Lives, Interrupted

"I had gone to fetch fodder when my right foot slipped and I stepped on a landmine…"

Farming Amidst Landmines: Amputated Lives in Fazilka

Tripti Nath

Fazilka (Punjab): The rural folk of Fazilka, a sub-division in Punjab, have often had to pay a heavy price for living in perilous proximity to the Indo-Pak border. Many have lost their lives to the innumerable landmines laid by the Indian Army during Operation Parakram along the international border in Jammu and Kashmir, Rajasthan and Punjab, following the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001. The mines are said to have been laid at a density of 1,000 per square kilometre.

The stories of villagers 'lucky' enough to have survived these landmines are heart-rending. Take Raj Kaur, 55, an inhabitant of village Bhamba Wattu, which lies just six kilometres from the Pakistan border. Nine years ago she had inadvertently stepped on a landmine while trudging along a narrow mud track leading to her village. By the time she could fathom what had gone wrong, she had stepped on to another landmine. Ever since that day, Raj has lead an agonising existence: She has lost both her legs below the knees. The woman who had once earned a living as an agricultural worker has been forced to sit all day on her string cot guarding her lifelines – her prosthetic aids and walker.

Every detail of that tragic day that changed her life has been etched in her mind. She remembers how her husband, Balbir Singh, rushed her to the civil hospital in Jalalabad, 33 kilometers away. The authorities there administered first aid and referred the couple to the army hospital at the district headquarters of Ferozepur, some 85 kilometres away. There she received prosthetic aids that served her for some time. Only in February 2008 had she succeeded in getting proper prosthetic devices at a camp supported by civil society organisations.

While the family received financial assistance from the government, it was not adequate. The compensation that Balbir Singh managed to secure after running from pillar to post was just Rs 1,50,000. Using the interest-free loan of Rs 10,000 granted by the Delhi-based Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, the couple was able to help their younger son, Jaswant, open a barber's shop. Raj bemoaned her fate, "We have no land. I was earning almost Rs 4,000 a month as an agricultural worker but the accident has left me incapacitated."

Another landless labourer, Surjeet Kaur of village Behak Khas, located around eight kilometres from the border, has been coping with disability for over a decade. "I had gone to fetch fodder for the livestock when my right foot slipped and I stepped on a landmine. All that is left of the foot is the heel," she said.

Incidentally, before the fateful landmine accident Surjeet was already disabled. One of the toes of her left foot had been amputated when she was six as a result of a snake bite. "I had learnt to manage with an amputated toe but it is difficult to manage without one half of the foot. The army helped me get a prosthetic aid from Chandigarh (capital of the states of Punjab and Haryana) but over time it has lost its utility," she said. In these times of rising costs, keeping the family going has been a challenge for Surjeet, who has three daughters and a son. The government compensation of Rs 1,50,000 that came her way was spent on a daughter's marriage.

Struggling to make ends meet, Surjeet's husband, Harbans Singh, moves from village to village in search of work as a daily agricultural wage labourer. Surjeet, too, despite her disability, goes in search of wage work to Kheo Wali Dhab – 15 kilometres from her home – leaving her children in the care of her mother-in-law.

Why didn't Surjeet take the time out to get a proper prosthetic? "The choice was between two square meals a day or a prosthetic. Before the landmine accident, I was working as an agricultural labourer, and that is all I can do," answered the victim, matter-of-factly, as she revealed that even travelling

to the prosthetic centre in Chandigarh was an expensive proposition for her.

A mere two kilometres from the Pakistan border, in Jhangal Baini village, Mitoo Bai, 35, lives with her pre-teen children. Mitoo was in her 20s, when she lost her right foot after stepping on a landmine over a decade ago. She was in the fields gathering fodder for the family cattle at that point. Since the incident, she has been hopping around the house with the help of a staff. While she has had prosthetic boots made twice over since then, she felt they were not very useful, "Now I wear canvas shoes and walk with great difficulty. When my foot hurts a lot, I take pain-killers," she said.

Like the other women, Mitoo has been struggling to make ends meet. "We got Rs 1,50,000 from the Centre but that is not enough compensation for a disability that is life long. Should the state government not be sensitive to our condition?" she asked.

A source in the army pointed out that the Ministry of Defence gives ex gratia compensation to all civilian victims of landmines, "The policy has been in place since January 2003. The army gives Rs 2,50,000 to next of kin in cases of casualty, Rs 2,00,000 in cases of 100 per cent disability, Rs 1,50,000 in cases of disability assessed between 50 to 100 per cent, and Rs 1,00,000 in cases where disability is below 50 per cent." But the officer admitted that the paper work involved was very exhaustive.

Of course, the army disagreed with the victims' grievance that it hasn't cared to follow up on prosthesis. Explained another officer, "No patient came back to us. If they approach us, follow-up action will be taken. If we had gone all the way to get prosthesis fitted, nothing really holds us back from organising a follow-up. At that time funds for the expense incurred on transportation, accommodation, diet, treatment, including the cost of prosthesis, was provided by the Service concerned. Artificial limb centres in Chandigarh, Bhavnagar, Jaipur and Ludhiana, were also supported by the army for the provision of prosthesis."

The army also rejected the criticism that the warning markers on several acres of land along the India-Pakistan border were either missing or not legible. One officer put it this way, "During Operation Parakram, the army had laid landmines, which were in consonance with well-practised, relevant and standard operating procedures, including physical verification of the mines, and a meticulous drill during laying out these mines. Special emphasis had been laid on the recording and marking of each minefield to prevent civilian casualties."

Sources also claimed that the army had made all efforts to ensure the safety of civilians. Caution notices were put up in all border villages by the state and district administrations and the local police was informed about the presence of the minefields. Besides, there was also prominent perimeter fencing with barbed wires and conspicuous marking and warning signs, in both English and the local language, at close intervals, to indicate the presence of minefields and alert civilians.

According to the army, almost the entire area was, in any case, de-mined after Operation Parakram. Yet, while sources did concede that there could be the drifting of mines due to the melting of the snows or sub-soil erosion, they hastened to add that whenever such developments are brought to its notice, the army takes prompt action, apart from preemptive steps like conducting regular monitoring exercises.

The residents of the vulnerable villages, however, have continued to live in fear of the hidden dangers that lurk in their fields and pathways. Many among them have already been struggling for years with the consequences of having stepped on a stray landmine that has either led to death or a family member becoming permanently disabled.

This is a region known for the high value of its fertile agricultural land, but for some that very land turned out to be the source of a lifetime of pain and suffering.

Chhattisgarh's Children, Nobody's Children

Manipadma Jena

Raipur (Chhattisgarh): A traumatised Sunita Hemla, 13, has lived every moment of her father's last hours a thousand times over. It was the dead of night when seven masked men visited her parents' home in Santoshpur village of Bijapur district in Chhattisgarh. The strangers revealed themselves to be Maoists and demanded that Sunita's father step out or else they would kill the young girl and her two siblings. Fearing for his children's lives, her father Masa Ram gave himself up. At dawn, his battered body was found in the backyard of the family home.

Sunita was not the only young witness to such terror. Sarita Netam, 14, another local girl, lost her father, Ganapat, under eerily similar circumstances. Ganapat, the headman of the Ambelli Gram Panchayat, also in Bijapur district, was killed because he would not hand over to the local militants the 24 boys and girls they were demanding for induction into their cadres. Revealed Sarita, "Two days after they took him, my elder aunt who lived in the neighbouring village found his body in her millet field. His limbs had been tied together and his body bore multiple hatchet wounds. He had been repeatedly dunked in the village pond with the objective of extracting information, and then left to die." Every detail of this tragic story seemed to have been etched on the mind of the young girl as she narrated it.

Since 2004, Chhattisgarh has been one of states worst hit by Maoist insurgency. According to data from the Union Ministry of Home Affairs, 1,483 people were killed between 2004 and 2008 in such violence, with civilians accounting for 828 of the deaths. We visited the worst affected districts of Dantewada and Bijapur in 2009 to understand the impact of the violence, especially on children.

The situation in Dantewada was grave. The district had

been locked in a civil war-like situation since 2005, with Maoist insurgents pitted against the security forces in a brutal embrace. An armed anti-insurgency squad known as the Salwa Judum – which ironically means "a movement to restore peace" – was set up in 2005 to counter Maoist violence, but ended up only replicating and perpetuating it. Members of the Salwa Judum would visit villages, hold pre-announced meetings, exhort local tribals to resist the Maoists and then proceed to capture alleged militants who often ended up killed. There were many occasions when the Salwa Judum would run amok, burning down the houses of known or suspected insurgents in the region.

The resultant atmosphere of conflict and uncertainty had forced local tribal communities to flee the area even if this meant deserting the homes and villages of their ancestors. They would either end up in government relief camps, migrate to the bordering districts of Andhra Pradesh or simply disappear into the forests seeking protection of the insurgents.

Over the years, thousands of children here were caught in this scenario of violence and uncertainty. In many cases they had to fend for themselves, not knowing whether their parents were dead or alive. The conflict had come home to them in at least three distinct ways. First, many were drawn directly into the vortex of the violence. According to local sources, arms – even AK-47s – were sometimes strapped on to the bodies of children, who were then used as 'human shields' by the perpetrators of violence in order to protect themselves. Children would also be used as conduits in the passing of secret information, or be made to plant bombs and landmines.

Moreover, numerous youngsters were made to engage directly in armed hostilities, including the teenagers who had signed up for the Chhattisgarh Police Service, as Special Police Officers (SPO). Recruited for a salary of Rs 3,000, under Section 17 of the Police Act, 1861 and Section 9 of the Chhattisgarh Police Act, 2000, they would find themselves on the frontline of the offensive against the insurgents after having been trained to deploy the most brutal means of violence

themselves. It was only in mid-2011 that the Supreme Court of India had intervened to stop such recruitment.

Of course, this conflict resulted in the loss of basic schooling of Chhattisgarh's children - the second big impact of violence on these youngsters. According to a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report, *Dangerous Duty* (September 2008), around 40 per cent of the children between ages six and 16, who had been residing in government sponsored rehabilitation camps in Chhattisgarh, had not been attending school. The state government, in order to prevent local tribals from joining the ranks of the Maoists, had opened 23 makeshift relief camps in Dantewada and Bijapur, many of them located in local schools. Not surprisingly then, according to one estimate, since 2005 no less than 260 schools in abandoned villages in the two districts had either been relocated or shut down.

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), in its 2008 inquiry report, conducted in response to writ petitions alleging excesses by security forces and the Salwa Judum cadres, had also noted that school buildings were occupied for months by the Salwa Judum and security forces. Since these schools were being used as operational bases, they sometimes came under Maoist fire and became the scene of pitched battles, which reduced school infrastructure to rubble in some areas.

International Humanitarian Law prohibits the destruction of schools, considered as civilian objects, unless such buildings were occupied by the military. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NHRC) also recommended that schools be recognised by all parties to a conflict as 'zones of peace'. But these were clearly be overlooked by the state as evidenced by the very poor literacy figures at the time - Dantewada had a literacy rate of 20.5 per cent for women and 39.5 per cent for men, compared to the state average of 65.18 per cent (Census 2001).

The third significant impact observed on children's lives was the dislocation brought on by a conflict that had torn the very fabric of family life. Kamli Hapka's was one such family. Kamli, 37, lost her husband, Mangu, the sarpanch (village head)

of Ghumra in Bijapur, to the insurgency. Then her son was lost to her because he was recruited into the Salwa Judum and she didn't hear of him after that. Her daughter, Aarti, 12, had to be sent away to a *kanya ashram* (a residential school run by the Chhattisgarh government) in Dhanora. The ashram was later set on fire and Aarti had to be relocated to a shelter for children affected by conflict in Raipur, the capital of the state. Although she was safe, Aarti was about 500 kilometres away from her family members and could not contact them even in an emergency.

Aarti, Sunita and Sarita, along with 26 other girls, ware all housed in the shelter at Raipur. When we met them, they smiled hesitantly for the camera but their faces bore evidence of the deep trauma that had marked their young lives. These were children who never got the chance to live their childhood and soon were to be young adults without a future. All because of a conflict they had no role in creating.

After the Garo-Rabha Clashes, Malaria and Hunger

Ratna Bharali Talukdar

Kukurkata (Assam): A bumper crop during the agriculture season, the birth of a baby boy one month ahead of Magh Bihu – the harvest festival that falls in mid-January – and her husband's promise to buy a two-wheeler with his increased income as a small trader in the East Garo Hills district of Meghalaya, were reasons enough to make Himani Rabha, 27, smile.

This Rabha tribal woman from Teklipara I village, located in the Goalpara district of Assam that lies close to the Assam-Meghayala border, could never have imagined that a totally unexpected conflict would turn her world upside down, that she would have to flee her home, and live in sub-human conditions in a makeshift relief camp at Kukurkata in Assam.

Inter-tribal clashes broke out between the Garos and Rabhas in the first week of January 2011 and the violence and arson that followed displaced 60,000 people in both Assam and Meghalaya. The two tribes, which had peacefully coexisted since the days of their ancestors, were locked in a stand-off that may not have claimed many lives – twelve casualties were reported – but which rendered thousands homeless. Over 40,000 people took refuge in the thirty-odd relief camps that came up across Assam, while ten camps set up in Meghalaya became the temporary homes of nearly 20,000 others.

Life for Himani and other Rabha women in the Kukurkata camp was fraught with hunger, poverty and panic. Food was hard to come by: most of the displaced people couldn't afford even one square meal a day. And since provisions for health care were almost non-existent, pregnant women were the worst hit. In the name of sanitation, the Public Health and Engineering Department set up pit toilets, but open defecation was common, creating serious health and hygiene concerns.

The education of school-going children was put on hold as most of the village schools close by had been burnt down in the clashes. This disruption of life also meant no jobs. The high level of unemployment gave families sleepless nights because they had no idea how they would ever manage to get back on their feet without financial resources. Conversations with Himani and other women in the Kukurkata camp indicated how tragically disruptive are the ethnic clashes that regularly break out in this region. "Our granaries, full of paddy, and our homes were set ablaze by miscreants. Animals, fowls and properties were either looted or destroyed. We were left with no means to even resume a normal life. In such a situation, with my jobless husband and three children, we have no idea what to do for survival," said a completely distraught Himani.

Following the violence, unemployment became a major issue. Traditionally, the livelihoods of the Garos and Rabhas has been interlinked: the men from Assam—Garo or Rabha—cross over to Meghalaya to work in the coal mines or in small

business ventures there as daily wagers, while Rabha women make *dakmandas,* the typical dress of Garo women, since the Garos don't have a weaving tradition. However, in the aftermath of the ethnic tensions, this age-old relationship completely broke down.

Things took a turn for the worst when, two months after the clashes, the state discontinued its assistance and with it the flow of relief material and rations for camp inmates also ended. Some external aid helped during this time of deep crisis. Himani, for instance, was able to construct a temporary shed with a tarpaulin sheet provided by the Assam state branch of the Indian Red Cross Society (IRCS) and the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC). The lone blanket, also provided by the ICRC, was her family's only protection against the cold at night, while her kitchen was lined with cooking utensils given as part of the relief kit: two cooking pots, five bowls, five full plates, five glasses, five cups, five tablespoons, two serving spoons and one knife. But while the cutlery and crockery was there, food stocks were still low because of limited funds. Himani's five-member family lived on one meal a day in a bid to make the rehabilitation grant of Rs 10,000, that it had received from the Assam government to rebuild the family home, go as far as possible.

Another major challenge that Himani faced due to her changed circumstances was the deteriorating health of her three children. Her newborn baby was not able to get proper attention because the health sub-centre at Kukurkata lacked personnel. And while her two school-going children would have got their government-funded mid-day meals had they been attending their old school, they were now becoming pale and listless because of poor nourishment.

Almost every one of the Rabha women at the Kukurkata camp had similar stories to relate. They all longed to get back home to their old lives. In fact, some had bravely made their way back to their villages but quickly returned with horrific stories about how the whole area looked like a war zone. Importantly, they found there was no source of safe drinking

water because the existing water sources, mostly wells, had been contaminated by the rioters.

Displacement has always posed specific problems for women which seldom get articulated in policy making. But talking to the women at Kukurkata provided important glimpses into some of these. Take Triveni Rabha, 30, who was eight months pregnant at the time. Her prematurely lined face bore evidence of the tough experiences she had had to face in her condition. She recalled how her family escaped their burning home and crossed a river before they found safety at the Kukurkata Police Outpost. Her husband, Dilip, was later compelled to go out in search of work, leaving his pregnant wife behind. She was in dire need of proper rest and food but barely got to eat more than once a day. The one lifeline Triveni had in those difficult days was the local Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA). "The village ASHA attended to me regularly and tried to give me as much help as possible. She also reassured me by saying that she would be around when it was time for the delivery and that was a big consolation," she said.

The other concern that loomed large during those days was the changing weather. With the onset of the rainy season in June life only got tougher: refugee tents began to leak and there was slush all around. But what was really worrying was the threat of malaria; in the border areas of north-east India malaria outbreaks are common. While the Congress-led coalition government in Assam had made budgetary provisions for the distribution of medicated mosquito nets and blankets among the poor, most of these had already been distributed in the first quarter of the year as poll freebies, in time for the Assam assembly elections in April. Predictably, none of the families in Kukurkata got any.

Despite all these difficulties, the Rabha women did not admit defeat. They went about piecing together the shards of their broken lives, bit by bit, drawing heart from their collective strength. Their first move was to request civil society organisations to help them set up looms so that they could

resume their weaving to earn some money. The Assam state branch of the IRCS also helped out with a Micro Economic Initiative Programme to enable the women to take on various economic activities based on their traditional skills and aptitude.

"It is only through cooperation, not conflict, that the future can be secured" – this was the implicit message that the hardworking Rabha women sent to those who had lit and then fanned the flames of conflict which engulfed the region and their lives.

Desperately Seeking Doctors: In Odisha's Red Zone

Sarada Lahangir

Malkangiri (Odisha): A doctor is a rare sight in Malkangiri, one of Odisha's poorest districts and the site of a long-running Maoist insurgency. Yet, if any community needs affordable health care, it is this one, caught as it is between insurgency and chronic malnutrition.

The case of Minati Kirsani, a young woman resident of Petal, a predominantly tribal village in Malkangiri, shines a light on the situation here. When she was seven months pregnant, Minati suddenly developed acute stomach cramps and was taken to the Paplur Primary Health Centre, around ten kilometres from the village. An Ayurvedic doctor, Prassanna Ku Patra, attended to her. He administered a dose of intravenous glucose, but Minati's condition deteriorated rapidly. Finally, her hapless husband, Raghuram, acting on the advice of the doctor, decided to take her to the hospital at Chitrokonda, about forty kilometres from Paplur. Unfortunately, no transport was immediately available and Raghuram decided to take Minati back home. She did not survive the ordeal.

Patra, the only doctor in these parts, has to routinely handle cases of this kind from fifteen villages in the area. When we met him to ask about Minati's case, he sounded helpless. "The case was quite complicated. Here in this new Primary Health Centre (PHC), we have almost no infrastructure. No electricity, no water supply, no ambulance facility. And the general fear of the Maoists has ensured that timely public transport is also not available. I did my best, but unfortunately couldn't save this patient's life," he said.

Tulema Hental of Badpada village, which lies in an inaccessible part of Malkangiri, is another young mother who died in childbirth. When she first went into labour, nobody in her family realised the seriousness of the situation. The baby emerged in the breech position, and the young mother began to bleed profusely. The local midwife, Kali Hentalo, tried to salvage the situation, but Tulema's condition soon turned critical. At that late stage, the family tried to take her to a hospital in Chitrokonda. But because of a *bandh* (shut down) call given by the Maoists, no transportation was available and Tulema passed away.

The stories of Minati and Tulema are not unusual in Malkangiri, where the official Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) is thirty per 200 live births, according to the office of the chief district medical officer. Out of 14,982 deliveries in the district during 2009-10, only 6,122 took place in a health care institution.

The growing insurgency in Malkangiri has certainly taken a heavy toll on health care delivery systems. While the insurgents have not directly attacked any health establishment or health personnel so far, the frequent road blockades, ambushes on police parties, and threats to government officials in the affected areas have left health care services in complete disarray. In 2011, of the 111 sanctioned posts for doctors in the district, seventy-one posts were lying vacant; similarly, 50 per cent of paramedical posts remained unfilled and half the PHCs had no doctors.

Legislators cutting across party lines have admitted that

most of the doctors and para-medics emerging from the state-run medical colleges do not wish to work in Malkangiri, despite attractive pay packages and incentives from the state government, due to security concerns. Their fears are not unfounded. This is the same region from where R. Vineel Krishna, the serving district collector, was abducted by Maoists in February 2011, as the country watched in helpless anxiety.

According to Malkangiri's chief district medical officer, C.H. Pravakar, "Women and children here are severely undernourished. Although no formal study has been done, our health workers from villages like Janbai, Jodamba, Badpada and Jantapai have informed us about the high MMR and the alarming levels of anaemia among the nursing mothers."

Pravakar also said that many maternal deaths were going unreported, and that his office was quite helpless in managing the situation. "We are trying our best to deliver good health services, but what can we do? First, the area is almost inaccessible, given the bad roads. Second, bandh calls by the Maoists for at least twenty days in a month ensure that there is no transportation worth the name. So how do we dispatch the medicines and food material under schemes like the Integrated Child Development Services to women who desperately need them?"

Local people talk of having to walk for miles, carrying sick relatives in bamboo baskets or on a cot, in order to get them some medical care in the nearest town. The roads are badly damaged and the Balimela reservoir has ensured that some 151 villages remain completely cut off from the mainland by a large body of water. Earlier, there was a regular launch service to ferry them across the waters, but after the Alampaka incident of 2008 – in which thirty-eight security personnel were killed in a Maoist attack – there is only one service a day. The few boats available take over six hours to traverse the forty to fifty kilometres from the Balimela spillway to the villages on the bank of the reservoir. This leaves the people living there with no option but to suffer and wait endlessly should

they be confronted with a medical emergency.

Visiting the region was an eye-opener. A PHC opened in Badpada in 2005 was still awaiting its first doctor years later in end-2011. In the nearby village of Papermelta, Sania Matem, 60, held the slight, feverish form of her two-year-old grandson in her arms. There was fear on her face as she pleaded with anyone she came across for medicines to save the child. Her daughter-in-law had died while giving birth to him; in that case too her family had not been able to provide the young woman with timely medical attention.

According to Dr. Khirod Chandra Mahanto, a senior doctor at the Chitrokonda Community Health Centre, "Everything comes to a standstill here after 6 p.m., because of the fear of the Naxalites. Earlier, doctors and auxiliary staff would respond to a call from an interior region. Not any more. It's the fear factor that operates here."

One auxiliary nursing midwife from Badpada added, "If a district collector can be abducted here, then what about ordinary people like us? Who will guarantee our safety? We want to work and serve the people but not at the cost of our lives."

When R. Vineel Krishna, who got transferred from Malkangiri after he was released from captivity, was asked about the problem of health care delivery this region, he was not keen to say too much on the issue. This was perhaps understandable given his own tough experience. But he did say that the district administration in the interior pockets of Malkangiri was very conscious of the problem and was trying hard to improve the situation.

But can these words of hope from Krishna be of any consolation to the thousands suffering here? How long will it be before women like the elderly Sania Matem, who was desperately seeking medical attention for her frail and sickly grandson, can access health care will out fear?

Ghost Health Centres to Treat Real People

Sarada Lahangir

Nabarangpur (Odisha): It would be wrong to say that there was no health infrastructure in Odisha's tribal-dominated, insurgency-affected Nabarangpur district. In 2011, on paper at least, there were thirty-seven Primary Health Centres (PHCs) and seven Community Health Centres (CHCs) covering the ten blocks in the district.

But impressive as these figures sounded, in terms of health delivery on the ground they were hardly making a difference. Here's how alarming the health personnel shortage in Nabarangpur was in 2011: at the district headquarters' hospital, on which more than three lakh people were dependent, there were ten positions lying vacant, including key posts in the departments of medicine, orthopedics, paediatrics, obstetrics and gynaecology, eye, skin, anesthesia, pathology and surgery. The situation in the block areas was no better: at least twenty sub-divisional hospitals were being run solely by health workers and nurses, while certain facilities in the very remote areas were being managed by Class Four employees without any real professional medical training. This was the situation at the PHCs: while thirty-six posts of surgeons were vacant in 2011, no doctors had been posted in the eleven specialist departments in the last decade. Moreover, no doctor had ever been posted at PHCs near the villages of Kosagumuda, Papadahandi, Dabugam, Jharigam, Chandahandi, Nandahandi and Tentulikhunti, while at the seven CHCs in Nabarangpur, posts for senior medical officers had been lying unfilled for the past twelve years.

Despite this grim reality, there seemed to be no urgency on the part of the state machinery to look for a workable solution. No real surprise as the authorities in the state capital Bhubaneswar usually sat up and took action only when there

was the occasional tragedy. In 2004, for instance, the villages of Dongriguda and Jharigam had made it to the front pages of the local newspapers when twelve children died due to the lack of timely medical care for illnesses related to malnutrition. At that point, the government promised to improve the health care system at the village level, but once the public outrage died, nothing happened. The deaths were soon forgotten.

How were local people coping with this serious shortfall in health care delivery? According to Kusuma Gauda, 50, a resident of Chandahandi village, "No doctor has been sighted here for years. The Chandahandi PHC is run by a pharmacist. During times when the incidents of malaria and diarrhoea increase, a mobile medical unit does come by. But it is usually around only for a day or so. For the rest of the year we are dependent on the medicines given by our local village medicine man. We have no other alternative."

Dependence on 'medicine men', or those selling indigenous therapies, seemed to be common in Nabarangpur. These medicine men made quick money because few here have been able to afford to go to the big Berhampur Medical College and Hospital in Ganjam district or to hospitals in Visakhapatnam in the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh.

The topography of the region, too, has contributed to the misery. Much of Nabarangpur is hilly and has only fair weather roads. During the monsoons, people have to walk or, at best, ride a cycle. This situation is particularly trying for pregnant women. According to Sushama Jain, an activist who works for the local civil society organisation, Jagruti, "in Nabarangpur, which has one of the highest Infant Mortality Rates (IMR) in Odisha, women nearing their delivery date have to sometimes travel fifty to sixty kilometres to the district hospital through terrain that can be covered only on foot and which could entail crossing rivers. No other modes of transportation exist here."

When Bimala Majhi, 30, of Dongriguda village went into labour, she had to be rushed to the only CHC in the area located at Jharigam. To reach there, she had to endure a long and

tough journey: she travelled the first 10 kilometres to Badtemra village in a bamboo basket carried by her husband, Dhanapati, and his two nephews. It took them forty-five minutes to cover that distance. From there, she travelled another thirty-six kilometres by bus. By the time she reached the poorly-equipped Jharigam CHC, she had developed severe complications and was referred to the sub-divisional hospital at Umerkot, about eleven kilometres away. An autorickshaw was hired, but when the family reached Umerkot they found that the only doctor there was on leave. So Bimala had to be taken to the district headquarters hospital at Nabarangpur, where she underwent a Caesarean section and gave birth to a baby girl who died a day later.

For any mother, the loss of a child is tragic. But when this scene is replayed around these parts, many times over every day, it does provoke the question: where is the health care for the people who need it most? "Our village is very remote," said a dejected Dhanapati. "Every year, people here are dying because accessing any form of health care is difficult. And even if there is a health centre in the area, it is often of little use because there are no medical personnel in attendance."

As was evident in Bimala's case, only the hospital at the district headquarters was equipped to come to the rescue of critically ill patients; there was simply no one in the PHCs or CHCs to handle emergencies. Sushama Jain revealed that even if these patients did manage to reach the PHC/CHC in time and there was a medical worker in attendance, chances were that nothing would be done. "If the case is complicated, local personnel do not even touch these patients. They are immediately referred to the district hospital," she said.

This delay in attending to the critically ill was responsible for the high number of maternal deaths in the state, especially among tribal women. The figure for deaths of infants below five years, too, was poor – nearly ninety for every 1,000 children, according to the Comptech Tribal Rehabilitation Society, an organisation that did an IMR survey of Nabarangpur. Several tribal women had no choice but to deliver babies in

their homes, because family members did not see any benefit in travelling for hours to a congested hospital where there would be no trained doctor to oversee treatment. In 2010-2011, for instance, there was no gynaecologist posted anywhere in the district.

Dr. Manoj Parida, the doctor in charge at the Umerkot Zonal Hospital in 2011, admitted to the lack of good doctors and medical support staff that afflicted the region: "Besides a lack of infrastructure, in this hospital, for instance, out of nine posts for doctors only three – which includes me – are filled. Four posts have been vacant during my entire tenure of six years. We don't even have an anaesthetist here so how can we conduct major operations? Whenever we come across a serious patient we have no option but to refer them to the district headquarters' hospital."

The former Chief District Medical Officer of Nabarangpur, Dr. J.K. Behera, also explained how the entire health system had been brought down to its knees here: "This is one of the most backward and underdeveloped tribal districts in Odisha. There is a lack of proper connectivity and good educational facilities. Making matters worse has been the sharp increase in Maoist insurgency in the district and the situation is only getting worse. Fearing for their lives, doctors are unwilling to work in the district."

Ultimately, what good would the empty shell of a PHC or hospital be for people suffering from serious health problems in an insurgency-hit district? The health authorities in Nabarangpur had no answers.

Behmai's Widows: "We've Been Left to Die Forever"

Yogesh Vajpeyi

Kanpur Dehat (Uttar Pradesh): Behmai village was in the news over three decades ago when Phoolan Devi and her gang of dacoits gunned down twenty men here on February 14, 1981. Decades later, there are many in the village who still remember that day, but possibly no one more than Munni Devi. "I feel like something that has been used, abused by the world and then discarded," she told us when we visited Behmai, which falls in the Kanpur Dehat district of Uttar Pradesh (UP). One of those gunned down on that fateful day was Munni's husband, Lal Singh.

Like most girls in the region, Munni was only thirteen when her parents married her to Lal Singh, a boy from Behmai, all of fourteen. Local custom required her to continue living with her parents in Tengua village, situated across the river Yamuna in the adjoining Jalaun district, until her *gauna*, a second marriage ceremony held in a year or two, after which the groom takes the bride to his home.

The teenaged bride was preparing for her new life when fate intervened. She was still in her parents' home when news came in of the now-infamous Behmai massacre in which her husband was also killed. "I had not even seen his face. I only got to see his dead body," she recalled.

A year later, tragedy struck young Munni's life once again – this time she lost her parents. And before she could come to terms with her loss, she had to pack her bags and shift to the home of her in-laws in Behmai.

The helplessness and despair that Munni felt at that point does not seem to have faded with time. In fact, abject poverty and memories of the tragedy have branded her life ever since. "I have nowhere to go. I have no child to support me. I receive no pension from the government. I am at the mercy of God

and my husband's family," she wailed.

Immediately after the killings, almost the entire state government machinery descended on the scene of the crime in Behmai. Led by then UP Chief Minister, Viswanath Pratap Singh, the administration promised jobs to the relatives of the victims and pensions to their widows. Three decades have passed and none of the twelve surviving Behmai widows are receiving support any longer. Only one relative from each victim's family was given a constable's job with the state police.

"We did receive a pension of Rs 25 per month for a couple of years after the massacre, but then it stopped suddenly. We approached district officials in faraway Kanpur city but ended up spending money over futile journeys without any results," revealed Santoshi Devi, 60, who had helplessly watched her husband, Banwari, plead for his life before being gunned down by the Phoolan Devi gang.

Behmai is a hamlet of nearly 300 households, precariously perched on the ravines of the Yamuna river – the southern most part of the Chambal valley, notorious for its dacoit gangs since times immemorial. Besides subsistence agriculture, animal husbandry is the only source of livelihood for the Chaurasi Thakur community that dominates the village's social life. Those killed in the 1981 carnage included 17 Thakurs, one Muslim, one Dalit and one person belonging to the OBC (Other Backward Classes) community.

Contrary to generally held belief, the Chaurasi Thakurs of Behmai are not upper caste Thakurs, but reconverts from Islam who had been excommunicated by the Thakurs when they first embraced Islam. Unlike the regular Thakurs who have been the dominant landholders in the region for centuries, this community has fragmented landholdings. Also, they are confined to eighty-four (*chaurasi* in Hindi) villages in the Etawah, Kanpur Dehat and Jalaun districts of the state, and they marry only amongst themselves. Although excommunicated from the Thakur community, this isolated group follows Brahmanical cultural norms characterised by an adherence to the practice of child marriage and opposition

to widow remarriage.

The Behmai massacre went on to capture the imagination of the country. As the Phoolan Devi legend grew, movies came to be made and political parties became active here. But nobody cared to remember the condition of Behmai's widows. With no help coming from either the state or society, these women have now given up all hope of any redress.

In the celluloid versions of the massacre – notably in film-maker Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* – Behmai is invariably depicted as a village inhabited by brutal rapists, and this portrayal may have played a role in deflecting attention from the plight of its widows. Such portrayals seem to suggest that no one in such a decrepit village deserved any compensation. In politics, while prominent state leader Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party used Phoolan Devi as an icon for an OBC woman's fight for social justice, his rivals paraded the Behmai widows as part of their strategic counter-mobilisation of the upper caste Thakur communities. They even erected a *shaheed sthal* (martyrs' memorial) at the carnage site, where local politicians make ritualistic visits on February 14 every year.

But it is all shadow play. The continuing and unmitigated plight of these women represents the failure of the state and its criminal justice system. According to Bharat B. Das, author of *Victims in the Criminal Justice System*, "Victim's suffering, reparation and rehabilitation are essentially matters of the criminal justice system. Apart from undue hardships the victims face, failure on this count can result in their alienation and non-cooperation with the justice system or, worse, cause them to take law into their own hands."

This is exactly what happened in the case of Behmai. To avenge the killing of Behmai's Thakurs, Phoolan Devi's rivals raided the neighbouring Astah village in Auraiya district, inhabited by people from her caste – the Mallahs – and perpetrated another massacre.

A growing number of experts feels that the Indian criminal justice system is oriented towards safeguarding the rights of

the offenders and not those of the victims. Although there is provision for compensation to victims, the police, the judiciary as well as the state are primarily focused on the conviction of the offender. The classic study, *Compensation to the Victims of Dacoit Gangs in Chambal Valley*, by Saugar University sociologists D.P. Singh and D.R. Jatar, has highlighted this. After a scrutiny of 184 victims, the researchers found that the majority of them received either no compensation at all or merely paltry sums after considerable delay. "The victims, especially poor villagers, reported considerable difficulty in obtaining government help. They also complained that they had to bribe officials," wrote Singh and Jatar.

The Behmai widows present another dilemma. Since they are not perceived as the direct victims of the crimes perpetrated by the dacoits, they are not visible. Mahadei, the widow of Ram Singh Shakya, from an OBC background, underlined the poignancy of the situation she, and others like her, face: "When her man dies, a woman is invariably left to die forever."

Life in Salabila: No Relief from Relief Camps

Ratna Bharali Talukdar

Bongaigaon (Assam): The thatched shack with bamboo walls, measuring ten square feet, located in the Salabila Relief Camp in Assam's Bongaigaon district, was depressingly quiet. Poverty, hunger and fatigue seemed to have blocked out the sounds that signify a happy home.

Marjina Khatun, 25, who lived there, looked exhausted. She had just returned home after a fourteen-hour shift at a construction site that casts slabs, and her youngest child, Manowar, aged eleven months, lay asleep on a mat on the floor, emaciated and naked.

While Marjina's life may appear as if it were a scene straight out of an 'alternative' film which had poverty as its backdrop, for her the privations were only too real. Just as they were for the scores of other Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) – all Muslims – who had been languishing in the nine relief camps of Bongaigaon and Kokrajhar districts in Assam since 1993. When we visited the region in late-2009, these camps, housing 5,500 people were located in Hapachara, Balajani, Tapatari, Salabila and Bardhup in Bangaigaon district and in Bangaldoba, Sanlatari, Nangalbhanga and Bengtal in Kokrajhar.

Who were these people and why were they still living in the camps all these years later? It started way back in 1993 when the Bodo-led pro-statehood movement was at its peak. These people were uprooted from their ancestral villages, which numbered around forty-five across the two districts, following violent clashes between the Bodos – the single largest plains tribe in Assam – and the local migrant Muslim settlers. According to the records, sixty-four people of this community, chiefly poor farmers, were killed in Bangaigaon, while thirty-six died in Kokrajhar during that conflict. Many others also slain in the sporadic incidents that followed between 1993 and 2000.

For Marjina, a mother of four, the conflict ended any chances she may have once had of living a fulfilled, happy life. She, and thousands of others like her, were reduced to becoming daily wage earners in the very region where they had once lived in self-sufficient ancestral homes and on the very land they had once farmed. In 2009, they were continuing to lead severely constricted lives in the absence of even the most basic amenities or social security.

Time and again, all attempts at rehabilitating this community were thwarted by the hostile locals. For instance, in 2006, the Salabila inhabitants, who were earlier living in the Goroimari camp, were promised a permanent settlement because the Goroimari camp area had been acquired for expanding National Highway 31. The locals, however, opposed the move and the IDPs had to reconcile themselves to living in

yet another makeshift camp, which came up at Salabila.

Salabila was typical of the nine relief camps functioning in the region. Spread over sixty-four *bighas* (one *bigha* equals 0.4 hectare) it was home to 1,310 families (over 6,500 people). Of the fifty-six tube wells provided by the government, only twenty-two were functional. As for toilets, while there were forty in all, many of them were clogged and unusable. Poor sanitary facilities and a critical water crisis had resulted in the practice of open defecation, which made for appallingly unhygienic conditions. According to camp dwellers, the hot summer months and the rainy season were the worst times of the year, with children, in particular, falling gravely ill because of the environment in which they were living.

Sarbeswar Bayan, a surveillance worker at the nearby Dompara Mini Public Health Centre (PHC), spoke of the severe health crisis that people were up against. According to him, while living in unhygienic conditions increased the chances of diseases like chicken pox, malaria, diarrhoea, jaundice and other water-borne infections taking on epidemic proportions, for the inmates at Salabila the situation was even worse because there was no health care facility to cater to their needs apart from a doctor who visited the local PHC once a week. Moreover, travelling to nearby towns for medical treatment was really not an option, given the distances entailed and the fact that every working day lost meant a significant loss of income.

Wwithout a doubt, children were the worst affected. As food was hard to come by – the rice provided to each family lasted for only ten days a month – around 1,639 children in the 0-14 years age group here showed signs of malnutrition.

Failing health apart, even their education was at risk. In fact, for an entire decade – between 1993 and 2003 – many of the children had not even stepped into a classroom. It was only after the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan – the government's flagship programme for the time-bound achievement of universal primary education – decided to set up a centre in Goroimari under the Education Guarantee Scheme, that some form of schooling was made available to them. At Salabila,

two Sanyogi Siksha Kendras (SSKs) – which are usually meant for out-of-school children, but serve as formal schools in such camps – were providing primary education. A total of 543 primary students were enrolled in 2010, being taught by six teachers, who were paid an extremely nominal salary of Rs 1,500 per month.

As for the government-run mid-day meal (MDM) scheme, only one of the two functioning SSKs had been covered, revealed Amir Hussain, a teacher and secretary of the local camp management committee. He also added that the rations provided under the MDM scheme were often inadequate: at the SSK where he taught, of the 419 students enrolled, only 279 could be provided with a meal.

Also missing from the camp was an *anganwadi* centre (government-run crèche), mandated to care for children between 0-6 years, lactating mothers, pregnant women and underweight adolescent girls under the Supplementary Nutritional Programme of the Integrated Children Development Scheme.

There was a clear lack of focus in addressing the urgent problems faced by women and children, perhaps because there were no women holding important positions within camp management committees. It wasn't as if they were incapable of taking decisions or getting things done, it was just that they were not being given a chance.

Yet, women had stepped up to contribute in more ways than one. Besides taking care of her home and family, Marjina was one of the several women here who had also become a breadwinner for her family. A typical work day for this hard-working woman started early in the morning when she boarded the overcrowded truck arranged by contractors to transport workers to distant construction sites for slab-casting work.

While this kind of work paid better than others, it also involved great uncertainty as the enormous demand for wage work ensured that jobs were not easy to come by. Marjina revealed that she got Rs 100 per day and some extra money

for overtime duty. "Normally, I get work like this for ten to twelve days each month," she added. Another fallout of the employment crisis was that children were often forced to discontinue school after they completed the primary levels, as they were expected to help out at home, with both parents away the whole day looking for work.

Nearly two decades had passed since Marjina first moved to Salabila and she had no idea how many more years she would have to spend in this ghetto. Normalcy was what everybody at the camp longed for. Hope kept alternating with despair. The words of young Hamida, who had grown up as an IDP at Salabila, said it all: "Over nearly two decades, many people visited us, sometimes at the Bangaigaon relief camp, sometimes in Goroimari and sometimes here. They all talked of giving us a settled space, but wherever we moved, there was always local protest against our presence. I have seen how young girls are practically sold in the camps in the name of marriage. Getting two meals, some education, a few clothes are all luxuries for us. Are the lives we lead here normal?"

When Women Take Up Arms

Soma Mitra

Paschim Medinipur (West Bengal): In the summer of 2009, conflict in Lalgarh in West Bengal's West Midnapore district (now called Paschim Medinipur) had reached a point of no return. By late June, Operation Lalgarh, an armed intervention by central government forces against Maoist insurgents in the region, in tandem with the state police, was in full swing. A nondescript area became a battleground and its poverty-stricken inhabitants were either drawn into the violent confrontation between security forces and Maoist insurgents or caught in the crossfire.

What was striking about the Lalgarh developments was the mass mobilisation of women, many of whom joined ranks of the Maoists after their sons and husbands were arrested by the police for being sympathetic to the insurgency. The women even participated as members of 'peasant battalions' – wielding bows and arrows, even axes, and raising slogans, staging rallies, and participating in acts of arson.

How did this come about? Why did ordinary women find it necessary to take up arms? At one level, the events that played out in Lalgarh could be seen as a battle between the ruling West Bengal government and its party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPIM(M)], and the insurgent Maoists assisted by the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCAPA). At another level, it was about the discontent of a troubled community fighting for survival and the basic necessities of life, such as potable water and education for its children, which found expression in public protests.

Talking to these women in the turbulent days of June 2009 revealed just how stark was the local deprivation. Shashi Murmu, 28, of Mulapara village, in the adjoining Shalboni block of East Midnapore district (now called Purba Medinipur) spoke for many women in the region when she said, "We don't have clean drinking water; our children are deprived of proper schools. We have no other way but to revolt against this situation." Her mother, Tara, 51, who also took up arms, added, "For a long while, we have been forced to lead a miserable existence. That's why we have decided that from now we will fight." Almost everybody in Mulapara had a similar view.

What was most striking was the fact that these women were completely fearless. They did not appear to be scared of any police reaction to their protests. Even earlier, the villagers in these areas revealed, the police had often picked them up for questioning whenever there was a Maoist attack. As soon as the combined operations were announced, the men had fled the villages, leaving the women behind to face the wrath of the security forces. While the police claimed that they did

not generally pick up women for interrogation, the people here told another story, adding that there was little administrative recourse or legal support when harsh and unjust treatment was meted out.

Government agencies were shaken when images of local women with arms began flooding the media, and a six-member delegation was sent to assess the actual situation on the ground. The experiences of this delegation proved to be a major eye-opener. R.D. Meena, Secretary, Backward Classes Welfare, who was a member of the delegation, is reported to have said, "I was shocked to see many [people] are yet to get ration cards. Those who should have rightly been enlisted as Below Poverty Line (BPL) are listed as Above Poverty Line (APL)."

Employment – or rather the lack of it – was a huge source of local discontent. Said Gouri Mahato, when we met her in 2009 at her village, Domahani, which lies close to Lalgarh, "The panchayat (village council) had assured my family of a job card under the rural jobs guarantee programme (the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005) two years ago. But I have not got one till date." MGNREGA assures the rural household of a minimum of 100 days of unskilled wage work in a year.

Gouri's family had five *bighas* of land, which they were forced to sell off when her mother fell critically ill and had to be taken to a Kolkata hospital for treatment because the Primary Health Centre (PHC) at Lalgarh had no doctor on duty. At the time, the job card could have made all the difference to Gouri.

Other women, like Krishna Halder, considered themselves 'luckier'. Halder did get a job card issued to her, but she had managed to access only 14 days of work over the last two years. Eventually, the struggle of daily life took its toll on Krishna's family. Her son joined the PCAPA and, later, the ranks of the Maoists, before being taken into police custody.

Earlier, the villages of Paschim Medinipur district were the stronghold of the CPI(M). However, three decades of rule

by its government had left Lalgarh without a proper irrigation system and other necessary infrastructure. A large section of people were still dependent on forest produce for their livelihood, including women like Mohua Baskey, who went into the forest every day at about five in the morning to collect *kendu pata* (leaves used to roll tobacco to make the local cigarettes called *beedis*). Baskey's teenaged daughter accompanied her on this daily two kilometre walk into the woods to supplement the family's meagre income. According to Baskey, the early morning toil of these two women and their subsequent trip to the market resulted in a meagre Rs 15 each day, which was obviously insufficient for their family of four. When Baskey was asked why she hadn't bothered to get her daughter educated, her explanation was matter-of-fact. "If I allow my daughter to go to school, our income, which is already such a pittance, would be reduced by half," she said.

The other major concern voiced by women here was corruption in the Public Distribution System (PDS). Said one old woman, "We have nothing else but our ration cards to give us something to put into our stomachs." Unfortunately, as Meena noted during his fact-finding mission, the PDS system was in a shambles as illustrated by the case of around 400 families of Gopalpur village. As all the households in the village fell into the BPL category, they were supposed to get 25 kilograms of rice at a rate of Rs 2.50 a month. However, the women complained that the local ration dealers claimed that they were entitled to only 10 kilograms of rice a month. Moreover, as standard practice, these ration dealers – many of whom were either members of the ruling party or were well connected with government officials – insisted on retaining everybody's ration cards so that they could dole out a small proportion of their entitlements to them every month. It was not surprising to see evidence of malnutrition on the faces and bodies of most children in these villages.

When the women of Lalgarh took up arms and joined the ranks of the insurgents, it made for striking media coverage.

But it was also a searing comment on their lives, for behind each of those images of women holding aloft machetes was a terrible, and preventable, human tragedy.

How Lalgarh's Flames Engulfed Ordinary Lives

Ajitha Menon

Paschim Medinipur (West Bengal): What began as a landmine attack on the convoy of West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya in late 2008, rapidly escalated into a spiral of violence that affected large swathes of the district of Paschim Medinipur, perpetrated by the state police, on the one hand, and Maoist cadres, claiming to represent the interests of the local tribal population, on the other. The Lok Sabha elections of 2009 only fanned the stand-off that had as its epicentre the village of Lalgarh, in Binpu-I block, located under the Jhargram subdivision of the district.

By June 2009, special central forces were assisting the state police in Operation Lalgarh, a consolidated armed intervention against the Maoists operating in the area. The Maoists, in turn, were assisted by a group that called itself the People's Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCAPA). The conflict carried on for months thereafter, deeply impacting the lives of ordinary people. For the women, in particular, it was a period of great distress.

When we reached Lalgarh in June 2009, about 35,000 people had already fled what came to be known as the Pirakata-Ramgarh-Goaltore triangular war zone. Many had taken shelter in state relief camps; others found temporary accommodation in the homes of relatives. With violence a constant threat, schools everywhere were closed and, what was worse, nobody could go out to work to keep their families fed.

Mangala Mal and Savitri Murmu were two women who found themselves on opposing sides of this conflict. They were divided by age as well as by ideology, but the consequences of the conflict for both were eerily similar. Both had been abused and tortured, both had lost their homes.

For Mangala, 26, the nightmare started in December 2008, when PCAPA-supported Maoists entered her village of Pirrakuli and started recruiting reluctant villagers for their cause. "They announced that there would be a police boycott and they wanted the men to join their force, apparently to protect villages. But the men were taken into jungles and forced to fight the police and the administration. My husband, a Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] cadre, was taken away. I never saw him again. I was beaten and molested when my husband refused to go with them, so he had no choice but to leave," she recalled with tears in her eyes.

On the other hand Savitri, 60, willingly joined the PCAPA after she was tortured by the police following the fateful landmine blast. "I wanted to take revenge for the abuse and took part in all the PCAPA rallies. I was there when the police camp at Shirish was set on fire," she told us. This meant that when the central government forces took control of the area again, Savitri found herself on the police hit list.

Savitri elaborated: "The Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) came looking for my son, Dulal, on June 18, 2009, when they launched the operation. They called him a Maoist and threatened to kill me if I did not inform them about his movements. I had to hide in the jungles at night and during the day come back to my village where people offered me protection." The uncertainty of her son's fate made her sick. All she wanted was for the violence to end.

In any conflict, the consequences for women are the same whichever side they are on. When Operation Lalgarh commenced, Kamala Mal, 48, fled with her family of six from Pirrakuli village on foot, since there was no public transport plying once the security operations were in full swing. "We had been living in terror. The Maoists came and forced the

men to go with them. When my husband, Gopal, refused, he was beaten. Then the armed men turned on me and my daughter-in-law, who was breast-feeding her three-month-old baby. They left only after we gave them Rs 50 and two kilograms of rice. But we knew they would return. That's why we decided to leave," she said.

When the Mal family fled their home, they left behind eight *bighas* of land, paddy stock and Gopal's eighty-four-year-old mother. "She could hardly walk. How could she cover the distance to Midnapore on foot?" asked Gopal. He was clearly heartbroken over her fate, but almost every family in the village had left the old, the infirm and the cattle behind, not knowing what would happen to them.

Mangala also quit her village when the central forces took control of the highway in June. For her, paying the Maoists their daily collection of Rs 20 and one kilogram of rice was a huge burden. But the last straw was when they wanted her to join them in their fight. "They used women and children as a frontline resistance force. Refusal led to severe beatings. But I had to think of my six-year-old daughter," she said.

Where some families were fed up of the diktat of the Maoists, others shed light on the police brutality. Said Sandhya Manna, 34, of Shirish village, "Traditionally, women here earned money by collecting *sal* leaves from the Anandapur forest, which are then made into leaf plates. But for months we were unable to go into the forests because of a police camp there. The policemen would harass us – I know of cases where women have faced brutal assaults at their hands."

Incidents like these only went to inflame popular anger against the police in the region and led to the burning down of CPI(M) party offices and police camps. Bedona Mahato, 68, the mother of Chatradhar Mahato, the leader of the PCAPA, talked in detail about police brutality. She said, "The police used to pick up young men from our villages and accuse them of being Maoists. They never returned. Their mothers and wives can only feel hatred towards them. My son is in hiding but I keep up the resistance despite the repeated raids and

torture."

The active participation of women was a conspicuous aspect of the Lalgarh interregnum. Explained Monglee of Chotopelia village, "Many young women like me voluntarily joined the PCAPA. We are peace-loving but we won't be treated like second-class citizens. Our demands are simple: we want safe drinking water, water for irrigation, and an end to corruption in the administration. But nobody listens."

Some women were openly militant. "We have our traditional weapons like bows and arrows, the spade and sickle. If necessary, we can fight for ages to safeguard our rights," said Esha Mari, 58 of Shirish village. But even as she said this, she added, "We know that prosperity for our children will only come with peace. We just want both sides to recognise our right to live decent lives."

Ultimately, no one in this region had escaped the terrible impact of that spell of violence. Lalgarh was full of sad stories of women. Of Jharna Mal, 25, who was waiting interminably for her husband, Manoranjan, to return – he had been picked up by the police one night for questioning from her village of Pathardanga, two kilometres from Lalgarh; of Pingbani village's Lakshmi Soren, who cried out that her family had nowhere to go because her husband and sons were being threatened by the Maoists for not having joined them. Like Mangala Mal and Savitri Murmu, although they found themselves on opposing sides, the trauma that this conflict had brought about was remarkably similar.

Barred from Life: Experiences of Women Prisoners

Anjali Singh

Lucknow (Uttar Pradesh): With tears streaming down her wrinkled face, Geeta Devi (name changed), 70, asked

plaintively, "*Bhagwan ne is umar mein mujhe itna dukh kyun diya hai*?" (Why has god given me so much sorrow at my advanced age?)

Geeta's grievance against fate was not completely baseless. Convicted by the court of Shahjahanpur, a small district in Uttar Pradesh, she was serving a life sentence under Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code. In jail for the past eight years, the old woman, who was incapable even of standing straight when we met her in 2011, had only painful memories to keep her company. All her thoughts were focused on her two young grandsons whom she had brought to the Nari Bandi Grah (women's penitentiary) at the Adarsh jail (Model jail) on the outskirts of state capital Lucknow when she was sentenced. They too had been taken away from her and placed in a protection home for children above six years.

Geeta recalled the fateful day that brought her world crashing down: "My mother had passed away and I had gone to the next village for her cremation. When I came back I was arrested by the police and sent to jail. I was told that my daughter-in-law's family had filed an FIR (First Information Report) against the whole family under Section 498A. I did not even get time to consult a lawyer. My son was also arrested and sent to the Bareilly jail. I was forced to bring both my grandsons – just two-and four-years-old then – to jail. They grew up here, but have been sent away to a protection home now. My family is completely destroyed. I just hope God will do justice one day before I die."

Condemned and lonely, Geeta's condition was quite miserable. But she was not alone. Behind the walls of the newly-constructed Adarsh jail at Mohanlal Ganj, were many women and children whose fate had been sealed with pain, stress and ill-health. Many among them also claimed they were suffering the ignominy for no fault of their own – that they are truly innocent. Narrated a vehement Krishna Kanta, 25, from Sonebhadra district, who was serving a life sentence for allegedly murdering her husband: "I was just seventeen and one-month-pregnant when Naxalites came to our hut one night.

They locked me in the next room and hacked my husband to death. I kept screaming for help but no one from the village came forward. Next morning, the police arrived and arrested me because the villagers gave witness that I had murdered my husband. My son was born in jail and was taken away to a protection home when he was six. Every day I think of him. He was not even born when all this happened; he doesn't deserve the life of a convict."

Shunned and rebuked by society, Adarsh jail's women convicts had no choice but to suffer silently. What tormented them most was being separated from their families, particularly their children. And while they may have reconciled themselves to their situation, they were fiercely against their children being forced to spend their lives in jails and protection homes. Of course, the constant agonising had taken a toll on their health, with most of showing signs of mental and physical breakdown.

Explained Indu Mati Singh, Deputy Jailor of Nari Bandi Grah in 2011, "The aim of this new jail was to make life a little easier for women serving prolonged jail terms. But I have seen that though we may give them the best of everything, it can never compensate for the loss of freedom and separation from children. Most inmates suffer from depression and anxiety and are receiving regular treatment at the jail hospital. Carrying the stigma of being a convict ruins any chance of their going back home and into the society they once knew. This realisation has an added emotional burden. It's a very sad state to be living in."

While the younger women were trying to take control of their lives and health, the older inmates suffered greatly because age was not on their side. "When they are sent in at the age of 60 or 70," said Singh, "the confinement breaks their resolve and spirit. They age faster and can't even walk to the toilet on their own. Many old women prisoners who can't see in the night have fallen and hurt themselves. We try to ensure that someone accompanies them at night but it's not possible to keep a constant vigil."

An ailing Geeta was surviving on the medical attention she received from the jail hospital staff. She needed the support of the prison walls to walk even a few steps. Then there was Sharda Devi, 80, from Kanpur, who, on her way to the privy one night, had fallen and broken her knee. Sentenced to life under section 498A, she had already served ten years when this happened. Since her accident, Sharda had been languishing in the jail hospital, her body covered with bedsores. She broke down as she said, "I wish I were dead." The nurses too weren't able to do much to ease her condition. Said Kirti (name changed), a nurse who had seen Sharda deteriorate, "The emotional torture is the most difficult for her to bear. Besides, it is very difficult for bones to heal at this age. What is really sad is that she has ten years more to go in jail, so she can't even be sent home to be cared for by her family. It's difficult seeing old prisoners suffer like this."

As grim as all this may sound, most inmates were grateful that they had access to a well-run hospital within the jail. What disturbed them greatly, though, was the extreme lack of sensitivity on the part of the legal system. Dulari, (name changed), 26, an inmate from Lalitpur district, said, "I had just given birth to my son at my mother's house when I got the news that my husband had been attacked and killed by his elder brother. The reason was a long-standing land dispute, so I was shocked when the police came and arrested me for the crime. Even the judge refused to listen to me and I was sentenced to life under Section 302 of the Indian Penal Code. I have already served 10 years and till date have had no access to a lawyer. I miss my child the most and I blame the legal system for ruining many young lives like my own."

G. Sreedevi, a senior bureaucrat who once headed the Uttar Pradesh State Legal Services Authority, agreed with Dulari. "When I hear such stories and meet women in jail, I am shocked. I think judicial officers need to be more sensitive in cases where there is a possibility, however remote, of the accused being innocent. Committing a woman to life imprisonment is like giving her a death sentence, especially

when she has young children," she commented.

R.K. Mittal, former special secretary and DG Prisons District Jail, Lucknow, who has written a book on his experiences with prisoners, put it thus: "Life in jail changes people, it breaks their spirit and cuts them off from everything that has meant something to them. Women suffer more since they feel they have so much to lose apart from their freedom."

From the Streets to Jail: Painful Transitions

Shwetha E. George

Kottayam (Kerala): What did Meenakshi, Sarojini and Rakkamma have in common? All three were Tamil speaking women, under forty years of age, and living under one roof. They were inmates of the Women's Cell at the Kottayam Sub-Jail. Accused of petty theft, all three were migrants – among the many who come to Kerala from neighbouring states. During the summers these women cross the border to make some quick money on the streets of Kerala's cities, but many end up behind bars. Of the eleven inmates in the Kottayam jail in mid-2011 – all of them undertrials – nine were arrested this way.

Although they were extremely reluctant to speak about their lives, when coaxed to do so they came out with accounts that were remarkably similar.

Rakkamma, 35, a native of Pollachi in Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu, had been coming to central Kerala for a few months every year to beg in the small town of Changanasserry. Usually she brought her toddler along with her during these excursions, while leaving her four school-going children behind to be looked after by her mother and husband, an umbrella hawker.

In the summer of 2011, Rakkamma's mother and twelve-

year-old daughter decided to spend time with her, sharing her dingy shack located at one end of the public grounds in Kottayam. On the day she was arrested, Rakkamma and her daughter were begging at different points near the busy bus station area when, as she put it, there was "suddenly a hue and cry and, before I knew it, the crowd was dragging my daughter to the police station". Eventually, Rakkamma said, she was arrested instead of her daughter.

Immediately afterwards, her mother left town with Rakkamma's daughter and baby. Rakkamma was left to fend for herself alone in jail. She didn't even know who her court-appointed lawyer was, let alone his contact number. "No one has come for me in the last two months. I don't know how long I'll be here," she said.

Meenakshi, too, was extremely downcast because no one from her family had bothered to visit her at the sub-jail. She constantly remembered her three children who were living with her mother in Chennai. "They haven't come even once. I have no one to help me. Maybe it's better they don't see me like this," she said. Meenakshi and her nineteen-year-old married sister, Sarojini, were nabbed from the bus stop at Pampady, a village near Kottayam. She insisted they were innocent. "I saw a chain on the ground and picked it up when everyone just pounced on me and my sister and took us to the station," she maintained.

According to Ratnakumari, the jail matron of the Kottayam sub-jail in 2011, some of the women undertrials at the sub-jail were actually victims of a huge begging racket being controlled by a gang leader and his agents. These agents always ensured that the women were eventually released. "One agent visits an inmate, claiming to be her brother and, two months later, he is back to visit another one of his so-called sisters. It's a mutually beneficial relationship: the women earn a steady daily wage, while those who run the operation get the women's earnings," she revealed.

The women, however, denied any such connections, although Meenakshi did reveal that she was able to earn

around Rs 300 a day if she begged on the streets with her toddler. She added that a toddler accompanied by a ten-year-old girl could collect up to Rs 200 per day.

Jayashankar, an advocate at the Kerala State Legal Service Authority at Kottayam, strongly felt that the police must deport these petty criminals back to their places of origin, rather than keep them incarcerated. His reasons were straightforward: first, court procedures are tedious and costly. Second, there is a serious space crunch in the women's jail. With only three cells available, accommodating these women is a major problem. Third, and most important, the police need to recognise that these women are driven by poverty to do they do and that they were certainly not professional criminals. "Most arrive here by default. Either they have lost all their money and cannot buy a return ticket, so they stick around and get caught while stealing. Or they come as a couple to work in Kerala and after an ugly domestic spat, the wife finds herself abandoned with the children and with no means to return home. She is practically forced by circumstances to resort to stealing," Jayashankar observed.

Having studied the situation, Jayashankar also believed that most women migrants who were first-time offenders rarely came back to Kerala once they were acquitted. "Unfortunately, however, acquittals are very rare in the crime of theft because the evidence recovery has already happened. This means that these women have to serve a seven-year sentence," he said.

Sections 379 and 380 of the Indian Penal Code state that attempted theft and theft can earn a sentence of three and seven years respectively, if there is a conviction. These are both non-bailable offences, meaning that bail can be set only at the discretion of the court, depending on the nature of the offence. The undertrials are taken to court every fifteen days, which is the remand period under the Criminal Procedure Code, and returned to jail until the trial date is set, the trial carried out and the verdict declared.

"What we need is classification of crime and criminals in

our jail system," said Jayashankar. He argued that habitual offenders, first-time offenders and teenage offenders should be incarcerated in separate jails, and that a first-time offender should not be allowed to be in close proximity with habitual offenders because she may end up getting drawn into criminal networks and committing even worse crimes. "Also, a criminal's detention space should depend on the nature of a crime. It is not right to have a woman accused of infanticide, for instance, to share the same cell as another accused of major theft," he added.

If life outside the prison walls was tough, owing to poverty and destitution, then life behind them was very traumatic. These women were paying a very heavy price for their incarceration, physically, mentally and emotionally, not knowing when they would finally be set free. Most women prisoners spent much of their time moping about their children and worrying about their welfare. In fact, most had got into this sorry situation precisely because they imagined they could improve their families, circumstances by resorting to theft. Of course, what hurt most was that their family members seemed to have deserted them, leaving them helpless and isolated. Said a tearful Ammalu, 25, who admitted that she was caught pickpocketing, "We do it only to save our children from starvation." While she was serving time in prison, her three-year-old was in an orphanage in Kottayam and, according to Ammalu's friend and cellmate, they had been told that her daughter cried for her mother every day.

So what is the day like for a prison inmate? Meenakshi, the most verbal of them all, put it very starkly: "We simply talk. We eat our three meals. We cry ourselves to sleep." They hadn't given the jail authorities any cause for complaint and Ratnakumari vouched for their discipline. "I haven't had any problem with them," she said. "They keep themselves and their room clean."

In mid-2011, Meenakshi, Sarojini and Rakkamma were preparing to be produced in court, but nobody was expecting a miracle. "The judge will look up, write something down

and then put us away," said a dejected Meenakshi, adding that this had been their routine every fifteen days.

Despair was evident in the very language of these three women. Truly, the walls that surrounded them had come to define the limits of their life.

Conviction and Courage Keep Wives of Political Prisoners Going

Sharmistha Choudhury

Kolkata (West Bengal): In West Bengal, especially in the state capital of Kolkata, fervent celebrations mark the five days of Durga Puja, an important annual Hindu festival. But the last time Shikha Sen Roy enjoyed Durga Puja festivities was in 2001 when her husband, Himadri Sen Roy (alias Somen), the jailed Maoist leader and ex-state secretary of the West Bengal committee of the Communist Party of India (Maoist), was still with the family.

Post-2001, Himadri went underground and then, on February 23, 2007, he was arrested and put in prison. Since then, life has turned out to be a grim battle for Shikha. "Although he had been away from home for years, I was happy because he was free. He was fighting against an unjust system. But now he's in poor health and it tortures me to think that he has been robbed of the one thing a person treasures the most: liberty," said Shikha, sitting in her modest one-room home in the city in late 2011.

Besides the emotional trauma, Shikha was also struggling with numerous health problems. She was chronically underweight, under constant medication, and even came very close to a nervous breakdown once. "I couldn't have afforded medical treatment if it hadn't been for our family physician who respects my husband and refuses to accept any fees from

me," she said, adding, "yet, I often skip the medicines he prescribes because I simply cannot pay for them. But that's no big deal. The vast majority of people in our country cannot afford any health care at all." What was far more important to Shikha was ensuring that she could buy her husband the little things he needed in jail: clothes, dry rations, and books.

An activist with a local women's organisation, Shikha didn't like talking about her own situation. Yet, one look at the dreary single room that was her home, dominated by a rickety sewing machine that provided her her daily bread – she is a ladies' tailor by profession – a small bed, a gas oven, and a couple of plastic chairs, left little doubt of the wretchedness of her situation. But she chose to remain positive, believing that there were others who were far worse off than her. Perhaps women like Mukta Chakraborty, the wife of jailed Maoist leader and spokesman, Gour Chakraborty.

A pall of gloom hung over Mukta's tiny home in the suburb of Madanpur, a few kilometres from Kolkata, as her only son, Somprakash, too, had been arrested on suspicion of being involved in Maoist activities and sent to the neighbouring state of Jharkhand. Last heard, he was lodged in prison in Jamshedpur. Her voice shaking with anger and despair, the elderly lady said, "First it was my husband and now my son. What was his crime? Joining the campaign for the release of all political prisoners, including his father? That alone made him a dangerous terrorist? Why don't they pick me up too and round off the score?"

Mukta, who was working in a small medicine factory for paltry wages, was entitled to only one off-day in a week. "But I have already used up all my leave visiting my husband in jail, consulting lawyers, being present in court for case hearings, and participating in campaigns demanding his release. So now my wages are deducted when I take time off. At this rate, how will I meet my husband and son who are in jail in two different states? I'm really at the end of my tether," she rued. She said that while she could bear most things, what she couldn't was to see her once lively and spirited husband

confined to prison, ailing and weak, with the hope of freedom steadily fading away.

Mahamaya Sarkar, the wife of jailed Maoist leader Chandi Sarkar, too, was struggling to put up a brave front. After the West Bengal assembly elections were held, there had been a ray of hope when the state government announced that fifty-odd prisoners, including Sarkar, were slated to be released soon. "My daughter and I were so happy. I thought that that was to be the Trinamool Congress government's first step in honouring its electoral promise of releasing all political prisoners. I couldn't wait for my husband to come home...it's been seven years and he is really old and ill now," she said. Her happiness was short-lived as the government announced it would not be releasing any Maoist leaders because of strong reservations conveyed to it by the central government on the issue.

Thereafter, things went from bad to worse for Mahamaya. Earlier, her husband was lodged in Krishnanagar prison in Nadia district – where she lived in a tumbledown house with her only daughter – and she could visit him often and keep an eye on his health. Then he was transferred to Dumdum jail in Kolkata. The authorities suspected him of inspiring fellow prisoners to protest against the abysmal quality of the food and the high-handedness of prison officials. "I can't visit him regularly now," said Mahamaya. "It takes nearly three hours to reach Kolkata by train. If I take time off from my small sari business, how will I earn?"

Once every fortnight Mahamaya travelled to Kolkata to buy saris in bulk from traders and then hauled them back to sell in Krishnanagar. Of course, when a lot went unsold, she would lug it back to exchange for newer goods. It was hard work and it got only harder when she had to fit regular visits to Dumdum jail into her schedule. "My husband continues to be ill but I have been able to visit him only once since," she sighed.

These brave women were aware that it would be easy for their husbands to get bail if they publicly renounced their

ideals and promised to cooperate with the government. But not one of them wanted her husband to take such a step. They were unanimous in the opinion that 'surrender' is a hateful word. "The police have raided my home twice – once before my husband's arrest and once after," recounted Shikha. "They ransacked the single room in which I live with my son, interrogated me mercilessly, and took away dozens of books and every single photo that I had of my husband. The second time, they came in the dead of night and accused me of sheltering Maoist activists! I know I can be arrested at any time. I certainly wouldn't have borne all these trials if I had wanted my husband to surrender," she declared.

In Mahamaya's case, after her husband's arrest, she had to spend many days away from home because the police would turn up at odd hours for questioning. Even her minor daughter was not spared. Some weeks later, she too was arrested on suspicion of having links with Maoists but was released when the charges could not be proved. "I shall never forget those days in police custody and the torture that I had to face," she said.

In 2011, in a fresh bid to secure the freedom of political prisoners, Shikha had taken the initiative to bring together various women's organisations and wives of political prisoners onto a single platform to demand the unconditional release of not just Maoists but all political prisoners. She stated, "We will start a vigorous campaign soon. Political prisoners are not criminals and we are proud to be fighting for them."

Arrested Lives: When Trade Union Struggles Came Home

Sharmistha Choudhury

North 24 Paraganas (West Bengal): Saraswati is only 27. Yet,

except when she smiles, she looks older. She has been through an unending cycle of hope and despair, mostly despair, over the past five years: her husband, a jute mill trade unionist, was first sent to jail for murder, dismissed from service after coming out on bail, reinstated after a year of fierce struggle, and then booked again on charges of attempted murder and dismissed from service yet again. He has since been released from jail but this experience has aged Saraswati more than an entire lifetime.

Her story is important because it is the story of innumerable women across India whose husbands, fathers or brothers find themselves in prison for their trade union activities. What are the experiences of such women? How do they cope? How do they fight suicidal thoughts and keep going?

Returning to Saraswati's story, it was in 2008 that her husband, Rajkumar Singh, 29, a worker in a prominent jute mill in the North 24 Paraganas district of West Bengal, first dared to take up the cudgels against the mill authorities. He was joined by a few fearless colleagues. Together, they demanded that retired workers be paid gratuity dues and the Provident Fund accounts of all workers be made public. The mill authorities didn't want to do that, perhaps because a large chunk of their profits came from depriving workers of their legitimate entitlements. Instead, the management came down heavily on Singh and his friends for taking up this issue.

"I knew what my husband was doing involved a lot of risk. His company was notorious for ruthlessly suppressing workers' movements. So I expected him to be beaten up or sacked any day," recalled this mother of four, sitting in her modest home in 2011, her children huddled around her.

What Saraswati hadn't expected was that her husband would be falsely implicated in a murder case. In May 2008, Singh – along with nineteen others – was booked under Section 302 of the Indian Penal Code and jailed on charges of murder. It took them three months to manage bail and get out of prison. "Those were the worst days of my life," said Saraswati, adding, "there was no money. The kids often went without

food when shopkeepers refused to extend credit. The electricity was disconnected because of non-payment."

According to Salma Khatun, the wife of Peer Mohammed, who was a colleague and cellmate of Singh', "The trauma was worse than the hunger. As the court dismissed one bail plea after another, I was certain my husband would remain imprisoned for years. I couldn't eat or sleep, imagining the worst." Her daughter was just a year old and those bleak days had a profound impact on the infant. With her father no longer around and her mother always crying instead of playing with her, the child slowly fell silent, her once-cherubic face robbed of its normal cheer. Only months after her father was released from jail did her peals of laughter ring out in their tiny home once again.

"I knew my brother and his friends were no criminals – they had to go to jail because they had the temerity to demand their basic rights," asserted Basanti, sister of Shyam Sundar Shaw, the leader of the agitating workers, with pride in her voice. "Just the previous year, the mill authorities had pressurised the local police to arrest him for his alleged involvement in a dacoity case. He spent a fortnight in jail before the case was dismissed. All the workers of this mill, especially the old and ailing ones, love him. If it hadn't been for their support, my brother may still have been in jail," she added. Basanti was engaged to be married at the time of Shaw's arrest, but the engagement was called off when it was learnt that the bride's brother was in prison.

For the families of Shaw and his comrades-in-arms there was little relief when they were finally released on bail. The mill authorities refused to give them back their jobs. A year of fierce struggle followed and, once again, Saraswati was on tenterhooks. She was petrified that her husband would be sent to jail again on another fabricated charge.

Moreover, with Singh jobless, their daily struggles were already unbearable: the children had to be taken out of school and two meals a day were a luxury for the family. The local doctor, too, bluntly refused to treat them on credit. When the

hungry children fell ill with alarming regularity, Saraswati recalled that she often had a mad urge to run away. "I even entertained thoughts of taking my two youngest and jumping in front of a speeding train to end it all," she confessed.

But despite the utter ruination they faced, the indomitable young trade unionists didn't give up. They picketed the mill, held countless meetings and demonstrations, went on hunger strikes, and made public the manner in which the authorities were siphoning off funds from workers' accounts. The struggle finally bore fruit. After the Lok Sabha election of 2009, the sitting Member of Parliament (MP) of the constituency lost and the new MP promised to do something. Singh and his friends were taken reinstated by a very reluctant management.

Back at work, they did not abandon their mission. Said Salma with a lingering smile, "I knew the workers of the mill regarded my husband as their hero, but that hardly helped when there was no food in the house or when my mother-in-law needed hospitalisation because her blood pressure shot up due to anxiety over her son's fate."

Some time in 2010, the mill authorities, desperate for a solution, conceded a few of the workers' demands. They began to issue gratuity payments to a slew of retired workers. There was a whiff of victory in the air. "But I knew things would not remain rosy," sighed Salma. Sure enough, after a few months, the authorities stopped issuing gratuity payments. The battle began all over again.

In mid-January 2011, First Information Reports were lodged against the trade unionists at the local police station. They were booked on charges of "attempt to murder". Apparently, they had 'attempted to murder' a senior manager of the mill, although he had not suffered a scratch. "Our husbands had no choice but to abscond," said Saraswati. "they became fugitives from the law."

It was a long time before the men were able to secure anticipatory bail. But for their wives, mothers and sisters, the trauma was no less this time round. Salma was at a critical stage of her pregnancy. Saraswati's eldest son, around ten-

year-old, took to petty crime. Basanti was resigned to a life of drudgery, with her mother taking to her bed and the burden of the family falling on her frail shoulders.

Although the men eventually managed bail, their fight is far from over and, although their lawyers have been extremely kind and accommodating, financial pressures are acute. Singh's children still do not go to school; Peer's newborn daughter is an underweight baby, in and out of hospital. Uncertainty continues to dog the life of women like Saraswati and Salma, who live with the fear that their husbands could be thrown into prison at any point and perhaps never come out.

But if there is anything that these women have learnt from the experiences of the past years, it is the importance of coming together and speaking out. Saraswati, for one, has promised herself that should her husband and his colleagues get jailed again, she will personally take to the streets with her four children in tow, to demand justice.

Behind Police Lines: Edgy Lives of Constables' Wives

Shwetha George

Kottayam (Kerala): While the media's focus has invariably been on police atrocities, not enough attention has been paid to the poor conditions under which police personnel at the lower levels of the constabulary live and work – factors that could play a part in triggering police brutality. A constable's job is a highly coveted one in a state like Kerala, with its high unemployment figures. Yet, life in the barracks is often far from congenial.

The struggle begins the moment the Public Service Commission examination results are announced. A successful recruit is faced with an extremely gruelling training programme at the Kerala Armed Police (KAP) battalion, which

could take from nine months to three years. This is followed by another tough stint at one of the Armed Reserve Camps (ARCs), with a transfer likely to other ARCs every three years. It is only after this phase is completed that a police constable can exercise any choice in his or her posting. Of course, by then the majority are well into their forties, with their best years behind them.

The tensions inherent in a job that involves such strenuous training and entails confronting situations of conflict and violence often get transferred to the family members of the constables, especially their wives. Said Simi Prabhash, 35, "When I got married, my husband was undergoing his training at the KAP battalion in Thrissur. He would come home just twice every month." Once he moved to the ARC in Kottayam, his home town, Simi moved into her mother-in-law's home in order to meet her husband thrice a week. It's only in the past five years that Simi, her husband, and their two children have been able to live together as a family in Kottayam. Their dingy two-room police lodging has a kitchen, a bedroom and a tiny toilet. The bed serves as dining table, study table and ironing board. In all probability, this will be their only permanent home.

Sreeja Ravindran, 35, who is married to a constable based in Thrissur, recalled the first time her husband, Ravindran, left for his training at the KAP battalion in Thrissur: "It was barely three weeks after our marriage. I was nineteen-years-old and all alone in his home at Alleppey. He was soon made the platoon leader of his team and was granted a day off every month. His journey home would take twelve hours and he would end up spending just three or four hours with us, mostly in the wee hours of the night, and then he'd board the bus back to Thrissur."

It's Sreeja's belief that the life of a police constable's wife is almost as tough as that of her husband, given the uncertainties and stress that mark it. This is why she gets furious when she sees films that portray police constables in a poor light. "In movies, they [constables] are either depicted as buffoons or

as corrupt criminals. Why doesn't anyone care to find out more about the struggles we face?" she asked angrily.

Both Prabhash and Ravindran, now in their forties, have been police constables for the past fifteen years, working an 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. shift. They do night shifts too, from 8 p.m. to 2 a.m. Prabhash commutes to work on his motorbike and makes sure that he has his lunch at home. Ravindran prefers to take the city bus and settles for a hotel meal for lunch. Neither gets a fuel allowance nor meal reimbursements. All they can afford is to carry a bottle of water with them.

Although every constable is entitled to a day off in a week, it is rarely granted since the ratio of policemen to citizens in Kerala is 1,000 to 1, as opposed to the stipulated 500 to 1. But they get to earn an additional Rs 150-200 if they work on an off-day, and this is a bonus they can ill-afford to lose, given their monthly salary of Rs 10,000 (in 2011).

The situation at home is no better. The biggest problem of this job is the difficulty in obtaining leave. And so, most often, police constables cannot be counted on to be around in times of domestic crises. Women like Sreeja, Simi and Deepa Prasannan, 37, have had to fend for themselves whenever their children suddenly fell ill and needed to be admitted into a hospital, or when a sudden death occurred in the family. Because one parent keeps such irregular hours, the wives of police constables rarely seek employment outside the home.

Although Deepa lives in quarters that look slightly better than those of the others, and her husband, M.K. Prasannan, 42, works as police constable in a police station close by, she doesn't think she is privileged in any way. "My husband works as a *paaravu* from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. He has night duty thrice a week: it is either bike patrol from 4 p.m. to 5 a.m. or jeep patrol from 11 p.m. to 5 a.m. He doesn't get any time with the family," she says. Prasannan served at the ARC at Thrissur for seven years, then for three years in Idukki, and one year at the ARC in Kottayam, before settling down as local constable at the Kottayam East police station for the past six years.

"This may be a good job in terms of honour and security

of tenure, but it is impossible for the family of a police constable to save, let alone build a house," revealed Deepa. But more than money, it is the personal security of their husbands that most worries these wives. They are clearly the most vulnerable in a situation of conflict or violence. They are exposed to physical assault, disallowed to react at will and easily fall prey to ill health. For instance, on days when a VIP makes a visit to the area, constables have to stand in the sun for hours on end. "The trauma I go through each time my husband is called away to places of unrest is difficult to express. Now even my children have stopped asking me why their father has not yet come home," said Sreeja.

Since work and family conditions impact adversely on the attitudes and behaviour of the police force, the authorities have been forced to envisage reform measures. In 2011, when we caught up with Premji K. Nair, district president of the Kerala Police Association, which represents police constables and head constables, he spoke of the change in designations: "From 2010, the 'police constable' has become 'civil police officer' and the term 'head constable' has given away to 'senior civil police officer'."

The government has also decided to cut down on time spent in training at various ARCs and is beginning to assign local postings according to individual choice as soon as the new recruits complete their KAP battalion training. This means new recruits could be living in police lodgings with their families in less than two years of joining the force. Earlier, postings at 'mother-stations' – stations at a recruit's or his spouse's home town – were deliberately denied. Now, the department believes that a recruit is most suited to a posting in a place with which he or she is familiar, since the constable will have first-hand knowledge of the area, a wide social network, and could make a smoother transition to post-retirement life.

The idea is to train police personnel who are "civic-minded" rather than "force-oriented", so that constables – who are deemed to be the backbone of the police force – conduct

themselves in a more enlightened, more citizen-friendly and less violent manner.

The Lost Daughters of Bengal's Border Communities

Swapna Majumdar

North 24 Parganas (West Bengal): It's not uncommon for young girls to 'vanish' or 'go missing after marriage' or get 'lost' in the villages of the North 24 Parganas and Nadia districts of West Bengal, which straddle the 2,000 kilometre India-Bangladesh border.

In July 2010, Shikha Mondal, 16, went missing from her marital home in Tangra village in Bongaon block of North 24 Parganas district. One month after she had disappeared, when neighbours inquired after Shikha, they were told that she had got 'lost' while grazing cattle. Then there is the case of Belika Khatun, 15, of Mahakhola village in Nadia district. She had been sent with her aunt to get married to a 'good boy' in Delhi three years ago. Since then, her parents, who are daily wage labourers, have not heard from her.

According to West Bengal's Criminal Investigation Department, the number of missing children from the state had increased from 4,621 in 2008 to 8,598 in 2010, and the districts of North 24 Parganas and Nadia report the highest numbers of such missing persons. These borders areas are presumed to be guarded by the Border Security Force (BSF) on the Indian side of the border and the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) on the other side. Yet, the presence of security forces has not brought a sense of security to the lives of people living in these areas, partly because of the impunity that marks their conduct.

Local people speak of being subject to verbal abuse, intimidation, beatings, and even torture, on the suspicion that

they are illegal migrants. In fact, the Banglar Manabadhikar Suraksha Mancha (MASUM), a non-governmental organisation based in Kolkata, has documented over sixty-one killings along the border by the BSF since 2007. According to MASUM, the rights of border communities are constantly being violated. Security men regularly storm people's homes and harass them on the pretext of conducting searches for illegal migrants.

The 2010 District Human Development Report of North 24 Parganas, conducted by district authorities, revealed that it is women who are most vulnerable in such circumstances. Their situation is only made worse by the prevailing food scarcity and social norms that are gender unequal. Poverty, coupled with poor education, the lack of livelihood opportunities, and abysmal health care results in lives of absolute vulnerability, with women and girls often falling easy victims to human traffickers.

Little did Rinku Mondal, 16, know what she was getting into when she left her border village of Boaldah, in Bongaon block of North 24 Paraganas, in the hope of augmenting her family's meagre income. All she wanted to do was earn enough to enable her two younger brothers to study. The second of four siblings, Rinku dropped out of school when she was ten to help her mother roll *beedis* (local cigarettes). It was after four years of living a hand-to-mouth existence that she decided to accompany her neighbour's daughter to Mumbai, despite her parents' opposition.

Rinku's mother, Rekha, was never in favour of sending her daughter to the big city. "I told her not to go, that we would manage with the money that we were earning. I warned her that Mumbai was not a good place and bad things happened to girls there. But she didn't listen to me and quietly left," she recalled.

Rinku returned home some months later with *sindoor* (vermillion) in her hair, claiming that she was working in a Mumbai home and had married the man who had got her the job. Although her family was angry with her, they were relieved to see her and pleaded with her to bring her husband

and stay back at home. Rinku, however, soon returned to Mumbai. "I begged her not to go but she said she had to earn more money so that we could lead a better life. When she gave me Rs 9,000, I knew something was wrong," said a clearly distraught Rekha.

Her worst fears came true when Rinku called her in 2010 to say that she had been caught in a police raid and had been sent to a shelter home run by an organisation in Mumbai. Since then, Rekha has been trying to secure the release of her daughter with the help of the Charuigachhi Light House Society (CLHS), a community-based organisation working on child protection issues in the Bongaon block of North 24 Parganas.

A survey conducted by the National Commission for Women in 2009 revealed that trafficking of women and children for commercial sex was taking place in 378 districts of India – accounting for roughly 62 per cent of the total number of Indian districts. Given its porous border regions, West Bengal has emerged as a prime site for such trafficking.

"There is a demand for young girls by those running prostitution rackets and, going by the numbers rescued from the red-light areas of Mumbai, Pune and Delhi, the situation is alarming. In 2009, Rescue Foundation, an NGO in Mumbai, helped 176 girls to escape from a red-light area in the city. The youngest of them were girls aged sixteen," said Roop Sen of Sanjog, a Kolkata-based resource organisation working on anti-trafficking and child rights issues.

Evidence-based research into sex trafficking of girls in West Bengal – commissioned by Sanjog in 2010 – reiterated that in situations of stark poverty, it is obvious that local girls will search for better livelihood opportunities. According to Paramita Banerjee, who anchored the study, adolescent girls desire a life different from the one they have experienced. "It is to escape semi-starvation, multiple pregnancies, and domestic violence that they succumb to inducements like income-earning opportunities outside their villages," she explained. Most often, these girls end up in brothels across

India, with the most likely destination being Mumbai. However, according to Sen, since sexual exploitation is no longer confined just to brothels, tracing and rescuing the girls has become extremely difficult.

Sanjog, which is using its knowledge and resources to strengthen and sustain efforts to address trafficking and exploitation of adolescents and children, has teamed up with several community-based organisations, like CLHS. One such initiative focuses on reducing the prevalence of early marriage of girls in these districts – a major factor that facilitates trafficking. Cross-border tensions and uncertainty mean that education is almost certainly disrupted. This, in turn, has serious consequences – like early marriage. According to government figures; over 80 per cent of the children in rural North 24 Parganas are married before they turn adults. This not only impacts negatively on their physical health and mental development, it has consequences for their future security as well. That is why CLHS is working to stop local communities from marrying off their daughters before they turn eighteen. "Families are not keen on educating their children, particularly their daughters. Poverty drives them to marry them young because then they do not have to pay dowries or feed them. They don't realise that their daughters are at risk of being trafficked in the process," said Palash Roy, CLHS founder.

The Sanjog study also showed that the chances of daughters marrying young are higher in female-headed households, and it is precisely these families who lose their daughters to trafficking.

The West Bengal state government has attempted remedial measures. But their impact has been insignificant, largely because of the lack of political will and the fact that the various implementing bodies have failed to work together. Meanwhile, communities living near the border continue to lose their daughters to forces far beyond their control.

When Sikkim Shook

Saadia Azim

Gangtok (Sikkim): When an earthquake measuring 6.9 on the Richter scale struck the tiny north-eastern state of Sikkim in September 2011, Kima Sherpa, 56, who was living on the outer verandah of Vijra cinema hall in state capital Gangtok, did not leave her temporary shelter for fear of losing all her hard-earned belongings.

Just six months earlier, Kima and her husband, a carpenter, had left their home in Lingtam village in eastern Sikkim in the hope of making more prosperous lives for themselves in the city. That move proved to be a disastrous mistake in the wake of the earthquake. Even as her husband urged her to run for cover, while the walls around them were crumbling, a part of the roof of the hall suddenly came crashing down up on her. Kima was rescued from the rubble with deep cuts on her head and face and was rushed to a local hospital. Later, when she regained consciousness, she found that her right leg had been amputated.

A month later, as Kima lay helplessly on her hospital bed, the traumatised woman revealed, "Our family has a small farm in Lingtam. It's just my husband and I, along with my brother in-law, his wife and their daughter. In the village, my brother in-law's family sold farm produce to run their home and we hardly had any money. That's why we came here."

When Kima lost her leg, the cinema hall owner contributed Rs 5,000 for her treatment, which came in handy, but was clearly a pittance. When the government sanctioned Rs 50,000 as compensation to them, Kima and her husband felt a little better. But she knows that life will never again be the same for her and she is "not really sure" if the money she received would cover the expenses of health care in the future.

Of course, life in the immediate future looks very bleak,

but Kima is one of the luckier ones: she, at least, is alive, unlike so many others. Being in Gantok, she was able to get timely medical attention. Scores of women, especially the ailing, elderly or pregnant, had to wait for days before a doctor could attend to them. In fact, many of them were transported to Sikkim's capital from distant villages and small towns by rescue teams after being left stranded for days.

Accessing health care has never been easy in a state that already has limited health facilities and support services. Gangtok is really still the only place where hospitals are somewhat geared to handle such emergencies. "We had no option but to ferry the injured to safe places in Gangtok," said Mridula Agarwal, state coordinator for the Helping Hands Group, an umbrella organisation that was formed when various non-governmental organisations got together to work for the rehabilitation of quake victims. "Sikkim as such has always remained cut off from the rest of the country and even within this small state all regions are not easily accessible. When rescuers first came here, they had no clue about how to reach out and attend to the distressed people," she added.

Indeed, Sikkim, the least populous state in India, generally tends to be forgotten by the rest of the country. Most Indians do not even realise that, apart from Gangtok, a major part of Sikkim falls in the extremely difficult terrain of the high Himalayas. Apart from National Highway 31, there are no motorable roads to its interior villages. What made things worse during the rescue efforts were the landslides everywhere, caused not just by the earthquake but also by the inclement weather that followed the calamity.

Nerkit Lepcha, 31, can vouch for the rough conditions that women like her have had to face while negotiating the inaccessible terrain. The stress she experienced after the quake drove her into premature labour, but there was no one to help her out. It was some time before an army team could airlift her from the sleepy village of Chungthang in north Sikkim and get her to STNM Hospital in Gangtok. She gave birth to a baby girl minutes after she was admitted. "Had

relief not reached me on time it would not have been easy," she confessed, adding, "We still do not know what happened to others like me who could not be rescued on time."

For people living in remote locations in Sikkim, modern medical assistance is a rare luxury. Most tend to take recourse to local home-made remedies or visit monasteries for medical help. Said Bishal Cintury, a volunteer from Gangtok who works with monasteries in north Sikkim to raise social awareness among the people, "The quake came as a real eye-opener to us, in terms of showing up the inadequacy of our health care system. The main reason for this is the fact that large parts of Sikkim are still unconnected with the rest of India and people shy away from approaching the few government-aided programmes that do exist because of unfamiliarity."

While the chaos, devastation and deprivation have been particularly tough on women and children, some modest efforts to ease their situation must be flagged. For instance, female army pilots were included during helicopter rescue sorties to facilitate the evacuation of women, especially those who were pregnant. In fact, in one single endeavour, four women who were in labour were airlifted from north Sikkim and brought to Gangtok in time – Nerkit being one of them.

Every earthquake comes as a reality check on the standards of life of people, and the Sikkim earthquake was no exception. Millions the world over have been exposed to a quake's devastating effects and, according to sources like *The Lancet*, nearly 60 per cent of all disaster-related mortality can be traced to the natural calamity. Its impacts are not just immediate, but long-term. Those surviving crush injuries, like Kima Sherpa, for instance, are left to face a future marked by serious physical disability. It becomes important, therefore, to remain engaged with the task of rehabilitation and recovery long after the incident itself.

Manita Pradhan, secretary of Sikkim's Women and Child Welfare Department, has agreed with this assessment and reiterated the need for continued focus on the state's health care delivery in the months and years to come, especially

among women who, in any case, lead very difficult lives.

But Srijana, who comes from the village of Lumsey, on the outskirts of Gangtok, which was not as badly affected as the rest of the state, is worried that Sikkim, along with the earthquake that shook it, will soon be treated as a footnote in the annals of India's history. "This state has always been left out. The earthquake came as a reminder of how much we lack in health care systems here. This time we must make sure that the promises made in the aftermath of the earthquake to Sikkim are kept by New Delhi," she said.

Mumbai Blasts: Emergency Response Lost in Transportation

Geeta Seshu

Mumbai (Maharashtra): A riveting photograph of the bomb blasts that shook Mumbai in July 2011 was of bloodied victims being transported in a tempo to the nearest hospital – a telling comment on the state of emergency care in a city that has been facing major terror attacks every few years and, given its very large population, scores of minor emergencies every day.

Mumbai is no stranger to emergencies. There were the 1992-93 riots (900 casualties), the serial blasts of 1993 (250 dead), the bomb blasts in 2003 (54 dead), the floods of 2005 (447 dead), train blasts in 2006 (200 casualties), the November 26 terror attacks in 2008 (200 dead) and the three blasts of 2011 that claimed twenty-six lives. Yet, even today, preparedness is the last thing the average city dweller can hope to experience.

Consider this: following the recent blasts, Mahashtra Chief Minister Prithviraj Chauhan went on record to state that he was not able to get in touch with his colleagues for fifteen

minutes because the telephone lines were down. And, according to eye-witness R.C. Shah, a trader at the Dadar blast site near Kabutharkhana, the police arrived fifteen minutes late, ambulances were unavailable, and the injured were ferried to hospitals in taxis and tempos.

Incensed by the image of victims being transported in a tempo, Dr. Sanjay Nagral, a senior surgeon who operates at the city's premier Jaslok Hospital, penned an anguished article in a local daily. According to him, the world over, emergency care follows the concept of the 'golden hour' and transport is an essential aspect of this response. "This is not the first time we have voiced the need for specialised emergency care. But it has not been a priority," commented Dr. Nagral.

During an emergency, he elaborated, Triage – the task of categorising those affected into fatalities, the most severely injured and the less severely injured – is absolutely vital. Transporting victims in well-equipped ambulances that are staffed by trained paramedics is the next step. A proper mode of transport is important in case a patient may have suffered a spinal injury, Dr. Nagral pointed out. But are these standard procedures being followed in India?

If a victim survives the breakdown of emergency procedures or the lack of proper ambulance services, what does the system have to offer in terms of trauma care? The Mumbai blasts of July 2011 demonstrated that the options were clearly limited. There was the civic administration-run Sion Hospital in south-central Mumbai. But this twenty-five-year-old, fifteen-bed centre was not only overburdened – since it also catered to victims of road accidents on the Mumbai-Pune highway – it was also in desperate need of an overhaul.

Another trauma centre at the government-run JJ Hospital in south Mumbai hadn't been set up then, despite a sanctioned approval at a cost of around Rs 40 crores. Said Dr. T.P. Lahane, dean of JJ Hospital, "We have everything ready for the centre. It will be equipped with trained personnel – ward boys, nurses, technicians, doctors, investigation facilities, MRI or CT scans – everything will function like a self-sufficient division."

Despite the absence of a specialised trauma care centre, Dr. Lahane averred that JJ Hospital was able to provide the twenty-five patients sent there during the 2011 blasts with immediate care within the golden hour. "We got the information of the blasts by 7:10 p.m. and by 7:30, around 200 medical personnel, including thirty-five doctors, were waiting in the lobby. The first patient arrived at 8:10 p.m. From then, our operation theatre worked till 1:30 p.m., until the next team took over," he said. He added that it wasn't just the 'golden hour', but the forty-six hours that follow, which are crucial. Increasing the capacity of the current twenty-bed disaster ward to 100 beds and doubling the four operating theatres would have definitely helped improve patient care, he felt.

Of course, emergency does not always strike in the form of extreme violence. Mumbai has had to contend with natural disasters like floods, which have brought the city to its knees in the past few years. Today, there is a 108 helpline that connects to the Disaster Management Department of the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai, the apex civic body that administers the city. This was set up after the 2006 floods and a major part of its work is to monitor the flood situation, says a senior official of the department, who did not wish to be named. "We have thirty-five automatic rain gauges that are updated every fifteen minutes and they give us data on the rainfall across the city. Low-lying areas are particularly monitored," he added.

The personnel in this unit have been trained to deal with all kinds of emergency situations, including fire-fighting, rescue, flood relief and wall collapses. The helpline gets at least 100 calls a day but even the helpline staff felt that there is need for better ambulances and trained paramedics. "Many deaths are due to faulty transport to hospitals and we must have special ambulances. We also need better civic and traffic sense from the public. Often, ambulances don't get right-of-way," the civic official rued.

Of course, in the absence of trained personnel and in light of tawdry service, it's caring and responsive Mumbaikers who

have always come to the rescue – such as Sanjay Bengali, proprietor of a printing press, who lives on the second floor of a building opposite the Kabutarkhana area of Dadar in central Mumbai, one of the recent blast sites. He recalled, "At first, I thought the noise was of a tube light bursting in the advertising hoarding on the bus shelter. But when we saw the thick smoke rise up, we realised it was something worse." When the smoke began to clear, Bengali saw two bodies – a woman and a man – lying on the road. Calling out to his son to help, he rushed downstairs. Initially, the two saw the woman moaning and bleeding, while the man seemed still. But then he, too, began to stir. Bengali and his son immediately stopped a passing taxi, picked up the man and put him into the cab. Meanwhile, others helped the woman by requisitioning a passing police van to take her to the hospital.

Bengali and his wife, Nisha, felt that people should always come forward during an emergency. "We mustn't panic and, when the police come, we must help them in their work instead of crowding the site," the duo observed. However, when they were told that, according to emergency response guidelines, patients must not be picked up until an ambulance arrives, Bengali said, "When we see someone bleeding, what must we do? If we get the person to a hospital quickly, maybe his life can be saved. Besides, we took care to pick up this man carefully."

JJ Hospital's Dr. Lahane agreed with the Bengalis' approach: "The type of vehicle the patient comes in is not important, the speed with which they come is. I don't think they will get a fracture or anything if they are not transported in the right vehicle. They are, in any case, in deep shock and the protective response of their body makes them rigid. We need to respond in the best way we can."

Given the overstretched public services, private initiatives in emergency care have emerged – although they are expensive. Ziqitza Health Care Ltd. has a thirty-ambulance service that is fully equipped with cardiac equipment, mobile intensive care units, and GPS. The company has also tied-up

with the state governments of Kerala, Bihar and Punjab.

But, for Dr. Lahane, there were no short cuts. He believed that it was the responsibility of the government to spend wisely the money allocated for the public healthcare system, which was invariably tested in traumatic times such as when blasts rip through a city leaving death and injury in their wake.