Chapter VII

Summary and Conclusion

The present study has attempted to lay its focus on the hitherto ignored and less represented section of the population in Chhattisgarh, the children, who have been living amidst the State-Maoist conflict for years now. It has been argued that in the midst of overarching debates and discourses that centre around this conflict, the everyday life of the native population of the region, the adivasis has been overlooked to a large extent. There continues to be a non-representation of the lives of these people who have been caught at crossroads for decades now. Children in particular have been silently bearing the brunt of this conflict. Their everyday life continues to be embroiled in conflict. With this backdrop, the study laid its focus on children and closely exploring their everyday life, living experiences, structural relations between child and adults and also amongst children themselves. It attempted to bring out children’s understanding of the context within which they live, their ability to counter balance ruptures and rebuild a new meaningful life.

In the larger context of children living in situations of armed conflict, it has been observed that they have been looked at as passive victims of armed conflict. Mostly dominated by adult interpretations, the interventions in the field of children and armed conflict have been based on quantitative methods, psycho-medical measures, pre-coded instruments etc. and have looked at children as a universal category. This completely omits certain important environmental, societal and relational dimensions of their lives that have an impact on these children, their experiences and subjective interpretations of the world within which they live. However, in the recent past children are also being looked at as social actors and active agents in their own rights. In the recent past, there has been a shift in the way studies have looked at children in the larger domain of armed conflict. They have highlighted children’s active and constructive nature while they engage in their social environment within which they live. Children are a part of the social world and their interpretations, assigning meaning to relations etc. all occur within this social gamut.
The present study too has looked at children as active agents in their own right who are capable of bringing out their own subjective understanding and interpretations of the social world they are living in. It explores how the socio-cultural context in which they live shape their understanding, experience, interpretation of the conflict and their response to it. Children in the present study exhibited the capability of internalising, give meaning to and resist adult discourse and reconcile their everyday experiences with adult interpretations of conflict events. Children’s voices have been taken into account. Their lived experiences of the past, their everyday living experiences in the present, their insights into their own self, feelings, and subjective interpretations have guided the research.

The study was conducted in an ashramshala (residential school for tribal children) located inside an erstwhile Salwa Judum Camp in Kasoli. Although the counter insurgency campaign *Salwa Judum* was banned in the year 2012 by the Supreme Court of India but the camps continue to exist in large numbers and the aftermath of this campaign can be felt in these camps. A six months stay in Kasoli camp alongwith a large number of children and displaced people around, gave two different pictures of a camp life in conflict zone. On one hand, Kasoli camp exhibited the features of being a temporary settlement for hundreds of people who were displaced from their homes and made to settle in these camps during the times of Salwa Judum. The residents of this camp have undergone a complete disruption of the socio-economic and cultural fabric of life and are gradually losing hope for their return. There is prevailing sense of fear, insecurity, vulnerability, and uncertainty. However, one also observed that on the other hand, with having spent around eight years of living here, the camp has gradually attained meaning for its residents. They are now bringing a sense of permanency in their lives. People of Kasoli camp, consciously and unconsciously, are giving a new meaning to their present lives. While living in the camp the residents are gradually creating structures that have held meaning for them in the past and by doing so the temporary place has acquire some sort of permanency in its nature.

There has been a slow and gradual accumulation of experiences and memories- of birth, death, marriages, *melas* (fair), community functions and festivals etc., that have given a new meaning to this space. In the very act of living, the residents have created new meanings and laid down enduring ties and relations amongst each other. People
from different villages and socio-economic backgrounds have come to Kasoli with only one thread in common- a lived history and experiences of conflict. However, now they all are living under one common identity- of being Kasoli residents. Consciously or unconsciously, there is a feeling of village and community life that is gradually being brought into the camp by its residents. The social relations and support systems created amongst families and people seemed to occupy a much more integral space in this camp than the handful of institutional support provided by government. The social systems created by people themselves give a sense of security in the prevailing situations of insecurity.

However, as one enters Kasoli camp, one is ought to get startled by the large number of children that this camp is an abode to. These are the children who have somehow escaped the fatal dangers of this on-going conflict and found a minimal degree of security in this camp. However, there should not be much comfort found in this because once out of the immediate dangers of this conflict, newer challenges pose a threat to the childhood of these children. Although, children here do not encounter and experience conflict on an everyday basis in terms of witnessing violence and bloodshed, but conflict continues to be the reality and is present through its varied manifestations in their everyday lives. Presence of conflict can be experienced through the omnipresent security force personnel, having guarded men around at all times, highly restricted life, prevailing sense of fear, getting distanced from their natural abode and for having a no hope of return.

Majority of children in Kasoli, have been sent away by families to ashramshala on the assumption of it being relatively safer, however, this had led to other repercussions for children. Children here have been separated from their families at a very young age too. The distantly located ashramshalas are leading to breaking up of family and other social ties, uprooting of socio-cultural practices and a shift from traditional way of life. Children hear the news of births, deaths, marriages in the family very late and are not able to participate in village mela, dances and other community celebrations. On the larger level, the uprooting of the tribal people from their native villages and forests life has led to a sudden disruption in their cultural and social practices also. There are negligible number of mela- mandai, social dances and other practices that take place in
camps like Kasoli. They cannot participate in the ones happening around the camp due to restrictions on movement imposed on them.

Most of the children who have their families residing in the camp itself had atleast one member serving as SPO either in Kasoli or elsewhere in neighbouring districts. Although getting recruited as SPO during the times of Salwa Judum did bring some sort of economic security to many families wherein they started getting a fixed honorarium of Rs. 1500 per month (which now has been increased to Rs. 6500 per month after SPOs have got regularised in the Chhattisgarh Force), but it brought with itself high levels of vulnerability and risk not just for the SPOs themselves but for his entire family, including children. They are now prone to attacks by the Maoists and have no possibility of return to their own villages. They have all started their life from beginning. However, none of the SPOs in Kasoli were in favour of their children joining the security forces. They have all enrolled their children in the ashramshala with a hope for a better future. But, with non-availability of resources and economic opportunity, children did mention about joining in, in order to fend for their families. However, many of the residents looked at the non-availability of employment opportunity as a well thought out strategy of the State to create conditions wherein more and more people join the security force. Whatever the case may be, but the lives of the present day ex-SPOs continue to be highly vulnerable. The children of these families are also growing under this larger gamut of vulnerability, risk, fear and uncertainty on an everyday basis.

In their everyday lives, children in Kasoli are leading an influenced life too. They are being influenced in different ways. Firstly, the security force personnel have an influence over children. They are looked at as powerful entities in the camp not just by children but by residents too. As stated previously, some children consider joining the security forces as a lucrative option, but many other were observed getting influenced by the aura and sense of power exhibited by the force personnel in the camp. They consider the force personnel more powerful in this ‘fight’ between the Maoists and security forces. For these children, roaming around with a sling rifles and getting greeted as ‘Salaam Sahab’ by residents is not just fascinating but gives a different meaning to their lives.
On the other hand, children were observed getting influenced by media too. In addition to the discourses of local, religious and community encountered in their immediate surroundings, children in the ashramshala were also viewers and followers of television programmes. For children, television programmes conveyed imagery lifestyles and alternative realities. Television has exposed them to a wide array of information and images which most of them had not been exposed to back in their remote villages. Children are also getting exposed to visitors like journalists, researchers etc. who too come from relatively bigger cities. They are being exposed to a new world through means like television on which children are mostly seen enjoying Bollywood songs, movies and serials. However, it can be argued that government’s effort to bring them out of conflict and attempt at aligning them into the mainstream is encouraging but at the same time it is leading to a subtle dilemma in the lives of many children. While I observed children of the camp during the Sunday mandi or mela, one could see how they imitated the characters they see on television.

Children in these ashramshalas and in and around the Salwa Judum camps can be seen gradually distancing from their traditional attires, dialect, life style and finding their own ways into the mainstream, with denim jeans, t-shirts, Bollywood movies, fashionable hairstyles etc. being the most evident ones. Also children are seen idealising heroic characters from television and drawing similarity between them and security force personnel around. Unknowingly they are caught in a position wherein they have not completely left their traditional practices but at the same time are trying to get assimilated into the mainstream through their own small efforts. However, it is important to understand that the prevailing need for these children is not just an exposure to the outside world through television, but also a conducive environment for growth, development and critical thinking but most importantly a conflict free environment. It is State’s ultimate responsibility to ensure that children are put on the right path of an overall development and ensure a better future not just of this newer generation but of the region too.

However, interestingly, in their everyday, children were also seen getting influenced by leaders like neta ji who resides inside the camp. He has a direct and indirect influence on children and camp residents too. In terms of the functioning of the ashramshala and camp, he is a key decision maker. However, what emerged unique and
important during observation were his subtle attempts towards Saffronising Kasoli. Children of the ashramshala are sent to Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) training camps to Raipur and other bigger towns. Children look forward to become a part of it, not out of any individual orientation towards the ideology but out of the sheer chance of getting out of the camp and going to a big city. Children are made to learn the art of self-defence, stick wielding exercises etc. On various occasions, during many of his speeches, Neta ji evoked a feeling of defending the nation in children from the threats around them. However, the threats were always synonym to Maoists. On the other hand, Hindu practices and rituals are followed in the ashramshala during festivals etc. leaving a couple of non-Hindu students getting no representation ever. One argues that schools that are supposed to lay the foundation of life and future for children should evoke a feeling of brotherhood, peace, non-hatred and imbibe a feeling of secularism within children rather than being sites of politics.

All children in the camp have experienced conflict in some form or the other. Many have witnessed killings of their family members by Maoists or security force personnel, experienced the violent times of Salwa Judum that brought them displacement, separation from families and breaking up of family ties, leading a vulnerable life due to the virtue of having an SPO in the family. Disappointingly, many children who were born in this camp, camp life is the only reality they know of. They have no knowledge about the before and after life of this camp. Their interpretation and understanding of the conflict is highly influenced by what they hear from the adults in and around the camp. The phenomenon of hearing and perceiving prevails here. Young children lack clear understanding of their environment within which they live. With no other life being experienced by them than the present day, they are unable to draw any contrast of their past and present.

On the other hand, for those who have had some experience of spending some time back in the villages, did have glimpse of it in their minds wherein they fondly shared about the kind of independence, non-restrictive and close to nature lifestyle they had. As the tribal are known to be close to nature, these children were literally playing in the lap of nature. Their present day lives stand in stark contrast to their past, where life now is characterised by restriction, sense of fear, risk and a continued feeling of
uncertainty for future too. Children did share their experiences of coming to the camp during the times of Salwa Judum.

However, they also shared how adjusting to camp life has been equally challenging. Children mentioned about getting intimidated by the security force personnel around at all times. It can also be stated that that for these children, restriction has not just come in terms of physical movement but also in terms of their scope of thinking too. Children talk of becoming an *anganwadi* worker, labourer or cook in the ashramshala. It can be argued that alongwith restricted movement even thinking spaces seemed to have shrunk in Kasoli.

Children shared their past lived experiences of conflict wherein they stated about witnessing *Jan Adalats* (people’s court called by the Maoists) back in the villages, witnessing killing of family members during such meetings, experiencing the violent times of Salwa Judum wherein they not only witnessed family members getting recruited as SPOs but clearly remembered the experiences of getting displaced from their native villages and brought to camps like Kasoli. The children were also observed adopting newer and altered socio- economic roles in their everyday lives. On the other hand, children were also seen making sense of the past in their present day. They were now able to comprehend what the Maoists spoke of during the meetings back in the village and how State had failed in safeguarding the tribal. Children do feel that although conflict is not physically present in their everyday lives now, but there certainly is a consciousness of it being existent everywhere around them.

However, children have experienced a life deeply embroiled in violence, loss, displacement, separation etc., but children here did exhibit agency in their own individual spaces and through their actions. They have been resourceful in making use of the emotional resources available to them- teachers, caregivers and the researcher too. Children are involved in the process of conceptualising the environment around them and making sense of the events on an everyday basis. This has helped them look beyond their own selves and realise how thousands of lives have been affected by this conflict. Children have been affected by the changed social, cultural, political and economic context around them. They have exhibited their own ways of getting accustomed to the changes and were also seen resisting the prevailing social order around them. However,
this resistance and discomfort never came out explicitly. But children discovered their own ways of expressing their resistance towards the restrictions imposed on them at the ashramshala or in camp. They also looked at the security force personnel as the entities imposing restriction on them but also as intruding in their spaces of enjoyment. However, the resistance could never be overt therefore, they were seen resorting to subtle, non-confrontational, non-rebellious ways by using their tactical agency.

Ashramshala, where most of the interaction and observation with children took place, was a structure constructed to provide not only education but care and safety to these children. But more importantly, what emerged was children’s manifestation of this ashramshala as a home away from home. It emerged as an integral part of the social world of children that has provided them a space to socialise as a family, create their own social roles and relationships and also relive their memories and emotions with those having a common past and then together desire and hope for a better future for themselves and for all those affected by this conflict.

At the end, I conclude by stating that children’s everyday life is deeply embroiled in the context of this protracted conflict. In their everyday life, children are engaged in production and reproduction of meanings and subjective interpretations, newer social, political and economic ambitions, newer desires and hopes. However, while attempting to study children, their lives and living experiences of growing amidst armed conflict is not the same as to condone. In the process of exploring the everyday life of children, their experiences, social relationships, social structures within their social world, one should not ignore the fact that as we discuss these children here, their life is still marred by the most terrible forms of suffering. No attempt can ever bring out a holistic image of the life being led by these children. For me, living with them on an everyday basis, and trying to lead a life as being led by them was just an infant step towards experiencing what they have been experiencing since they first came to this conflict ridden world created by us, the adults.

What gives us a hope is the fact that children in Kasoli wish for a peaceful future for themselves and for their Chhattisgarh. The night before I left the ashramshala, I sat with some of the boys under the old Sal tree having a long conversation with no research
motives in mind. However, what emerged through that night was what we, the adults often ignore. Every child in Kasoli has a silent wish,


(We, the children, hope that one day everything will be like it used to be before. We could go back home, roam around in the village without any fear. There would be no bullets and no killings. We want to lead a life of an adivasi: full of happiness, and always dancing)