

Two Roads Parted in the Woods

Written by Priyasha Nair

Wednesday, 29 May 2013 13:10 - Last Updated Saturday, 06 July 2013 06:40

Citizens for Peace condemns the killing of Mahendra Karma and his team. We mourn the continuing cycle of violence that has plagued the people of Chattisgarh, as well as surrounding states. We appeal for the strengthening of efforts to find both peace and justice in this region.

Re-published below is a moving article by the Gandhian activist Himanshu Kumar, about his long standing friendship with Mr. Karma. Himanshuji, who worked in this area for 17 years, has spoken on our PeaceTalks platform on the complexity of this problem.

<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL51421AFBDBEC0155>

Two Roads Parted in the Woods by Himanshu Kumar

I first met Mahendra Karma in 1992. We had organised a training programme for farmers at our NGO, Vanvasi Chetna Ashram, in Kanwalnar village in Dantewada, which was still part of Madhya Pradesh then. Karmaji came over and spoke to the farmers. I became his admirer in my very first meeting with him. He was a very good orator. I have never heard anyone employ the Gondi language as powerfully as he did. I learned a lot from his use of the language.

At the time, Karmaji did not have an official position. He had a lot of free time. We spent a lot of our time together. He borrowed and read nearly every book in my personal library. He showed an immense interest in the working of our organisation. He often attended our meetings, too. Subsequently he became the head of the district panchayat. Our friendship deepened. Karmaji often called me to his office to seek my views on various matters of policy. When elections were called Karmaji became an independent member of parliament. Later he became an MLA and the jail minister in the cabinet of then Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Digvijay Singh.

Meanwhile, a movement was launched to demand that Dantewada be made a separate district.

Mahendra Karma was the chairman of the committee set up for the struggle and I was made its secretary. Later I piloted the programme where Dantewada was made a district. After that, the entire administration came down to our ashram. We had a meeting where we discussed all the then existing problems of Dantewada district and their likely solutions.

When Chhattisgarh became a separate state in November 2000 Mahendra Karma became its industry minister. My friendship with Karmaji was getting ever deeper. The administration would nominate me to every committee in the district. So much so that BJP leaders started calling me a Congress man.

In 2003, the BJP won the assembly elections. Karmaji became the leader of the opposition in the assembly. We were still friends as before. He would often talk with me about the BJP's communalism. I gave him Prabhash Joshi's book, "Hindu Hone Ka Dharma" (The Dharma of being a Hindu), to read.

As industry minister, he had told me that he was going to invite the industrial houses of Mittals and Jindals for mining in the Bailadila area to bring development. Karmaji told me that he would ask the industrialists to begin by building a township in Bijapur district, which is to the west of Dantewada, so that it, too, can develop.

In 2005 Mahendra Karma had a word with me when the Salwa Judum, a militia of the tribals to counter the Naxals, was being started. It was possibly only a coincidence, but a dangerous

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one nonetheless, that the Salwa Judum was to be started in the same Bijapur where licenses were given out for mining. Karmaji told me that tribal villagers were planning a rally against the Naxals and he was going to join it. He said that I, too, should participate in it. I told him that I am always in solidarity with the people and if they are against the Naxals then I would stand with them. But I said I would join the rally only if it was free of weapons because I just cannot participate in a movement that has weapons in it.

Mahendra Karma assured me that the rally would be without any weapons. I asked if his bodyguards would be there. Mahendra Karma had been given Z category security and 55 commandos were always with him. I know this figure because every time he visited our ashram I would be asked to count how many cups of tea needed to be brewed. I had to count all the people with him.

Karmaji told me that his bodyguard would indeed be present with him and that Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Raman Singh had said he would send the police to provide security at the public meeting. Upon learning that I declined to participate in the rally. In a few days news of violence began to come in. I still kept quiet. Now various human rights activists and national and international journalists began visiting our ashram to investigate the role of the Salwa Judum. Binayak Sen, Balagopal, Nandini Sundar, Ramchandra Guha, Harivanshji and many others visited our ashram and subsequently published their reports on the Salwa Judum. Mahendra Karma and I continued to meet each other. But we did not talk as openly as before. Although I hadn't yet publicly spoken out against the Salwa Judum.

Around that time Vanvasi Chetna Ashram started working with UNICEF. That was when Salwa Judum men attacked our workers for the first time. They kidnapped our volunteers and thrashed them badly. That was when I spoke against the Salwa Judum for the first time publicly. By now, the tribal people had begun coming to us to seek help. Most incidents were about the police murdering tribals, or kidnapping and raping tribal women. We wrote to the government on these matters. But the government did not take any action. So we started approaching the courts. We had now begun speaking out against the Salwa Judum in the news media even though Mahendra Karma was its leader.

Karmaji, too, had now obliquely started attacking me. Any time we came face to face we still talked to each other but only about our children. He doted on my two daughters. His young daughters would often drop by at our ashram to play there. His wife, Devti, too, would visit often to meet with my wife, Veena. Karmaji continued to borrow books from me. But we had stopped talking politics altogether.

Then in 2009 the state government demolished our ashram. We tried to continue our work through a rented house. I wrote to the then Union Home Minister P Chidambaram and invited him to visit Dantewada to hold a hearing on the atrocities being committed on the tribals. This greatly troubled the state government and Mahendra Karma. The police began to put our workers into the prison, or threaten them with murder. On my last day in Dantewada one of my volunteers came to me and said that Mahendra Karma was sitting in the office of the district collector and screaming that he wanted freedom from Himanshu Kumar right away. The volunteer told me that I would be killed that night. Immediately thereafter that worker fled Dantewada with his wife and daughter. Within a half hour of that the police attacked his house and, among others, took away the motorcycle that the ashram owned and that was parked outside.

I thought about all this for long. I realised that if I died that night it would be of no profit to the tribals. My coworkers were in prison. I was fighting court cases on behalf of so many

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tribals. That night I jumped the wall in the backyard and escaped into the forest. The police had surrounded the entire house. I somehow reached the main road. A taxi was waiting for me there. I sat in it and left for Delhi. Since then I have not gone back to Dantewada that had been my home for 17 years.

Mahendra Karma's killing today has revived my memories of the time I had spent with him. His ambition and his fears had forced him to get caught in a trap that Raman Singh had laid for him. In 2005 the police had been closing in on him over his alleged role in an illegal sale of teak wood from the forests. He had faced imminent arrest. It was to escape that and the subsequent ignominy that he gave in to Raman Singh's demand that he head the Salwa Judum. I may or may not have agreed with whatever Mahendra Karma did, but I must concede that he always impressed me with his intelligence and courage.

I am deeply saddened by his killing today. I bid farewell to my loving friend with a heavy heart.

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