maoists in the region that was manifested only through hate words, hiding the belongings, serving bad food to them etc. But it was only after the launch of Salwa Judum that this resistance took a concrete shape. Salwa Judum was also looked at by many as an opportunity to retaliate to the Maoists, however, the consequences following it were not known to them. The family being discussed in the above narrative too believed that Salwa Judum would relieve them of their situation but, ironically, made them even more vulnerable. They are not just at a high risk of being targeted by the Maoists but live under a deep sense of insecurity, fear, uncertainty and resource scarcity being faced on an everyday basis. There is no freedom from fear or that of want that exists in their present day lives.

The family referred to by Gulori was that of Roshan, another student of the pre-metric school in Kasoli. Roshan (9th standard) is from Satwa and his father’s elder brother was the one who has been referred to in the above narrative. Roshan’s father became an SPO and was posted in Kasoli but was soon killed by the Maoists in a weekly haat in Chindnaar (around seven kilometres from Kasoli). Interaction with his
mother Murri, not only brought out the details of her personal life but also the kind of challenges being faced by her in this camp.

The roof of Murri’s home was leaking. Like all other shelters, black coloured sheet was the ceiling of this small mud house. Although, the rectangular set up was made into three small rooms, only one of them was occupied and other rooms were completely vacant due to limited belongings. I was informed that back in the village, the usual practice is that these compartments in every house are used to store grains, but here at the camp there is no land for cultivation and no grains to store. This is the condition of almost all houses in the camp. People were forced to leave their villages and therefore, they did not get a chance to bring their belongings. Murri shared,

“We cannot go back now and so this is our home. Government is not doing anything to renovate this. Monsoon went away and the situation is even worse now. But as this is the only shelter I have, I am trying to make it a little liveable. With my little capacity, I am renovating it to make it feel more at home. We left behind everything and came here and are now left with no option but to stay here. My children had to be sent to distant schools. My husband got killed by the Maoists and no compensation till date has been given to us. Nandkishore Pawar who stays comfortable in Kasoli, always guarded by armed men, was the one who pushed my husband into becoming an SPO. But he has not helped me either, no one cares. We are so vulnerable here. The camp has been attacked once and it can happen again. Kasoli camp is always guarded. Women work there, but I have no work. I sometimes go to Dantewada to work as a maid in bungalows; I break stones for constructing roads but it fetches me very little money. My life has changed. My heart weeps but I cannot cry in front of my children.”

(Murri, mid 30s, resident of Chitalanka Camp)

Murri’s narrative highlights some important aspects of the post- Salwa Judum life of people in the region. For people living in the camps, life still remains under risk. However, having accepted it as the fact of life, people like Murri are making efforts in their own little capacity to repair the house and make it more liveable. She overtly expressed her aversion towards an erstwhile Salwa Judum leader who according to her was the reason why her husband became an SPO. Even after her husband’s death, the challenge to live and fend for her family continues, infact to a greater extent now. She reported of not having received any compensation against the death of her husband. She feels the disparity existing between herself and the Salwa Judum leader, wherein she feels that he is living comfortably and she has lost everything to this campaign. There are on-going insecurities that she faces in the current times in terms of being unsafe inside the camp to that of having no employment opportunity available to fend
for her family. The residents of Chitalanka continue to live a vulnerable life. State’s response to Murri and her family has been dubious. She claims that she has not been compensated by the government and all her efforts to claim it have gone futile.

The security of the camp is ignored as compared to that of Kasoli, where the security forces are omnipresent. With no employment opportunity at her disposal, she works as a domestic help in ‘bungalows’. On my way to Dantewada from Geedam, I was surprised to see a number of big bungalows on either side of the roads. I was informed that these were owned by traders, contractors and government officials from big cities and towns like Raipur, Dantewada, Jagdalpur etc. On the other hand, with extremely poor housing, sanitation, education, livelihood and security conditions, Chitalanka camp gives a contrasting picture.

1.1.2. Dornapal Salwa Judum Camp, District Sukma:

_Dornapal_ is the largest Salwa Judum camp in Chhattisgarh. According, to the Collector’s Memorandum of Dantewada (undivided) released in 2007, there were a total of approximately fifteen thousand people residing in Dornapal. However, the numbers must have changed for it has been over seven years since the last figures were released. Located at a distance of approximately thirty five kilometres from the district headquarters of Sukma, Dornapal has been and continues to be one the most sensitive camps in terms of security and has been attacked numerous times by the Maoists. The first things that caught my attention in Dornapal camp was the extensive CRPF security personnel guarding the camp and also moving around and inside the camp. Compared to Kasoli, this camp had an incomparable number of security force personnel. Different check points had seven to ten CRPF personnel each, at a time.

The camp felt more like a village and not a camp site. There were shops on either side ranging from cycle repairs, mobile recharging shops, small sweet shops, medical shops etc. However, majority of the customers at these shops were the security force personnel. An ashramshala is set up inside the camp. Hariram, 17 years old resident and also a teacher at the ashramshala informed that this camp has approximately a total of three thousand children. Hariram further shared his experience,

“We often hear that this is the biggest Judum camp. I do not know as I have never been anywhere outside. The only time I came out of my village Kunded is during Judum. I lived all my life there and was brought here by the security force personnel. Back in the village, there were tensions however, we did have a life of our own. Here, we do not have a life of our own and are at the disposal of the force personnel. People joke here and say that you cannot even urinate without the permission of force walas. This is our life madam. There are so many children here who were born here and have experienced this life right from their birth. What will government do for them? They cannot even learn farming now. We have no land or cattle here, we cannot even collect tendu patta. We are not used to this life. Even with little problems, our villages were better. Old people pray for their return, but we know it is not possible now”

(Hariram, 17 years old, teacher at Dornapal ashramshala)

Hariram brought out the ground reality of people’s everyday life and the varied manifestations of conflict being encountered by people in the camp. As for Hariram and for many other villagers too, Salwa Judum phase was the first time they stepped out of their villages. This in itself was challenging for them. However, keeping their inhibitions aside, the greater challenge has been to adjust and adapt themselves to the camp life. However, what exists today in these camps is a sense of extreme degradation and un- freedom wherein the residents are at the disposal of the security forces who are an embodiment of State. Rather than ensuring freedom to the residents, the State is constraining them in their everyday life. Children who were born to this camp are vulnerable in terms of having no exposure to any life outside the camp. Hariram represented those thousands of people who still believe that life in a village was relatively better than the one being led in the camps. Although, having faced the reality of life, they know that they have reached a point of no return. Unlike the older people, who still hope for their return, people like Hariram have given up all hopes.

Sukhdev, who works as a cook at this ashramshala in the camp shared his experience of coming to this camp. He shared,

“I came from Tarlaguda village. I stayed with my parents who were old. Two of my sisters got married and stay elsewhere. I lived with my old parents back in the village. My mother passed away few years back. My father was severely unwell when Salwa Judum took off. The security force personnel used to come very often and randomly beat people. That night hundreds of force personnel came, forcefully vacated all houses and made us leave the village. Seeing the situation, my father asked me to leave him back in the village and go. He was too weak to even walk. My father forced me to leave. I was helpless. That was the last time I saw my father. I came to this camp and have not been able to go back ever since. I do not know what happened to
my father, is he alive or dead, I do not know. My heart weeps. I feel angry but helpless. I wonder what my father would have gone through. I think he must be dead.”

(Sukhdev, mid 20s, cook at the Dornapal ashramshala)

Bharti, a young camp resident too shared her experience of the times of Salwa Judum and what followed after that. She narrated,

“I stayed not very far from Dornapal. But during Judum we were all brought here. I came here with my mother and brother in 2006. I got married to a local Dornapal man after a year of coming. He is a political figure here. My brother also got married here. He was an SPO. However, once Salwa Judum was banned, all the SPOs lost their position. He could not even go back. He stayed unemployed for a while and then the news of regularisation of SPOs came in. One needed an identity proof for it. My brother did not have anything here and so going back to the village to get the documents was the only option. My brother took the risk. It proved fatal. My brother was caught by the Maoists and killed brutally. His body parts were cut and thrown right outside the Dornapal camp. He is survived by his wife and two children. They are completely at the disposal of the government but no help so far has been extended to them. Salwa Judum has stopped but greater harm has been done. We are helpless.”

(Bharti, mid 20s, resident of Dornapal Camp)

The above two narratives highlight the turbulent times of Salwa Judum. It was turbulent not just in terms of physical loss and displacement that people suffered, but also in terms of the fracturing the relational aspects within the families and even outside of it. Wherein for Sukhdev, camp gave him an employment opportunity in the ashramshala, but it shook the very foundation of his family. His only family member, i.e. his father, had to be left behind at the mercy of time. Till date he has a deep sense of loss, guilt and pain that challenges his everyday living. Similarly, Bharti too lost her brother after Salwa Judum was withheld. Her brother’s family continues to live in the camp and are at the complete disposal of the government. Bharti’s brother’s death is not compensated for till date. However, what came out was the response of the Maoists towards those who supported and participated in Salwa Judum. This continues even today as thousands of young SPOs and their families live under a state of constant fear. His body thrown right outside the camp was symbolic of this retaliation and response of the Maoists towards the State.

As informed by Hariram, Dornapal is home to a very large number of children too. A rough estimate provided by him stood at approximately three thousand children in
total. However, with camp’s total population being around sixteen thousand now, one can easily accept the figures being provided. The ashramshala itself has a total of around twelve hundred students. Not many children were available to talk as it was the *Dornapal Mela* day. All had gone there right in the morning. It is now once in a year that these children and other residents get to re-live their village life. However, residents told that the fun and frolic here during the mela is nothing compared to what they used to have back in the village. Now, celebrations also have an element of fear and sense of insecurity where they are not allowed to dance till late night, security force personnel stop and frisk anyone they want etc.

The condition of children in Dornapal camp was succinctly put forth by Mahendra. I got an opportunity to talk to him at length about children in Dornapal Salwa Judum camp. He is a native of Dornapal village and has worked on projects with some development organisations in Dornapal in the past. He shared,

> “The plight of children here is miserable. Children have been worse affected by this displacement. But not much is being done for them. There is a school but with the number of students being really high no one pays attention to them. Others keep loitering around in the camp. They are growing seeing armed men around all the time. There are critical cases of malnourishment of three to four grades here which is worse. Children have not only been physically affected but psychologically too. Under an NGO project, during a session I asked them to draw whatever comes to their mind. They drew guns, broken houses. They drew what they see everyday. Camp life is not suitable for them by any standards. Children are still growing in an environment of conflict. I often wonder what will these thousands of children do once they grow up? This camp is a like a prison”

(Mahendra, mid 40s, native of Dornapal village and now a resident of Dornapal Camp)

Mahendra brought out issues pertaining to children growing in this conflict hit region. The uncertainty that future holds for these children is a challenge that is faced by many. With limited or no access to service, children are being deprived of their basic needs for development like those of health, nutrition, education etc. He also raised a pertinent issue of what future holds for these children? Providing school buildings does not serve any purpose until a feasible environment for growth and development is created by the government. Life of children in camps is vulnerable not just in terms of safety but also in terms of witnessing the large scale militarisation, restrictive life and uncertainty at large in their everyday.
Interactions and observation also elucidated the plight of those people who were already living in Dornapal village before Salwa Judum was launched. People who had been staying at Dornapal before it turned into a camp have suffered equally. Unlike the natives of Kasoli village who were not shifted inside the camp and have continued to stay in their original homes with no restriction imposed on their movement, the natives of Dornapal village are living under high restrictions. They were leading a normal life till the time Salwa Judum took off. Once people from nearby villages and other remote villages started coming in large numbers, the district authorities ordered the natives to accommodate them. Accommodating everyone was not possible. One of the residents also highlighted how during the times of Salwa Judum, few families of Dornapal decided to leave the village and go to other safer places (which in present context meant a non-Salwa Judum camp site). People sold off their homes and land at throw away prices. However, this was done mostly by those who had some money and resources to move elsewhere. A few displaced people who had some money at that time were lucky to get these homes.

With being under constant supervision of CRPF personnel, only a limited number of people could be spoken with. They all highlighted their present vulnerable condition at the camp and how they are always under a state of fear and threat, not only by the forces but by the Maoists too. Incidences of violence keep occurring. The locals informed that the day before my visit, a tractor driver was abducted and killed and his body was found right outside the camp, in another incidence, a couple of weeks back, two Maoists were arrested from inside the camp. Residents are all at the disposal of the security forces for their everyday life also. The movement in and out of the camp is highly restricted in Dornapal. The population of the camp is very high and infrastructural development to cater to the needs of these people is almost negligible.

1.1.3. Jagargunda Salwa Judum Camp, District Sukma:

Another camp looked at during the course of fieldwork was Jagargunda. Located in one of the remotest regions of Chhattisgarh, Jagargunda falls at a distance of around eighty five kilometres from the district headquarters of Sukma. I was informed by the accompanying journalist that before Salwa Judum hit this region, Jagargunda was the centre of trade of forest produce like tamarind and Mahua. It was decently connected to town of Dantewada and Konta. However, after 2005, the transportation ceased to exist
and the village turned into a cantonment. When Salwa Judum started, the Maoists strategically blocked all the roads that reached Jagargunda. The villagers were in a state of dilemma during that time as they did not have an idea as what to do; whether to leave their village and go to nearby Salwa Judum camp or continue staying here. A large number of people from villages of Misiguda, Ursanghal and Tolivarti stayed back in the village. While others from villages like Tarlaguda, Koder, Kunder etc. came to the Salwa Judum camp in Jagargunda, only to get confined by concertina wires. Adivasis inside the forests were given no possible chance to come out. The original habitants and new entrants in Jagargunda completely boycotted those who stayed in the forest.

With all these inputs gathered beforehand, I embarked on my journey to Jagargunda from Dornapal (see Appendix I, Map 6). The road journey to reach Jagargunga was quite challenging and brought out the prevailing life conditions of people of this region. The feel of this conflict, was felt at every single moment of our journey. As we gradually started moving ahead on the road and deeper into the forest, the symbols that signify State’s presence started disappearing into the thick forests. Roads, school, ration shop, anganwadi centre, police station all started to disappear. For the first time during my entire stay in Chhattisgarh, I saw a school building completely blown up by the Maoists. It was something I had only read about in reports till now. This school was located in Kakerlanka which was around five kilometres away from Dornapal. The locals informed that the school was blown up in 2004 and since then the building has remained as it is. Neither has the government reached here to have a look at it nor did the Maoists ever explain their act. The debris has been lying there as it is for the past nine years (see Appendix II). With no school here, people are sending their children to schools that are distantly located.

As we ventured deeper into the forest, the feeling of entering the red zone was dominant. Traces of Maoists’ presence could be felt at many places. At a couple of places, roads were painted with messages and warnings written in red colour (see Appendix II), pamphlets pasted on tree trunks and red flags seen flowing at some distances. However, between Dornapal and Jagargunda, there were a couple of Salwa Judum camps that suddenly brought out state’s presence mostly in form of security force personnel. The first Salwa Judum camp we entered was at Chintagufa.
‘Welcome To Heaven’ read a board right outside the Chitagufa camp, highlighting the ironical situation that prevailed in the area. We were stopped and interrogated at the check post. Surprisingly I was not questioned directly, but was given suspicious looks by almost all the CRPF men. I was accompanying one of the most well known journalists of Bastar and hence, was not asked direct questions. My identity as a researcher was not explicitly revealed to them by him. He believed that introducing myself as researcher from Mumbai would have invited more trouble. Rather being identified as a journalist cum scholar, with the team, was considered alright by the security forces. The force personnel continued the suspicious gaze; I was later informed by the journalist that it was also because a girl venturing into this highly sensitive zone was a rare sight. The road, by any standards, did not qualify to be called roads. It was only due to passing of a few vehicles that had made a road like impression on which our bikes were running. There were big boulders, mud, water, crater, trees trunks and whatever one could imagine of in that jungle. The bridges were all broken and the makeshift bridges were also reportedly blown up by the Maoists.

We were soon in Tadmetla, a village that can never be forgotten in the history of this conflict. It was in Tadmetla in April 2010, that seventy six CRPF personnel were killed by the Maoists in an ambush. It is the worst ever rebel massacre where about four hundred Maoists had ambushed a CRPF patrol party in the Tadmetla forest. The exact spot where the incidence took place still exists in the form of a deep crater along with scattered remains of the vehicle that carried the force personnel. The place was extremely quiet. I got down for a moment to see the spot closely, however, I was asked to come back and get moving before it became dark.

Our next stop was Chintalnaar Salwa Judum camp. It is a big village that falls around twelve kilometres before Jagargunda; our final destination. This place is also symbolic in the history of State-Maoist conflict in Chhattisgarh. In May 2012, during the abduction of the District Collector of Sukma, Alex Paul Menon, it was this place from where the two mediators namely, Prof. Hargopal and Dr. B. D. Sharma were picked up by the Maoists for mediation. During the abduction, a lot many media persons had set up camps in Tadmetla and Chintalnaar. But no media person was allowed beyond Chintalnaar. The road from here onwards i.e. between Chintalnaar and Jagargunda is considered to be the most sensitive belt in terms of presence of the Maoists.
As mentioned above, this twelve kilometres patch from Chintalnaar to Jagargunda is considered to be highly sensitive with no presence of security force. It is completely a Maoist dominated belt. I was expecting to have an encounter with Maoists, however, that did not happen and I was told by the journalist that they were already aware of our visit and would not stop us. There were dense forests on either sides and the entire area looked uninhabited. There were mixed feelings of excitement, fear, inquisitiveness and restlessness. The only voice that was reaching my ears that was of the motorbike. The area had no traces of presence of the State. But the silence had its own meaning.

We reached Jagargunda, our final destination. CRPF personnel were at guard but very few in numbers. The camp looked very different from what I expected. The images of Kasoli camp stood in stark contrast to Jagargunda. There were a lot of broken structures that not only included houses but also a school building and a small health centre. In terms of infrastructure, this camp was incomparably in a worse state than Kasoli. One could easily get the feel of how a storm of violence, displacement, destruction, loss of life and livelihood had left this place completely devastated. At the entrance itself, there were a couple of women drying mahua flowers. They mentioned that with no access to forest and markets, their livelihood has shaken completely. They shared that the quantity of mahua they used to collect in a week is what they have to survive on for the season.

People here discussed about the problems they face on daily basis. There was only one hand pump available for all which led to severe water scarcity. With only one broken school building, people of the camp have no option but to send their children to distant school. Sometimes these schools are as far as hundred kilometres from Jagargunda. They get to see their children once in a year as coming here is not an easy task. Often the roads are completely cut off. There was one health centre running in the village, but in response to Salwa Judum, the Maoists blew it off. With no medical facilities available, one has to travel a minimum of forty kilometres (one side) to reach the nearest health centre in Chintagufa. There were no traces of government administration in the camp. It was informed that no political leader or anyone from the district administration ever visits them. The residents are left on their own to fend for themselves and are completely cut off from markets. Although, Chintalnaar is the nearest market for them but reaching there is a challenge in itself. They are always under
the scanner of the security forces and also by the Maoists. Jagargunda camp, especially, is also sensitive due to its close proximity with Maoists’ dominated pockets.

Children of Jagargunda camp shared that they now prefer staying in the ashramshala, away from home. Phooldhar, a 15 years old boy, studies in Konta. He came home after a year along with his friend Hemant, also a student at Konta. They shared,

“Our life is very different in the ashramshala. Here we are under constant control and threat of the naxals and of the force personnel also. Although the force personnel do not harm us physically but we always have to face rounds of interrogations whenever we go outside the camp or come in. Our movement is restricted. We miss our home, but then after Salwa Judum home has not been home. Before Salwa Judum had started there was less violence in our village. Naxals used to come and conduct meetings, take away ration, dance all night and go back to the jungles. But now they are targeting the locals who are inside this camp. We guess, they feel that we, residents of the camp, have betrayed them. This has made us extremely vulnerable. We feel more scared now. We hear gunshots frequently. But now we do not react.”

(Phooldhar and Hemant, 15 years, residents of Jagagunda camp, currently studying in an ashramshala in Konta)

The above narrative highlights how children perceive their changed life. Phooldhar and Hemant represent that large number of children in Chhattisgarh who do prefer staying in ashramshalas now because of lack of educational opportunities in their native villages and also because ashramshala life gives them some sense of freedom too. They stated that although, the security force personnel do not cause them any sort of physical harm but the do look at every child coming into the camp with a suspicious gaze. Their presence is also intimidating for these children. With schools being next to defunct and high teacher absenteeism, children can be seen wiling away time. For those in distant ashramshalas, life is, however, not easy either. There is a gradual breaking up of family ties and sense of community and social life. Children are unable to participate in the socio-cultural activities in the village. Children miss home and their village life. They shared how before Salwa Judum, the prevailing situation was not as worse as it is now. Although, they shared how gun shots, which are very frequent during nights, do not scare them anymore. The sense of loss that children have experienced owing to this conflict is not easy to gauge. What usually gets noticed is the physical affects of conflict on children, but the social and emotional challenges that children face in their everyday life often goes unnoticed.
Lachha, a resident of Jagargunda camp shared,

"Had there been schools nearby, our children would have studied here itself. Now we have to send our children to distant schools in Dornapal, Konta and Katekalyan. A lot of children have nothing to do here and can be seen wiling away time. Times of Salwa Judum were really horrific. Our children are far away and are not able to come home during the time of rice cultivation hence, we do not get enough helping hands. We have to manage on our own. Earlier our village used to be very good. But now no one sees us or visits us"

(Lachha, late 30s, resident of Jagargunda Camp)

A lot many children had to discontinue their studies after Salwa Judum campaign because going away from home was not an option for them. Going away also meant a decrease in number of helping hands in the family. However, one is forced to argue and question how the life of those children who have been sent away by their families different from the ones who stayed back? The conflict and its varied manifestations still continue to surround those children as well. What results will this separation due to the availability of education there will fetch is a pertinent question in the minds of all here. On a personal level, visiting Jagargunda was an eye- opening journey that I had ever embarked upon. However, for me it will be always be an incomplete journey as no encounter with the Maoists happened and so the other side of the reality could not be explored. Although communications were established with the Maoists about our visit and a meeting was fixed but due to some sudden change of plan, they sent a communication about cancelling the meeting. Disappointment hit me, but overall I had a feeling of immense satisfaction for having touched the untouched areas on Chhattisgarh and for getting a reality check about life in this conflict zone.

If a parallel contrast is drawn between camps like Dornapal and Jagargunda with Kasoli, one can state that Kasoli stands as relatively a more developed camp in the region. However, by stating this one is not attempting to belittle the adversities being faced by the residents of Kasoli but this constrast is completely being drawn on the basis of the role played by the State during and after Salwa Judum. The plight of adivasis of these remote camps needs serious thinking. Although Salwa Judum was banned in the year 2012 but the after effects of the campaign can still be strongly felt. Life has not been the same for many people residing in these camps. The campaign has hit the very foundation of life of these people leading to a devastated social- economic and cultural
structure. Camps have only added more vulnerability to lives of thousands of people in Chhattisgarh. (Glimpses of Jagargunda Camp can be seen in Appendix II)

2. The Everyday life in Kasoli:

The attempt to draw a contrasting picture between Kasoli and other Salwa Judum camps should not obscure the real issues and problems being faced by the residents of Kasoli Salwa Judum camp. The residents here have also gone through a situation of turmoil during the times of Salwa Judum. Whenever the residents of Kasoli Salwa Judum camp spoke about their lives in this camp, issues of hardship, lack of livelihood opportunities, vulnerability and fear dominated the narratives. They shared how their lives have changed after being brought to this camp.

The everyday life and living experiences of people of Kasoli Salwa Judum camp was explored and observed. A six months long stay in the camp alongwith a large number of children and displaced people around, gave me a two different pictures of a camp life in conflict zone. On one hand, Kasoli camp is a temporary settlement for hundreds of people who had to leave behind their places of origin, either out of force or out of will, but continue to lead a life which is not normal according to any standards of living. Their life is now characterized by a sense of resignation, elements of fear, insecurity, vulnerability, instability and uncertainty. On the other hand, there is a continued pressure to cope. However, having spent around eight years in this camp with no concrete opportunity given to them for their return, the residents of the camp are gradually giving up the hope of return. Having accepted this, the residents are working towards making sense of their present day lives here. In this process, the camp is gradually attaining meaning for its residents. They are now bringing a sense of permanency in this temporary settlement.

Different studies on camps have looked at camp life differently. Said (1991), while depicting the life of the Palestinians in exile in Lebanon, states ‘people in exile do not really live, but linger in non-descript places, neither here nor there’. This perspective looks at camps as temporary, meaningless space that is characterised by suffering and state of confusion. He calls it a ‘life in transition between a meaningful past and hopeful future.’ Countering this view is the work of Ramadan (2012) wherein he believes that
camps in which the Palestinians live are neither meaningless nor nondescript. He states, ‘camps may be temporary spaces in which refugees await their right to return, but they have nevertheless become imbued with meaning and significance over decades of living’.

When one attempts to look at the Kasoli camp with this perspective, one observes how people, consciously and unconsciously, are giving a new meaning to their present lives. While living in the camp the residents are gradually creating structures that have held meaning for them in their earlier lives in their native homes. By doing so, these temporary places have also acquired some sort of permanency in its nature. Although, there is no denial or belittling of the fact that the residents of this camp have undergone a complete disruption of the socio-economic and cultural fabric of life, but now with over eight years, this camp as a space has gained meaning in the lives of many. In this course of little less than a decade, Kasoli Salwa Judum camp seemed to have developed into a seemingly permanent feature on the map of Dantewada. However, ironically a large number of villages from where the present camp residents have been evacuated are losing their existence and identity. For example, villages like Faraspal, Bangapal, Dornapal, Nagarnar and even Kasoli village etc. have lost their original identities and are now known only for the presence of Salwa Judum camps or some industrial set ups. Returning to villages is now a far-fetched dream for many. Accepting this reality, the residents of Kasoli have started converting this temporary site into a permanent habitat on their own.

The temporary makeshift set ups provided by the government are now being made into *pucca* houses with bricks and cement by the residents who now have accepted that possibility of their return is bleak. However, it is interesting to see how the *adivasis* who have hitherto been living in mud houses with thatched roof covered with tree barks and branches, move into these cemented structure. Accepting this change does not come easy for them.
As Gutlu Ram (Kasoli camp resident since 2006) stated,


(We have now accepted the fact that we have to live here only, so we will have to make permanent houses for ourselves. The ones provided by government cannot stand the monsoons. The jungles are far away, beyond our reach and so we cannot access it for using forest resource for constructing our homes. We have to use cement and bricks. It becomes hot. We, the tribal cannot walk on charcoal roads)

(Gutlu Ram, resident of Kasoli Camp)

With the houses becoming pucca, a feeling of permanency is gradually coming in the camp. However, living in cemented structures is not what these adivasis are habituated to. As Gutlu shared, despite of construction of roads in many areas, the adivasis not walking on it is a common sight in Chhattisgarh. They are usually seen walking barefoot and so walk on either sides of the road and not on it. Charcoal roads are too hot to be walked on barefoot. I would observe the youngest of children in the ashramshala walk for kilometres together without slippers. However, fleet of official vehicles speedily making their way on these roads is often a common sight in Dantewada.

The residents of the camp are confined to its boundaries. No farming activity is done outside the camp. Government has not provided the residents with individual pieces of land to work upon, rather a collective piece of land is provided where people work and yield some produce. Adding on to it is a dairy which is solely handled by a Salwa Judum leader. A fixed amount of milk is given to the ashramshala and to security personnel and rest is sold off. The Forest Department has set up a bamboo processing unit, being managed by Aarti Didi. She is also a camp resident. A handful of women come and work with her in the afternoons. The unit manufactures handicraft items made out of bamboos. These items are also used to decorate forest guest houses in different districts of Chhattisgarh. Major employment in the camp has come in the form of SPOs and the remaining few work as wage labourers whenever they get an opportunity.
2.1. **Gaining a sense of permanency:**

It was observed that despite of a life full of restriction and non-availability of resources, the environment is gradually becoming more permanent in Kasoli. There has been a slow and gradual accumulation of experiences and memories - of birth, death, marriages, melas (fair), community functions and festivals etc., that have given a new meaning to this space. People from different villages have come to Kasoli with only one thread in common - Salwa Judum. However, now they all are living under one common identity - of being *Kasoli residents*. Consciously or unconsciously, there is a feeling of village-life and community that is gradually being brought into the camp by its residents. More than the institutional support being given to the camp residents, in terms of small scale livelihood programme like bamboo processing unit, dairy farming and some agricultural land for community farming, the support system and social relations created by the residents themselves occupy a much more important space in this camp and gives a sense of security in this prevailing situations of insecurity. It is said that the camp’s meaning is embodied by the very people who populate it (Rosemary 1994 and Peteet 2005: 49). In this context, Kasoli camp is that place where people from different villages, socio-cultural and economic background having undergone a common experience of violence and displacement have congregated.

The camp now seems to exhibit a sense of community life. It was during a series of incidents, that brought how in such adverse situations too, the people of this camp work as a closed knit community that is working towards leading a life of togetherness. In the very act of living, these residents have created newer meanings and laid down enduring ties and relations. Community here is conceptualised as a web of interconnected networks, encompassing both families and households. Highlighting a few incidents here would bring out how sense of togetherness and meaningful spaces exists in the camp.

My first ever interaction with the residents of the camp happened at a function called *chathi*. My guide for the day was Dinesh (2nd standard) whose family resides inside the camp and his father is an SPO posted in Sukma district. He was inclined towards eating something at the function and so asked me too to join in. I was pleasantly surprised at the warmth extended to me by not only the family, but also the other camp residents attending the function. Dinesh who was seated next to me was also being given
a guest-like treatment, which he was enjoying thoroughly. I learnt that Chathi is the name bestowal ceremony of a new born child. Today it was for a girl child who did not look very healthy at the first sight. Her mother, with this second child, was not more than seventeen-eighteen years of age. The girl was named Laxmi (Goddess of wealth).

A bowl made out of Mahua leaf (Mahua is a tree commonly found in this region and is used for various purposes) was given to me. In it I was offered Laai (a kind of snack made out mixing of puffed rice, sweet cardamom, bhujia made out of lentils) and Mahua (most popular local drink of this region made out of fermented Mahua flowers). What attracted me the most was the sense of sharing and togetherness that these residents were exhibiting. Siyaraam, a camp resident and also an SPO, who was also present there shared,

“People work together here. Almost all families got handful of Laai. Some camp residents got Mahua too. Had we been in the village, we could have easily got everything from the forest. Here we cannot go out easily so, we all work together”

(Siyaraam, resident of Kasoli Camp)

This sense of community seemed strong in the camp. On other occasions too, I observed how the residents came together to extend a helping hand to, not only the people of the camp, but to the natives of Kasoli village too. During one of the marriage celebrations of a school teacher of the ashramshala, invitation was extended to all. Durgesh (22 years old) has been teaching in the ashramshala for the past three years. He resides in a nearby paara (village hamlet), hardly one kilometre from the camp. His family has been staying in Kasoli ever since. He shared that life has not been the same now. Durgi Sir, as he was popularly known as, stated,

“I have been living in Kasoli since my childhood days. Earlier I, alongwith my brothers, used to go to the nearby pond to bathe, collected Mahua, tamarind, and tendu from the forest. There was no school and the nearest one was in Dantewada. We, people of Kasoli worked on our farms and led a peaceful life. Salwa Judum changed everything for us too. Although we did not get displaced but we do feel the effects of it. Now the pond is occupied only by the security force personnel. We cannot go to the forest as we have to go through the camp. The guards at the check posts ask too many questions- Where did you go? Why did you go? Whom did you meet? Initially we did feel awkward with the presence of so many people here. But now I am friends with the camp residents too. This ashramshala was made here and so I got a job here. Everyone calls me guruji (sir). The camp residents are all from villages across the river. During the initial years, the camp used to be in a bad shape. People
kept coming in and houses were all temporary and broken. But now the camp looks more like a village. All the residents stay together peacefully. Now they also know that they cannot go back."

(Durgesh, native of Kasoli village and teacher at the Kasoli ashramshala)

Durgi Sir highlighted the way Salwa Judum has brought a major change in the lives of people living around the camp too. Living in the close vicinity of camp has made them vulnerable too. Although Salwa Judum did not expose them to the phenomenon of displacement but it has certainly altered the living and livelihood practices of these people too. Access to forest is not as easy as it used to be earlier. Camp as a structure poses restriction and other challenges to the Kasoli village residents too. There had been negligible or no communication between the natives of Kasoli and camp residents, however, with time, the social dynamics have also altered. Communication is established between these two groups and a sense of larger community is gradually prevailing in the area.

During Durgi sir’s marriage functions, a truck full of firewood was brought from the forest with the help of camp residents. The female cooks of the ashramshala cooked for the entire village that also included the camp residents. It seemed like a community wedding where all had come together to assist and celebrate. I was informed that these kind of practices were a common sight back in the villages, where people came together for all events - birth, deaths, marriages etc. However, Salwa Judum overshadowed all these socio-cultural practices and rituals in the area. However, now after having spent so many years in the camp, people have started making efforts to bring these traditions back in their way of living.

2.2. Creating Meaningful Spaces

Meaningful spaces have gradually emerged in Kasoli camp. They are meaningful in terms of having social, cultural and emotional values for the residents. These spaces are also created by the residents who have gradually started giving a new meaning to their lives in this camp. These spaces now act as places of social, cultural, economic and political discussions and also the inter-personal dynamics prevailing in the camp and in the lives of its residents. One such meaningful space created by the residents has been of organising bhajans once in every fortnight at the community centre built by the government. This fortnightly gathering, other than being a religious practice, is also
symbolic in nature. Community singing was a practice back in the villages however, for long people had not been doing it due to prevailing disorder in their lives. However, it was observed that these bhajan programmes have also served as major ice-breaking sessions at two levels. It has not only created a space wherein social bonds amongst the residents have developed, but has also created a common place of interaction between the residents and the security force personnel. Hitherto, there had always been a sense of fear, awkwardness and hesitation with the presence of security personnel, but with a space like this, there is a gradual change. The residents see the force personnel participate in singing bhajans and playing dholak. Although, life still remains restricted but the residents now do interact with the security forces at some basic level. These bhajan programs are usually followed by a camp meeting presided by neta ji. He informed that these meetings are usually about the issues and problems being faced by the residents on a day to day basis.

Secondly, the Bamboo Processing Unit set up by the Forest Department is another place where one can find women sitting together and talking to each other. However it a structure set up by the government, but the camp residents, especially the women have given it a new meaning. Aarti didi manages the unit. She has had her own experience of this conflict. Hailing from a small village called Kokelanka in Abujhmaad, she has been a resident of this camp since 2006. She informed that her husband was killed by the Maoists in full public view during a jan adalat. Her house was completely ransacked. She had no option but to take refuge in this Salwa Judum camp and has not looked back ever since. She narrated,

“My husband was killed by the Maoists in a jan-adalat. Life back in the village was very challenging for me and my son. At the time of Salwa Judum, I escaped and came here with my son. At that time a lot of people came here. Force personnel did not let us bring any of our belongings. I had nothing with me when we came here, just the saree that I was wearing, no utensils and no money. Then I started working as a labourer. Gradually I earned little money and bought utensils. This bamboo processing work is fine. Although we do not get much money out of it but at least women come and talk to each other and share their problems here while making incense sticks and other items. It feels like a family here. We get some space away from the force walas to talk on our own. But home is home, our village was our home. We cannot go back now and so we consider this as our home. I think I will grow old here only, but before dying I have a wish to visit Delhi-Mumbai”.

(Aarti didi, resident of Kasoli Camp and caretaker of the bamboo processing unit in the camp)
She has been a resident of this camp for eight years now and she has come in terms with the reality that returning home is not possible. Having a painful past experience, she does not want to go back. She has stopped complaining. Having accepted the reality, she finds comfort and safety here. This camp has been a life saviour for her. Like for Aarti didi, for other women too, this unit serves as a space for security wherein they work in a group and also discuss about issues concerning their lives. They shared that although they are living with minimum resources but without any fear of losing anything. Gulori didi, who also works at the Bamboo processing unit, shared,

“Madam, my sons study in your school {referring to the ashramshala where I was staying and teaching} in 2nd and 5th standards respectively. Their father has no employment. He goes for some digging work whenever he gets a chance. Initially we used to feel awkward here, but now we have adjusted. We do not feel scared anymore. Here we can work hard, earn accordingly and spend accordingly. My sons eat at the ashramshala itself. Till 10th standard there is no problem. I come here to this unit. We all work with didi {referring to Aarti didi}. We take out time and come here and chit chat a lot, my old mother-in-law stays at home. Today afternoon we got these tendu fruits. Have some and take the rest {offered a few to me}”

(Gulori didi, resident of Kasoli Camp, works at the bamboo processing unit)

These two women quoted above, like many other women in Kasoli camp, do miss their homes back in the villages. But life goes on, and these women have lived and breathed around eight years in this camp. While their lives draw meaning from an understanding of home as elsewhere, in the very act of living, they have created new meanings and laid down enduring ties and relations in their present lives in the camp. They are now participating in creating new meaningful spaces. That new meaningful space for them is the bamboo processing unit that holds a meaning in their lives in this conflict zone. Women are reconstructing their lives in this new place also by making changes in the emotional attachments that they had with their homes. As, Phoolo didi shared,

“We came here out of our helplessness. My husband is an SPO and is posted somewhere far away. I do not know if he will come back or not. I have to fend for my children here. I have to earn for a living. Back in the village we did not have such works for women. It used to be home and land. Here we do not have land to work on. So I come here and make incense sticks. I do miss my home but now I consider this camp as my home. I tell my children also that this camp is our home and camp residents are our family. With this thought life is easier”

(Phoolo didi resident of Kasoli Camp, works at the bamboo processing unit)
Lives of women in the camp is challenging. There is a prevailing sense of insecurity and uncertainty. Uncertainty comes with having their husbands and sons not around. Most of them did not even know about their postings and whereabouts. With women camp residents, the economic insecurity and starting their life from the start has come parallel with this conflict and displacement. However, they have negotiated equally, if not more, than men. The negotiations done by them are not only at family level but at an individual level as a woman too. They have the unsaid duty and responsibility to create a feeling of home in this homeless space and that is where one can find women here referring to Kasoli camp as “my home”, “my camp” and “our camp” and also teaching their children to consider this camp as their home.

Consciously or unconsciously, other meaningful spaces have also been created here and they continue to be a part of the everyday living of these people. One such space, symbolic in many ways, was a chai tapri. It is not merely a place to get chai and biskoot but gradually, it has become a centre point of interaction and communication, not only between the residents of the camp and natives of Kasoli but also between them and the security force personnel. This tea-stall is situated at a radius of approximately fifty metres from the camp’s entry checkpost. So, strategically it caters not only to the camp residents and security force personnel but also the natives of Kasoli village. For me as a researcher, it was also an apt site for interaction and observation. Regular visit to this tea stall in the evenings, gave me insights about people’s life in the camp and also the politics of camp and the everyday dynamics here. My initial interactions with security personnel also happened at this chai tapri. Surprisingly, my whereabouts were already known to the security personnel who he asked me where was Uttarakhand located? (Uttarakhand being my native state)

Going by numbers, it can be stated that it was the security personnel who were frequent visitors at the tapri and sat there comfortably. Whenever a villager walked in, especially someone from the camp, he/ she had a hesitant body language. The residents always gave way to the force personnel at the counter. No one ever walked through the group of security personnel to buy anything from the tapri. One can thus, argue that there was some level of consciousness and subtle power play in the camp and some level of awkwardness and fear existed amongst the camp residents when it comes to force personnel. Sitting at one corner, talking to Umashankar Bhaiya and Deepali didi (couple who ran the tea shop) or playing with their children Chanda and Chandan, I spent a good
amount of time there every evening. This *chai tapri* did give me enough insights into the politics of this camp which will be discussed subsequently but at the same time, my coming to this *chai tapri* also invited unpleasant incidents for me as well. With my first cup of tea already sponsored by some security force personnel, like other girls in the camp, I was too a target of eve teasing. In their own subtle ways, the security force personnel used to pass comments or stare or sing some unpleasant Bollywood numbers and send marriage proposals through children of the ashramshala. However, the fellow teachers with whom I was staying informed this was a common phenomenon there and that I must learn to avoid it.

However, all this was disturbing. Despite of me being an outsider, and supposedly more educated and aware than the other women of the camp, security personnel still targeted me without any fear of being complained about. This was the state of security of women. Although no major incidences of violence or harassment against women was reported from Kasoli, but on an everyday basis, women did go through their own share of fear, awkwardness and discomfort while walking within the camp or while crossing the check post. In such scenario, non-reporting of such incidents can be looked at as a cultural or political issue wherein on one hand, women could be culturally shy in nature and refrained from talking about such issues and on the other, this can also be looked at a political issue wherein the image of the camp is given much more importance over the security of its residents. However, it was disturbing to experience all this but above all it was more disappointing to see this happening from those particular set of people who, in this camp are believed to be the protectors of the residents.

One is forced to think that in this closed camp, although, the women are making efforts to create meaningful spaces wherein they can re-live their village life, but the fact remains that they are doubly vulnerable- as displaced residents on one hand and as women on the other. Almost every woman interacted with during the fieldwork in Kasoli, shared about how they felt safer back in the villages where they had no exposure to the outside world. Hardly any woman complained of any sort of sexual or physical harassment by the Maoists back in the village. But, now after coming to Salwa Judum camps, they are being exposed to a world outside of their own. With their men being at risk (mostly being in the ex-SPOs), women do consider themselves insecure. With many women, loss of their husbands, brothers and fathers, has created newer insecurities
in their lives. Maitrin, who works as a cook at the ashramshala came with her mother and brother from village Chingair, District Bijapur. She shared,

"My father was old and had passed away back in the village itself. During the time of Salwa Judum, I came here to this camp with my mother and younger brother. My mother stays in the house and my brother studies here at the ashramshala. I am now the sole earning member in the family. My home is here in the camp itself but I feel very unsafe and awkward while walking back from this ashramshala. Security force personnel stare at women. All are from outside our region. The Naga Battalion was worse. They were very bad. I feel more scared in the camp than I used to back in the village. Back in the village, it was a different life”

(Maitrin, resident of Kasoli Camp, cook at Kasoli ashramshala)

Gradually, many women like Maitrin are making efforts to reconstruct their lives in this new space. However, in this new life, the spaces between private and public already seemed to have blurred. This conflict has ruptured the life of many women. However, they still prefer to remain silent about their problems here and so did I about my own discomforts in the camp. However, for me the only resentment I could show was to continue going to the tapri with no element of fear and awkwardness. My work continued.

My visits to the tapri never stopped. It became a meaningful space for me too for I could also interact with people around me. Tapri was also a place for frequent interactions with neta ji. He usually came for his evening stroll and we sat together to have tea and spoke about the camp, conflict and experiences of his life in this conflict zone.

2.3. ‘Neta ji': The most influential figure in Kasoli Salwa Judum camp

Nandkishore Pawar, an erstwhile Sawla Judum leader and now a major political party affiliate, is definitely the most influential person in the Kasoli camp. My first encounter with the term neta ji happened during my first stroll in the camp. Till now I was under the impression that the referral was being made to some politician of Dantewada but I soon learnt that it was Nandkishore Pawar, alias neta ji who has been an erstwhile Salwa Judum activist. He had been actively involved in the Salwa Judum campaign right from the start. Infact, he was the protagonist in launching the campaign in Kasoli. Always guarded by three four gunmen carrying SLRs, he is on the hit-list of the Maoists. With
most of his counterparts being already killed by the Maoists, he is reportedly one of their prime targets.

Nandkishore Pawar is a Gond (a tribe of central India) and hails from Abujhmaad region. Still in his early 40s, he has become one of the most influential leaders here. It was much before Salwa Judum had started that his family came and settled in Kasoli village. They still have a big house and acres of land in Kasoli and continue to be economically better off. His extended family still stays in the same house while he alongwith his wife has shifted inside the camp.

It was only during my first stroll that I had noticed a house which looked different than rest of the shelters in the camp. There was a jeep parked outside, men with rifles guarding the house. It had a proper defined boundary, a pucca roof, land around the house which was more than compared to others in the camp. I was too curious to know who stayed there. It was then that I was informed that “yeh neta ji ka ghar hai” (This is Neta ji’s house). The term neta ji was introduced to me then and after that I kept hearing it from almost everyone in the camp; from security force personnel to teachers and even from the youngest children at the camp.

I had numerous interactions with neta ji throughout the span of the fieldwork. Interactions with him brought out several facts about the conflict and also his own understanding of how Salwa Judum was for the larger good and that it should not have been banned. He also shared his experiences of village life much before Salwa Judum started. He shared,

"Naxals have always been the troublemaker here. But the situation got aggravated since the year 2000 when they started attacking at the weekly haats. People were killed there and a lot of looting at the haats started happening. There were killings in public spaces. The situation was such that anyone found with new clothes and belongings were suspected as naxals by the police. People started being tortured from both sides. We had already formed Gram Suraksha Samiti (Village Protection Committee) in our village much before Salwa Judum took off. This Samiti comprised of the local people who guarded the village shift-wise every night. One member from each family was bound to be a member of this Samiti. However, people were very enthusiastic about participating in it because they were all dismayed by the naxals. This model was replicated by the nearby villages too. During Samiti’s times, the naxal activities in the region were reduced to a great extent. Naxals thought twice before coming to the village. The locals, obviously, had good knowledge of the terrain and so they were able to prohibit the naxals from coming this side to a great extent. The villagers did not have enough resources at their disposal. They definitely lagged
behind the naxals in terms of their weapons. This was replicated and was given shape of a proper counter-insurgency campaign called Salwa Judum”

Neta ji has always been of the opinion that it was such resistance by the villagers that led to the idea of Salwa Judum in the region. Having been a Salwa Judum activist himself, he strongly feels that the campaign was serving the larger benefit of the people and people had faith in it. The ultimate goal was to bring an end to this ‘problem’. His ideas and strong views against the Maoists and in favour of Salwa Judum have been playing an influential role in Kasoli camp.

Neta ji unlike other residents in the camp, is well aware of the latest happenings in the political corridors in the state and nationally too. He strongly believes that in any counter-insurgency campaign like this, some innocent people will get killed and one has to accept this reality that any campaign cannot be flawless in its design and implementation. Here it can be argued that by stating these views neta ji completely rejected the fundamental right to life of an individual. The cost of life seems too cheap for anyone to care and that is why counter insurgency campaigns like Salwa Judum have been allowed to take off at the first place. According to him the social activists took note of only one-sided killings and filed a petition against the government and demanded for the immediate closure of Salwa Judum. They took note only of the killings by the Salwa Judum activists and security forces but never took note of the killings by the Maoists. This continued for some time and finally the campaign was banned. He believes that the petitioners never realised how they were putting the local people in a more vulnerable position. The Salwa Judum activists and all those who participated in it in any capacity have become most vulnerable to Maoist attacks. They cannot even go back to their native villages now. He believes that the people, who really wanted to bring a closure to this conflict, i.e. the Salwa Judum activists are at most risk today. He is of this firm opinion that Salwa Judum should have continued for the betterment and freedom of Bastar and its people from this conflict.

Neta ji is strongly of the opinion that since the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and social activists like Arundhati Roy and Nandini Sundar came into the picture in Chhattisgarh, they ‘ruined it’ ("Unhone sab barbaad kar diya yahan"). His views are sometimes reiterated by the camp residents too. During a visit made to Dantewada by prominent social activist Medha Patkar, Magasaysay award winner Sandeep Pandey and other activists of National Alliance for People’s
Movements (NAPM), in January 2010, an angry mob of local villagers confronted them and threw stones, eggs and raw sewage onto them shouting slogans like ‘maowadi wapas jao, medha patkar wapas jao’ (Maoists go back, Medha Patkar go back). The mob was said to be brought from Kasoli Salwa Judum Camp. The next day some NAPM activist visited Kasoli camp only to find people they could recognise as participating in previous day’s protest.29

* Neta ji did confirm this but supported it by stating that the *adivasis* in the camp had been very patient but when they saw social activists advocating the Maoists, their patience reached a threshold. However, when spoken to the residents about their participation in this attack, they stated that they had no clue about who the *guests* were. They acted as were instructed. However, not many questions were entertained on this particular incidence, neither by *neta ji* nor by the residents. But it highlighted a very important point of how one influential leader in the camp is governing the life of hundreds of residents here and how the ignorance and vulnerability of the local people is being manipulated and misused for vested interests. His words are gospel truth in the camp and are followed not only by the residents but now also by the Kasoli village natives. Seeing their parents and teachers follow and respect *neta ji*, children too are following their footsteps.

Itwari a student at the pre-metric hostel when asked about *neta ji*, shared,

“As long as *neta ji* is here, we are safe. He is a big leader and is always guarded by three to four armed men. Whenever the District Collector and Superintendent of Police visit the camp, they first pay a visit to his home. He is the one who hoists the national flag during functions. Despite of being under threat, he is a fearless man. The Maoists and the security force personnel, everyone is scared of him”

(Itwari, student at the pre- metric hostel on *Neta Ji*)

* Neta ji is indeed the most influential person in Kasoli, however, there were many instances where people, not explicitly though, did communicate about how he projects himself as a big leader but the reality stands that he has no recognition outside Kasoli. However, no one has ever been vocal about their disagreements with him. But one

29 http://sanhati.com/articles/2171/
http://searchlight-is-on.blogspot.in/2010/01/eggs-muck-tomatoes-welcome-napm.html
http://www.downtoearth.org.in/node/259
person who spoke openly about it was the Chhattigarh Force (CF) Camp Commandant, Manohar Kumar. He has been posted in Kasoli for almost two years now. Interactions with him at the tapri were always informative and interesting. He had his own experiences to share about his life in this conflict affected region. He had lot of first hand experiences of the conflict and strong views against the Maoists and their *modus operandi*, but his perception about the State government and the current Salwa Judum leader in Kasoli was interesting to know. He shared,

“There is no political will to bring an end to this issue. Government in Chhattisgarh has not been taking pro-active efforts to control this. The naxals of Andhra Pradesh were convinced by the State Government to come and participate in peace talks. Today, there is complete ceasefire in that region. However, the fact is that a large number of naxals from AP have fled to Chhattisgarh. This camp is highly influenced by neta ji. If you see Bikram Usendi of Behramgarh (district Bijapur) who was also a Salwa Judum activist, you can see a stark difference. He stays in a 2 room house and has been doing so much selflessly. Neta ji has so much of land for himself, big house, jeep; dairy is also run by him. He is misusing his powers. He is politically motivated and wants to become an MLA of BJP. You yourself can see how he moves around. People talk of him behind his back. These adivasis are very innocent people and he is exploiting this innocence. He has seen a little more world than these adivasis and so people follow him. In your ashramshala also, he acts like a superintendent and takes all important decisions.”

(Manohar Kumar, Camp Commandant, Kasoli Camp)

The camp dynamics prevailed in Kasoli. Although the dynamics were not explicit but the undertone of it was always existent. For the local adivasis residents, it was not possible to talk anything against neta ji. But for the camp commandant, who is an outsider and has not direct influence of him, could openly talk about him to me. During interactions with me, he left no possible chance to mention how it is his men, i.e. the security force personnel, who are the real fighters in this region and not any Salwa Judum activist. Although there was no visible dispute between the two, it was always interesting to see conflicting interests and attempts to establish ones authority during various occasions. Occasions like Republic Day, both of them shared the stage but the prominence was taken away completely by neta ji with his address to the gathering. On the other hand, during Kasoli mela, commandant was seen controlling the scene completely with neta ji having no say in it at all. The differences could be related to how both these men are strong and influential in the camp in their own capacity. Wherein neta ji enjoys full public support, commandant enjoys a full controlling power of the camp in terms of its security, which forms an integral part of camp life. The not so
explicit discomfort between the two clearly brings out the subtle powerplay that exists inside the camp, wherein on one hand, neta ji enjoys mass public support, commandant enjoys State support. However, what comes out as a point of concern is the experiences of powerlessness of the camp residents. When one looks at the larger picture of this conflict, we often argue about how the local tribal have been caught midway between the State and the Maoists. However, one observes that these people continue to be caught midway even in their everyday lives too wherein the politics prevails between two individuals who control and govern them in their own ways. One needs to seriously and sincerely examine the existing living conditions and circumstances of the residents of the camp who have no space for expressing their resentment and discomfort and are leading a controlled life.

2.4. The Special Police Officers (SPOs) of Kasoli Camp:

Most of the residents of Kasoli camp are former SPOs and have now been regularized as auxiliary force personnel under Chhattisgarh force as Sahayak Arakshak. It was observed that other than the economic benefit derived from their employment their life has become more vulnerable than before. They are still referred to as SPOs by all.

Radheshyam, who was an SPO, shared how his father was killed by the Maoists and so he had no option but to leave the village. He hails from a village called Priyakot in district Bijapur. However, he came to Kasoli much before Salwa Judum had started. However, the natives of Kasoli had resisted his coming here as at that time anyone coming from across the river Indravati was considered a Maoist. Radheshyam was beaten up by the villagers and it was only after a jan sunwayi (public hearing) called by the Collector, that he was allowed to stay here. It was after the launch of Salwa Judum that he joined in as an SPO and moved inside the camp. He shared,

“People have not come here out of their own will and now they cannot even go out on our own. We are completely dependent on the State. It can throw us anytime and anywhere and so we have to live with it. I am an SPO now and have to follow the orders of the senior officers. Life was neither good back in the village nor here. We cannot express our discomfort or resistance or we will be killed. Going back to villages is also a ruled out possibility as we will be killed by the Maoists. We adivasis are caught midway. People from this camp are serving as SPOs in different places like Dantewada, Kota, Sukma and Narayanpur. For the security of their family and they themselves, most of the SPOs stay inside camps. This camp has become like a joint family now. All the residents are like my brothers and sister. We all are going through similar pains. However, in a way if you see we are leading a
life of an animal. We were being treated like animals back in the village and here too. The only difference being that back in the village we were free animals not tied under any restriction”

(Radheshyam, resident and now Sahayak Arakshak at Kasoli Camp)

Radheshyam brought forth some of the pertinent issues that SPOs continue to face even today after almost four years of end of Salwa Judum. The life of SPOs and their families are highly vulnerable. Other than being the prime targets of the Maoists, they continue to face the everyday life challenges in the camps too. Although they are looked at as powerful individuals by the residents of the camp, but what prevails is the inherent restriction faced by them too. The fieldwork observation brought out that in this panopticon like structure, everything is under the surveillance of the regular Chhattisgarh Force personnel who completely dominate the camp scenario. The SPOs functioned under their instructions. The movement of the SPOs, their duties etc. is all guided by the CF personnel leaving them with limited power in the current setting. A deep sense of helplessness and frustration was felt as Radheshyam spoke. He also expressed a deep sense of resignation and withdrawal as he stated about having come in terms with the fact that this is now a point of no return. Munna, also an SPO shared that it was out of his own will that he decided to leave village and come out of that life. He came to this camp in 2006 from Aekelli Village in district Bijapur. He shared,

“There were not many opportunities back in the village. We only collected tendu and made mahua. Back home we could only make money by selling our goats, cocks etc. Life revolved around cultivating rice and then eating it. How much will one make out of it, so, in a way everyone was in the same state. I always thought that I could never progress in life if I continued staying there. The naxals never gave chances to grow. They would have never let me grow in life. I felt weak. They do not allow people to go to market, it is prohibited. They want people to continue their lives in the state of poverty and not get attracted to the outside world. But I wanted my children to grow and come out of that kind of life that we have led. This was best I could do for them. Joining as SPO was the option we got after many years. I did not want to let it go. And after coming here, our lives seem much better than before. I am happy with my decision. The money that I get is also good. We have heard that in a few years’ time our salary will reach upto twelve thousand. This, definitely, involves life risk too but we have no option. I will never let them join force. We had no option and so joined it. But our kids are getting education and so they will do something else. Till the time I am alive, I will fend for them but then after that they have to become independent, which education will make them”

(Munna, resident and Sahayak Arakshak at Kasoli Camp)
Munna came across as an outspoken and bold man. At no point in time, he was hesitant sharing his feelings. In fact, it was during one of my evening stroll in the camp that I was called by him to see how he was renovating his house. Interaction with him brought out an important aspect of life that every individual thinks about. Growth, prosperity, better opportunities of employment and living, freedom of thoughts, movement etc. are some of the few desires that were highlighted by him. According to him, back in the village, life was too restricted not just in terms of the presence of the Maoists who posed restrictions on the villagers but also in terms of the availability of resources for a better way of life. With limited options for gainful employment, Munna wished to come out of that village life. Salwa Judum came as an opportunity to him, opportunity to grow and make a better living for him and his family. Munna had no direct experience of any sort with the Maoists. His deciding to become an SPO was completely out of economic reasons and not out of what often gets projected by the State i.e. a feeling of aversion towards the Maoists. Although, he calculated the risks that came with this opportunity but he decided to take it on for the sake of his family and children. He does not want his children to join the security forces rather want to see them grow into independent individuals living a life full of dignity and worth.

One interesting trend observed during the course of fieldwork was that almost all the SPOs interacted with in Kasoli and other Salwa Judum camps were not in favour of letting their children join in too. They did not want their children to live and experience the life that they are experiencing. For most of these men, taking up this job of an SPO was the only option available at their disposal during the chaotic times of Salwa Judum. They all have enrolled their children in ashramshalas and believe that this will broaden their scope for finding a better economic opportunity and so they will not have to join the force.

Mohan, in his early thirties is a father of three children. He became an SPO after coming to this camp during the time of Salwa Judum. He started as an SPO with Rs. 1500 monthly honorarium and after getting regularised in Chhattisgarh Force as Sahayak Arakshak, earns Rs. 6500 per month. He shared,

“My father, mother and brother continue to stay in the village. I came to Kasoli in 2005 alongwith my wife who was then pregnant with our first child, Khemu. He studies in this ashramshala. Now I have two daughters as well, Laxmi and Parvati. I feel it is better here in terms of the opportunities available. We have nearby medical services in Geedam and education at our disposal. However, being an SPO has made...
my movements extremely restricted. Whenever I go to Geedam or Dantewada (rarely though), I dress up like a civilian, cover my head so that my ‘force wala’ haircut is covered. But the naxals know me well and all these precautions will not help me whenever they decide to kill me. I have not been able to go back to the village ever since. I put my life and family at stake and took up arms against the naxals but life here is also full of risks. After banning of the Salwa Judum we all are more vulnerable.”

(Mohan resident and serving SPO at Kasoli Camp)

Mohan brought out the everyday challenges that life throws at him after he has participated in the conflict in capacity of an SPO. He, like all other SPOs, is experiencing a constant and continuous sense of fear and insecurity. His movements are highly restricted. Although, as he stated that health and education services are available at their disposal, but accessing them is a challenge. Although, his children study in the ashramshala, but their lives are also vulnerable. Families of SPO are also at risk. He shared how he has to cover his identity of an SPO before venturing out of the camp. It brings out the sense of un-freedom that all the SPOs and their families go through here. His participation in the conflict is shaping his personality and socialisation too. He is not able to participate freely in any of the melas, marriages, community pooja (worshipping local deities) etc. Amidst all this, one area that Mohan talks about with confidence is about not letting his son Khemu become a security force personnel ever. Khemu studies in 1st standard in the ashramshala. However, one argues that with limited opportunities of employment available around, the future of children is uncertain. However, Mohan expressed his desire to move out of the camp with his family and stay peacefully away from this conflict. He wishes that Khemu and his daughters grow up in an environment that is free from this conflict, a place where they can lead a life without fear, uncertainty, vulnerability and insecurity. During the times of Salwa Judum, a lot of youth joined in as SPOs. These people, on one hand, have become economically better off than before by getting a regular monthly income of Rs. 6,500, but more importantly, on the other hand, their lives have not been the same again. All the SPOs, I interacted with, shared that ever since coming here, they live under constant state of fear, uncertainty and risk.

For those who did not join in as SPOs, life has been challenging for them too. Bidda, is not an SPO and works as a construction labourer whenever he gets the opportunity. His source of income is not regular and so, finds it difficult to fend for his family of five. His children are taken care of at the ashramshala but running a house seems an everyday challenge for him. He shared,
“It is difficult to earn a living here. I did not join the security force and so now I am finding it very difficult to fend for my family. I have nothing at my disposal. We had to leave our land, cattle everything behind and come here. We are helpless now. We all were brought here but no one comes to see our plight now. People come from elsewhere and take our pictures. What report they write is not known to us. We do not get any benefits from it. It has been eight years since we were brought here. Our life is ruined. We atleast had some land to work on back in the village here we have nothing. During the times of Salwa Judum villagers became SPOs and attacked their own fellow villagers. Initially they got wooden sticks and now they have rifles. We got a tent when we came and now we have made it into a pucca house. Neta ji gave only one mosquito net. The Maoists are not as bad as they have been projected. Ten to twelve Maoists used to come to our village once or twice a year and asked us to protect our forests from government officials. The forest officials used to come and take away our cocks and eat them. Maoists always asked us not to allow anyone to take tendu patta or to cut trees. And if someone cuts trees, he was asked to plant five more. Life in the camp is not good. One can see children loitering around the whole day doing nothing”

(Bidda, resident of Kasoli camp, sometimes works as construction labourer)

Bidda, who is not an SPO informed about the challenges he faces out of not being employed as an SPO. With no employment opportunities available other than becoming a security force personnel, the residents feel a sense of vulnerability and economic insecurity in their lives. They cannot move around freely in search of employment around are left with no way out to fend for themselves. Exploring opportunities outside the vicinity of the camp is neither feasible nor available. There are restrictions of movement. Bidda, while talking about his economic vulnerability also highlighted how the camp residents have become mere pieces of interest to the outsiders, who according to him, come, take their pictures and leave. Bidda did show his discomfort about this phenomenon and stated that the residents do not benefit from this. He also expressed his apprehension and anxiety about what is done with the pictures and data that is collected from camps like these. Bidda gave his opinion about the Maoists who, according to him, are projected as the exploiters of the adivasis. He highlighted a couple of incidences that bring forth his argument of the Maoists being better than the forest officials.

Gagan is also not an SPO. He runs the ration shop in the camp. Although he has an employment option but it has also come with an element of risk. However, procuring ration is not an easy task he says.

“There are a lot many people here to cater to. With around six hundred children and over eight hundred residents, it sometimes becomes difficult to suffice the ration. This ration shop is the only option available here, especially for the SPOs because they cannot go out of this camp and to the nearby market in Geedam to buy ration. They
will be killed. I also feel scared going to Dantewada to procure ration. I try to go with neta ji, because he has guards with him at all times”.

(Gagan, resident of Kasoli camp, runs the ration shop in the camp)

Issues related to access to ration through public distribution system are faced by the residents. With no land to cultivate, there is complete dependence on the government’s distribution scheme. Although ration cards are provided to the residents but there always persists a gap between demand and supply. With only SPOs having a regular employment option, others continue to live at the disposal of the administration. As has been argued that a lot of villagers joined in an SPOs out of sheer economic reasons and not out of their strong aversion towards the Maoists, but the residents of Kasoli were also observed relating this the non-availability of employment in and around the camps with State’s strategic move to create conditions wherein people are left with no option but to join in as a security force personnel. The camp offers limited opportunities to make a living. The youth, in particular does look disillusioned with life in the camp and many of them also feel that like many others from their village, even they should have moved into the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh.

But as the famous proverb goes, *the grass is always greener on the other side*, the plight of those who took refuge in the bordering districts of Andhra Pradesh have been vulnerable too. During the times of Salwa Judum, many people in order to escape from being caught in the crossfire between the State and the Maoists, decided to take the alternate way and take refuge in Andhra Pradesh. In a visit to an IDP camp in Kewak, in Khammam district of Andhra Pradesh, the issues of identity and acceptance got highlighted They also faced severe resistance from the natives of Khammam and there were a couple of killings too because the locals found a potential threat in these displaced people. They feared that these displaced people might take away their land and might settle down here permanently.

As Salwa Judum started gaining momentum, the influx of people from Konta in Sukma district started to increase and they started settling in the forests of Khammam. Some non-governmental organisation has been working closely with these IDPs towards getting them their rights and entitlements and advocating for getting ration cards and MGNREGA cards. However, with non-availability and lack of accessibility of employment opportunities these families are living a hand-to-mouth existence and
verging on the brink of daily starvation. Children are facing a major challenge in these IDP camps. There are no schools nearby and the ones distantly located have Telugu as the medium of instruction which is not known to the people of Chhattisgarh. Many children are also denied admission for not having identity and school certificates to produce. Adding on, the health services are also poor. One has to travel for thirty kilometres to reach the nearest health centre. This is the plight of the IDPs from Chhattisgarh in the Andhra Pradesh (see National Commision for Protection of Child Rights, NCPCR 2007; 2010; Human Rights Watch 2008 {a} {b}).

Coming back to the residents of Kasoli camp, one can state that having accepted the harsh realities of life in this conflict, the residents seemed to have reached a point of no return wherein they see no possibility of returning to their own native homes and leading a conflict-free and normal life. Almost all the residents of this camp, when displaced, did not have an idea that they would not be able to return ever. All these years they lived under the hope of retruning someday, but their life and stay in camp now seems to move from being temporary to permanent. Although, during the time of the fieldwork, Salwa Judum had already officially ceased to exist for over three years, but the after effects of this counter-insurgency and manifestations of the conflict could be seen in the form of camps like Kasoli, omnipresent security force personnel and restricted life being led by the residents of these camps. The failure to reconcile with the permanent loss of home has left a permanent scar on the lives of these displaced people including children of Kasoli camp. They now re-live their past through memories. They are living with their memories- of the days back in the village where they were close to nature, leading a non-restricted life, going to weekly *haats, melas* and dancing all night with their fellow villagers celebrating marriages, festivals and more importantly, celebrating life. However, with the passage of time, residents have assigned new meanings to the camp and camp life.

3. **Children of Camp: Experiences of children living in Kasoli Salwa Judum Camp**

Whosoever visits Kasoli camp will be impressed by the large number of children of all ages present all over. These are those children who have somehow escaped the fatal dangers of this on-going State-Maoist conflict and found a minimal degree of security
in this camp. However, there should not be much comfort found in this because once out of the immediate dangers of this conflict, newer challenges pose a threat to these children. Ideally the process of reconstruction, reclaiming and rebuilding their lives should be the next step, however, the reality is that these children are still caught in the clutches of restriction, fear and vulnerability.

When one talks of vulnerability in context of children growing amidst conflict, it becomes important to identify the key factors that lead to situations of vulnerability. These could be their exposure to violent incidents, the kind of burden that falls on their parents and caregivers, the age of children, the support system available in terms of institutional and social i.e. family, parenting support, peer support, etc. Children, particularly during the times of violent conflict, find themselves in a traumatic and then vulnerable position if they experience the death or killing of their family members, friends, neighbours or anyone else who they are familiar with, getting displaced from their homes (Belfer 2006; Balaban 2006).

Looking at children of Kasoli with this understanding, it can be stated that their levels of vulnerability are high. Since the times of Salwa Judum, this camp as a space has become highly sensitive. Kaosli has been a target of the Maoists attack wherein it has already been attacked twice by the Maoists. There are approximately six hundred children residing inside the camp including those living with their families, studying in the ashramshala or residing in the pre- metric hostel. Majority of these children, barring those who were born here, have all been a witness to conflict in some form or the other. Many of them have lost their parents at a very young age. Some have seen their parents and siblings participate in the conflict in capacity of an SPO and others have witnessed violent confrontations throughout their process of growing. Now, in the camp, these children are experiencing a life which is very different from the one led in the villages.

3.1. Kasoli Camp: ‘Home’ and ‘Displacement Site’ for Children

When I first came to Kasoli, I was taken by surprise to see a large number of young children in the camp. By young I mean children broadly under five to six years of age. I could see a lot of them walking into the ashramshala that had just reopened after summer vacation. They walked in with little bags containing their sundry belonging.
These young children either have their families residing inside the camp or have been sent away to these distant ashramshalas by their families who continue to stay in the villages. For such children, growing up in this conflict situation has left them with no option but to leave their families behind at such an early age.

Kasoli serves as home for many children. However, for many this home is without their families. Children comprise mostly of those whose families have sent them away in the hope that they will escape the danger of conflict and reach a relatively safer place where they can also work towards gaining employment if possible. These safer places, in the present context are the ashramshalas. However, experiences of such separation are wrenching for families as well as children, especially the young children. These children also comprise of those who have been orphaned by the conflict or have lost atleast a parent or a sibling, near one in this conflict and have witnessed violence in their everyday life.

Kasoli camp has been the only home for a large number of children who were either born here or were too small when displaced from their native villages. Life has been constructed here for many as they witness birth, death and develop social relations, peer relations, all under this umbrella of camp life. Most of these children have no idea of the reason for this displacement, infact they are not even completely aware that there has been a ‘before and after life’ for them. For vast number of children here, camp is the only life known and experienced by them.

Khemu shared,

“My mother tells me that I was born while we were on our way to this camp. We came from across the river. There was a big gate. Everyone came and stayed in tents. My mother told me that I was born in a sack. Laxmi, my sister was born in this camp”

(Khemu, 1st standard, student at ashramshala also a resident of the camp)

There are many children like Khemu, for whom camp life is the only life they have known. When asked about whether they know if they have come from somewhere else, most of them, interestingly mentioned being from “nadi uspaar” (across the river Indravati). Although these children have never got the opportunity to re-visit their villages, they have only heard that they have come from across the river. Although the Salwa Judum camps were intended to serve as places of temporary respite and people
were expected to return after the campaign ceased to exist, however, this has not happened in reality. Like many others who get displaced during times of violent conflict, even the residents of Kasoli have already spent a little less than a decade in this camp. With life being characterised by uncertainties regarding the future and access to basic resources being highly limited, the residents are leading a difficult life. For children who were born in the camps during these prolonged stays and also those who arrived at the camps as infants, this world of the displacement camp is the only world with which they are intimately familiar.

3.2. Glimpses of Village Life:

Unlike those children who were relatively grown up at the time of displacement and had to leave behind their village life, friends, family members and a whole community culture, have some memories of the village life and their experience of coming to this Salwa Judum camp. Here are narratives wherein children shared their memories of life back in the village. Somaru is from a village Orssa in District Bijapur. During Salwa Judum, his family crossed the river and settled in Kasoli Salwa Judum camp. He shared,

“It was good back in the village. I use to take my cows for grazing. I did not go to school then. My friends and I used to sleep under a neem tree. I had gone back to the village once. It was scary. My home has turned into a pile of mud now. I cried seeing it. But I like it here now. Everyone is my brother’s friend {Somaru’s brother is an SPO}. I have school too. Although, if all this was available back home, it would have been better.”

(Somaru 4th standard, student at ashramshala also a resident of the Camp)

Somaru’s closest friend Parmesh also remembers spending a few years of his early childhood in his village Chingair in district Bijapur. He recalls his experience of briefly re-visiting his village once,

“I had gone back to my village once. I did not feel like coming back here. But our home was totally broken now. I felt very sad. There are only a few families back in the village now. We, who stay in camps, cannot go back now. We do not have land, livestock or even home. But here we have school, market and home. My mother goes for work, she is a labourer. There is no fear here. It is fine now. Although I enjoyed more back in the village, but we can never go back”

(Parmesh, 4th standard, student at ashramshala also a resident of the Camp)
Sohan from village Chingair, District Bijapur, shared,

“It was good back in the village. We used to roam around without any fear. We had fields and three cows. My father was a farmer. Maoists used to come often but we still could roam around freely. Here we are restricted. We cannot go out in the evenings. The force personnel question us then. Village life was better. I used to like it more”

(Sohan 6th standard, student at ashramshala also a resident of the Camp)

Laxman, village Satwa, shared how his father’s elder brother once took him to the village,

“I felt really nice going back to the village. But I knew that we had to come back only because of the Maoist. Animals back in the village, which were domesticated earlier, now chase away humans at the very sight of them. They have all become wild now. My family does not allow us to go back to the village now. My home back in the village must have become all mud now {moist eyes}”

(Laxman, 10th standard, resides pre-metric hostel in Kasoli Camp)

Mangesh from village Cherpal, Bijapur, shared how he used to live a free life back in the village. He was so close to nature. He shared,

“It was good back in the village. There were open spaces to play and dance. Everyone used to stay together. Now everything seems scattered. Now we are guarded by police all around. We feel uncomfortable when they question us every now and then. But now we have got used to it”

(Mangesh, 8th Standard, student at Kasoli ashramshala)

All the above stated narratives highlighted the contrast that children draw from their past lives in the village and their present life in the camp. Almost all the children who have spent some years back in their villages did speak of the freedom that they enjoyed there. They played in the lap of nature and expressed their desire to go back if given a chance. However, this freedom spoken about by them comes in deep contrast to the highly restrictive life being led by them in this camp. Interestingly children did mention that if school and teachers were available back in the village, then life would have been better.
3.3. *Source of Knowledge about the conflict:*

Most of the young children in the camp have not witnessed violence first hand, however, despite their lack of direct exposure to or recollection of the violence that drove their families into displacement, most of these children are familiar with some sort of conflict that they are surrounded with. What exists in the camp is an adult discourse of the conflict, which includes the violent past of village life and also of the Salwa Judum campaign. This discourse has made a prominent entity in the lives of these children. This was evident through interaction with children in the camp and also through the recurrent images of violence that often appeared in children's drawings and stories of life (see Appendix II). It was also apparent in the expression of fear that some children spoke about in the camp. These children, at such a young age, readily use vocabulary to speak about Maoists, bloodshed, violence, death and displacement. Referring to Maoists, they were often seen using terms like “*Gunda log*”, “*Chor log*”, “*Harami Log*”, “*Khatarnak Log*” (Direct translation of which will be goons, thieves and bastards). However, this understanding about the Maoists has not come naturally to these young children but they only reiterate what they hear from their parents, neighbours in the camp, security force personnel and other ashramshala staff.

Ashutosh, a camp resident shared,

“*They {Maoists} stay across the river. Whosoever goes that side is killed by them. The Maoists are all thieves. They come and take anyone and anything they want. My father told that they are bad people. We see it on television also. They take away old people and kids. They cover the faces of people and take them away. They slit the throat and place the body over bridge. Across the river they kill. We don’t go there. We are prohibited to go. They burn men alive.”*

(Ashutosh, 2nd standard, student at Kasoli ashramshala also resident of Camp)

Dinesh and Khemu (reside in the camp and are children of SPOs) shared,

“*There are Maoists back in the village. They shot and burnt down houses and so, we came here. Police is here but they {Maoists} can kill anyone. Police cannot do anything. They can easily come here. They can come anytime they want. They have come once, we were very scared. We slipped under the blanket and slept*”

(Dinesh and Khemu, 1st standard, student at Kasoli ashramshala also resident of Camp)
Much of what children in the camps know about this conflict around their camp is what they have heard and learnt from their parents, siblings, peers and other significant others in the ashramshala or in the camp. They have developed some understanding of their past and present through listening to the adult discourse within the camp. However, these discussions in the camp do not primarily include the topics related to children but children are mostly present at the sight of discussion either sitting quietly or listening to the conversations around. Interestingly, the set ups of the homes in the camp are such that not much privacy prevails in the household. Rooms are usually separated with a curtain or a loose plank and so children easily absorb the contents of discussions on the conflict. Especially during the times of Salwa Judum, when adults discussed about their experiences of coming to camps, the ongoing violence and killing, children used to hear it and created images of it in their own minds which are fresh in their memories even today.

3.4. Coming to the camp: Images of violence and displacement

Not all children in the camp had a clear understanding of the conflict and of the reasons and experiences of coming to this Salwa Judum camp. Children’s understanding of why their families left their native villages and came to lead this restrictive life was also dependent on the age of children. The younger boys spoke with little understanding as compared to the older boys who had a more detailed explanation of the times of Salwa Judum. Junu, a camp resident had some images of coming to this camp. He shared,

“I was this small {raised his hand to his waist length} when one night my family members left the home in the village. That night we slept on stones. We had food at the river bank. Then we went to Orssa {another village} and then from there we came here. I was too small. A lot of other people from the village also came. Ramesh’s father was shot by an arrow. He did not die but he had to be carried by two other men on their backs. It took us a lot many days to reach. We did not get food. My stomach used to ache. My mother told me that I should sleep, we would reach the next day and eat only then”

(Junu, 3rd standard, student at Kasoli ashramshala also resident of Camp)

Junu highlighted his own set of challenges faced during the times of Salwa Judum when he and his family were displaced from their native village. The tough conditions that Junu faced in terms of non-availability of food, rough terrains to walk on for days, were faced by many of his age and even younger too. However, the older boys of the camp were relatively much aware of the times of Salwa Judum and how it has brought a
substantial change to their lives. A group of boys staying at the pre-metric hostel inside the camp shared their experiences of the times of Salwa Judum. They stated,

“There was too much of violence and exploitation during 2005 when Salwa Judum took off. It was a war like situation. We were caught from both sides. That time news came of some special kind of security force personnel coming to our village. They had weird looks and were dog-eaters. Out of the sheer fear of this news, a lot of people ran away from the village. Villagers would leave in big groups. It looked like herd of cows and goats. A lot of people joined as SPOs and led attacks and operations. The CRPF always followed behind. They were all well aware of the terrain and knew of Maoists’ hideouts too. The SPOs were only given bows and arrows and therefore, initially a lot of SPOs lost their lives. Now they are given rifles. There was a lot of violence and bloodshed during the time of Salwa Judum. People who stay in Kasoli camp now were forced to leave their villages at that time. Police gave them protection during their displacement. Initially they all were kept like animals. They all came in herds as animals do. During this displacement also a lot many people got killed. People left their land, home and animals behind. All the villages are now vacant.”

(A Group of boys from the pre-metric hostel, Kasoli Camp)

Ugesh shared how he came to Salwa Judum camp.

“I was staying in an ashramshala near my village Satwa. We used to hear incidences of killings by the Maoists once in a while. But after the start of Salwa Judum, the situation became very intense. We used to hear gun shots every night and receive news of encounters after regular intervals. One night we heard too many gun shots. Police had come and there was an encounter happening outside my school. I asked my Sir if we had to vacate this place and go elsewhere as others were doing that time. He just said “yes” and that was it. There was no looking back after that. I have not visited my village eversince. I heard the Maoists blew up my school for it was being used as base camp by the CRPF after we all had left. We did not get time to even collect our belongings that night. We just had to run with whatever was possible to carry with ease. We ran for long. We then took a boat and crossed the river early morning. I joined my family in Chitalanka Salwa Judum camp. I was happy to see them alive and then later I came to Kasoli ashramshala. My parents had passed away in the village itself and my elder sister works as a construction labourer in Dantewada and younger sister, too, is in an ashramshala. We do not meet often. I miss my family.”

(Ugesh, 9th standard, residing in pre-metric hostel, Kasoli Camp)

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30 Reference is being made to the Nagaland battalion posted in Dantewada during Salwa Judum campaign. In the course of my fieldwork, no one ever spoke in good spirit of this battalion and were reffered to as aliens and dog eaters. The Naga people looked very different from these tribal people in terms of their physical appearance and daily life practices. This created suspicion and fear in the minds of the locals.
Laxman, also belongs to Ugesh’s village Satwa. He had his own share of experience of times of Salwa Judum and how his family flee from the village.

“That was a weird time. A lot of families had moved out already. My father who worked as a peon in the nearby school once crossed the river to get medicines for my ailing grandmother. During that time, crossing this river symbolically meant that one has taken side with the Government. On the other hand, people who were already staying on that side of the river considered people from the other side of Indravati, as Maoists. On crossing the river, my father was caught by villlagers and beaten up badly only to realise that he was not a Maoist. By now even Salwa Judum had taken off in full swing almost all the villages. We got no news of my father for a couple of months, only after a while that we got a message somehow that he was alive and wanted us to come to the camp in Dantewada. Fleeing from village was the biggest challenge as Maoists were keeping a close watch on everyone. After a few attempts, one day we managed. My mother, as per our plan, went to the river to wash clothes and my brother and I went to the forest to collect firewood and chapdaa (red coloured ants, fondly eaten by the adivasis and also used for various medicinal purposes). We all met at the river. My mother had tied money to her waist (this money was given by the school superintendent against my father’s services as a peon). But, she was caught by the Maoists whom she somehow convinced that she was going to wash clothes only and had no intention to escape. They, thankfully, let her go. My brother and I were not caught. We all met at the river and boarded a small boat. We reached this camp first. My father was in Chitalanka camp and hence, we all moved there. But this incidence was horrific. We could have been killed”

(Laxman, 10th standard, residing in pre-metric hostel, Kasoli Camp)

The years of Salwa Judum were a nightmare for the adivasis of Chhattisgarh including these children who were also caught in crossfire between the Maoists and the state being represented by the security forces. Death toll in regions of Dantewada, Sukma and Bijapur went high, the exact records of which are still unavailable. For me, personally, it was only after interacting with the people of these camps, that I realised the magnitude of loss that this campaign caused. The experiences of children of Kasoli brought out how Salwa Judum affected these children differently.

It is important to mention briefly how Ugesh, completely helpless, was left with no option but to vacate his school hostel in the village and come to the camp. Now his sisters stay separately in another camp. His life has not been the same ever since. Contrary to this, Laxman’s family was living under a false image created about Salwa Judum by the State and supporters of the campaign during the time of its inception that camps were the safest sites for these adivasis and there was possibility to ‘earn more’
and better life. Following which his father, like hundreds of other innocent villagers, was convinced that life in a camp would be relatively better than the one in the village. They left their homes also in search of better economic opportunities. With a dream of a better life and economic stability, he risked not only his life but also the life of his family members who took the risk of crossing the river.

Bhuneshwar is from Palleywaya village. He lost his mother when he was three-four years old and also lost his father to this conflict. He was an SPO and got killed in one of the encounters with the Maoists during the initial years of the Salwa Judum campaign. He stays in the ashramshala. However, his father’s younger brother stays in the Kasoli camp along with his family. Bhuneshawar seldom visits his uncle. His two sisters stay in Chitalanka camp in Dantewada. He shared,

“I lost my mother when I was very young. My father was an SPO. Once he, along with some security force personnel, went across the river Indravati to encounter some of the Maoists who were reported to have come there. He did not return but his dead body did. A bow had pierced his heart. I have an elder sister working as a construction labourer in Dantewada and younger one studying in an ashramshala there. We are not able to stay together. My father’s younger brother stays here in Kasoli camp. But I cannot go there also. If I go, he says food will not suffice if you also come here and eat. Everything has changed. Atleast here at the ashramshala I get food and some education. May be I do something good in life now.”

(Bhuneshwar, 6th standard, student at Kasoli ashramshala)

Such experiences shared by children also bring out how this conflict and Salwa Judum in particular has also changed the dynamics of social life in this region. During my interaction with people in Chhattisgarh, I was often told how adivasis have always been a close knit community. For them there is not much of segregation between family members and the extended family members. Children are looked after by their uncles and aunts and sometimes neighbours too. Marriages are also organised by communities whenever the need arises. All these are phenomenal practices and bring out the sense of community and togetherness that the adivasi culture portrays. However, the conflict has hit these social bonds very hard. The socio-economic lives of the adivasis has been ruptured by this conflict. Leading a restrictive life, along with lack of economic opportunity and livelihood support system and one has to think twice before extending a helping hand even to the nearest ones. These adivasis are, hence, left with no option but
to think for themselves and not collectively any more. As Bhuneshwar informed how his uncle asks him not to visit him frequently,

"Yahan itnaa matt aaya kar. Wahan ashramshala mein reh. Tu aata hai toh yahan khana nahi poorta”

(You should not come here. You stay in the ashramshala. Whenever you come here the food does not suffice for all)

(Bhuneshwar, 6th standard, student at Kasoli ashramshala)

This has been a by product of this conflict. The conflict induced displacement and its consequences have created such socio-economic conditions that have fragmented the communities and families and the repercussions of it can be observed with such examples wherein the sense of community looks weakened and people look more individualised in their thinking and actions.

All children in the Kasoli camp shared enormous experiences of this on-going conflict and their camp life. Where some have had a first-hand experience, others reiterated what they hear on a regular basis from their parents, siblings, peers and other significant others in the camp. But for someone like me who was hearing about Salwa Judum straight from those who have experienced it, it seemed like a phase; a phase that gave an entirely new dimension to this conflict. It has almost been a decade since Salwa Judum was launched and almost two years (at the time of fieldwork in 2013-14) since it was banned, however, its aftermath can still be seen and felt very strongly. Life in a Salwa Judum camp is an apt example to validate this argument. Life has completely changed for people who now reside in these camps. Children in the camp, in their own way gave glimpses of the kind of independence, non-restrictive and close to nature lifestyle that they enjoyed back in the village which stands in stark contrast with their present camp life. As adivasis are known to be very close to nature, their children back in the village were literally playing in the lap of nature but are now leading a highly non-restrictive life. Here, they are surrounded by concertina wires and armed men at all times.

3.5. Adjusting to the camp life:

With the passage of time, most of the children are accepting the reality of this new life. There has been no looking back ever since they started residing in the camps. Their families decided to start from the beginning rather than risking their lives by going back
to the villages again. For these children, life in this camp has not been easy, especially for those who have family members serving in as SPOs. Life has become more uncertain with displacement, vulnerability and fear going hand in hand for them and their families. However, now they are adapting themselves to this camp life. For many children this is what life has always been like since their birth but for others this is a new phase. They are gradually getting accustomed to it and often mentioned how they have no other option at their disposal but accept this as a reality. Children also showed signs of getting comfortable having security personnel around. However, an element of fear still exists. But they are getting used to it.

Baksu shared,

“It feels weird. We feel scared too. But nothing can be done about it. We cannot go back to the village now. We will stay like this forever. We will always live in this camp, poor and lead a life in this conflict”

(Baksu, 7th standard, student at Kasoli ashramshala also resident of Camp)

Dashrath also shared,

“Initially we used to feel little awkward. But now we do not get intimidated by the force personnel. But even today if we see a big group of police personnel somewhere, we feel hesitant to walk past them. There are a few known faces now from our village so it is fine here. The Naga Company posted here years back used to eat dogs. They were scary”

(Dashrath 9th standard, residing in pre- metric hostel, has family in Kasoli Camp)

Many children in Kasoli also feel that that coming here has opened up doors of opportunities for them. It is due to the availability of schools and education on the basis of which children have developed this perception. They believe that they can now explore newer opportunities and options of livelihood for betterment of their lives.

Talking about the camp life, Laxman, whose family stays in Chitalanka camp in Dantewada shared,

“It is better here. I have learnt a lot after coming here. This life is better than that of the village. Had I remained back in the village, I would have remained an illiterate like my father and uncle. After coming here, I have got a chance to get educated. I can now understand what is good and bad for me. Had I continued living in the village, I would have got into drinking like my father or I would have become a Maoist. I am happy here. Now atleast I can dream of doing good and becoming something big in life”

(Laxman 10th standard, residing in pre- metric hostel, Kasoli Camp. His family stays in another camp)
Pawan shared,

“Initially I used to feel awkward. There was a feeling of restriction and suffocation. Presence of security force personnel intimidated me. Then gradually it became normal. I got admitted to this school and learnt to converse in Hindi. Earlier I only spoke in Gondi and so the force personnel could not talk to me. Now they converse with me. My father also became an SPO after coming here”

(Pawan 10th standard, residing in pre-metric hostel, Kasoli Camp)

With conflict hitting the very foundation of life of these children, there is also a transformation in their roles and responsibilities towards their families. Children, who have lived through the violent times of Salwa Judum has radically affected their perception about their own future. Some children showed complete despondency and helplessness while talking about their future. Children in the camp, despite of getting some exposure to education still are not very hopeful about having a possibility of a fear-free life ahead. They expressed strong sentiments of loss and hopelessness. However, a ray of hope still exists in the minds of some children who, now with exposure to education, are determined to make the most of what they could salvage from their current lives. Children are gradually adjusting to camp life at their own pace. Where once, they used to get scared at the very sight of security personnel and guns, they now are developing a decent enough rapport with the force personnel to at least not get intimidated by their presence. Being enrolled in school and undergoing a fixed study routine is something many older children see as an opportunity for a better life.

It was further observed that children in the camp spoke about their experiences of witnessing violence with an ease which was not expected by me as a researcher. I did have a pre-conceived notion about how children would narrate their life experiences of living amidst this conflict situation. However, to my surprise, children were very vocal about their experiences. But, one cannot associate this comfort to any sort of disconnect of emotions, sense of loss and pain that these children have gone through. Any child, witnessing the death of his/her parents, siblings or dear ones definitely gets affected by it. In Kasoli, the difference lies in the fact that now conflict has become an ongoing part in the lives of hundreds of children. Regular discussions amongst the security personnel about encounters, violent incidents during melas and haats, are all heard by these
There was bomb blast heard on the morning of 27th February, 2013. The night before, almost more than half of children of the ashramshala had gone to attend the Ghotpal Mela. Even I had. This particular mela was being looked forward to by the residents and students. I, alongwith a group of teachers and caregivers had returned late night. Infact, there were few children who had returned in the wee hours of the morning. For me this was the first time experience of a mela and now of a bomb blast too. Although, the blast happened around six kilometres from Kasoli, but it was so powerful that it was clearly heard till the camp. I stepped out of my room, expecting some sort of commotion and restlessness amongst the children. But I could see children busy playing around barefoot, some bathing at the hand-pump and rest basking in the sun on this cold morning. More than surprised, I was shocked at the sight. May be as a researcher, I was expecting a certain kind of reaction from these children. I casually brought up the blast incidence while taking a class that day. It was 3rd standard. These children did not show any kind of unease and discomfort while discussing the incidence. They shared how they too heard the blast while playing in the morning. They stated,

“Madam kuch nahi hua. Yeh toh hota rehta hai. Hum toh sunte rehte hain. Ji Madam aap matt daro”

(Madam nothing has happened. This is a usual thing here. We keep hearing such things. You do not get scared Madam)

(Young children’s reaction after a bomb blast incident nearby)

This statement shows how such incidents are taken as matter of fact because it has got routinised. Students from 8th standard narrated how a few of them saw the blast site as they were returning to Kasoli and how there was a massive crater formed due to the blast. They stated what they heard people talk at the blast side that it was a pre-planned blast and the target was Mahendra Karma, the mastermind behind the Salwa Judum capaign. He was now on the top of the hit list of the Maoists. During the evening stroll in the camp, similar reactions from the residents were observed. However, in the radius of five kilometres from the camp, there was presence of a large number of Chhattisgarh Force personnel roaming around and patrolling on motorbikes. But, no one other than me, looked startled at the sight.
3.6. An Influenced life:

Camp as a living space does not offer much of outside exposure to children and also to the residents. Children in Kasoli camp are thus, prone to influence by people in and around the camp. These influences were observed at various levels. To state a few, the omnipresence of security personnel had an influence on children, adding on to it was the Salwa Judum leader in the camp and his ideologies and also media and television seemed to have a great influence on the children of the camp.

Camp life, with being highly restrictive, also offers extremely limited livelihood options. With almost one member from each family serving in the security forces, children are growing up seeing that environment in the family and around themselves. However, interestingly, despite of considering the security personnel as their protectors, not many children wanted to join the force out of the potential threat in the future. However, one argues that with such a restrictive life and minimal economic opportunity available in this camp, there is a possibility of these children again taking up security force as an employment option and falling in the same violent vicious cycle like their parents.

Observation and interaction with children, especially the youngest of the lot who have not seen any world outside of this camp, showed that just like their life which is characterized by restriction, their horizon of thinking is also restricted. I was amazed to hear them talk about what they wanted to become when they grow up. Options at their thinking disposal were, “Anganwadi Worker”, “Ration Shop Wala”, “Bhojan Mata”, “Mazdoor”, “Daamar Bichaonga” (I will lay charcoal for road construction), “become like Peelu bhaiya” (Peelu worked as a cook in the ashramshala and a much loved person amongst students) and some say “force wala”. As even I was someone from outside they were being exposed to, a couple of children did share that “I want to become you”. One can clearly analyse how being born in place which is highly restricted in terms of movement and also restricted in terms of exposure to the outer world, children’s ability to think for a future is also affected. With such restrictive life and lack of resources and opportunities, thinking spaces have also shrunk. Children living amidst conflict here have limited options to even think big. This limitation is often limited till the kitchen of this ashramshala, where boys see a potential future for themselves as a cook.
3.6.1. Influence of the security personnel around:

The only visible lucrative employment option that most of the children see in the camp is getting employed as an SPO. The younger children, however, have only seen the present phase of this conflict wherein they see these SPOs roaming around in the camp with sling rifles and carrying an aura around them. Children see the SPOs as powerful entities in the camp. But interestingly, many older children who have experienced this conflict are also getting influenced by the presence of security personnel. However, this is not the case for all the children.

Fieldwork suggested that the influence of the security forces on children is at two levels. Firstly, there are children who want to become like the SPOs only out of economic reasons. They believe that serving as SPO fetches a handsome amount and adding on to that is the power that one gets alongwith it. Puran is one among the many children in camp who fall in this first category. He is the only son and also the only male member in a family of three. He shared,

“I lost my father before we came here. I live in the camp with my mother and younger sister. My mother goes to the bamboo Centre and gets little money. My sister is too young and does not go to school. I study here. Everyone says becoming SPO is risky. My mother says it too. But there is nothing else here. We do not have land to work on. We cannot go out freely in search of job. People recruited as SPO get good money. I think I will also become an SPO and will take care of my family”

(Puran, 8th standard, student at ashramshala and resident of Kasoli Camp)

Puran was too young when he was brought to this camp and has been exposed to camp life since his early childhood days and is now conditioned to it. Despite having no family member in the force, Puran still wants to join the security force out of sheer economic reasons. He feels that this is the only option for him as his family.

Lakheshwar also wants to join the force. Two of his elder brothers are serving as SPOs. He shared,

“Initially I used to feel scared in the camp. It was an awkward feeling for me being surrounded by force personnel from everywhere. But now I am used to it and everyone is my friend. My brother’s friends (also SPOs) talk to me, come over to
watch television at my place, give me chapatti and sometimes money too. They ask me to join the force after I complete my school. I think life of SPOs is very comfortable and everyone is scared of them. My brother gets good money. He often buys me new clothes.”

(Lakheshwar, 4th standard, student at ashramshala and resides with his family in Kasoli Camp)

Lakheshwar’s reference points are his brothers and their friend. He also knows that this will fetch him decent money. He represents those children here who do not have a clear understanding of the ongoing conflict and camp life has exposed them to this employment option. He has seen SPOs in his own family, and hence, wishes to become one in the near future.

Secondly, there are children in the camp who are highly influenced by the force personnel’s attitude and aura exhibited in the camp and in addition to the economic benefits too. Narsimha is one such strong example.

Narsimha hails from a remote village in district Khammam, Andhra Pradesh. This district shares borders with Chhattisgarh. He lost his parents at a very early age and remembers nothing about them. His maternal aunt took care of him and his elder brother. She moved to Chhattisgarh in search of work. Narsimha was not even a year old when they came to Kasoli village and so Narsimha relates more to Chhattisgarh than Andhra Pradesh. His aunt worked as a construction labourer. They stayed in a tent at the place where the present day camp is located. It was only after the launch of Salwa Judum that things changed. Actually Salwa Judum came as a boon for this family. They were forced to move inside the camp and hence, got a house. Narsimha’s unemployed brother became an SPO and is now earning a salary of Rs. 6500.

Narsimha, yet to appear for his high school exam, has already appeared for Chhattisgarh Force exam. He is very clear that once he gets recruited in Chhattisgarh Force, he will quit studies. He was very sure that this is the best option available to him. He believes that it is one of the most powerful jobs and it will not only fetch him good money but will give him immense respect from people around. He has seen his brother and believes that he carries and aura around himself. This is what he longs for when he gets this job. Narsimha has no proper understanding of the ongoing conflict or about the reasons why his family is leading a restricted life or anything about the Maoists. But he was confident in stating that the Maoists are scared of the security force and that he wants to continue scaring them. For him Maoists are bad and it is the duty of the police to kill them all. He too has fascination of encountering Maoists.

(Narsimha, 10th standard, resides in pre-metric hostel, brother serving as SPO in Kasoli Camp)
Narsimha’s story highlights some very important issues that prevail in this region. His family came to Chhattisgarh and as Salwa Judum took off, they were relocated inside the camp. They never even realised that they have been directly affected by this conflict in terms of forceful displacement. His brother had no aversion against the Maoists but he became an SPO out of sheer economic reasons. His brother took up this opportunity to make a living for his family and unknowingly became a stakeholder in this conflict. He talks of the Maoists with aversion. Narsimha has grown seeing this and listening to his brother’s experiences and hence, has decided to become like him. Narsimha represents those thousands of youth in Chhattisgarh who have been exposed to camp life and having security personnel around. The scope for critical thinking has shrunk in this place. Narsimha, like many other boys in this camp is highly influenced by the security personnel, who according to him are more powerful in this ‘fight’ between the Maoists and security forces. For these children, roaming around with a gun and getting greeted as ‘Salaam Sahab’, not only is fascinating but gives meaning to their lives.

3.6.2. Influence of Media:
My interactions with children often brought out some of their dreams of going to Raipur, Delhi or Mumbai. However, this came out of their sheer exposure of these places through television and through the visitors who came to this camp. Even I was asked questions by them about Mumbai. With around five hundred boys in the ashramshala one can imagine how many times I had to respond to their “Nipey Pader Bata?”(What is your name?) and “Nim Beja Tinawatin?” (Where are you from?) They would often ask me questions about Mumbai, my family, my ashramshala, my work but mostly about having met any Bollyood star.

In addition to the discourses of local, religious and community encountered in their immediate surroundings, children in the ashramshala were also regular viewers of television programmes, thanks to the big television provided by the district collector in the ashramshala. These television programmes conveyed imagery lifestyles and alternative realities and were a major source for ideas and aspirations for these children. Serials like CID and ACP Arjun were the favourites across all age groups. Both of these serials show strong men fighting crime. Children did idealise characters from these serials and also drew similarities between these protagonists to some of the security
force personnel in the camp. On the other hand, Saturdays and Sundays were completely dedicated to Bollywood movies. The effects of which could be seen during the days when children would go out for melas, marriages and even to Geedam. They were seen imitating the characters seen on television. They were seen getting dressed up in the best of their clothes, hair nicely done in different kind of styles and using strong perfumed talcum powder. During festivities and the days of haat (weekly markets), most of the male caregivers in the ashramshala, dressed up in non-traditional ways (not wearing lungi) and put their add-on accessories like flashy mobile phones and watches. Female caregivers, on such occasions, would also do fabulous work with their hair along with matching lipsticks and nail enamels. However, getting dressed up in the best ways has been a practice in this tribal region, but what one notices now is this tradition also being highly influenced by what people are exposed to through media.

When I state about the engagement of young men and women in Kasoli camp with such consumer and media product, I am not attempting to state that these children focus their aspirations solely around this globalised culture, but rather I am making an attempt to highlight two points here. On one hand, we need to acknowledge the wide array of information and images that these young boys have access to through media even in a place like a displacement camp in a conflict hit region of Dantewada. Secondly, government’s effort to bring them out of conflict and trying to put them into the mainstream is encouraging but at the same time it is leading to a dilemma in the lives of many children. While observing children of the camp during the mela, I could see how there is an attempt to become like boys and girls from towns and cities. These are children who have been brought here from remotest villages of the region, where they were completely cut from the outer world. Now they see journalists, researchers, etc. visiting their camps frequently. The outside world is exposed to them through means like television which always plays Bollywood songs, movies and serials. There is an attempt to imitate them and there is thus, a gradual shift from their traditionality. Unknowingly they are in an awkward position where they have not completely left their traditional practices but at the same time are trying to get assimilated into the mainstream. However, it is important that a conducive environment for growth, development and critical thinking is provided by the state for these children.
3.6.3. Influence of the Salwa Judum Leader:

A lot has already been mentioned about the presence of Neta ji in the camp. He is one of the most influential persons in the camp. However, here I would specifically highlight how his religious ideology is influencing the life of many children of the camp. He has been staying in Kasoli for over a decade now and especially after the launch of Salwa Judum campaign, he became a much more prominent figure in the region. He has built multiple networks and connections. His home has become an advisory center where residents, youth, security force personnel, journalists, researchers, local political leaders and even officials of district administration who come here for advice and consultations. The income generation programs set up by the government in Kasoli camp, like the community farming and dairy, all function under his supervision. Hence, the residents consider him to be the key player in providing them with these handful employment opportunities as it is him who acts as a link between the residents and the district government officials.

With an active involvement in Salwa Judum and now in the district level politics, neta ji is well known to the governmental and non-governmental bodies. Even during my first visit to Kasoli, I was made to visit him first. This continued even after I started my fieldwork as I was expected to seek his advice on almost everything. He is a very informative man. He introduced me to a few residents, who either had particular points of view that he thought would be helpful. Neta ji has unparallel power and influence in the camp.

However, in reference to children in the camp, he is definitely the most important person in terms of having a direct influence on their lives. He is the key decision maker in the ashramshala in terms of its functioning, deciding the menu, ration, time-table and even celebrations in the ashramshala. It is his final words that prevail. Most of the decisions taken by him are considered good for the children by the ashramshala authorities and residents too. However, as a researcher, one particular area of discomfort with him has been his efforts towards inducing his personal ideologies and belief systems in the children of the camp. He believes in the right-wing ideology and is an ardent Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) follower. On various occasions, I strongly
felt that he is influencing not just the children but camp residents too. Saffronising of Kasoli camp is what I prefer calling it.

During the course of my fieldwork, Neta ji had organized a satsang (religious talk) for the camp residents and to deliver sermons, a Swami Ji (religious guru) was called from Rishikesh. I was surprised to see the turn over of the residents. Infact it was that day when I could actually assess the population of the camp and also of the Kasoli village. Children were given a half day off and were strictly instructed to attend the satsang. I was also expected to do the same. Other than talking about aspects of discipline, hard work, respect to elders and fellow human beings, brotherhood and non-violence, Swami Ji touched upon various facets of Hinduism that one should strictly follow. Although this was shared in a subtle manner however, he did mention how Hindu religion is the most sophisticated in terms of way of life and conducting ones own self.

But more than this, what actually struck my attention was the day the festival of Makar Sankranti was celebrated. A lot of children of the ashramshala have already been enrolled in the RSS. They are regularly sent to the State capital Raipur for training that often lasts for a week. During this course of time, children miss their classes too. The chatra nayak (head boy), Maheshwar is a RSS trainee. He has been sent to Raipur on a couple of occasions. Seeing him, a lot many younger children in the ashramshala are getting influenced and look forward to become a part of it, not out of any individual orientation towards right wing ideology but out of the sheer chance to go to Raipur. At Makar Sankranti, the boys who had undergone the RSS training first displayed their physical training in knife and stick wielding and through this they spread the message of ‘defending the nation’. This was finally closed with a speech delivered by a student. This is what he had to say,

“Ram Mandir toota nahi hai. Wohh Kabhi toot bhi nahi sakta. Uska ek- ek pathar humare karyawan ke roop mein khada hai”

(Ram Mandir is not demolished. It can never be demolished. It is standing strong and erect. Every single stone of Ram Mandir has now taken form of offices).

(A child’s speech on Makar Sankranti festival)
The event was much appreciated by the residents, who were also made to clap by neta ji. He is instrumental in this process of Saffronising Kasoli and also its children. On many occasions he was seen telling children how they all needed to ‘defend their nation’ from ‘threats’, however, for him ‘threat’ was a synonym to Maoists. This reminded me of Miklian’s (2009) argument that this conflict is increasingly polarized and politicized along a Red vs. Saffron (Maoists Vs. Hindu fundamentalist) line. The attempts of saffronising the camp can be seen explicitly in Kasoli. Talking specifically about the ashramshala, it is certainly a non-secular place. However, all the boys in the ashramshala are Hindus but there were two boys whose families have converted to Christianity. The television room often got converted into a small temple during festivals like Makar Sankranti, Durga Pooja and Shivratri, Basant Panchami, with all students doing vandana (prayers) with folded hands in front of a big portrait of Baharat Mata and Lord Shiva. However, no such celebrations took place during Christmas or any other non-Hindu festival. However, one can argue that education should be secular. For this, ashramshala which is laying the foundation for the lives and future of many children it should expose them to the wider horizon of brotherhood, non-hatred and imbibe in them the feeling of secularism.

3.7. The Ongoing Insecurities:

However, the banning of Salwa Judum campaign in 2012 did bring a sense of end to violence and bloodshed on a daily basis in the lives of many, but this did not allay the fears about future in the mind of the residents and especially children. They remain anxious that their camp could be attacked anytime by the Maoists. Personal security was the obvious reason for this anxiety. However, part of the reason for this ongoing insecurity even after the campaign has ceased to exist is because of the broader social-political context in which they still continue to live under the larger ambit of conflict. Conflict now is present in its various manifestations like restricted life, heavily guarded camp, omnipresent security force personnel and a life of uncertainty. The conflict has been a part of the lives of these residents and children for decades and continues even today as I write about them. On the other hand, living in this closed restricted space children are exposed to the wider impact of this conflict on the lives of other people of their own community and age-group. They see and observe incomplete families,
ruptured social relations around and empathise with those who have been orphaned by this conflict.

For many children like Biju, his fears did not centre around his own self, but on the problems beings faced by those in the camp. He showed immense despair and pain while he shared,

“I feel sad. I cry sometimes. With the grace of God I have all my family members here. Safe and sound. My heart aches for children who have no family now; for wives who have lost their husbands; for mothers who have lost their sons...Madam, I do not know why all this disturbs me so much. Although, there is peace here now in the camp and we are free from violence. But I do not feel free when I see small kids without fathers and mothers running around here. I cannot enjoy this freedom. I do not think we are free”.

(Biju, 10th standard, resides in the pre-metric hostel in Kasoli Camp)