Chapter VI

Walking with the Conflict: Exploring children’s experiences of living amidst conflict

Introduction:

The present chapter is an attempt to bring out children’s experiences of growing amidst the on-going conflict in the state of Chhattisgarh. The children of Kasoli are a reservoir of experiences that were shared during the course of my stay with them. Arguing against the common belief of children being vulnerable and passive agents in situations of armed conflict, the chapter accords voice to them and try to bring out children’s own discourses and subjective interpretation of the social world within which they live. This methodological position underscores the need to closely look at children’s experiences and understandings on one hand, and at the same time, also emphasize on the need to look at how children living amidst the current social order develop strategies and make adjustments that reflect their own agency.

Drawing from this stance, the chapter is divided into three broad sections. Following the introduction, the first section highlights children’s past lived experiences of the conflict. These experiences included that of attending village level meetings called by the Maoists, witnessing death of parents and family members, experiencing the times of Salwa Judum and the displacement and separation that it brought. The second section highlights the everyday day social world of children in Kasoli which forms an integral part of their lives in present day context. Family and ashramshala emerged as the most important units in the social world of children within which their social roles, interactions and other social relations emerged. Family’s role in the lives of children of Kasoli is highlighted under two broad sub- headings, namely, family as a source of information about the conflict and family separation as a present day reality in the lives of these children. The section on ashramshala brings out the meaning that ashramshala holds in the present day lives of children in Kasoli wherein it is looked at as a home away from home for many. The varied roles played by ashramshala in the lives of these children are highlighted. The third and last section closely looks at children in the
everyday life context and brings out their *agency* in this conflict zone. Children’s agency in Kasoli emerged in varied forms like that of children’s resourcefulness, their conceptualisation of the environment around, their role as managers of economics and the tactical use of their agency in order to adjust and survive in the present day social order.

The chapter tries to base all its arguments against the received assumption of children being passive, vulnerable and in constant need of care and protection during adverse situations like the one prevailing in Chhattisgarh. Children are looked at as active social actors having the capability to interpret their social world and exhibit social competence. Having gained social competence implies what Hutchby and Moran-Ellis (1998) refers to as the ‘capacity of children to successfully manage interactions with peers and adults and pursue agendas of their own’. Children are also seen as involved in the process producing and reproducing social interactions and roles within the social world wherein they live. In the process of attempting to study children and their everyday life and lived experiences amidst the on-going armed conflict in Kasoli, an effort was made not to look at children in isolation but in relation with the significant others\(^{31}\) in their lives. In the present study, significant others were identified as family members, peers, teachers, caregivers at the ashramshala and security force personnel and other influential individuals in the camp, etc.

Drawing from fieldwork, it can be stated that every child in Kasoli is affected by this conflict. For some, the conflict took away their parents, siblings and other social support system while for others it brought displacement, separation from families and dear ones and for many, conflict and violence has been a reality since their birth. For those living in camp and ashramshala now, are also living under the larger ambit of conflict wherein it can be experienced through its varied manifestations. Many young children have not seen a world beyond the camp and hence, for them camp life is the only reality. Children have faced loss at different levels and have experienced the conflict from close quarters on an everyday basis. There often seems no point of return

\(^{31}\) Significant others refer to ‘those persons who are of sufficient importance in an individual's life to affect the individual's emotions, behaviour, and sense of self. These include relations such as family members, close friends, mentors, peers etc. Through interactions with significant others, and perceptions of their responses to one's behaviour, an individual gains a sense of who he or she is, and comes to understand how to act in a given context and role’. Source: [http://www.blackwellreference.com/public/tocnode?id=g9781405124331_yr2013_chunk_g978140512433125_ss1-119](http://www.blackwellreference.com/public/tocnode?id=g9781405124331_yr2013_chunk_g978140512433125_ss1-119)
for them and what prevails is a deep sense of uncertainty and fear in the guarded camps.

Taussig (1984, 1987) argues that children in the midst of war must cope with both the dangerous events of war and the terror that those events. In his work ‘culture of terror’ he states that one needs to ‘see’ the phenomenon ‘anew through the creation of counter-discourses’ (1984: 470). Hence, drawing from here, it can be stated that in order to understand and analyse children’s past lived experiences and on-going everyday life experiences in this conflict situation, one needs to create counter-discourses and hence, an emic point of view is taken wherein the central empirical evidence is drawn from the narratives of the children coupled with participant observation carried out in Kasoli Salwa Judum camp and ashramshala.

1. Walking with the Conflict: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Children in Kasoli

Legitimacy of children’s views and opinions are often overlooked in researches. We often tend to understand their experiences, perceptions, knowledge, response to conflict mostly through adult interpretations and understanding. Drawing from this major blockade, an effort was made to give validity to children’s lived experiences, their own understanding, and interpretations not just of the conflict but of their everyday social world also.

The on-going conflict has been an integral part of the lives of thousands of children. The few hundreds of them who form a part of this study, have lived their childhood and continue to live in spaces marked by warfare, uncertainty and fear. In the process of engaging with children growing in conflict situations in Kasoli, I realised that they majorly draw their understanding and interpretations of conflict from two major sources, namely experience and observation. It is argued that experience enables children to choose a course of action with a reasonable expectation that certain outcomes can be achieved (Chandler and Dahlquist 2002) and observation relies on other information and processing from it to gain relevance (Geldard and Geldard 2004; Moses 1990). Children in Kasoli have been a witness to the conflict at varied levels and have experienced the conflict in the process of growing up. While being exposed to violent confrontations between the security forces and the Maoists, displacement, separation and killings etc., children have experienced the conflict from close quarters and in this
process, they have also observed the world around them which has always been characterised by on-going conflict.

Capturing children’s narratives were considered to be the best way to capture the essence of their experiences and understanding of this conflict. As Turner and Bruner (1986) have advocated in favour of using narratives to study ‘anthropology of experiences’ as they call it, wherein they state that one has to study experiences if attempting to understand reality. However, as experiences are something personal and internal, one needs to look at ways in which experiences are expressed, e.g. in narratives (Bruner 1986). Children have constructed meaningful narrative out of the past events in the light of the present and in expectation of the future. The narratives of these children bring out the intertextual relationship between their own life experiences and the experiences of their family and their people.

As highlighted earlier, the experiences of children in Kasoli, prominently included, being a witness of killing of a parent (s), siblings and other near ones during jan- adalats (people’s court called by the Maoists back in the villages), attending meetings called by the Maoists, encounters and violent confrontations between Maoists and security force personnel back in the village, separation from family, displacement during the times of Salwa Judum, physical destruction of school buildings and health centres leading to non-availability of educational and health services etc. These experiences are not mere stories that were shared but had deeper meanings attached for every child growing here.

During the span of six months, a lot was shared between children and me. Getting into the role of a participant observer gave an edge over just being an outsider, a researcher. I, with passage of a few days itself, was considered a part of the ashramshala in various capacities. Although, I was playing the role of a teacher and a caregiver but I was also looked at as a friend, mentor and colleague by the children and other around. These roles helped me get involved in the lives of these children at varied levels. On various occasions – in class, in the kitchen, tea-time, dinner, recreation time, festivals, mela (fair), Sunday afternoons and Sunday outings to mandi (vegetable market) etc., gave me ample opportunities to have informal interactions with children. The following section brings out the narratives of children about their personal experiences and
encounters of the conflict. Attempt is made to use narratives to retain the nuances and richness of the experiences shared.

1.1. Hearing out the Maoists: Children’s experiences of attending meetings

Interactions with children brought out the phenomenon of ‘attending meetings’ prominently as being the first exposure and experience to this conflict. ‘Meetings’ referred to here are the public gathering of the villagers called by the Maoists to discuss their agendas and set rules and regulations for the conduct of every villager under their influence. Meetings can be considered to be the ‘public face’ of the Maoists, for it is during these meetings only that the Maoists come in direct contact with the villagers. It is during these meetings that the Maoists also call for Jan- Adalat (People’s Court) wherein cases are taken up by them ranging from social-economic concerns of the local villagers to charges of conspiring against the Maoists. However, Maoists have been much criticised for the atrocities done by them during jan- adalat. Reports have suggested that during the jan- adalat the Maoist squad leader functions as- complainant, a prosecutor, a judge and finally the executor and punishes the villagers publicly on being suspected as police informer, alleged traitor or State supporter in any capacity and it is also believed that jan- adalats are also used to target village leaders and land owners (ACHR 2006; Human Rights Watch 2008a, 2012).

Interactions with children highlighted how during the jan- adalat a terror regime was created in the minds of all and the impressions of it are still fresh in the minds of many children. A lot of opinions about the Maoists were formed out of the experiences that these children have had during meetings in their village. Santu shared what he remembered of the two meetings he attended before he and his family were forced to vacate their homes in Bijapur district and move into a Salwa Judum camp there. He shared,

“They pick up those who according to them are traitors and police informers. They tell about him/ her to the villagers in the meeting and then kill them brutally in full public view. By doing so, they warn the villagers not to do the same or else they too would be killed. They do not want people to inform police about their whereabouts. Maoists are bad people. I get scared of them. They kill by using bow and arrow, guns or even knives. Everyone has to go for the meeting and if someone does not, he is beaten up. They beat as if you were some cow-buffalo”

(Santu, 5th standard, student at Kasoli ashramshala)
Lakhmu shared,

“They threaten the local people not to inform anybody about their whereabouts. Villagers live under the state of constant fear. Many of my relatives stay there. People from across the river (Indravati) cannot come this side easily. Meetings take place in those villages People across the river are all under their (Maoists) supervision. During meetings they tell about how we should fight the police and chase them out. A lot of tribal youth join in due to the influence of the Maoists. They write down names of young boys and girls like us during meetings and recruit them. They undergo training like the police do. When names are taken they have to go otherwise they are beaten or even killed and so are their family members. There are a lot many boys and girls of my age there. During Jan Adalat, the Maoists actually come face to face with the villagers. Otherwise they live deep in the forests”

(Lakhmu, 8th standard, student at Kasoli ashramshala)

Shiv also had similar experience to share of what he himself witnessed at one of the jan-adalat that has left a deep impression on his mind. He shared,

“Once a meeting was called in our village. They had made it compulsory for everyone to go. A word of warning was spread that any absence would lead to severe repercussions. Everyone gathered for the meeting. Only young children were home. I was strictly asked by my mother to stop playing and come to the meeting. A man was tied to the tree. He was the man who ran the ration shop in the village. He was bleeding heavily. The Maoists told the villagers that he was an informer and had informed about their whereabouts to the police and also about our visits to this village. That man was crying and pleading for mercy. His wife was also present there. She, too, was crying. The Maoists cut all his fingers and beat him up brutally. I hid myself behind my mother out of fear. Maoists always warn the suspect two to three times before taking action against them. This man must have ignored the warning. Had he remained silent, he would have escaped this torture. They are scary beings.”

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

The above stated narratives are only a few amongst the many experiences shared by children. Children’s exposure to the Maoists is through these meetings and it is here that they form an image about them. Most of them consider the Maoists to be brutal and terrifying beings that kill and create terror around. However, it is important to highlight that it is during these meetings only that the Maoist ideology gets percolated to the youngest lot of the village, i.e. children. The Maoists were reported to influence the children with their strong revolutionary speeches. Drawing from these meetings, the children have also developed their own subjective interpretations of the Maoists.
To quote a few, Gutlu shared what he could sum up from the three meetings he attended in the span of three years. He stated,

“They (Maoists) tell the villagers that we should not let outsiders enter our jungle, not even the police. But they allow contractors who construct roads and collect tendu to work only if they pay them some money. They also enquire if police came to the village or not. They tell everyone that the government is doing nothing for the tribal people and so we should not allow any government official inside. The Maoists are our protectors. They do not do anything to the children. Only those who betray them and become informers are punished”

(Gutlu, 7th standard, student at Kasoli ashramshala)

Rakesh shared some interesting experience of meetings called by the Maoists that he attended and brought forward his understanding of the conflict developed out of these meetings. He stated,

“Maoists dance a lot during the meetings. Then they give speeches in full energy also. The way they talk is very empowering. They talk with great enthusiasm and conviction. They ask people to come together and throw away the government and establish our own rule. After this they call out names of people who are found guilty by them and pronounce punishment which often is killing in full public view”

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

These few narratives bring out substantial points of how the Maoists have been propagating their agendas amongst the local adivasis through these meetings. If we categorically look at the experiences of meetings attended by the children, it can be stated that barring the violent modus operandi of the Maoists, many children did seem to think of Maoists in a fair spirit. However, they did share about getting intimidated by the presence of Maoists and also feared getting recruited by them. Children, through the exposure of these meetings, have developed an understanding that Maoists punish those who “commit mistakes”. Although, majority of children interacted with did not have an idea about what the mistakes meant.

1.1.1. Making sense of the past in the present:

Interestingly, children who attended meetings back in their villages are making sense of it now and are able to comprehend what Maoists meant when they spoke about exploitation and alienation of the local tribal. Especially the older children, who are now also exposed to the outer world through education, feel that the Maoists are not completely wrong when they speak against the government. Narratives discussed here
are representatives of the many sharings wherein children did feel a sense of marginalisation of the tribal people by the government.


(They are against the government rule and also against the police, political leaders and against the corruption administration. They do not believe in government, they want to rob it. They say that if the government officials are allowed to come here, they would rob you of all your land, forest, tendu patta, Mahua and would not pay a single penny for it. You all are safe as long as we are here to protect you. May be they are right madam because there was not a single functional school in the village, no roads, no hospital back in our village. People are given meagre money for tendu collection)

(Group of boys from pre-metric hostel, Kaosli Camp)


(The Maoists want to establish their own rule. They seek support of the villagers to overthrow the government. Their slogan is ‘we will hoist our red colour flag at red fort’ and only then the country would be free. They do not hoist the Indian flag. They hoist their own flag. It is red in colour with a sickle symbol. Back in the schools, they sometimes hoist a black colour flag and say it is to show their discord)

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

Further it can also be stated that while living back in the village and attending these meetings, children were not able to comprehend statements like “Looteri Sarkar” (exploitative State), “Sarkar ka Virodh” (Stand against the State), “Milkar Sarkar Hatani Hai”(Collective efforts to overthrow State rule) or even “Tendu patta ka kum paisa milta hai”(We get meagre amount for tendu patta collection). However, now after moving out of villages, either by choice or force they are able to make some little sense to what was being propagated back in the villages. They are gradually relating to these phrases that were introduced to them during meetings. Now with the exposure to relatively better education, health services and other opportunities, some children are able to reflect and analyse how, back in their village, the State has failed miserably in
safeguarding the interests of the tribal people. However, by stating this, one is not trying to advocate that the State has been able to fulfil its duties and responsibilities for the tribal people presently residing in camps or children in ashramshala. This is only an attempt to highlight how children, in their own capacity and exposure available, have been able to interpret the issues of marginalisation and alienation.

Although, not explicitly but children in Kasoli did talk about how on various occasions they have felt that the Maoists have done better for the people in comparison to ‘sarkar’ and ‘force walas’ (government and security force personnel). It was only after many days of my stay with these children that they could confide in me and speak in favour of the Maoists. During one of the post-dinner group discussion with pre-metric boys (9th and 10th standard), it was highlighted how these children felt that Maoists to be more ethical in their conduct. Children informed that they punished those who did not conduct themselves in a socially and culturally appropriate manner. The boys about the fact that the Maoists always get blamed for any killing or any mishap in the region, despite of them being innocent most of the times.

“Koi bhi marne se naxalite mann ka naam aata hai. Chahe gaon wala marey ya police wala kisi ko maarkar faik de, naam naxali ka aata hai. Aise hi unko badnaam bhi karte hain. Asli naxali mann kabhi bhi bina wajah nahi maarte”

(When anyone is beaten up or is killed by the police, the blame goes on to the Maoists. We feel they are often defamed. The Maoists do not kill without a reason)

(Group of boys from pre-metric hostel, Kaosli Camp)

Children also spoke of the Maoists in stark contrast with the security force personnel posted in Kasoli. They shared

“Madam the Maoists are good people. Back in our villages, wife beating and alcoholism is a problem. Men beat their wives, so the Maoists beat them badly. They teach them a lesson for life. Maoists respect women, unlike the force personnel who are very insensitive. Maoists do not kill without a reason. Police on the other hand beat people for no reason. They keep harassing the villagers. They did that back in the villages too and here also. During the times of Salwa Judum, these force personnel were uncontrollable. Any slight doubt or activity, they used to beat the villagers with rods. The real Maoists who wear uniform do not get involved in killings. It is only the village level, the Sangam Sadasya [village level cadre of the Maoists] that beat and kill, but that too after giving repeated warnings. Their rules and regulations are all straight and they follow it religiously unlike the police personnel who are brutal and beat anyone.”

(Group of children from the ashramahala, Kasoli Camp)
Children interestingly also shared how the Maoists often came to their schools and kept a check on the teachers. They shared,

“Maoists used to come to our school and ask if our teachers were teaching and whether they were regular or not and whether they teach properly. They ask the children to inform them if the teachers were ignoring their work at school”

(Group of children from the ashramahala, Kasoli Camp)

This particular phenomenon of the Maoists coming to schools and keeping a check on its functioning was also validated by teachers from another school I got a chance to visit in Paunaar which falls across river Indravati. The area across the river is considered to be dominated and controlled by the Maoists. The teachers of Paunaar shared their experience of an incident when they were called over by the Maoists during a meeting in that area. The Maoists came to know about the teachers who were not regular to school. Teachers were questioned directly and were categorically told by the Maoists to be regular and honest towards their work. The teachers showed their belief that the

‘Maoists are not against education. But they are against these children joining the police. They encourage the children to stay back and serve in their villages rather than going to town and cities and losing touch with their own land. They say, this is a rich state and no one should die of hunger and lack of resources’

(Teachers from Paunaar primary school, Village Paunar)

However, in the process of discussions, children did mention that at the end of the day, it is a conflict that is troublesome. They believe that both the Maoists and security force personnel are same and equally involved in the conflict. Putting it in Kamlu’s words,

“Both the sides are same. Someday we feel the police is for our good and someday it is the Maoists. It is very difficult to take sides and say who is right. There is bloodshed from both sides. I think this will never end. Back in the village, the police used to beat up someone and someday he became a Maoist. Both the parties are displaying their strength and trying to maintain their supremacy. Had the police harassed us, who knows even we would have become Maoists. Police personnel are troubling the Maoists and Maoists are troubling the police. The ones caught in the middle are the local villagers, local tribal people like us”

(Kamlu, 8th standard, student at Kasoli ashramshala)

The above few narratives highlight some important issues in terms of how children perceive the Maoists and security force personnel, out of their sheer exposure to the conflict and the experiences they have had with either parties. Children definitely did
not approve of the violent *modus operandi* adopted by the Maoists which they witnessed during the meetings called by them. However, at the same time they did not even approve of the way the security force personnel have dealt with the tribal people of this region. Out of the sheer lived experiences of these children, they could draw a contrast between the Maoists and the security force personnel. Children stated how back in the village the Maoists addressed the social issues like that of women marginalisation, alcoholism, etc. On one hand it also shows that children are conscious of the fact that these are evils of the society and need to be addressed and that is why they spoke in support of the Maoists in this regard and considered them to be more ethical in their actions. In the same breath they stated how the security force personnel have been insensitive towards women back in the village and continue to be so even in these camps. As also observed and experienced by myself, that women in the camp are living under a constant fear and discomfort.

It can be stated that out of the lived experiences of these children and their present day living experiences, children associate State to ‘police’. For them, symbols of State include schools, hospitals, roads etc. that are provided by the ‘*sarkar*’ but they relate the presence of State only through the security force personnel. The experiences they had in the past and their present day experiences, mostly the encounters with the security personnel, are shaping their understanding of State and developing a perception which is not always in favour of the State.

Children highlighted the issue of ‘teacher absenteeism’ back in the villages. The Maoists have been much appreciated for this act. However, two points of discussion emerge from here. *Firstly*, one has to go deeper into the reasons for the phenomenon of teacher- absenteeism. Here, one is not trying to argue in support of this practice, but simply highlighting the observed facts. The case in point is of the primary school in Paunaar. With no proper road and transport facility, reaching the school across the river is an everyday challenge in itself. The river Indravati at all times has large volumes of water. The situation becomes more risky during the times of monsoon. With no bridge over the river, the only option to cross it is either in boats of fishermen (during monsoon times) or simply by crossing it on foot (during other times when the water level is relatively shallow). After crossing the river one has to walk for ten kilometres (to and fro) on *kuchha* roads to reach the school. Such adverse conditions act as major impediment to the teachers who mostly are from outside Paunaar village. This leads to
teacher not going to school regularly, which in turn leads to children loitering around with no agenda for the day. Once again, it is important to highlight the idea of bringing out these facts is not to speak in support of the absenteeism, but it is an effort to highlight the challenges one has to face to reach these schools. Making roads, bridges and other infrastructural facilities available to the people is the prime responsibility of the State and here we witness that there is denial of these basic facilities to the people of the region.

Secondly, another important aspect emerging from the narratives on teacher absenteeism is that, on one hand the Maoists are working towards ensuring that children get proper education in school and that teachers fulfil their duties with commitment. However, what emerge as an area of concern are the dominant practices of the Maoists in schools. They are reported to force teachers in the remote villages to talk about how Maoists are for the larger good and are the protectors of the tribal people’s rights. Further they instruct children not to join the security forces and rather stay back in their own villages and work for the fellow tribal. Interactions with people and children also brought out the realisation that despite of strong presence of the Maoists in their villages, no developmental or employment opportunity, educational and health facilities etc. have been made available to the people. At the same time, even the State has failed to provide the tribal people any kind of development and opportunities to grow.

The other important issue that emerges from the previous narratives gathered during the course of fieldwork in this region was that the subtle inclination showed by children towards the Maoists was based on incidences that they have experienced and observed, for e.g. that of wife beating, alcoholism, absenteeism in children, proper functioning of school etc. Majority of this inclination has not emerged out of any strong belief in the ideologies being propagated by the Maoists. There is not enough knowledge amongst children about the reason for this on-going conflict. They are not aware of the basic ideologies on which the Maoists are working and why State is suppressing them by force? All they know is “Naxali mann police ko nuksaan pahucha rahe aur police naxali mann ko” (The Maoists are troubling the security personnel and vice versa). It

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32 These inputs were provided during the pilot study and also final fieldwork. Interaction with some of the teachers from ashramshalas in the interiors of Abhujmaad and in district Dantewada informed that when posted in the interiors of the district, they are often forced by the Maoists to talk about how state is nothing but an instrument of exploitation in the hands of landlords, politicians, forest officials, the bourgeoisie and is catering to the needs of a specific class.
would not be incorrect to state that the understanding of this on-going conflict seemed to have narrowed down to ‘a fight between the Maoists and the Police’, both of whom seem to be fighting to establish their supremacy and the only one standing at the fringe are the *adivasis* who have been exposed to the worst experiences of this conflict.

1.2. “*Yes! We have seen it all*”: Children’s experiences of witnessing violence

The most difficult task in the entire process of this research work was to hear out children share their experiences of witnessing violence, bloodshed, killing of parents, siblings, displacement from villages and separation from family. Being a sensitive issue, an informal approach towards this was adopted wherein unstructured in-depth interviews were carried out throughout the process of fieldwork. Most of these sensitive and highly personal experiences were shared by children in the form of stories. In the way of story-telling, they could talk about their past experiences in a much comfortable way. In the course of research, it was realised that researching with children and touching upon their past involved immense emotions. As a researcher, it thus, became important to look beyond words and listen to silences too. It was also in this context that, story-telling by children was encouraged as it is believed that it was most suited for ‘as it provides opportunity for lengthy conversations and also allows the narrator of the story to reveal the less visible levels of their stories, including their silences (Ghorashi 2008). An attempt is made here to highlight the glimpses of few amongst the many stories told by children of their lived experiences of the conflict.

1.2.1. “*I feel like a father*…”

Sumit and Amit are brothers, studying in Kasoli ashramshala in 5th and 3rd standards respectively. Being the class-teacher to Amit, I had many interactions with him and he always came across as a hardworking and diligent boy. Sumit on the other hand is more reserve in nature and always takes care of his younger brother. Sumit comes across as an extremely protective elder brother. The relationship between the brothers looked perfect by all standards. Never did I realise that the two had a story. They were hit hard by this conflict. Sumit and Amit are orphans and belong to a family of five brothers. Their parents were killed by the Maoists some five years back in their village. Everyone in the ashramshala knew of their story, however, they did take time to share it with me and
when they did, they did with some level of trust. Sumit shared how in a matter of one day, they lost it all,

“My father was the sarpanch of our village Avapalli and we had a big house and some land for agriculture. My father was often threatened by the Maoists, however, he always put a strong foot forward. I still remember, that evening. My father made all of us sit and listen to what he had to say. He said he might get killed. My mother was continuously crying while he spoke. Amit was too small to understand a word. I could gather some sense out of it. But my elder brothers had a different look in their eyes, which I can’t explain. My father did not shed a tear. I don’t know how he was able to talk without even shedding a drop. I make sense of it now as I grow. He did not break in front of us so that we all remain strong. He was right, they [Maoists] came that evening and hunted for him like a prey. My father tried to hide but they found him and stabbed twice in his stomach in front of all of us. My elder brother was trying to escape but was shot with an arrow and fell down bleeding. My mother came to my father’s rescue who was still breathing but they pulled her away and when she resisted, they cut her fingers and one ear too. They shot an arrow straight into my father’s chest and he lay dead. It was 4 p.m. Somehow, my mother managed to get up and sprinkle some water on my father and brother. My brother was gaining consciousness but they came back again and this time killed my mother too. All this was too quick to understand. Within no time, our family was finished. No one came to our rescue till the next day early morning when some elders from the neighbourhood came and told my elder brothers to leave the village in order to survive. Madam we have not gone back to our village ever since that evening. Our land, livestock everything was left behind. We have never looked back and I guess, would never do it in future. Those images are still fresh in my mind. Although, Amit was too small but, he does talk about it sometimes. My brothers live at different places and we do not get to meet each other. Amit is my family now. I sometimes feel like a father”

(Sumit studying at the ashramshala, sharing experience of witnessing the killing of his family members and now playing role of an elder brother to Amit)

The life story shared above highlights some significant issues that need to be brought forward and discussed. Sumit and Amit are one amongst the many boys who have been orphaned by the conflict. Sumit shared how being from a headman’s family brought them to this fate. During the course of my fieldwork, it was observed that in almost all the villages, the headman’s house always stood erect and sarpanch was always reported to be powerful. The Maoists on the other hand, have always been reported to kill the headman on the grounds of being corrupt, hoarding abundant grains and money. Sumit mentioned how his father used to be against the Maoists. According to him, this resentment came out of the regular demands made by the Maoists to distribute his land, give away livestock etc. One could also argue that many a times the headman of the village is involved in corrupt practices, leading to strict actions by the
Maoists. However, it is to be stated again that the *modus operandi* adopted by the Maoists needs scrutiny and critical examination.

The images of the incident that took away their father, mother and brother are fresh in the minds of children. Although Amit was young at that time, he still had some aspects for sharing such as how his father was stabbed, how his mother cried and how his brother fell after being shot by an arrow. On the other hand, Sumit remembers those silences and minute details that he experienced that evening. He shared how his father sat with the family and asked them to be strong in case of some adversities. He did not understand his father’s silences then, but in the process of growing and parenting his younger brother, Sumit is acting like a father. He now understands why his father put a brave face in front of the family and did not shed a single tear. Today Sumit is doing the same by keeping his emotions to himself and projecting a strong face to Amit. The experiences of the conflict have taken away Sumit’s childhood as he has become an adult in his own capacity.

### 1.2.2. “We collected his body pieces and put them on pyre…”

Ramesh is studying in 9th standard and stays at the pre-metric hostel in Kasoli. It was a hot Sunday afternoon when I sat in the kitchen area writing my diary when Ramesh stood there cooking *itta-jumma* (Tamarind curry). We struck a conversation and the story followed. Ramesh hails from village Maasori in Dantewada. He shared about his family and [his elder brother. His elder brother was a security force personnel with the Chhattisgarh Force (CF) and was killed in a bomb blast that was planted by the Maoists. He narrated,

“My brother was unemployed till the time Salwa Judum started. Like many other young people, even my brother joined in out of sheer economic opportunity. He started getting Rs. 1500 rupees per month. What an irony of life, unemployment at least kept him alive and employment came with a heavy cost. My brother became an SPO. For a while, everything was going good. He used to send money back home. One day he was returning from work to his camp along with his battalion personnel. Near a village called Katekalyan (District Dantewada), the Maoists had planted a bomb under a bridge and blew it up. It was around 7 p.m. We saw the news on television. No one survived in the blast. We got a few pieces of the body. But who knows whose body we got. Everyone was burnt completely. My sister-in-law cried a lot and did not eat for days together. Although we got some meagre
compensation but what will one do with that money? Money gets spent some day or the other but my brother will never come back again. He has gone forever. My sister-in-law now works in one of the ashramshalas in Faraspal (District Dantewada). I would rather become a peon, but will never join the force. I feel very agitated and restless whenever I think of it. But at the end of it, I am helpless. At last we have to lead our lives too. My parents are old. We all still recall the time when his body- pieces were handed over to us in a box. We had to lift them with our hands and put them on pyre. My parents have been extremely silent since then. I am studying here and I am sure they miss me but with no schools around, they had no option but to send me here. They want me to do something good and stay away from this bloodshed. I do not know how will we ever escape this conflict?"

Ramesh’s story brings out some harsh realities about this conflict that has affected millions of families in the region. He highlighted how his brother like many other youth of Chhattisgarh, joined the counter insurgency campaign out of sheer economic needs and in the process became vulnerable. For his brother too, getting a regular remuneration was a highly lucrative option. But this option came at a heavy cost. The loss of his brother has impacted the family no ends. Ramesh stated how being unemployed was better for his brother than being employed as it costed him his life. This is the story of many other families, whose economic vulnerability was well targeted by the State in the name of this counter insurgency campaign. This experience has closed the doors of similar kind of employment for Ramesh who prefers becoming a peon over police personnel. He has developed aversion towards Maoists, however, he has no understanding of who the Maoists are and what they are fighting for. He has no agreement or disagreement to their ideology per se. It also needs to be understood that Ramesh’s choice of not joining the force is not out of any hatred or disagreement with it, but simply out of the experience he and his family has gone through. His understanding and opinions are shaped out of his lived experiences. The images of this experience are still fresh in the mind of Ramesh as he showed me how he picked up pieces of his brother’s burnt body pieces with his own hands and put them on pyre.

1.2.3. “My father was killed in a weekly haat... Everyone watched him die…”

Roshan studies in 9th standard. By nature, he is extremely quiet and shy. Roshan suffers from a disability too. His fingers had to be amputated after he had burnt his hands in an accident during his childhood. Roshan did not mingle much with children either in the ashramshala or even in the camp. Building rapport with him was a slow and steady process. Gradually over a period of time he started responding and acknowledging my
presence. I had already heard about Roshan from a number of sources, children, teachers and caregivers in the ashramshala and also many camp residents. It was informed to me that his father, an SPO, was killed brutally by the Maoists in full public view during one of the weekly haats in a nearby village. However, I never probed him to share about his father’s death. However, after many interactions with him, one day we got a chance to walk and talk on our way to Gumargunda temple, eight kilometres from Kasoli, to participate in a bhandara (village feast) organised by the temple authorities. Roshan shared,

“I came from a village called Satwa. Our family was often tortured by the Maoists for they felt we were wealthy. My uncle, who was a sarpanch was brutally killed by them. They tied him to a tree and stabbed him to death in front of the whole village. We lived in a state of fear. My father, who also became a sarpanch was also threatened by them and they took away all our ration, livestock etc. Then Salwa Judum took off and we escaped from our village and took refuge in Chitalanka camp in Dantewada where my father became an SPO. A lot of people joined in that time, they were getting good money. My father was posted in Kasoli and things seemed settling down when suddenly one day we heard the news of his death. He was killed at the weekly haat (market) in Chindnar (a nearby village) in full public view. Everyone watched him die but did not come to his rescue. He was accompanied by one of his colleague SPOs. Someone must have informed the Maoists about him. I was in Chitalanka that time, however, even if I was with him, what would have I done? He had not been home for long. I have no idea how they hit him, how he fell, how he breathed his last. People say he was stabbed on his head and then several times on his stomach too. My elder brother got his body but my mother did not look at it. Since my father’s death, my mother has been the sole- earner for the family. She washes utensils in some of the houses in Dantewada and fends for our family of four (I have an elder brother and younger sister). My mother never talks about my father’s death and just says that it was our destiny. However, I get angry sometimes and want his killers to die (Moist eyes). My family is in Chitalanka and I am in Kasoli. My whole family is scattered. If anything happens to them, I will be unable to be there for them. We cannot go out of the camp easily and so can’t go. My heart longs to meet them’.

(Roshan, on his father being killed in a weekly haat)

Different versions of Roshan’s father’s death can be heard in Kasoli, wherein some say that because he joined in as SPO, he got killed by the Maoists. Others say that he had become too arrogant after becoming an SPO and it was the local villagers only who wanted him to get killed, hence, informed the Maoists about him. However, whatever the reason be the reality stands that Roshan and his family are leading a life which is not normal by any standards. Roshan’s hatred for the Maoists is obvious; however, he had not been vocal about it. When asked if he is angry, he said “yes”, but nothing beyond
that. Roshan claimed that the Salwa Judum activist (who still resides in the Kasoli camp) played an instrumental role in getting his father recruited as SPO but ever since his death, he has been very uninviting towards his mother whenever she approached him for any sort of help. Roshan seemed restless and helpless. Though he did not speak much about him, but his body language spoke volumes. He mentioned that the Salwa Judum leader took away his father but did not take proper care of him. He himself is comfortably sitting inside the camp and others are out dying.

Like many other lives of conflict affected people, Roshan’s life too has also taken a complete round about. Roshan belonged to a headman’s family and was leading relatively comfortable life in terms of access to resources, economic wealth, etc. After being driven away from their village and relocated in camp, and especially after his father’s death, his family has nothing at their disposal now. During one of the visits to Roshan’s family in Chitalanka Salwa Judum Camp, Dantewada, his mother and brother shared about the challenges being faced by them on an everyday basis (discussed in the preceding chapter). His mother washes dishes at other people’s homes and sometimes gets employment as a construction labourer. Life has not been the same for this family. They are vulnerable and are at the mercy of the State. Roshan does not want to join the force out of the fear of being killed like his father. He dreams of constructing a house away from the camp as he feels that life can never be normal in the camp or even around it. He wishes to grow up as an engineer and do something good in life. His idea of a good life is the one which has no impressions of this conflict.

1.2.4. “Once Branded…Always a Maoist”

The phenomenon of branding has been a very critical part of this conflict. ‘Brand’ referred to here is the practice of declaring a local adivasi as a Maoist and carrying out actions against him/ her with full impunity. Under this, many innocent people are reported to be taken into custody and tortured. These sharings highlight the plight of the local people, once branded always browbeaten. Not much gets reported in the media, however, this sharing was done by a number of people interacted with during the course of fieldwork. It was informed that especially during the times of Salwa Judum, a lot many adivasis were detained on the grounds of being suspected Maoists.
Kamlesh, a 5th standard boy shared how his father was once taken away by the police who suspected him to be a Maoist. His family tried a lot to negotiate with the police, but nothing worked out. At last after several attempts from the headman’s end, the police agreed to release him. However, he shared with disappointment that his father is still looked at with suspicion by the police and is often harassed by them.

Similar incident was narrated by Dinesh, whose grandfather was suspected to be a Maoist and was mis-treated by the police. He narrated,

“They (police) came to our village at 4 a.m. and woke up everyone up and brought them out. My grandfather had gone to the field to attend to the nature’s call. They brought him from there. Everyone was asked to gather on the road. They covered my grandfather’s mouth and dressed him up like a Maoist. There were a few other people accompanying the police and they were taking photos. Police beat up my grandfather brutally. They beat few women too. During the times of Salwa Judum, police used to catch hold of anyone and beat them on the grounds of suspicion. That time was very bad. We all lived under fear of being caught”

(Dinesh, 6th standard, student of the Kasoli ashramshala on his grandfather being branded as a Moisit)

While in the process of writing these sharings about branding, I strongly feel the desire to share one of my own experiences in Kasoli in this context that made me believe that branding serves an easy way out for the security force personnel who exhibit their dominance over the local people. This experience might have gone unnoticed by me had the children not shared about the phenomenon of branding prevailing in this conflict zone.

“It had been already been around two months since I settled in Kasoli. By now everyone in the ashramshala, camp and security force knew of me either as a teacher at the ashramshala or as a researcher from Mumbai. Somehow the news of I being a native of Uttarakhand was also known to some already. A Chhattisgarh Force’s personnel, Sukhram, also hailing from Uttarakhand knew of my native roots and hence, met me at the chai tapri one day. We had a long conversation. He, at the very instance called me “bhuli” which, in our native dialect, means a younger sister. His conduct throughout my stay in Kasoli was decent and everyone in the camp called him my brother. By the time I had settled well in the camp, another instance happened wherein I was constantly being harassed by a local contractor working in the ashramshala. Some people in the ashramshala came to know about it and so the news did reach Sukhram too. He spoke to me about it and I categorically told him not to worry or react. What Sukhram mentioned to me highlights the issue of branding being discussed here. He categorically stated,
“Iss...(abuse) ladke ko main kahan faink sakta hun tum nahi janti. Isko naxali banakar aur fir iska encounter karna humare liye badi baat nahi hai. Koi poochtaach nahi hoti yahan humari. Humne pehle bhi do baar aisa kiya hai Sukma mein..tum daro matt”

(You have no idea of how I can throw this boy anywhere I want. We can brand him as a Maoist and then encounter him. This is no big deal for us. Here, we are not accountable to such incidents. No one says anything here. We have done this twice before while being posted in Sukma district. You do not feel scared)

(My own field experience, excerpts taken from personal diary too)

This particular incidence highlights how branding of a local villager as a ‘Maoist’ or a ‘Maoist supporter’ is not a difficult task for the security force personnel here. Many people in Kasoli and even in other Salwa Judum camps and nearby villages also shared about how security forces enjoy such impunity. They pick up young boys and girls and detain them at their own disposal. No one questions them back. It was shared that even if one is not proved guilty, he/ she is always looked at with the suspicious eyes. A teacher from the ashramshala shared,


(If the police take you to the thaana (police station) even once, you will always be under their suspicious gaze. You cannot move around freely, you can be frisked whenever they want. Police becomes a regular visitor at your home. Your houses can be ransacked under suspicion. You cannot dance late night at the mela or else they will suspect you to be an informer. You cannot lead a normal life madam. Infact I feel that with so much of suspicion and restriction, one would rather prefer becoming a Maoist)

(A teacher from Kasoli ashramshala on the phenomenon of branding)

1.2.5. “Salwa Judum changed it all for us…”

The counter insurgency campaign called Salwa Judum has played a crucial role in the lives of many tribal people. The campaign brought violence and displacement on a massive scale. It affected the lives of people living in villages who left their homes behind and moved into makeshift camps set up by the government on highways. Much has been written by civil society organisation, academia, human rights organisations
about the times of Salwa Judum and its aftermath, however, the voices of children have not given due attention. In the process of fieldwork, it was realised that children had lots to share about the times of Salwa Judum that they have been a witness to. Although much has been shared about children’s experiences of Salwa Judum in the preceding chapter in the thesis, but a couple of narratives deserved a little space here too.

Kamlesh, hails from a village called Priyakot, not very far off from Kasoli. He shared,

“This problem was not very intense in my village Priyakot. The Maoists used to come once or twice a year only. But since Salwa Judum started, the picture changed completely. The security forces used to come from this side and go towards the jungles. We used to hear gun shots all night long. It was a war like situation. At that time my family was in Priyakot. My father decided to bring all of us here to Kasoli. My grandfather stayed back in the village. The Maoists beat him a lot. Broke his hands and legs only because his family came to the camp. They suspected that we too became SPOs. During those times, the villagers had to face the wrath of the Maoists like never before. We could not bring my grandfather here, as it was highly risky to go back. My father still weeps in pain for having left an old ailing father at the mercy of the Maoists.”

(Kamlesh, 10th standard on Salwa Judum)

Kishore shared his story and how his family lost everything to the conflict and how Salwa Judum played a catalyst in this process. He hails from Huripal village, Dantewada. He shared,

“We collected and sold Mahua, had a good house, land and livestock too. Although harassed frequently, my grandfather never gave way to the demands of the Maoists. But he was killed at the break of dawn while he went to the river to bathe. His body lay on the bank. My father then decided to leave the village and so we came to Muner. Starting from the beginning, we gradually were able to buy some livestock and a very small piece of land for agriculture. However, being from outside, we were noticed by the Maoists who started troubling us and took our livestock and grain. My father was reaching a threshold and Salwa Judum came as an opportunity for him. He joined in as an SPO. There was too much of violence everywhere and my father’s battalion was targeted a couple of times. I was sent here to this ashramshala. One day my brother came here and informed that the Maoists killed my father. I was helpless madam. I had not seen him in two years”

(Kishore, 8th standard on Salwa Judum on his experience of Salwa Judum)

These two narratives represent those hundreds of stories of children who experienced the times of Salwa Judum. Most of the children shared how the family economics changed drastically during the times of Salwa Judum and how their families had to start their lives from the beginning. Children’s narratives interestingly highlighted how the economic inequality that prevailed in the villages was well targeted by both the
parties in the conflict. The practice of redistribution of surplus land and agricultural produce amongst the poorer families by the Maoists helped them gain mass support at village levels. This created friction amongst the land owning families who then preferred joining the Salwa Judum. Many members from headmen’s families became SPOs. The aversion towards the Maoists that existed in the hearts and minds of the economically well off classes in the villages was well manipulated by the creators of Salwa Judum campaign.

With violent confrontations between the Maoists and security force personnel, children described the situation as “Bahut badi ladai jaisa mahaul” (war like situation) wherein two sides were violently and brutally fighting each other. This war was characterised by violence, bloodshed, guns and weapons, death, displacement, separation, fear and uncertainty at a large scale. Children highlighted how it was during the times of Salwa Judum that people became more vulnerable than ever before and were beaten like cattle “Gai bhains ki tarah dauda dauda kar bhagaya” (villagers were chased away like cattle). In the context of the times of Salwa Judum, children also highlighted the phenomenon of displacement that led separation from family. Many children spoke of how they were forced by their parents to come to such distant ashramshalas out of fear of getting killed in the conflict. However, this separation further led to breaking up of family ties between children and their families and also between children and their unique culture, social practices and other economic activities that they are expected to perform in the family. Children have shared how news of death of their near and dear ones reaches them very late.

Salwa Judum not just led to this separation of children but also that of old aged people from their families. The above two narratives have highlighted how during the times of Salwa Judum, older people were also highly vulnerable. They too were beaten up and interrogated by both sides. Many older people had to be left behind in the village as they were either immobile or incapable to walk or were suffering from old age ailments. They continued living under the state of constant fear. People interacted with during the course of fieldwork highlighted how these older people were beaten up by the Maoists just because their children joined in as SPOs. For many families, this had also led to a complete generation being left behind with no direct contacts ever established between them and children.
However, a broader picture that came out of interactions with children on Salwa Judum highlighted the lack of knowledge on this campaign. Most of the children did not have much idea about why the campaign was started. The sharings on Salwa Judum came out of personal experiences and out of what children had heard from those who have experienced it. Children seemed to be having a very compartmentalised understanding of the campaign, wherein on one side there were the Maoists and on the other were the police and their local supporters. Children shared that the prevailing situations were not that bad earlier before Salwa Judum was launched. At that time, people were still guarding their villages but situation was not that violent. Ganesh shared,

“People who joined Salwa Judum were killed by the Maoists. After the campaign started the number of killings went up. Before it was started, people used to move around with no restriction but now it is impossible. Earlier villagers guarded their village themselves, but since these villagers have started supporting the police, the Maoists have become more brutal. Even if a person quits his/her police job, they are still targeted by the Maoist. Madam it seemed like a match with two teams, Maoists and Police wanting to kill each other”

(Ganesh 7th standard on Salwa Judum)

All the narratives shared here bring out children’s experiences of the conflict. Interestingly, all mentioned how they were talking about their lives for the first time ever. It was observed that in the process of sharing, children were talking about their past and making sense of it in context of their present day life. While having lived through their set of experiences, children have shaped their own understanding of the conflict, assessed the role and nature of the actors involved in it and been able to make sense of their environment, their social world within which they are living. Children have got involved into the new social order wherein they are leading a life different from that of their past and are engaged in producing and reproducing newer meanings within the new social world. Drawing from here, the following section highlights the everyday life of children in Kasoli in the context of the social world within which they live.
2. **The Social World of Children of Kasoli:**

In general term, *social world* means the ‘relatively immediate milieu of an individual or group being studied, and is understood as pointing at the specific contexts of the situation in which those individuals or groups are to be found.’\(^{33}\) Social world can also be defined as children’s everyday lives as a social group and in relation to the adult world (James and James 2008: 124). In this regard, children cannot be seen as outside the social, they are a part of the social world and their interpretations, assigning meanings to relationships etc. is all within the social gamut and are shaped by it. The social world of children in Kasoli comprises of those with whom they share close proximity, social interactions and implicate in children’s emotional world experience on an everyday basis. These in the present set up, include parents, siblings, peers, caregivers and teachers in the ashramshala, security force personnel and others residing inside the camp. Focusing on children’s daily interaction with adults and peers also brings forth how children look at their lives in different ways at different times and what sense they make of their changing social world. It is within this social world that children have created their closest circles of social life, bonding, trust- mistrust in a relationship, developed an understanding and perception about their everyday lives etc.

The empirical data coupled with observation suggested two major structures affecting the everyday life of children in Kasoli. In Kasoli, *family* as a social unit and its rupturing due to the on-going conflict has influenced the daily lives of children at large and as a consequence of the conflict, *ashramshala* has emerged as an integral part in the social world of children wherein most of the social interactions occur. The following section discusses *family* and *ashramshala* and their prominent role in the lives of the children of Kasoli.

2.1. **Family:**

A family plays an integral part in the lives of children. Family as a unit is essential for child survival in wartimes (Mann 2004: 4) and without the parents and caregivers around children’s physical and psychological wellbeing is often at risk. Concern for the fate of children in armed conflict may be framed in terms of both children’s adverse

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\(^{33}\) Definition retrieved from The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Sociology. Accessed from [link](http://www.sociologyencyclopedia.com/public/tocnode?query=social+world&widen=1&result_number=1&from=search&g9781405124331_yr2013_chunk_g978140512433125_ss1-188&type=std&fuzzy=0&slop=1)
experiences as a direct consequence of it and also in terms of what children are denied; the familial and social support to which they should be entitled (Watters 2011: 111). In other words, concern is not only focused on physical and emotional scars that result from being the victims or by being in close proximity to acts of violence, but also in terms of a ‘childhood’ that has been denied. Particularly during the situations of violent conflicts, parental care provides children with physical protection and emotional security.

Literature around family and children in situations of armed conflict is mostly based on the psychological impact of separation on children. Studies have brought out that the way children deal with the situations of violence and conflict depends majorly on the way the parents and family deal with these experiences. It can be stated that on one hand, the presence of parents in times when children are confronted with violence has a modifying effect on the mental health and its consequences on children (Lustig et. al. 2004), and on the other hand, studies have also shown how strong experiences of parents like that of torture, harassment etc. leads to mental health problems in children (Daud et. al. 2005; Halcon et. al. 2004; Qouta et. al. 2005). In her study with children exposed to organized violence, Montgomery (2000) interestingly brought out how in situations of continued violent traumatic events in a child’s life ‘forms a long-standing condition that influences the child’s general conceptions about the world. For e.g. this may result in creation of doubt in the mind of a child as to whether adults can be expected to provide protection and care to the children. This might further lead child’s idea of his social world to be unpredictable, insecure and dangerous.’

In the context of conflict situations like that prevailing in Chhattisgarh, family as a unit and children’s relationships within this unit has altered considerably. In the present study, role of a family in the life of a child came out prominently in two ways. Firstly, family’s experiences of conflict were seen having a strong impact on the way children perceived this on-going conflict and their social world. In this regard family emerged as a primary source of information about the conflict and their experiences. Secondly, separation from family as a consequence of the counter insurgency campaign Salwa Judum also came out as an influential factor in the everyday life of children in Kasoli.
2.1.1. Family as the source of Information:

Although literature across the domain of children and armed conflict has spoken much about children’s understanding of conflict, violence etc., however, not much has been written about children’s source of information and how these sources lead to the shaping of their understanding and perception of the conflict. It has been observed that most of the studies in this context have ascertained media and especially television as the key source of information about conflicts (Cairns et. al. 1980; Cantor and Nathanson 1996).

However, later studies brought out that other than television, sources like newspaper, parents, school and friends too, serve as a source of information about war and conflict. Tolley (1973) concluded, later supported by study conducted by McKelvey (1983) that mass media and television did contribute substantially to the knowledge of war and conflict amongst children, however, personal contacts with family (parents in specific) did account for opinion differences.

In the present study, similar observations came up wherein children’s subjective interpretations and perceptions about the conflict were highly influenced by what they heard from their family on an everyday basis and what their family had experienced in regards to the conflict. Every child in Kasoli had some understanding of the conflict. Talking specifically in the context of young children in Kasoli, one can state that they have interpreted the on-going conflict by the direct influence of their family. They are not able to comprehensively communicate their understanding of the conflict, but talk about it in reference to objects and events. Literature talks about how it is believed that most children understand war by the age of eight years (Hakvoort and Oppenheimer 1993), however, children are able to conceptualise war by age of five (Hall 1993). Mostly younger children have an understanding of the conflict in reference to the objects and activities, for e.g. weapons, fighting on the street etc. Rodd (1985) in his study with Australian pre-school children also stated that ‘young children have difficulties in verbalising their images of war, but almost every child in the study was able to express an attitude on whether it was good or bad’.

In the present study too, younger children growing up in Kasoli conceptualised the conflict in reference to the objects and activities, categorised it as being good or bad and reiterated what the family members say and discuss. Hearing and perceiving from what the family says, children have developed a story like understanding of the conflict.
The usage of expressions by them is also influenced by what they hear within their families. During interactions with the younger children they often mentioned about “lambi- lambi bandook” (long guns), “mota- mota danda” (thick sticks), “ganda mann” or “gunda log” (mostly referring to Maoists as bad people), “aise pet pe chaaku ghopa aur sab taraf khoon- khoon” (they stabbed the knife into his stomach and there was blood all over), “naxali mann raat ko andhere mein aate hain” (Maoists come during nights), “naxali mann ganda log hai…humko darr lagta hai, yeh sab ganda hai madam” (Maoists are bad people, we feel scared, all this is bad Madam). On the other hand, their understanding of security force personnel around is also very subjective. Children stated, “force mann ko yahan sirf bandook lekar ghoomna hai din bhar. Ache hain wohh sab. Woh humari raksha karte hain” (The security force personnel are here only to roam around with guns, they are good people. They are here to protect us).

It is important to highlight here that the younger children growing up in Kasoli are mostly the ones who were either born after coming to the Salwa Judum camp or those who have spent a brief period of their childhood back in the village, leading to lack of comprehensive memories about the life back in the village. For most of them, this camp life is the only reality as they have not experienced anything beyond this life. They have seen their parents being questioned at the check- posts every single time they leave or enter the camp, they have seen armed men everywhere at any given point in time, they have seen a restricted life since their childhood. On the other hand, whatever insights they have about the conflict has mostly come from what they hear on a daily basis. They have not had any encounters with the Maoists but have developed a notion about them being negative and bad only out of the information provided by the family.

The manner, in which families communicate within itself, has a great influence on the understanding and perceptions developed by children about the on-going conflict. It was also observed that some children in Kasoli narrated events with smallest details without any first- hand experience of it. Stories have been narrated to them so many times by their parents, or they have heard in the process of growing here. The following narrative highlights how children are growing hearing about the conflict and this is leading to their perceptions shape in a certain direction.

The phenomenon of ‘hearing and perceiving’ is quite prevalent amongst children in Kasoli. Their understanding of Salwa Judum and the conflict has been highly
influenced by what their families talk in this regard. Similarly, children also seemed to have been influenced by their parents own experiences of the conflict. Ram, when asked about his understanding of the ongoing conflict, shared mostly whatever his mother has shared with him. He spoke about what his parents have shared about their experiences of the displacement and torture.

“During the initial days of coming to Kasoli, no one in my family spoke about what happened. When I started going to school and heard children talk about violence, I went back and asked my mother. She then shared some stories with me. I know the force personnel are animals. My mother tells me how the force walas used to behave during their patrolling in our village. They used to beat the villagers. She told me how Munna’s brother was taken by police and he never returned. I feel sad and angry Madam. They should be punished. I was too small and I do not remember anything. But when I hear this, I feel agitated. I think Maoists are not bad people. My mother has not spoken about them to me. We are in this camp now and I think we will always be like this. This will go on. Police and Maoists will continue fighting as they have been doing for the past so many years. We cannot go back. Our land, cows everything is there. We have no work here. My father died many years ago. I stay with my mother and elder brother. I sympathise with those people who are still back in the villages. We are all living a pitiable life. I just wish to do something good and go far away from here’”

(Ram, 8th standard, student at Kasoli asramshala)

The experiences of Ram’s life are closely related to the past experiences of his family that were shared by his mother. He believes he cannot go back ever and it is from here itself that he analyses his present life along with the lives of those living in the camp. It can be stated that he uses the information shared by his mother to interpret the political, economic and social reality of the present. Like many other children, Ram too has chosen to look into the future instead of the past now. Another important aspect that was highlighted in Ram’s narratives and also the sharings done by few other parents in Kasoli is that of parents deliberately not talking about the past in front of their children. After talking to Ram, I spoke to Ram’s mother, a camp resident, about this. She explained,

“What is the point of telling our children about this. It was our fate. Those days were like nightmares to us Madam. My husband died of Malaria during Salwa Judum. I have been raising my two sons on my own. They were too young when Salwa Judum took off and when we came here. They have vague memories of it. I never talked about it to them as I feel this will only refresh their memories. I feel past is gone, although I do not know what future holds for my sons but I do not want them to get influenced by our past. This is our new life, I have accepted it and I want them to accept it too”

(Ram’s mother, mid 40s, resident of Kasoli Camp)
During the course of my stay in Kasoli, I observed that even teachers did not talk much about the conflict. Being outside the conflict zone one assumes that conflict will be the major point of discussion in people’s life in the conflict zone. But these assumptions were not completely true in the context of Kasoli as many parents chose not to talk about the ongoing conflict. Writing about Iranian refugee children in Sweden, Almqvist and Hwang (1999) have stated in similar context that parents’ decision to not talk to their children about such experiences comes out of their conviction that this is best suited for their children and for themselves. And by not talking about the past, they would make it easier to forget (Almqvist and Hwang 1999)

Although, children, their parents and teachers did not talk about the conflict everyday, this did not mean that there were no traces of conflict on an everyday life basis. During the course of interaction with children, their families, care-givers and teachers, it was often highlighted that this conflict has become such a natural and ongoing part of their lives hence, they do no talk about it anymore. Many children shared that although today the conflict is not physically present in their everyday life, but there is a consciousness of it being existent. Once on our way to Geedam mandi (weekly vegetable market of Geedam) in Chota Hathi (a tempo used by school) a group of boys shared,

“Humne bacpan se iss ladai ke bare mein suna hai. Humare pitaji, dadaji bolte hain yeh unke samay mein bhi tha. Ab hum iske bare mein baat nahi karte. Ab kuch mehsoos nahi hota. Par humare dil mein dard hota hai. Humari zindagi yahan darr mein kat tii hai. Lekin madam humein lagta hai yeh ladai humari zindagi ka hissa nahi hai. Humari zindagi iss ladai ka hisaa ban gayi hai”

(We have been living through this conflict since our childhood. As we remember and as we have heard the situation has always been same for our fathers as well, we now do not feel anything while talking about it anymore. But we have scars that will remain forever. There is no denial of the fact that we are all leading a risky life, but Madam, for us conflict is not just a part of our lives but our lives are a part of this conflict)

(Group of boys from Kasoli ashramshala)

2.1.2. Separation from Family:
Another major phenomenon that has impacted hundreds of children in Chhattisgarh is that of having being separated from their family as a consequence of this conflict. Although living in ashramshalas does not expose them to violent incidents and
bloodshed on a daily basis but the guarded life, omnipresent security force personnel, staying in ashramshala away from family members and village life, are all the by-products of conflict making it very much existent in the present lives of these children and holding meaning for them.

It is believed that having a parent or any other family member around makes children treat him/her as their security base from which they explore the nearby space (Garbarino and Zurenda 2008: 571). However, in the larger ambit of research, it has been observed that most of the researchers exploring children and separation have their focus mainly on street children and their moral development (Aptekar 1991; Ennew 1994; Patel 1990; Verma 1999) and not much on separation during emergencies and conflict situations (Mann 2004: 12). However, the buffering role of family and parents during the times of conflict was brought forward in the seminal work on war and children during the Second World War by Freud and Burlingham (1943). Studies later have highlighted the role parental care gives to children during the times of armed conflict and political violence, wherein it gives children not just physical protection but emotional security too (Werner 1990). However, experiencing separation is wrenching for families as well as children and has devastating social and psychological impacts on children.

Children in Kasoli have been facing separation for long now. Children have been sent to ashramshalas due to non-availability of schools in remote villages. However, the times of Salwa Judum witnessed a large number of children being sent to these ashramshalas not just for education purposes but in the assumption of ashramshalas being relatively safer for them. But for most of the children, it was for education purposes and not the presence of conflict leading to such separation. Mahender informed,

“We are all here to get educated. There were no schools back in the village. Our parents want us to study here. Had there been school in our village, we would not have been sent here.”

(Mahender, 7th standard, student at Kasoli ashramshala)

But if one closely looks at this phenomenon, one can state that children continue to be vulnerable as they lead a life away from family. By sending children to distant ashramshalas they have been put under developmental risk wherein they may be spared
from physical harm but they are prone to major adjustment and psychological problems, especially the younger children. However, the present study was not touching upon the psychological aspects of separation but some instances in the field did make such observation evident. The under mentioned story of Tikeshwar makes the point clearer,

Tikeshwar (Tiku) was the youngest boy in Kasoli ashramshala and very shy too. I made several attempts to break the ice between him and me but all went in vain. However, on some occasions, he sat next to me to watch TV or eat but never spoke much. The only person I saw Tiku comfortable was Ranjan, an ashramshala staff who does different work ranging from a driver, to peon, to nursing children etc. Tiku’s story was unfolded by Ranjan. He hails from a village in Abujhmaad and came here two years back. He would have been two to three years old that time and so has very faint memories of his parents. They have never visited him. Ranjan shared that he has heard that once they attempted to come here but were stopped at some check post, beaten and sent back. Tiku definitely misses them. He has often locked himself in the room, slept under the bed, or under the tree or inside the kitchen. He is an extremely silent child and becomes nervous if someone talks to him or holds his hand. Interestingly, the only thing he looks forward to is being with Ranjan whom he sometimes call ‘babo’ meaning father. He finds solace with Ranjan, who for him is his family.

(Observations on Tikeshwar, 1st standard student, Kasoli ashramshala)

Tiku is one such child amongst the many in Kasoli and hundreds in Chhattisgarh who have been separated from their family as a consequence to this conflict. Distant residential ashramshalas have led to breaking up of family ties and social relations for children. Being from distant villages children are not able to go back to their homes on a regular basis and even parents are unable to do so.

During the Republic Day function as I helped the pre-metric boys choreograph a dance, they shared about how they do get disappointed for being unable to participate in community and family functions back in their villages now. This, however, I felt is also leading to a gradual uprooting of children from their tribal culture The boys shared,

“Our homes are far away madam. We cannot go back home during mela also. Adivasi people love to dance all night. We have not done jhelamari (special form of tribal dance) since we have come here. We hear of marriages and deaths after a long period of time. We often fear about our family. We do not get to see them for months together. Madam you would not believe, how Mithu reached his home in Sukma, only to realise that it was his wedding on that day” {giggles followed}

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

This relationship between separation and education cannot be negated in the present context. The absence of schools and education systems back in the villages, as
quoted in the above narrative, is also due to the school buildings being the major target of violent confrontation between Maoist and the security forces leading to a defunct education system. With non-availability of schools and reluctance of school teachers to work in remote areas, parents are often left with no option but to send their children to distant *ashramshalas*. However, fieldwork highlighted how children are also sent away by the families to distant *ashramshalas* 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 in Chhattisgarh. This is leading to not just personal impacts on children but the socio-cultural life is also getting affected gradually wherein children are distanced from their cultural and social practices, festivals, marriages, *mela*, dancing etc. which have always been an integral part of an *adivasi* life.

### 2.2. Ashramshala: Home away from Home

Schools in Chhattisgarh can be stated to be sites of political contestation wherein they have been used as a symbol of presence by both the Maoists as well as the State. It is well evident fact that schools in Chhattisgarh are targeted by both the Maoists as well as the security forces, wherein school buildings are blown up by the Maoists on the grounds of being potential hideouts and base camps for the security forces (Human Rights Watch 2008b; Charu 2008; Sharma 2011). Teachers are reluctant to teach in remote schools out of the fear of the being killed and also out of the fear of the Maoists who are reported to often visit schools and force teachers to propagate Maoists and their work. On the other hand, teachers also reported that they are looked at with suspicion by the security force personnel who sometimes harass them too. School is also a place where Maoists are often reported to come to propagate their ideology. Children in Kasoli recalled how they remember Maoists coming to their school once and made everyone repeat this slogan,

> “*Yeh Sarkar looteri hai...Isko humein badalna hai...Hum sab ladtey jayenge..Laal quiley mein Laal jhanda hum hi fhairainge*”

*(This government is corrupt and we have to overthrow it. Together we all will fight and one day we will hoist our Red flag at the Red Fort)*

*(Children of Kasoli ashramshala recalling a Maoists’ slogan)*

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34 This argument was brought forward by a number of teachers interacted with during the course of fieldwork in districts of Sukma, Narayanpur and Dantewada
On the other hand, schools are being used by the State as symbolic of its development initiatives. Setting up schools in large numbers is often projected as the State’s concern towards the future of children. As stated above, schools have become a site of political contestation between the State and the Maoists and amidst all this, children for whom these structures are set up, are ignored. On the contrary, as a result of this conflict schools are set up in distant villages owing to which, children have to walk for miles to reach. On one hand, this phenomenon has made education available to a large number of children but at the same time it has come with a heavy cost. As discussed in the earlier section, setting up of distant ashramshalas has led to breaking up of family ties for the children who are no longer able to visit their families frequently.

In the present study, with most of the children experiencing the wrenching pain of separation from family, children in Kasoli look at this ashramshala as a home away from home, constantly creating environment of normalcy in their everyday lives here. When I say home, it encompasses multiplicity of meanings. Easthope (2004) considers home to be a combination of spatial, social, psychological and emotional elements. For the displaced people, home emerges ‘through social activities, social practices and making and remaking of home through routines (Rapport and Dawson 1998: 8). Ashramshala has given them a space that enables them to converse and create contexts within which they construct their social world and the sense of their past, present and future is produced and reproduced. In the present context, on one hand, the ashramshala is a structure constructed to provide care and safety alongwith education to these children, but more importantly, it is children’s manifestation of this ashramshala as a home wherein they all live. It is an integral part in the lives of these children and provides a space wherein children socialise as a family, create their own social roles and also relive their memories and emotions and desire and hope for a future of their own.

2.2.1. Point of Socialisation:

Studies have highlighted how school is considered to be a safe haven especially when there are opportunities for interaction with people and environments that are positive for development (Qouta et. al. 2008; Sagi- Schwartz 2008). For children of Kasoli, the ashramshala is their social world. Growing amidst conflict, the scope for socialisation for children gets majorly narrowed. In this context, the ashramshala has provided the children with a space for socialisation. Socialisation in ashramshala focuses majorly on
the interactions with the peers and other adults in the ashramshala, which in this case comprises of the caregivers who reside in the ashramshala. Children live, eat, study together and talk in their social circle of the peers and caregivers leading to their development of certain social behaviours, relationships, cohesion and also development of coping and resilience.

For the tribal children of Chhattisgarh, staying in a closed school compound was an alien concept before coming here. It was only after interactions with the ashramshala teachers that I realise why there is no restriction for these children to enter or exit from main gate of the ashramshala. The superintendent of the ashramshala once shared,

“I am a tribal myself. We have lived our life free of restriction and have grown up in the lap of nature. We, tribal people, are primarily innocent and simple people. This conflict has come as a curse to us and we have no option but to live with it. The present day children are in worse situation. They are the real victims of the situation. They are forced to lead this life in which they have no say and everything is pre-decided by the State and also by the Maoists. When this ashramshala was set up, we had a gate at the entrance. But deep in my heart, I knew that it will come down one day as these children cannot be confined to boundaries. We do not stop these children from going out or coming in. We try to make sure that they all come timely for the assemblies and classes, later they are left free. We will lose all these children if we restrict them too much here in the ashramshala”

(Superintendent of Kasoli ashramshala on making special provisions for children)

As informed, the initial years in running the ashramshala were not easy as retaining children was a major challenge and hence, children were given freedom to maneuver around. Ashramshala is now able to retain children. Children are gradually getting accustomed to ashramshala life. In this practice of getting accustomed and adjusted to the new life, one should not ignore how with the passing of everyday, children are involved in the process of creating a support system amongst themselves. Boys live among their peers and rely upon one another for support, physically, socially and emotionally.

Children in the ashramshala have developed strong social bonds with their peers and also the caregivers in the ashramshala. The ashramshala has actually developed as a meaningful space for these children and this is precisely for this reason why even children of the camp spend maximum time in the ashramshala and prefer to sleep with their peers in the dormitories despite of few of them having homes in the camp. On
various occasions, children were seen helping their friends to the fullest, be it during illness, someone getting injured while playing, waiting for friends to come and then eat together during meals’ break, keeping a space vacant next to them in the classroom or while eating, giving medicines to friends as prescribed by the doctor, making bed for those who were ill, acting like elder brothers to the younger children in the ashramshala, extending a helping hand to the bhaiyas and didis in the kitchen etc. were only a few acts to mention to highlight how children in the ashramshala have created a family of their own.

To some extent, the life being led by children in Kasoli ashramshala has a positive attribute wherein with a collective cultural understanding of separation, children seemed to have gained some level of wisdom and sense of community. By sharing and caring for others provides these boys with an opportunity to contribute to the welfare of others and in doing so they are adding social and emotional value in this large network of people previously unknown to them. Far from their families and other familiar cultural referents, these children are able to develop a shared identity and a sense of belonging with the other children and camp residents. The living provisions made at the ashramshala in the camp also seemed contributing positively. Interactions with the children in the ashramshala brought out interesting narrations where children, young and older, shared that they felt better cared for, protected and nurtured after the ashramshala authorities changed the set-up of the dormitories. The new set-up had mixed groups of children, from different age groups and classes, put together. Baksu shared one night,

“Now Ajay, Kuldeep and Lakhmu bhaiya (referring to all older children) also stay in my room. I do not feel scared at nights. Earlier we had only my classmates and boys from standard 4th in this room. They all use to scare each other. Now these big boys do not do this. They keep food for each other. Last time I vomited and was not well and that time Lakhmu bhaiya got food for me and gave me medicines also”

(Baksu, 3rd standard, on the changed living set-up of rooms in Kasoli ashramshala)

Lakhmu, who is mentioned in the previous narratives also shared,

“It is good here. These younger boys are here and they all have fun with us. We all are like brothers. These younger boys are like our younger brothers”

(Lakhmu, 10th standard, on the changed living set-up of rooms in Kasoli ashramshala)
Therefore, it can be stated that enabling these older children to take care of the younger ones brings out the experiences of the social world which these children had been a part of and also which they would be introduced in the due course of life. As observed in Kasoli, there are shared responsibilities being taken up by children. With these strong social peer bonds being developed, children of all ages are learning new survival skills, developed the ability to relate to and learn from each other, agree or disagree with each other, negotiate, support and share each other’s success and failure, and make collaborative efforts towards any task at hand. However, the fact remains that these children have been able to enter into strong social bonds with their peers, mainly because of having a common history and shared experience of struggle of living amidst conflict.

2.2.2. Space of Normalcy:

With the overarching context of conflict, life in the ashramshala provides an impression of relative normalcy. The ashramshala has restored the sense of normalcy in the lives of children and has put them in a set of routines, which are needed in turbulent environment like that of armed conflict (see Machel 1996; Sinclair 2001; Buckland 2005; Kos 2005). Their day is structured, with the routine that includes, regular assemblies, classes, meals etc. On an everyday basis the schedule is fixed and that is one of the reasons why there is not much to talk about the conflict on a regular basis inside the ashramshala. An attempt is made to create an atmosphere of normalcy where children are kept away from the day to day effects of conflict, efforts are made to mainstream them in terms of education and provide them with better opportunities to educate themselves and develop a brighter future.

Children are provided with television, library, food, clothing including school uniforms and night suits, daily needs items, separate trunks to keep their belongings safely. They are encouraged to participate in cultural programmes on regular basis and sports equipments are also provided. By normal standards, these might look like a common practice in any residential schools however, this is not usual in the present context as these children in this ashramshala have never been exposed to such a schooling culture and routine life back in their village. Through these methods, children are being kept in a state of normalcy. To a great extent, the strategy has been successful in bringing normalcy in the lives of these children. However, one cannot ignore that the
larger picture remains the same. Within closed quarters of the ashramshala, normalcy prevails, but outside the premises, the reality of the conflict hits hard.

It can be stated that by bringing children to ashramshala, children are shifted from situations of active conflict to that of dormant conflict, wherein the conflict remains omnipresent but not visible on an everyday basis. The ashramshala is located inside a Salwa Judum camp making it susceptible to attacks from the Maoists; omnipresent security force makes the movement of a common man highly restrictive and constantly under surveillance. A group of boys shared,

“We feel normal here. We do not have to worry every day. We do not get exposed to violence. We are guarded everytime here. It is safe but we feel being barred, movement is restricted, we are asked questions everytime we enter or exit the camp. You know madam, back in the village, we used to run around, go to the forest, collect mahua and play in the river. Our families say we are safe here but we do not how for how long we can live like this.”

(Group of boys from 5th and 6th standard, Kasoli ashramshala)

Madhav shared,

“I like it here. The whole day goes in doing something or the other. Evening we get to play but it is not fun to play here. Back in the village, we used to run in the fields and climb tendu tree and pluck fruits. Family used to collect mahua leaves. It used to be so tiring. But my brother and I used to have fun there too. He is with me in the ashramshala but it is not the same any more. I like it here because we are learning to read and write. It is fine here.”

(Madhav, 8th standard student, Kasoli ashramshala)

Children in the ashramshala feel that their life is ‘fine’ or ‘normal’ now. Although children state that they find the ashramshala life ‘normal’ but they silently contrast their past with their present day life and in doing so, they implicitly highlight the present abnormality, uncertainty and lack of security. The uncertainty and instability that comes with living in an ashramshala in a Salwa Judum camp is defining feature of the lives of these children and their families. These children, by implicitly contrasting their present with the past, construct an understanding of loss of home, contrasting life in the past and present.

2.2.3. Ashramshala: Path to a Better Future?

For children in Kasoli, the ashramshala is not just a home away from home where they have created social interactions, relations and their social world, but also their first step
towards a better future. Almost all the children in Kasoli ashramshala are first generation learners and have stepped out of their homes for the first time. When asked what they liked about the ashramshala, the most common response was

“We are learning...not only how to read and write but also about the world that exists which we were never aware

(A common response of children when asked about ashramshala)

These children are mostly from the remote villages and not been exposed to the world outside because of the ongoing conflict situation and also because of the topography of the region. Children in Kasoli believe that they want to do something good not only in their own lives but for their villages too. They have seen their own teachers who, all from the nearby villages and educated till the intermediate level, being picked by the district administration and made teachers in the ashramshala. Children, however, have a sense that the ashramshala has put them on the path of a better future. However, what future it would be is not known to them but for them it is something ‘free from violence’.

Although, children looked at school as the path for a brighter future, however, they do not have a clear understanding of what the future holds for them. One argues that ashramshalas in order to keep them away from conflict and align them into the mainstream has not removed the uncertainty that continues to exist in the lives of these children. Most of the children in Kasoli seemed to have accepted this conflict as the reality of life for them. The experiences of children have not faded away and they live with the scars of conflict. They are still caught between the State and the Maoists and any choice one makes for one’s own future is still influenced by the role played by these two actors at any point in time in the lives of these children, past or present. It can be argued that coming to ashramshala brings symbolic freedom to children and not actual freedom. Children are gradually getting accustomed to the fact that conflict is an integral part of their lives now. They often stated,

“We have grown up seeing this. We no more get scared. We are used to it now”

Mithesh and Ranjan stated,

“We believe that we are lucky to have escaped that life just at the right time. With education, we will hopefully do something good and not become like our forefathers in the village who had nothing at their disposal. We would not associate ourselves with the Maoists under any given situation. However, we are also clear that we do
not want to join the security force either. Working for the State in capacity of a security force personnel is a risky job and puts life at stake.”

(Mithesh and Ranjan, 10th standard, pre-metric hostel, Kasoli Camp)

Drawing from the empirical data it can stated that although ashramshala is projected to provide a path for the better future of children, space of normalcy and better future. However, when asked about future, children still are caught between the choices of becoming an SPO or not. However, this is not to suggest that there is no ray of hope in the future. Children do want to lead a peaceful life that has no elements of conflict in it. Roshan, whose father was killed by the Maoists stated,

“I want to become an engineer. I want to construct a house, neither at our village nor in the camp but somewhere far away. I want to stay peacefully with my mother, brother and sister, away from this violence.”

(Roshan, 9th standard student Kasoli ashramshala)

Vetti was born during the journey his parents took while getting displaced to this camp. He innocently shared,

“I want to become you and then I will also speak and write in English like you. You also studied in ashramshala like me, right! and so I will also become like you”

(Vetti, 1st standard student at the ashramshala and also a camp resident of Kasoli)

In the present everyday life context of children in Kasoli, ashramshala does stand as an integral part. It is definitely serving a home away from home for these children; point of socialisation; centre of relative normalcy in the everyday life of these children and more importantly a centre for learning. While leading a life in the ashramshala that is relatively free from conflict and violence, children have acquired a space wherein they are able to make sense of their past and present, share their experiences, indulge in social interactions and create meanings out of their everyday life here. It can thus be stated that living in the ashramshala, they have become active participants in the social processes, in making choices and thinking about a future in their own capacity. The way children in Kasoli have actively shaped their experiences and participated in the social processes in the ashramshala, strongly brings forth their agency.
3. **Children’s Agency:**

When one reads on children living in situations of conflict like the one prevailing in Chhattisgarh, the view of children primarily being vulnerable is what gets highlighted. A child being vulnerable and passive victims in situations of armed conflict is a Western notion and promotes that children need protection from real life (Ansell 2005: 196) and highlights the long term psychological impacts of armed conflict on children are mostly highlighted in this scenario. However, it is argued that during situations of armed conflict only a small proportion of children suffer from long-term mental illness and majority of children are able to find their own ways of coping with adversity and stress (Boyden and Gibbs 1997; Loughry and Flouri 2001) and growing up in such adversities sometimes is a source of resilience rather than risk (Boyden 2000).

Children ‘occupy a status within the society that renders them less powerful than the adults however, they are still able to contribute to their own development and influencing others’ (Hart and Tyrer 2006: 8). Children’s agency in this context can be defined as their capacity to act independently (James and James 2008: 9) as a social actor and having the ability to interpret the social world. With conflict being an evident reality in the lives of children, their agency and potential to respond to adversities often comes out. Talking in the context of children in Kasoli, although having experienced a life deeply embroiled in violence, loss, displacement and separation, children in Kasoli did exhibit a resilient side too and have been able to create a space for exhibiting their own agency. However, by highlighting this particular side of these children, one is not attempting to surpass the pain and suffering which they have been exposed to in the past, but one is trying to bring forth what often gets ignored. Interaction and observation with children in the ashramshala for the entire span of fieldwork brought out some interesting phenomenon that highlighted their response to adversities using their agency as a child.

3.1. **Resourcefulness:**

With the limited or no access to family support, children in Kasoli make efforts to take the advantage of the limited emotional resources available to them in the form of their peers and caregivers in the ashramshala. As is argued by Apfel and Simon (1996) that with ‘diminished social support (especially that of the parents) the resilient child clings
to any attainable warmth and affirmation’. In the context of Kasoli, most of the children were resourceful in this manner and did make use of the emotional resources available around like the caregivers, teachers etc. They found comfort in my presence too as a lot was shared on a personal level by the children that included issues around conflict, but also issues pertaining to their everyday life, inhibitions, personal affairs like those of their love interests etc. A couple of youngest boys in the ashramshala cling onto me for care and one of them addressed me as “Yaayo” meaning mother in Gondi.

One particular resource that children have made use of with their agency is that of adopting strategies that do not come easily to the adults of the camp or the ashramshala. In the prevailing environment of fear, many children have established cordial relationship with the security force personnel too. Pointing his fingers at the security personnel guarding the check post of Kasoli camp, Madhav shared,

“Force personnel is my friend. He is like a brother now. Initially we all used to get scared here, but we know we have to survive in this environment until we finish school at least. I made friends with him. He sometimes gives me his phone to talk to my girlfriend who studies in another ashramshala in Dantewada. We will marry soon. Whenever I go to Geedam mandi on Sundays, I ask him if I can fetch him something from there. He, being a security force personnel, cannot manoeuvre around easily in the market like us. He gives me money to get him a phone recharge coupon etc. Whenever I get a chance to go to some mela, I tell him about my plan and then I am not interrogated much when I return”

(Madhav, 8th standard student at Kasoli ashramshala)

On similar lines, many other children of the ashramshala shared on different occasions how they are often offered non-vegetarian food and sweets by the force personnel. The security force personnel often came to the ashramshala to watch television and this is where some children break the ice with them. Adults in Kasoli have still not been able to do this. Although, this is not to suggest that children are always comfortable in the presence of the force personnel, but only to highlight how some children create resourcefulness out of their own resources. With highly restricted movement, children have found their own subtle ways to find freedom. Although the conflict remains overarching, but in their everyday lives children do find comfort in these small acts of freedom that they have managed to create by themselves.
3.2. **Conceptualising the environment around:**

Another important phenomenon observed in Kasoli was that of the ability with which children made efforts to understand their surroundings and make sense of the events on an everyday basis. As active agents, they explore ideas, collect information and act accordingly. This particular agency exercised by children seemed to help them conceptualise the prevailing situation and adversities surrounding them. Brothers Mahesh and Sudesh once shared while I offered them tea at the *chai tapri* (tea stall),

“Madam, now we all are like brothers here in the ashramshala. We have come from far away villages to this place. It is suffocating to be guarded all the time but we are helpless. Everyone of us have their own share of experiences, good and bad, everyone has suffered in this conflict. We hear from the camp residents and also the force personnel how their family members were killed during Salwa Judum. It is painful for everyone. The moment we shed tears for ourselves, we look around and see how everyone is in pain. The younger children here are unaware of it, so it is our duty as elder brothers to take care of them”

(Brothers Mahesh and Sudesh, students at Kasoli ashramshala)

Children are under the constant process of conceptualizing the environment around on their own and it is from here that children in Kasoli consider this ongoing conflict as something affecting their entire community and not just them in isolation. This has helped children look beyond themselves and become aware of the hundreds of lives around them who too have gone through the violent days of the conflict and continue to live amidst it. This is the reason why in the course of fieldwork, mostly every child in Kasoli seemed sensitive about the experiences of their peers and other children and are always willing to help their peers and caregivers in the ashramshala.

3.3. **Managers of Economics:**

During the situations of armed conflict, other than getting affected by the conflict, children are also pre-occupied with issues of economics. With the social and economic structures getting affected, children are often left with limited or no option to rely upon anyone. In such times, children are often required to assume adult roles and resume greater responsibilities. The phenomenon of child-headed household prevails in such situations wherein children take on responsibilities as carers and income earners earlier than they otherwise would. They fend for their family and often act as parents to the younger siblings.
In context of children in Kasoli, some children came from families that were child-headed. Children informed that their elder brothers or sisters, who in most cases were not more than fourteen of fifteen years of age, were running the house. However, due to forced displacement, they had to move out of their homes along with their younger siblings and settle in camps and other towns. For e.g. Mangesh who lost his parents much before Salwa Judum he shared,

“My elder sister stays in Chitalanka camp along with my younger sister. She works as a construction labourer and with that money she is running our family of three. My younger sister goes to an ashramshala near the camp. I do not get to meet her often but whenever I go, she gives me little money”

(Mangesh, 8th standard student at Kasoli ashramshala)

Sumit and Amit, whose story has been mentioned earlier in the chapter, come from a family of five brothers. After their parents’ death, the eldest brother by default became the father of the family at an age of fourteen years. But then he had to leave these boys in the ashramshala and go to another town in search of better employment. He now was reportedly working as a mechanic in Jagdalpur. As he is now unable to meet his younger brothers in the camp, Sumit who is elder between the two residing in the ashramshala now feels the need to earn and support his younger brother. Although, the expenses of children in the ashramshala are taken care of completely by the State government, but what gets highlighted is the self-awareness and consciousness of children to extend a supporting hand to the family at an early age.

However, with limited scope and opportunity of work available in the camp, children have also found their own ways to make some money. Sometimes during season, they go to nearby forests and pluck tendu fruit, make small packets and sell them in the weekly haat nearby. Other than this, children who have developed good rapport with villagers, also extend a helping hand to them during the time of tendu patta collection. The small amount they get is either kept safely by them and is mostly used during the mela, if they get a chance to visit.

3.4. The Tactical Agency of Children:

Matthews and Limb (1999: 80) argue that children do not ‘axiomatically occupy a political role and their political awareness and agency are evaluated in relation to development, participation and empowerment’. However, children are positioned as disempowered in the social order and are hence, considered non-political. In the context
of everyday life, drawing from Certeau (1984), politics is looked at something constant but a hidden struggle between strategic and tactical actors. Using Certeau’s theory, children’s politics can be ‘understood as a usage that provides agency and power to children’. Due to the positioning of children as disempowered, children are able to participate or resist in the everyday life only by using their tactical agency (Kallio 2008). Children use their tactical agency to make use of the prevailing order either in its favour or against it.

However, children’s agency in situations of armed conflict are not much studied as compared to children in their spatial world like home, school, park, street, city etc. These spaces have been looked closely in order to understand their everyday lives better. In the context of conflict, mostly child soldiers are studied but their lives outside the conflict have hitherto been neglected (Brocklehurst 2006). Children in situations of armed conflict are primarily considered to be in need of special care and protection. Children, in the present context too, are sent to far away camps or schools in anticipation that the farther places are relatively safer for the children within a protected environment. However, children here have been observed to use their agency tactically while being present within the existing social order. Quoting a few examples will highlight the phenomenon clearly.

3.4.1. This goes back to the initial years of Salwa Judum when children were brought to camps or were sent to ashramshala away from the family. In case of Kasoli, children studying in the ashramshala have come from distant villages. Initial years were tough to adjust as the concept of restriction was alien to these children. Any sort of resistance from children’s side brought them punishments that ranged from standing out of the class, or serving food to the children and eating at the end etc. However, children did find a fun angle to the punishments and enjoyed standing out. They often ran out of the gates of the ashramshala and hid somewhere in the camp. One specific feature of those initial months was the occurrence of petty thefts and breaking up of locks from staff room, cupboards, kitchen store house in the ashramshala. The mystery of broken locks is still discussed amongst children and others in the ashramshala amusingly. They were responding to resistance. These petty thefts and acts did disturb the functioning of the ashramshala and thus, gave children a sense of achievement.
3.4.2. As stated in the above example, restriction is something children did resist in Kasoli. But arguing against the notion of children being socially and physically disempowered, children did show their own signs of resistance and also acceptance to this changed social order wherein they were put under restriction. With closed gates of the ashramshala and guarded check post, children found their own exit points from the ashramshala premises and also from the camp. They invented strategies to coil their bodies and cross the thick concertina wires on the walls of the ashramshala and jumped into the adjoining backyard of a house. If caught, they saved themselves in pretext of stealing fruits and act innocent. If not, they would take long walks away from the camp. Children, from the nearby villages, did go back to their homes and returned at their own will. They used their agency and did create freedom for their own selves.

3.4.3. Children did show their resistance towards the security force personnel too. However, they could not show any sort of resentment or resistance publically or directly, they found subtle ways of doing it. A lot many security force personnel in Kasoli went to the nearby pond to take shower. Even children have been used to bathing at rivers and ponds back in their villages. Now they are limited to bathrooms and hand-pumps in the ashramshala. However, at any given opportunity, they still prefer to go to the pond for a dip. However, with the presence of security force personnel even at the pond, children have lost spaces of play and fun. Children are no more able to go to the pond freely. As they could not explicitly show resistance and annoyance over the fact that their space was intruded, their resistance came in the form of children throwing mud on security personnel’s clothes left at the pond’s side while the security force personnel took a dip. Children would run away and get a sense of victory over their relatively powerful ‘enemies’.

The above mentioned acts clearly bring out the tactical agency of children in Kasoli as introduced and practiced by them. Staying in the ashramshala or camp brings them a sense of restriction. With the disempowered position in the present context too, children express their discomfort, disapproval and resistance through what Scott (1985: 350) calls the ‘weapons of the weak’ that highlight the ‘non-confrontational, non-rebellious, non-revolutionary form of resistance and on the tenacity of self-preservation’. These tactics used by children are hidden struggle of resistance towards
the prevailing social order in Kasoli. The resistance, in the present context, came out in acts of petty theft, sneaking away, spoiling the clothes of the security force personnel etc. As Certeau (1984: xiv) argues in this theory of everyday life that ‘we are all caught in the nets of discipline, where survival is bound with the creation of anti-discipline’. Creating anti-discipline while exercising their tactical agency has given children some sort of survival mechanism that has helped them to sustain discipline. In the present context, life for these children is characterised by restriction and separation. These irregularities and hierarchies in the present social spaces were not chosen by children themselves but have been a part of their social world. Children, here, have only been able to tactically avoid subordination to some little extent and this is an example of children’s politics of everyday life in Kasoli.

**Conclusion:**

By closely looking at the daily lives of these children, an effort is made to document the daily manifestations in the lives of children and how they go about expressing their own selves and making sense of the world around them. A number of factors are playing a crucial role in exacerbating or mitigating the impact of this conflict on children in Chhattisgarh. Fieldwork suggested that being exposed to the conflict and having gone through the experience of attending meetings, Salwa Judum induced displacement and separation, omnipresence of security force and economic insecurity are all affecting the everyday life of children in Chhattisgarh. These, in turn, are shaping children’s subjective understanding and social interactions in their everyday life in this conflict zone.

Children’s everyday life in Kasoli was explored in the context of their social world which includes, the significant others like family, peers, caregivers at the ashramshala and security force personnel at the camp etc. Out of these, family and ashramshala emerged as one of the most integral parts in the everyday life of children in Kasoli. Family emerged as the major source of information about the conflict to the children, especially those who were born in the camp or were brought at an early age. Family and separation is another phenomenon that is prevalent in this conflict zone having a deep influence in the lives of children. Children also spend most of their time at the ashramshala and hence, in the everyday life of these children ashramshala is a home away from home. It is a place where children spend time with people with whom they
share a common story, memories and experiences. Children are able to create their own agency and to some extent, act independently in regards to it.

Living everyday amidst conflict, children in Chhattisgarh are internalizing, giving meaning to and also resisting the adult discourse on conflict and giving their own meaning to it. The state of mind of these children is still full of experiences and traumas of the conflict and it will take many more years for them to overcome it. Children’s attempt to envision a meaningful existence of their own is appreciated; their disdain towards the conflict, their efforts to create a sense of home in the ashramshala, their allegiances to their families, positive belief and attitude in education gives us a hope for future. Children today hope to lead a life which is non-restrictive and free from conflict.

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