

Chapter 18: The Naxalite Movement in Central Bihar

At a meeting on Wednesday 9 December 1998 at 22 Edmund Street, Bradford, Bela Bhatia gave a presentation on the Naxalite Movement in Central Bihar, the topic of her PhD thesis at Cambridge University. Present at the meeting were Tricia Allen, Annie Harrison, Andrew Rigby and Michael Randle.

Presentation - Bela Bhatia

When I began my research, there were two overarching concerns in my mind. One was the relation between political movements and change. This was motivated by the fact that poverty and inequality continued to persist in the lives of a large majority of Indians, even though India was then close to completing 50 years of democratic governance, and even though this period had seen the emergence of powerful social and political movements. So the questions that were uppermost in my mind were: What had these movements achieved? In order to be more effective, what could their future agenda be?

With this in mind, I decided to study the Naxalite movement. The Naxalite movement is a political movement which came on the Indian scene in 1967, when there was an armed upsurge of peasants and labourers against the local landlords in a place called Naxalbari in west Bengal. The peasants stormed the granaries of the landlords, forcibly harvested standing crops, burnt records of outstanding debts, etc. This led to the formation, in 1969, of the third major communist party in India, called Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist). As its name suggests, this new party believed that the Indian revolution would be achieved by following the Marxist-Leninist ideology and Mao Tse-tung's thought. The movement became extremely popular amongst idealist youths and even though in the late 1960s and early 1970s, thousands were killed and imprisoned on a scale unprecedented in the post-independence history of India, the movement spread to significant parts of rural and tribal India, where the people were the poorest and the most exploited. Unfortunately, from its early years and in the following decades, for diverse reasons, the CPI(ML) became heavily factionalised. According to one estimate, there are as many as 60 Naxalite factions (some of which had upheld the Naxalbari uprising but did not become members of the CPI(ML) when it was formed) operating in different parts of the country.

Even though movements such as the Naxalite movement are called 'people's movements', I soon discovered that most of the earlier accounts neglected this important dimension, ie the point of view of the people or a view of the Naxalite movement as politics of the people. In the lay person's mind, the word 'Naxalite' conjures up diverse images: either that of unreasonable gun-toting extremists or terrorists (an image painted by the State and a part of the media), or a heroic picture reminiscent of 'Che Guevara idealism', well captured in that classic image of the emaciated and bearded Che on his deathbed - shirtless, his torso riddled with bullets, surrounded by his uniformed killers - the image of the rebel, the revolutionary, the guerrilla.

While there is much of this latter image which fits the Naxalites, I wanted to go beyond this image, beyond the usual stereotypes, and find out the ground reality. My concern now was with a reinterpretation of the movement, as it was in the field. I was interested, so to say, in the making of a revolutionary, an inside view of the lives of these revolutionaries and of the workings of this revolutionary movement.

With this in mind, I decided to study the movement in Bihar, a state which neighbours West

Bengal. I decided on Bihar for three reasons. Firstly, because it is acknowledged as a stronghold of the movement. Secondly, because it is overwhelmingly rural (97%), and the poorest state in the country with as many as 60% of its nearly 100 million people below the poverty line. Many of these people are agricultural labourers - as many as 30-40% of the total rural population in some regions like central Bihar. Thirdly, I wanted to study three streams within the Naxalite movement. And this I could do in Bihar by studying the three dominant factions: CPI(ML)Liberation which is increasingly considered 'revisionist' by the other Naxalites, CPI(ML)Party Unity which is regarded as occupying the middle ground, and the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) which is considered to be extreme left. The last two of these are banned and operate underground, though they have 'open fronts' which continue to function.

How does one study an ongoing revolutionary movement? To what extent can one determine in advance the specific aspects one wants to study and the methodology to be used? To what extent is the researcher in control of the research in terms of its direction and depth? I found that the best strategy was to let the field speak to you, to lead you. I found that as one proceeded on this journey, more or less in the spirit of a traveller, the questions deepened and unfolded. Each new village I visited added a different dimension to the story - and in the two years in the field I was able to cover 51 villages in 5 districts of central Bihar.

The aspects of the movement I ended up studying can be divided into three parts relating to (i) its genesis, (ii) its contemporary dynamics, and (iii) change. Today, I shall try to share some of the most important observations regarding the Naxalite movement in central Bihar.

1. *The Naxalites:*

Who are the Naxalites about whom the representatives of the State and the police speak in hushed tones? A large majority of Naxalites in central Bihar are landless agricultural labourers or poor peasants. Most of them are also *dalits*¹, ie they belong to the lowest castes in the caste hierarchy. A labourer in most parts of India, all the more so in Bihar, is not difficult to recognise. You have only to look at them, their faces, hands, feet, posture, expression. When you visit their homes, often you find their mud houses to be without doors. Inside the house, there are few possessions, and whatever there is, is carved out of mud - whether it be the *chullah* on which they cook, the *kothi* in which they store the grain, or the *matka* in which they store water. On a visit, you may find that even to seat you, they have to borrow a string cot or sometimes even a gunny bag. Thus live a large majority of the Naxalites. It is on account of their participation in large numbers that the Naxalite movement has earned for itself the reputation of being a *garibo ki party* (party of the poor).

2. *Kranti (revolution) - varying perceptions:*

In its own self-perception, ie especially that of its leaders, the Naxalite movement is a revolutionary movement. Yet, people rarely use the word '*kranti*'. Instead they describe their struggle as *izzat ki larai* (fight for basic dignity). On many occasions it was pointed out to me that it was not for wages alone or an improvement in their economic situation that they were fighting. 'We can live half hungry,' they said, 'but not without *izzat*'. By *izzat* they meant a basic acknowledgement of them as human beings, a right to be regarded and treated as such. Spelt out, this would mean many things: that the honour of their women should be respected, that they should not be called by a nameless '*arai*' (a derogatory form of address) but by their names, that they should be able to wear clean clothes in front of the landlord. Indeed wearing clean clothes, walking erect, looking straight in the eyes of the landlord while speaking to him, or even sitting in front of their own homes on a cot, used to be considered serious offences. So

izzat, in their perception, would mean living a life as a free human being, without fear, and worthy of respect.

3. *The reasons why people join or support the Naxalite movement:*

I found that people join the movement for many diverse reasons. At the village level, it is not difficult for them to ascertain who are their friends and who their enemies (if I may put it that way). They have only to look at the landlords and the political parties they join, to know that those parties are not for them. This is certainly the case during the time of elections, even though they have for the most part not been allowed to vote. The booths have always been captured at gunpoint. However, most of the political parties that contest elections, both on the right and the left, are not working with people in their day-to-day struggles. And this is where the question of joining the Naxalite party comes in.

In contrast to others, the *saathis* (or companions) - as the Naxalite comrades are called - are usually young people full of idealism and commitment, who are ready to rough it out, eat the same food as the poor people, and treat them as human beings at par. As mentioned above, this is itself revolutionary in the case of central Bihar. This, in addition to the fact that the movement speaks the language of equality, justice, rights - and asserts the need to fight to achieve these aims, for which the *saathis* are themselves ready to die - proves very attractive to the people. It remains the primary reason why people join the movement.

But besides ideology, and the construction of the ideology in their own terms, there are also several non-ideological reasons why people join. We must remember that the choice is not only between the Naxalite party and some other party (of uppercastes or classes), but often between one Naxalite faction and another, for now there are many villages where two or more factions exist. Also, when middle and sometimes even rich peasants join the party, you have to ask why they do so. Some of the non-ideological motivations for joining the Naxalites include concern for survival or protection, opportunism, revenge, fear, compulsion, power, historical linkages and even the geographical location of particular groups in a village. There are also sociological reasons. For example, members of a particular caste may not make a decision on an individual basis but on a caste basis; women may not make a decision individually but on the basis of the family, and so forth.

4. *The issues:*

Revolutionary issues have tended to be the most basic ones, including rights which have been enshrined in the Indian constitution but which the government has failed to protect. As regards basic economic issues, the Naxalites have fought against the unlawful occupation of land, and the possession of land above the legal ceiling. Similarly, they have fought for better terms for sharecroppers, for minimum wages, and for control over common property resources. Social issues have included struggles that may be grouped under two heads (i) social equality and *izzat* (ii) social security - which includes freedom from attacks by dacoits.

Basic political issues have included a right to meet and confer - for in the old days it was unthinkable that labourers should go to meetings. Those Naxalite factions which have begun contesting elections have started ensuring that the people in their areas are able to vote. (The old line was to boycott elections. Participating or contesting elections was considered revisionist - as it still is by a large majority of the Naxalites). In these areas, as a consequence, booth capturing has greatly declined. In fact, in one district, there are two CPI(ML) Liberation MLAs (Members of the State Legislative Assembly). From this constituency, in 1989, the first Naxalite member of the central parliament was also elected. Locally, these are not small

victories. Indeed, for the landlords, it is unthinkable that not only economically, or socially, but also politically their power should be challenged. The landlords I met in these constituencies could not bear the fact that their MLA was a Naxalite!

Even though the issues that the Naxalite movement has taken up are basic issues, stories from village after village in Bihar reveal that even to achieve these minimum goals, long struggles had to be waged which at times took on the colour of war and became bloody battles.

5. *The forms of struggle:*

The forms of struggle that the Naxalites have adopted have included both nonviolent as well as violent forms. In 1969, the initial political line of the original CPI(ML) was partial to the 'annihilation' of landlords. They considered mass movements to be a redundant form of struggle. Since then the image of the Naxalite movement has tended to focus on its armed activities. Perhaps the Naxalite movement today would have been very different had the value of building mass movements had been realised in 1969.

Today, one finds that the open organisations or fronts of each of these factions are very important and doing valuable work. And most of the forms of struggle that they adopt are nonviolent, for example, meetings, *dharnas* (sit-ins), *gherao* (encirclement), rallies, *bandhs* (closures), effigy burning, people's courts for adjudicating at local levels, economic and social boycotts, *hartals* (strikes), etc. Many other actions have required the use of force, for example, the looting of grain from the granaries (which has been done during droughts), looting of rifles from the landlords or the police, forcible harvesting of crops on contested fields, etc. Besides, village protection or defence groups have been organised at the village level, and armed squads at the regional level. These are organised on militaristic lines and include military hierarchy. While, by and large, the work of the open fronts and the underground squads tend to be complementary, there have been occasions when the relationship between the two has been tense.

6. *The response of the state and the upper castes and classes:*

The state's response can be summarised in terms of four kinds of measures:

(i) Planning specific operations focussing on development works. Even though on paper a lot of money has been pumped into these, there has been almost no implementation.

(ii) Working in collusion with the landed. For example, most of these villages are dotted by police camps, which are often located on the property of upper-caste landlords and enjoy their hospitality.

(iii) Everyday forms of repression by the police including frequent raids, confiscation of household items, destruction of household property, threats and intimidation, using abusive language towards women, arrests without warrants and then imprisonment without trial or bail for many months, and sometimes torture in prison, and so forth.

(iv) Encounter killings - this is a result of official policy which gives policemen a license to kill the Naxalites upon getting hold of them. Such killings are then dressed up as killings which happened during the course of an encounter. These have been rightly called 'false encounters'.

Actions of the establishment, such as these, have time-and-again proved which side it was on. The upper castes and classes have responded to the Naxalites with organised violence. There

is a nonviolent response in terms of 'surrender' or 'compromise', to a very limited extent. By and large they have tried to reassert their dominance, and to teach the '*raad-raiyan*' (another derogatory word used by them for the labourers, which means someone who is below them but very stubborn) a lesson by organising themselves into private armies (called *senas*). The last three decades of class struggle have been accompanied by the rise of caste-based armies, which have been responsible for many massacres. So amongst the landed in Bihar, whether the *Bhumihars* or *Rajputs* (upper castes) or *Yadavs* or *Kurmis* (intermediate castes) or Muslims, their response has been the same. There are instances when groups have overcome their traditional antagonisms, for instance *Bhumihars* and *Rajputs* (who have equal status but a traditionally antagonistic relationship) and have joined hands to defend their class interests and formed a joint *sena*. Interestingly, some of them also use the language of 'liberation'. For example, one of the *senas* was called Swarna Liberation Front (front for the liberation of the higher castes).

During my fieldwork, I was able to document the emergence of one such *sena*, which started in 1994, called the *Ranbeer Sena*, and was able to interview some of their leaders. At the time, even though the *sena* was banned, the address of one of the leaders was given to me by the District Magistrate (who of course told me then not to tell anybody!) - making the collusion between the state and these private armies apparent. From 1994 until now the *Ranbeer Sena* has already committed seven major massacres, besides many killings on a day-to-day basis. Many of these killings and massacres have taken place despite a police presence. For example, in a massacre which took place in July 1996 by the *Ranbeer Sena*, houses were burnt, and 21 *dalit* women and children were killed, four of whom were less than 3 years old. Even though three police camps were located within 1 km of the hamlet, the violence was allowed to continue for 2-3 hours in the late afternoon.

7. *Amongst the internal weaknesses of the movement*, factionalism is the most serious. It has taken the form of internecine killings during the last decade, and led to scores of committed communist cadres dying at the hands of other communists.

8. *Achievements and weaknesses*: Besides factionalism, there are also several other weaknesses in the movement. I have raised these in the thesis in the form of questions to the movement. They concern issues such as ideology, caste, social aspects, living conditions, gender, democratic rights, etc. - which I shall not go into right now.

There are other aspects which pose some difficulty and call for some thinking. At the local level, one finds that in many Naxalite areas power equations have changed. During election time in 1996, in one village when I asked an elderly man who belonged to the Rajput caste (an upper caste) whether he had voted, he replied in low tones, 'our situation in this village is like that of the tongue in between a set of teeth.' Clearly, what he was trying to communicate was the existence of fear amongst the upper castes. This situation calls for some reflection on power and fear. The poor have to overcome their fear, to feel empowered, in order to be able to resist. Their concerted struggle further empowers them, increases their confidence, and may often result in changing the equations of power. Those who dominate do not give in or give up their power until they themselves feel (or are made to feel) that fear. In this process power and fear are seen to change sides. This is certainly a positive development from the point of view of the poor, but from the viewpoint of the society as a whole, the achievement remains incomplete until freedom from fear is achieved for all members of the society.

There are some very important achievements to the credit of the movement, not least the fact

that issues relating to the poorest people have been put on the political agenda. Besides, even though the Naxalites do not pretend to have faith in the present form of democracy or its institutions, they have done more for democracy and democratisation than those who are formally committed to it. The greatest gain of the movement is the confidence and fearlessness it has been able to instil in the people. For example, a labourer once told me, 'Earlier they used to beat us and we could do little but suffer, but now if a hand were raised to hit, I would hold that hand.' Many other faces come to my mind. What stays with me is their militant spirit conveyed in small but significant ways. For example, people have started giving different kinds of names to their children. Some have deliberately changed their own names from *Gariban* (poor), *Dukhan* (miserable) and *Bhikaridas* (beggar-slave) to *Suraj* (sun), *Bijli* (lightning), *Kiran* (ray of light), *Atal* (determined), to name just a few. So even in these small ways you can see a difference. [End]

Discussion

Persistence of the Caste System

Annie asked if the caste system as such was breaking down with all these changes, or whether it was just a matter of the lower castes feeling stronger within that system. Bela replied that she did not think the caste system itself was breaking down; it still had very strong roots. Inter-caste marriages, for example, were still taboo in Bihar as in no other part of the country and this was a major social problem. Sometimes young lovers had been killed because of the inter-caste element in their love. Even in Gujarat the caste system was strong, but in Bihar it was also linked with violence. So in the wider society, and even in the Naxalite areas, you found that it still had roots. Widow remarriage continued to be taboo among the upper castes in Bihar

while in other parts of India this taboo was breaking down. The Naxalites had taken action on issues such as marriage by promoting the concept of 'ideal marriage', encouraging simple rituals, and inter-caste marriages. They also protected inter-caste marriages where they were taking place. And within the communist movement there were a few examples of partnerships without marriage.

The notion of untouchability had not altogether disappeared even amongst members of the Naxalite movement. The *Chamars*, who were leather tanners according to their caste occupation and were considered as one of the most militant sections of the movement, might resist their untouchability vis-a-vis the upper castes, but might themselves not be able to treat those below them in the caste hierarchy, like *Doms* (responsible for dealing with human bodies for funerals), as their equals. This she found to be the case in a few Naxalite villages. The activists of the Naxalite movement in this respect were different from the members and supporters of the movement. They were clearly trying to provide an alternative model.

Even though an effort had to be made to fight against the caste system, in a society of that kind, the notion of caste was deeply entrenched and tied up with basic identities of individuals and communities. However, some positive aspects of caste needed to be acknowledged. For example, caste identity had played a crucial role in mobilisation in Indian politics in the post-independence period, especially against the elite politics represented by the Congress Party. This was evident in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The middle castes, like the *Yadavs*, which were numerically strong in these regions, had emerged as a powerful political force. *Yadavs*, a backward caste, had also been socially oppressed by the upper castes in these regions. This new-found political power of the backward castes had not only increased the confidence of members of these castes but also that of the lower castes.

This point was emphasised by a rickshaw puller she had interviewed in Patna in 1996 who had come to attend the *Garib* rally (rally of the poor) organised by the then Chief Minister of Bihar, Laloo Prasad Yadav. He said: 'Up to now, *rajās* (kings) have always belonged to the uppercastes; - if there has to be a king then let him be from the lower castes.' In his eyes and in the eyes of many other labourers like him in Bihar, even if a Chief Minister was corrupt (as is the case with Laloo Prasad Yadav), the fact that he belonged to a backward caste had some symbolic value.

Nonviolent movements and the Naxalites

Andrew said that in Tamil Nadu in the south people talked about Bihar in much the same way that Americans talk about Miami. Even so he encountered similar things in the south to what Bela had described. In a village in Tamil Nadu over 30 women and children were burned to death in the course of an armed struggle. When the landlords' men came along, the men with the weapons ran off and the women who were hiding in the huts were burned to death. At that point the nonviolent people moved in and were doing battle against both the landowners and the Communists, or revolutionaries, whom they detested. In the 1970s Jaya Prakash Narayan ('JP') had encountered the Naxalites when he went to work in Bihar. This was meant to be this wonderful state where Vinoba Bhave and the Gandhians had declared village socialism, but JP found that nothing had changed. Andrew wondered if there was any sign now of that constructive village work that the Gandhians promoted.

In her response, Bela spoke first about the JP-Naxalite relationship. The Naxalites in Bihar were strong in the early '70s, and JP said he would try to prove that the people did not need

Naxalism, and that change could be brought about in a different way. Unfortunately he only stayed in the area for a few months. JP's 1974 movement was powerful and brought about country-wide change, but its focus was opposition to Indira Gandhi's autocratic rule and to corruption which by then was already widespread. The reality of village India, especially of Bihar, with so much inequality, extreme poverty and oppression at a day-to-day level, was not directly on the agenda of the 1974 movement, and as a result it could effect little change in these aspects. Some efforts were made in this direction by the *Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini* (Student Youth Struggle Organisation) which was formed in 1978 and which looked on JP as a model, but this movement itself didn't last more than five or six years. It had to be remembered that the movement operated while the Janata Party - the party formed by JP which had ousted the Congress in the State Assembly elections in 1977 - was in power in the state. The Janata-led government was not as pro-landlord as the previous Congress-led governments. But even within the *Vahini* movement, there was an ongoing debate about the merits of the use of violence as against nonviolence, and it was this question which, amongst others, contributed to its disintegration. If the movement had been able to sustain itself it could have provided an alternative model.

Andrew explained that these were idealistic young people who went out into the villages to work with the poor and landless and were critical in some ways of the old Gandhians whom they tended to regard as old farts with their fasting and spirituality. They also had a kind of class analysis and in that sense were different from the sort of Gandhians who said - 'love everybody!' Bela added that they had evolved a concept of *shantimaita* (peacefulness). They were against premeditated or planned violence but did not rule out the use of violence in self-defence, if attacked. After the disintegration of the movement, some of the activists continued to do good work, like Anil Prakash, who works in North Bihar (and was one of the initiators of the *Ganga Mukti Andolan* - Liberate the Ganga movement).

It was interesting, she said, to observe what happened to people who had lived through a period of activism and were faced with the question of what to do with their lives when the movement disintegrated. Many of those involved in the *Vahini* group had joined NGOs, which represented a very different kind of politics. Some of these NGOs were also quite corrupt, as NGOs tended to be in Bihar - more so than elsewhere. In contrast, whether or not one would agree with the beliefs of the Naxalites, the fact was that they were ready to die for them. Many Naxalites had been killed since the movement first started in the late 1960s. A nonviolent movement with people having a similar kind of willingness to die for their beliefs had yet to arise in Bihar. And the problem was that if one wanted to start that kind of movement where would one go? Everywhere in Bihar you had these different kinds of groups with strong beliefs. There was a lot of contest between ideologies.

Differences over methods of struggle

Michael asked to what extent the differences between groups focussed on the methods to be used. Did any of the Naxalite groups, for instance, reject terrorism in the strict sense of carrying out of massacres and indiscriminate attacks on people? Bela said there were indeed disputes over methods. For example, the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC), on the extreme left of the movement, believed that a Naxalite group owed it to the people to retaliate against a massacre of the struggling peasantry with a similar massacre of the upper castes. The approach of this Maoist group was - 'If you kill one, we shall kill four.' They had carried out this policy in the areas they controlled. This approach, however, had been severely criticised and condemned by other Naxalite groups who argued that this was not what Naxalism was about.

Quite rightly they argued that a different way would have to be found.

The degree of brutality in the massacres conducted by the landlord or upperclass gangs forced one to reflect on their psychology. There had been many massacres in which the attackers surrounded a hamlet, burnt houses, and had gone into individual houses and raped women. Often they preferred to use knives and country-made weapons rather than guns. In a massacre in Bathani Tola (Bhojpur district) in July 1996, the *Ranbeer Sena* used knives to slit the throats of children less than 5 years old. On the night of 1 December 1997, the *Ranbeer Sena* killed 61 people in a village called Laxmanpur Bathe in Jehanabad district. The Naxalites in contrast, except in a few cases, had concentrated in their response on annihilating the leaders of these upper caste armies.

Struggle for minimum wage

Bela spoke of the problems of struggling even for a minimum wage. The traditional arrangement in Bihar was that a labourer was required to go to the landlord's field at dawn and continue working there till dusk. For that the labourer was paid less than a kilo of extremely poor quality grain called *khesadi*, which was later found to cause paralysis. Now the labourers were demanding a minimum wage, even though in other parts of India many groups were challenging the concept of the minimum wage itself. They demanded a *just* wage, not a *minimum* wage. But in Bihar the reaction of the landlords even to the more modest demand tended to be - 'How dare these labourers raise their voices!'

However, one should realise that a small farmer in Gujarat who had electricity 24 hours a day and was able to carry out intensive farming on a small piece of land might be better off than a landlord in Bihar with a much larger acreage. It was therefore also necessary to understand why successive governments in Bihar failed to deliver services such as electricity to the countryside. The level of corruption between states varied greatly. In Gujarat as against 80% work there might be 20% corruption. Over the years, therefore, the State had been able to build roads, provide electricity, supply functioning schools, and so forth. In Bihar, the figures were reversed. The level of corruption was around 80% and it was difficult to understand why this should be so. The level of violence in daily life was also extremely high. One rarely heard in Gujarat of a case of kidnapping, whereas in Bihar it was relatively common. Somebody once said that if you were not killed in Bihar it was because nobody was interested in killing you.

Risks in the field research

Annie asked if Bela had felt at risk during her travels and her work interviewing clandestine groups. Bela replied that of course there was some risk. But there was a degree of protection from the fact that she always told the various groups exactly what she was doing. She did not try to hide either her identity or purpose. She got a lot of cooperation, a lot of love. She had very little difficulty except from the police. In one instance she was with a small group of women who were going from village to village protesting against 'false encounters' - that is the killing of cadres by the police. It was her first day in that particular district and earlier she had left a message at the police inspector's office identifying herself and saying what she was doing. He had been out of his office at the time so she didn't meet him at that point. But when she was with the women the inspector and another policeman drove up in a jeep and began interviewing the leader of the group. When Bela tried to take photographs the inspector decided she must be a leader and ordered her arrest. She explained what she was doing, produced her Cambridge University library card and a letter from her supervisor - but he still

refused to believe her. 'From your dress and your speech', he said, 'you don't appear to me to be a Cambridge student!' Formally they were all arrested and taken out of the village. But they then regrouped and continued the protest.

There were other kinds of risk, and in one instance she felt she had perhaps put herself in unnecessary danger. This was in 1995 when she went directly from one village, Sarathua, Bhojpur district, where ten *dalits* had been murdered at night a few months earlier, to the village of Belaur where it was known the killers had come from, and which was the headquarters of the *Ranbeer Sena*. (A survivor of the attack had identified the attackers as members of the *Ranbeer Sena* from Belaur.) She arrived in Belaur after dark, and after reporting to the police camp started making her way to the house of the Mukhia - the head of the *panchayat* (village council). As she approached his house, she was stopped by a group of men. One of them, who later turned out to be the Mukhia's son, insisted on searching her bag and said the only reason he would not do a body search was that she was a woman. He then took her to the Mukhia's *dalan* - an outhouse used for meetings by men and where the men also sleep. By this time night had fallen. In the light of a single lantern, surrounded by men in the now-full *dalan*, she sat interviewing them about their alleged involvement in the *Ranbeer Sena* and the murders at Sarathua. The man sitting next to her appeared to be holding a gun under his shawl. That night, contrary to her expectations, she was given the room adjacent to the *dalan* to sleep in. The Mukhia mentioned that the women's quarters would not be comfortable. Probably the real reason was that they did not want her talking to the women who might be more unguarded in what they said. That was an uncomfortable night as she knew that some of those men had probably taken part in the murders in Sarathua.

Gandhi's vision and Congress praxis

Michael asked how it had come about that Congress, which Gandhi had envisaged and built up as an organisation and party to serve the people, was largely controlled by the rich and privileged. Was this something that had happened since 1948 or had it always been a problem with the Congress party? Some critics of Gandhi argued that he did not pay sufficient attention to the class issue, and was too close to landlords and industrialists.

Bela said that judging by her experience in Bihar the critics had a point. When she was trying to find out about the implementation of the 1950 Land Reform Act in Bihar, she discovered that already at that time, in the immediate aftermath of independence, the landlords were a strong lobby working against it. Most of them were in Congress, and Rajendra Prasad, the president, was himself a big landlord in Bihar and contributed to the stalling process. For five years they had managed to prevent the enactment and that allowed them sufficient time to use loopholes in the law to their advantage. So there was no doubt that the Congress Party was dominated by the more elitist sections of society. There were also records which showed that when Gandhi came to Bihar, where the tension between the landlords and the landless already existed, he did not pay sufficient attention to the problem. There may have been pragmatic reasons for this, since in all movements there are constraints that have to be taken into account. However, it was difficult to decide how big a part these constraints played in comparison to other factors. Michael added that perhaps some degree of class collaboration was inevitable in any struggle for national liberation.

Andrew referred to the writer Francine Frankel who argued that even if Congress had had all the best intentions on land reform, the key support for the party in the rural areas came from the very people who would be damaged by the implementation of the reforms. It could never

afford to push them through in a serious way because these were the people who acted as the 'vote banks' with the castes to ensure that Congress kept getting returned to power. The people at the centre might want to implement the reforms but they depended on the people at the periphery whose position would be undermined by them. Bela said that shortly before his death Gandhi himself had expressed some unhappiness with Congress. Andrew added that Gandhi wanted Congress to disband and become servants of the people, and go out into the villages. However, even some of the Gandhians who went to work in Bihar got too close to the landlords and were themselves involved in corruption.

Bela said that the sad thing was that the struggle element went from Gandhianism after independence. The logic of his approach would have justified a campaign of satyagraha against the new government. Instead the Gandhian movement became too institutionalised. Michael said that given that many of the leaders of the independence struggle were members of the new government, it was bound to take some time before activists would be prepared to confront what they would have seen as their government.

Gandhian institutions and People's Movements

Andrew said he had showed some students a film from India called Narmada Diary, about the big campaign against the dam led by a woman, Medha Patkar. What struck him was that there was no mention of Gandhi throughout the film although all those principles of being nonviolent, and regarding their bodies as their only weapons were strongly present. He saw this as coming out of the Gandhian heritage. You had the old Gandhian movement which retained the name but was like a shell, and vibrant grassroots movements like the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM) which also came out of the nonviolent tradition.

Bela said the Gandhian institutions, and the 'old Gandhians', so to speak, were far removed from present reality and were symbolically represented by the cobwebs which was always the first thing you noticed whenever you visited one of their buildings. They wore *khadi* and retained all the symbols of the Gandhian movement, but this did not resonate with the people at the local level. Ordinary people in India today could not afford *khadi*. And the young people who during the '70s and '80s established a tradition of going to rural and tribal areas to join or shape a large number of social and political groups and movements which proliferated at the grassroots after independence did not identify themselves explicitly with Gandhianism. Some joined and worked within political parties, others worked with autonomous movements. The latter would be struggle based and fighting for rights. Medha Patkar, and the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (NBA - Save the Narmada Movement) had very effectively opposed the big dam and what it stood for as far as India's development strategy was concerned.

Besides NBA, there were many other groups and movements at the local level, lesser known but of considerable significance, which had taken up important local issues concerning the tribals, *dalits* and other marginalised and oppressed communities. For example, there was a powerful and significant movement, the *Chhatisgarh Mukti Morcha* (Forum for the Liberation of Chhatisgarh), which had very effectively organised the miners in the area and was still active in Madhya Pradesh in spite of the fact that their leader, Shankar Guha Nyogi, was shot dead a few years ago by henchmen of the contractors he and his group were opposing. In contrast to the NBA, Nyogi and CMM preferred to disregard the media. Nyogi's way of mobilising the people was unique. When he first started he was known to have been a wandering salesman selling groundnuts and cloth in order to make contact with the people of the area. Even though he himself was known to be of Marxist persuasion, CMM itself

remained autonomous. Another powerful movement, *Kashtakari Sangathana* (Organisation of Toilers) had been functioning in the tribal areas of Dahanu district in Maharashtra. Founded by Pradeep Prabhu, a Jesuit priest who was soon thrown out of his order, the movement had sustained itself for many years. All these groups were using nonviolent strategies including satyagraha, and in a sense, without saying so, were continuing the Gandhian tradition. In their practice, they had brought the Gandhian and Marxist approaches closer, without declaring themselves either Gandhian or Marxist because they did not want to be put in a particular box. However, perhaps the questions of ideology, goals and methods needed to be addressed more squarely by these and other grassroots groups than they had been so far.

Problems of leadership in the grassroots movements

Bela went on to say that one of the problems facing many grassroots movements in India was how to take the people along with them, without inadvertently using them for gains the leaders or the middle-class activists might think were in their best interest. Even in significant movements such as NBA or the Naxalite movement, there had been a tendency at times to take actions in the name of the people without due involvement. A people's movement, committed to the people, had to guard against an approach, however well-meaning, which relied excessively on ideas from the top. Instead activists might have to reconcile themselves to the fact that a process in which the people were involved in an equal way would be a slow one. Such an approach was often missing but was crucial in a country like India where the gap between the middle-class activists and the people was considerable. It was important that these representatives of the 'voice of the people' remained true to this task and aware of their responsibility so that the thinking and feeling of the ordinary people was not ignored. They, after all, were the real India.

Andrew said that perhaps this was where the constructive programme came into the picture; it was unfortunate Bob Overy was not present to talk to that. He himself had been impressed by those Gandhians who had lived and worked for years in one area and had gained the respect and trust of the people. However, it was not always easy to draw a line between serving the people in the Gandhian sense and using them, or invoking their name, in pursuit of one's own agenda.

As an illustration of Andrew's last point, Bela contrasted the approach of NBA and the *Khedut Mazdoor Sangath* (an organisation of peasants and labourers) in Madhya Pradesh, which was affiliated to NBA, when both of them faced the issue of how to respond to those tribal families who decided, after years of being part of the anti-dam movement, to give it up and accept resettlement and rehabilitation offered by the Gujarat government. NBA was known to have called them *dalals* (government agents). The KMS took a different approach. This was a smaller group of four or five young people who had been organising the tribals in that area for several years, and had taken up the dam issue when it arose - though fighting against the dam was one of the struggle issues and not the main one. Their conclusion was that if the people they had been working with decided for various reasons, like survival, to go for resettlement and rehabilitation, they would support them in that process and continue to regard them as part of their organisation.

Similar situations in the life of a movement might raise the question of the extent to which a people's movement was shaped by the people. Such movements derived their legitimacy and credibility from the fact that they were movements of ordinary people. She too was part of a movement of this kind, and hoped to continue to be so in future. At the same time, there were

some uncomfortable aspects which she understood from first-hand experience or after close association with particular movements. There was no doubt that once you had earned the people's love and respect, they were willing to trust you and follow you. This complete trust on the part of the people increased the responsibility of the middle-class activists to ensure that they continued to involve the people and themselves equally in the movement. From time to time they might be required to take on a particular role, for example, as a mouthpiece of the movement while dealing with government officials or similar bodies. But for the good health of the movement they needed to immerse themselves in it like any other member. Bridging the gap between the activists and the people might be difficult but was only one of the many challenges and real dilemmas that faced a people's movement in India and perhaps elsewhere.

¹ *Dalits* - the oppressed, including '*harijans*'. The word is preferred by the *dalits* and other social movements to '*harijan*'.