

GOMPAD YATRA: A PERSONAL DIARY

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The Background to the *Padayatra*

On June 13, 2016 Madkam Hidme was, in all probability, raped and killed by state security forces near her village Gompad in Konta block of Sukma district in Chhattisgarh. The very next day, a picture of her corpse, draped in a crisp black uniform of Maoist guerillas, started appearing in local newspapers, along with an announcement that a notorious Naxalite member of the ‘Christam Battalion’ has been killed.

However, shortly after, yet another story started surfacing about the encounter – that the police had mistaken her for someone else, some real Maoist guerilla – a namesake to the victim in all probability. The corpse of Madkam Hidme, since exhumed, has been sent for post-mortem twice. Even the Chief Justice of the Chhattisgarh High Court has ordered for fresh judicial inquiry into the matter under the guidance of the District Judge of Sukma. This spurt of activities saw Madkam’s parents travel out of Gompad for the first time in their lives. They went to the Bilaspur High Court, around 600 kilometres away from their village, to seek justice for their dead daughter.

Over the next three months one of the strongest and most unwavering voices demanding justice for Hidme was that of Soni Sori. Shortly after Madkam’s rape and murder, Soni sought entry into Gompad and was denied by state forces. She had even gone on fast before the Collector’s office of Sukma seeking entry. Nonetheless, she had never been allowed entry beyond the Injram Camp.

It is in this background that a footmarch (hereafter referred as *padayatra*) was planned from Dantewada to Gompad between August 9-15, 2016. Soni Sori, Kawasi Hidme, Linga Kodopi and Sukul Nag held the tricolour flag and led a ragtag band including social activists, organisers of political parties, trade unionists, teachers, lawyers, journalists, scribes, artists, filmmakers and academics. All these were seekers of wisdom pertaining to various facets of Bastar including its rich culture, the clouds of mining that loom large over it and aspects of militarisation. The tricolour was hoisted in village Gompad, on the August 15, 2016, around 8:30 am, close to where the Madkam Hidme was laid to rest. Her corpse being since exhumed for post-mortem and presently lying in some *sarkari* (government) morgue somewhere in India, lies buried. The tricolour has never been hosted in Gompad before.

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The place has, for the last 21 years, been regarded as a '*dhur Naxal prabhavit kshetra*' (region extremely affected by Naxalism). No roads have, till date, been built up to Gompad. The National Highway 30, before bending Telengana-bound, leaves a tiny offshoot from Konta which trails off by the Murliguda CRPF Camp. The place for long has been regarded as a liberated zone by the Maoists. It had perhaps seen black flags, and heard Bharat Mata Murdabad slogans earlier, but had never seen a tricolour before. Thus, on the eerie evening of August 14 and on the sunny morning of the next day, the *padayatris* were asked by the people of Gompad – 'will the flag bring peace and justice for us?' Madkam Lakshmi, mother of the victim, insists that she would look at the flag as a symbol of peace. On 15th morning, the *yatris* learnt of 19 other situations of violence inflicted by security forces that had rocked Gompad and its neighbouring villages in the near past. The *padayatra* and the tricolour were, in some ways, symbolic signifiers that lay behind this learning.

Experiences

The *padayatra* started from the statue of Ambedkar at Dantewada on August 9, 2016, at 5 pm. Sori, who had to be present for trial before the National Investigation Agency (NIA) Court at Jagdalpur on that day, arrived a bit late along with her father, community elder Sukul Nag, Kawasi Hidme who has fought and survived much brutality from the counter-insurgent forces, and a three month old unnamed baby whose mother Hurre had fallen to similar state-backed violence at childbirth in May 2016. A motley crew of around fifty people from Chhattisgarh and across the country were also present. All were united in the realisation that much injustice has been done to the people of Bastar in the name of curbing Maoism over the past ten plus years. All were resolute to the cause of justice for the Madkam Hidme-s of Bastar. All were determined to reach Gompad before August 15 and carry the tricolour, alongwith a host of banners and festoons, as a totem of peace and justice for the Adivasis of the conflict-torn, mineral-rich hills and forests of Bastar.

After a short and spirited stretch of six kilometres from Dantewada, the *padayatris* halted at a village named Kumharras. The voyage for peace and justice filled the air with hope that the *yatris* can reach Gompad on August 15 and stand in solidarity with Madkam Lakshmi and the community. Over the next six days, it was cover a stretch of 180 kilometres, across realms where ancient community lives are being shattered in the name of area-domination and reached where they had set out to reach – the grave of Madkam Hidme. A few of the people who had launched the *yatra* and had accompanied it as *yatris* left at different points of time, not because of lack of support or solidarity, but owing the pressing unavoidable commitments to their ways of life, and many new people joined it as the *yatris* walked on towards destination.

On day two Sori, alongwith Nag and Kawasi Hidme, led the *yatris* with tricolour and a copy of the Constitution in hand. She had to leave for attendance to trial at the NIA Court, Jagdalpur. She was to join the *yatris* latter in the day.

Towards the evening, as the *yatris* were making their way to Bhusaras where they were to rest up for the night, Sori joined the *yatra* once again. It was then that the first in a series of three targeted violence aimed at the car Sori was resting in occurred. The car that was trailing and piloting the *yatris* had halted by the road. One of the *yatris*, having rested in the car for a while, was on her way out of the car. Suddenly, a speeding bike swerved by the side of the car where she was getting out of, lost control, skid and fell. One of the fallen bikers began bleeding from the head. Bitter altercations, resulting the aggressive threats and insults followed. Two similar attacks had also happened on the car Sori was traveling in on her way to attendance before the NIA Court at Jagdalpur from Bhusaras the next day, after the *yatris* had embarked on the journey towards Sukma.

From the repetitive nature of the attacks, it seems that they were pre-planned. The Inspector General (IG) of Police, Bastar Division, was never positive about the *padayatra*. The state had made local intelligence of Dantewada spread a host of misinformation and negativity around the *yatra*. Taking advantage of the fact that the laws of India necessitate Soni and Kodopi to attend their trial before the NIA Court at Jagdalpur, and, being law abiding citizens of the country, they had chosen to obey the same. They could not return to the *yatra* till August 14. Whatsapp groups run by the local propagandists who inevitably hold Sangh Parivar and Salwa Judum connections started spreading the malicious propaganda through local media-organs that Sori and Kodopi had returned from the *padayatra* to Jagdalpur.

Another propaganda that was sought to be spread throughout the continuation of the *yatra* was that it was an Aam Admi Party (AAP) led *yatra* and no villagers were joining in on the route. In fact representatives from various political parties, civil-rights organisations, social movements and people's organisation, came together to form the Bastar Bachao Sanyukt Sangharsh Samiti (BBSSS), which organised the *padayatra*. It is true that villagers did not join in for most of the journey, but the villages that fell on the route of the *padayatra* were ones where the people are under the constant harsh gaze of various counter-insurgent agencies.

From Bhusaras the *padayatris* set out towards Sukma on the morning of August 11, while Soni and Kodopiset out to attend their trial. Throughout the next two days, the *padayatris* kept striding towards Gompad. The airs before many a camps resonated with slogans of *Azaadi*. Throughout this time, the *yatra* was led from the fore by Sukul Nag and Kawasi Hidme.

Between the nights of 11th and 12th August, the *padayatris* halted at an Adivasi ashram a few kilometres ahead of Sukma. By the morning of the 12th, the *yatris* had reached and crossed Sukma, and were making their way towards Gompad across Dornapal and Errobore. Throughout these two days, few *yatris* left, but new ones joined. A steady number of 25-35 *yatris* marched towards Gompad. A few cars and two-wheelers, and a pick-up van carrying food grains, cooking utensils, medicine and other essentials trailed and piloted the *padayatris* throughout the way to Konta.

Also trailing the *yatra* were a host of state deployed smartphone happy paparazzi, mostly in bikes and put to the task of photographing the *padayatris* and Adivasi leaders by a host of state agencies including, but not limited to, the TI of Sukma who had personally interacted with multiple of *yatris* in Sukma on 12th August morning. From Sukma, as the *padayatris* made their way towards Konta across a host of Salwa Judum, Central Reserved Police Force (CRPF) and District Reserved Guards (DRG) battalion camps at Ramaras, Kerlapal, Dornapaland and Errabore led by Sukul Nag – the unending source of positive vibes and energy.

On 12th noon, having crossed Sukma, the *yatris* reached Ramaras. The *padayatra* was led across Ramaras by Kawasi Hidme. It was from Ramaras that Hidme (then 15) was picked up by the Special Police Officers (SPOs) in 2008, when she had come to a fair. She spent the next seven years of life confined to different lockups, jails and cells, being raped multiple times by multiple men of the state sponsored counter-insurgent forces. As she walked across Ramaras leading the rally, her friends came out from their huts and into the streets to meet and greet her. The Telugu-speaking Muslim couple who owned the shack in Ramaras where the *yatris* halted for break treated this brave young lady with much fond love and delicious fruits.

After breakfast, the *yatris* began walking towards Dornapal where they were to halt for the night. Police personnel, mostly local Adivasis deployed by the District Reserve Group of SPOs had begun their search operations. By nightfall the *yatris*, weary but resolute, reached Dornapal. Arguably the most notorious camp of Salwa Judum is still in full swing, conducting ghastr encounters. Villages like Dornapal must have changed so much over the past one decade ever since forces of counter-insurgency unleashed on these villages that how they used to be even a decade and a half back is impossible to imagine. It must have been an idyllic village by river Shabari.

Now, the entire village is a camp. Between the night of August 12 and 13, the *yatris* rested in Dornapal, in a newly built ‘*dharmashala*’ (a kind of dormitory) right beside the *Pota* cabin. A few of the *yatris* had gone to bathe by the water-tank of the cabin. The cabin comprised of rows and rows of rooms packed with Adivasi children. The children there seemed silent and stiff. Probably all of them have been scarred by fresh memories of violence which is an ongoing reality of these parts of Bastar. The *dharmashala* and the *Pota* cabin were along a compound of the Dornapal camp. Outside the compound, DRG Commandoes walked and waited in alert vigil with guns in hand the entire night.

On the 13th morning the *padayatris* made their way towards Konta – one of the most violent counter-insurgency affected blocks of the country. Before long, the *yatris* reached Errabore, yet another notorious camp. Sori and Kodopi re-joined the *yatra* from here. Their arrival infused new zeal among the *yatris* as they strode on, Konta-bound for the day. As with almost all the camps that the *padayatris* marched past through the six days of the *yatra*, human shields made of children, mostly from violence impacted families – in the form of schools or ashrams or Adivasi hostels or *Pota* cabins, were conspicuous here as well. These schools or ashrams or Adivasi

hostels or *Pota* cabins are inevitably placed strategically around the camps, to serve as human shields against attack.

The rains have been erratic in Bastar this season. The only time the *padayatris* were greeted by a refreshing drizzle was at Errabore. Enthused by the rain and by the arrival of Sori and Kodopi, the *padayatris* marched forth towards Konta with tricolour in hand. En route Konta, the *padayatra* halted for tea and snacks break for a while by a shop in the village that lay beyond Errabore. There, in the fading twilight, Sori had long talks with the Bengali refugee couple that runs the shop. They used to stay in Sukma before. Their house has been taken because a plush bungalow needs to be built where their colony house used to stand.

The *yatis* halted at Konta on the night of the August 13. Many were expected to join them throughout the next day. The cars and the pick-up van with its ration supplies for the *padayatris* were to rest across the Murliguda camp in Banda village and the *yatis* were to walk from there up to Gompad – a stretch of 12 kilometres through hills and forests. Throughout August 14, as more people began joining the *yatra*, the PWD guest-house where the *yatis* halted the night before saw frequent arrivals of several people. The intelligence was in frantic search for information. The entry of the tricolour flag and a copy of the Constitution into a place – which has been ignored by the sovereign state of India for 69 years after independence and deemed a ‘liberated zone’ ever since 1995 when the state gave up on its attempt to build a road beyond Banda, an area that has certainly been subjected to brutal counter-insurgent violence ever since 2006 – was significant. Unfortunately, it was feared that a few such state agents have had managed to tag along with the *yatis* and enter Gompad.

By 14th night, most of the *padayatris* reached Gompad with the tricolour and the banners. The villagers greeted them warmly. Many others reached Gompad on the next day morning. On 15th morning the *yatis* gathered at the grave of Madkam Hidme. Hundreds of villagers from Gompad and its surrounding villages also assembled. After paying homage in a traditional Adivasi pattern and observing a two minutes of silence by her burial place, the national flag was hoisted and unmounted following the due process of law established through the Flag Code. Then the air resonated with chants of *Inquilab* (revolution).

Meetings with villagers went on for hours after the hoisting. The persistent question raised was whether the tricolour would bring peace to the place. Madkam Hidme’s mother Lakshmi insisted that she would look at the flag as a sign of peace. Sori spoke of the flag and the Constitution as vital tools in the quest for justice for Madkam Hidme and others impacted by violence in Bastar. Through such conversations, 19 cases of atrocities from in and around Gompad came to light. Thus the *yatra* from Dantewada to Gompad did what it had set out to do.

By the afternoon, the *yatis*, weary with the long trail but filled with hope and inspiration, trekked back to Konta across the Murliguda camp. They were made to stand in queue, photographed by multiple people from the camp, and were made to give their names and addresses in writing to the camp people. However, compared to

the inequities faced by the people living in these villages, the harassments faced by the *yatris* pale into the insignificance of triviality. Soon after the *padayatra*, news of yet another fake encounter, conducted by the police forces on August 15, 2016 of a young boy named Arjun Madkam arrived. He was a resident of Chindgur village in Bastar, who was held innocent by court of law in 2015. Realisations of futility of the term ‘independence day’ accorded to that date pervaded.

Epilogue: Significance of the Padayatra

The *padayatra* happened at a time of great historical churning. Lately, we have witnessed a sudden spurt in suppression of all discontent against the state as anti-national or terrorist activities. Critique and reason are being chortled by the rising roars of harsh nationalism – one that seeks to homogenise, to destroy the syncretistic that the subcontinent represents. The military-industrial complex in all its harshness is manifested everywhere. However, voices against these inequities perpetrated by the nation state in the name of nationalism are also on the rise. Across universities, the youth has taken on the power forces of state and capital that seek to saffronise and privatise education head on. In Kashmir, people are braving pellets, bullets and teargas shells and streaming into the streets demanding Azaadi. The Dalits of Gujarat have taken on their powerful Brahminical oppressors, rallying under the national flag in countless numbers.

Voices against the war waged by the state against her Adivasi citizens in Bastar and the resultant brutalities perpetrated in the name of counter-insurgency are also on shrill rise from inside Chhattisgarh and beyond. In this context, the fact that such a *padayatra* could be successfully undertaken in Bastar becomes a significant addition to people’s resistance.

Independence Day signifies the fact that the nation state of India is a sovereign entity by itself and is not ruled as a colony to any other sovereign entity. The tricolour flag represents the independence of its sovereign identity. The Constitution reflects the hopes and aspirations of the independent sovereign state. Despite the independent identity of India, the Adivasis have perennially been ignored by the state. Despite civil society protests and Supreme Court orders, the violence against the Adivasis continues in Bastar, with series of rapes and fake encounters, the formation and operation of security camps and the use of Adivasis as commandoes. Thus the members of the community are made to fight, kill and rape their own people. When it comes to brutalities perpetrated by the security forces, such as the one to Madkam Hidme, the alleged perpetrators enjoy absolute immunity and continue to commit more such crimes at sweet will. Even the notorious Ikhwan forces of Kashmir did not last as long as the state-backed Adivasi commando-forces of ‘surrendered’ Maoists in Bastar. If, in and around just one village Gompad, 19 cases of atrocities have occurred over the past few months or so, the devastation that the whole of Bastar have been facing over the last 10 years can perhaps only be imagined as an unimaginable nightmare.

The politics of nationalism and area-domination in the war that the state is raging against its own people all along and beyond the route covered by the *padayatri* manifests in the way the tricolour is used in the war. When persons from the counter-insurgent forces fall to Maoists, they are regarded as martyrs and national flag is raised in their honour. But when a tribal falls to fake encounter committed by members of such forces, no such mourning happens. More often than not, the state desperately seeks to hide its crimes only to establish the genuineness of the encounter. State forces of Bastar can thus rape and kill innocent women, drape them in Maoist uniform, click their photos and send those to the media declaring that a Naxalite has been killed. Protected by the seal of the national flag and the concept of national security, the perpetrators continue to rise in power and enjoy absolute impunity. Even the former IG of Bastar is an alleged perpetrator of multiple heinous crimes against the tribal people of Bastar and Sarguja, including those that, allegedly, amount to gross sexual violations.

The use of tricolour as a symbol of peace and justice on the Independence Day reminds of how true freedom is yet to arrive for the Adivasis of Bastar. The Constitution also signifies rule of law – something that has disappeared from Bastar in face of the military madness. Not only the traditional Adivasi structures, but even the formal nationalist structures of the ‘division’ have been shorn bereft of rule of law. The Constitution, also an inherent political leitmotif of the *padayatra*, thus, along with the tricolour seek to send messages of peace, justice, dignity, liberty and equality to the people of war-torn Bastar. Thus, the symbolisms of the tricolour, of Independence Day and of the Constitution seek to wrest these concepts from the clasp of the dominant forces of state, social system and capitalism that has created a monster named nationalism – one that seeks to alienate all that it perceives as the other and suppress, with intolerant brutality, all jarring notes.