

## **'More violence since Salwa Judum started'**

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**The logic of electoral politics should have prompted the BJP to undermine the Salwa Judum, which was to begin with an initiative of Congress MLA Mahendra Karma. Instead, we see a complete convergence between the two .**

The Salwa Judum was not just an initiative by Mahendra Karma – it had full state backing all along, and that's why both Congress and the BJP support it.

Salwa Judum was probably started by the [police](#), and it grew after Mahendra Karma got involved. It suited the BJP to have him lead it. It also suited Karma because he had led similar movements in the past. Karma has always sided with the BJP against his own party.

At the ground level, however, there are workers from both parties who are not happy with the activities of the Salwa Judum. Mostly, it has been people at the top in Chhattisgarh, including senior [state government](#) functionaries, and the security establishment in Delhi, particularly in the home ministry, who have colluded in establishing the Judum and keeping it alive.

### **Why has there been no opposition to the Salwa Judum from among local civil society?**

That is primarily because there is no Adivasi middle class. Besides, all journalists in Chhattisgarh are non-Adivasis, and depend quite a lot on handouts and advertisements from the industry and the government for their livelihood.

It is practically impossible for them, in such circumstances, to write critical stories. And if ever someone was to report on the other side, they are accused of being Maoist.

There have even been cases of some local journalists being beaten up or threatened by Salwa Judum cadre and others arrested under the draconian Chhattisgarh Special Public Security Act, 2005, for speaking out.

### **Just who comprise the Salwa Judum?**

The Salwa Judum leadership is mostly made up of non-tribals. There are some Adivasi leaders, but they are mostly people close to Karma. The [leadership](#) is, therefore, almost entirely the non-tribal exploitative strata. There are also tribal SPOs, who have killed too many people to go back.

Then you have the ordinary people, who have been forced out of villages into camps, in a classic case of strategic hamletting, of the kind practised in Vietnam. They were forced to go on Salwa Judum processions to enlist new villages, and threatened with death and their villages burnt down if they refused.

And accompanying them on those expeditions, where they empty out villages, are the security forces — the local armed police, the CRPF and the India Reserve Battalions. There is obviously money involved as well. Many Salwa Judum leaders now have big houses and their lifestyles have become more affluent than before.

A lot of funds, mostly unaccounted, are being channelled into this area by the state to fund the Judum. Also, most of the government contracts for construction activity now go to these people.

### **Is it true that Salwa Judum has been aiding the corporate sector in its area of influence?**

It is not as simple as a direct link between industry and the Salwa Judum. But it is related to the idea that the area needs to be sanitised so that industry can come in.

In that, people rooting for the Salwa Judum also root for industry. Mahendra Karma, for one, completely backs the Tata and Essar steel projects there, and he and his sons have virtually been the companies' agents to actively get the inhabitants of villages in the Lohandiguda and Bhansi/Dhurli areas off their land so that it could be acquired for the projects.

Also, Essar has started funding, through the Essar Steel Regional Development Plan, the building of resettlement colonies even before they have got consent for acquisition of land. Now it's curious as to why a private sector company should fund such colonies unless it's certain that it would get the land it wishes to acquire.

### **Is there something inherently wrong with the idea of local self-defence committees?**

May be there is nothing wrong in, say, patrolling one's own village. But when locals get drawn into the counter-insurgency grid that's where the problems start.

Of [course](#), the state claims the Salwa Judum was a spontaneous people's movement against the Naxalites. Even if that were true, it doesn't justify the patently illegal activities they have indulged in, including killing children, and raping women in camps and villages.

Objectively, yes, the police has been able to get informers as never before, but were one to look at the police outposts established in Naxal-dominated areas, they are little more than fortified enclaves cut off from everything else. At the same time, the Naxalites have got more recruits than ever before.

These are people whose families have been killed and raped, or whose villages have been burnt. On the whole, there has been a massive increase in violence after the formation of the Salwa Judum. Culturally, all life has stopped.

There have, for instance, been no local festivals ever since the Salwa Judum started. Ironically, one of the reasons quoted by the government for the Salwa Judum's existence was that the Maoists were interfering with local customs, but now there are none left.