Suvojit Bagchi spent over a month in Maoist hideouts in the forests of south Chhattisgarh.

SUVOJIT BAGCHI 27th Nov

CAMP IN THE FOREST

After walking for eight hours in a forest that possibly had more hillocks and rivulets than trees, without any long pause, by early evening we entered a narrow barren table of land bounded on either side by two separate ridges. At the far end stood a few blue and yellow tents. Somji, one of the men who had met me at the edge of the forest, picked up speed as we approached the tents. With the amber red setting sun in the backdrop, I saw some activity in the camps as Somji reached the centre of the table.

Local Maoists evolved from tribals of Bastar, the Gonds. Their relationship is extremely cordial and friendly.

A moderately tall man standing guard with a rifle flung over his shoulder whistled and heads in silhouette started rushing towards the centre of the narrow rectangular table. Under a minute, the camp members, a group of about 40, stood in formation and began singing a welcome song for us, which I realised through my stay, is a Maoist ritual:

Lal lal salaam, lal lal salaam

Aanewale sathio ko lal lal salaam

Patrakar sathio ko lal lal salaam.

(Red salute to the friends who have come and to the journalists.)

Members in the queue raised their fist to whisper "lal salaam" — "red salute". There were very young girls with hair cropped like Audrey Hepburn in Roman Holiday, they ended their "lal salaam" inevitably with a giggle. Rest, between 15 and 30 years, the men and women, wore rubber sandals, olive green battle fatigues and carried guns of various makes. Insas Standard rifle 5.56 mm, .303 rifles (antiquated), the Carbine 9 mm, LMG 7.62 mm, 12-bore guns, the SLR 7.62 mm rifle and standard Kalashnikovs were the recognisable ones.

A thin and strongly built man in his 40s, armed with an AK and a whistle, introduced himself as Gudsa Usendi alias Sukhdev. Usendi is the spokesperson of the Maoist party in Dandakaranya. I was surprised. I had a different mental picture of Usendi. From the texture of his voice, which I heard over telephone, I thought of him as a tall, plump man. "But he is so thin," I thought. "He looks like a martial arts instructor and not an irate spokesperson of a revolutionary party."

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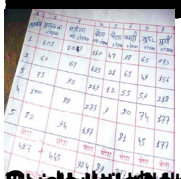

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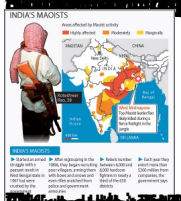

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