

Salwa Judum

On 4th April 2022, the CM of Chhattisgarh, Bupesh Bhagel announced that his government would rehabilitate all the villagers who had migrated to neighboring Andhra Pradesh and Telangana during the Salwa Judum violence.

What is the Salwa Judum and what were the factors behind the violence committed by them which led to about 55,000 tribals being displaced from their home villages?

What is the Salwa Judum?

Meaning "Peace March " or "Purification Hunt " in the language of the Gonds, the Salwa Judum was a militia specifically mobilised with the intention of countering the Naxalite violence in the Chhattisgarh region. It consisted of local tribal youth with logistical and training support from the state government of Chhattisgarh

The Naxalites held sway over the district of Bastar and Dantewada, which was rich in resources and sparsely populated by tribals. Using a combination of political mobilisation - around poor governance, land rights, livelihood and social inequity - and force, the Naxalites wielded control and influence over the tribals.

They made life for the tribals miserable enough, that a counter-movement against the Naxalites was started by the local populace. One of these movements would be led by Mahendra Karma, who would play a key role in the organization of the Salwa Judum as a counter-insurgency militia.

What was the controversy behind the Salwa Judum?

The Salwa Judum began receiving military and police support when the Chhattisgarh state signed mining agreements with the Tata and Essar group. To ensure that mining operations went smoothly, the state would deploy militias like the Salwa Judum to cleanse the region of Naxalite.

To facilitate a smooth operation of their activities, the Salwa Judum began to herd the local villagers into makeshift camps. Reportedly they became violent and out of control during this time. The militia began burning villages and forcing people to flee to the camps. Soon human rights abuses became rife in those camps.

The conflict between the Naxalites and the Salwa Judum further exacerbated the problem as more people were forced to flee to camps in south Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh.

Soon the NHRC began to accuse the Salwa Judum of the following violations:

1. Deployment of Minors as Child Soldiers: There were reports that Salwa Judum forcibly recruited minor boys for its armed forces. It was determined that over 12000 minors were being used by the Salwa Judum according to a survey by the Forum for Fact-finding Documentation and Advocacy (FFDA) determined that over 12,000 minors were being used by the Salwa Judum in the southern district of Dantewada.

2. Large-scale displacement of villagers: The Salwa Judum displaced large numbers of villagers. They even killed those that refused to leave, accusing them of being naxalite collaborators.

Following a number of petitions, the Supreme Court ordered the state government in 2008 to refrain from allegedly supporting and encouraging the Salwa Judum.

On 5 July 2011, the Supreme Court of India in a case filed by Nandini Sundar and others declared the militia to be illegal and unconstitutional, and ordered its disbanding.

Despite the order, the Salwa Judum remains a part of the auxiliary force of the state police. Despite the controversial nature of the Salwa Judum, other states were more than enthusiastic in setting up their state militias composed of ordinary people to counter insurgencies in their regions.

In 2006, Karnataka raised a similar force employing tribals youths to fight Naxalism in the state, as did Andhra Pradesh prior to it. Jharkhand is another state that has been successfully using SPOs to counter Leftwing terrorism.

Frequently Asked Questions about Salwa Judum

What were the initial activities of the Salwa Judum?

When it started in June 2005, the Salwa Judum involved holding rallies in villages considered Maoist strongholds, forcing village level sympathisers and workers of the Maoists locally known as 'sangam members' to 'surrender', and burning the houses of those who resisted or refused to participate in rallies.

What is Naxalism?

The term Naxal comes from the village Naxalbari in West Bengal where the Naxalbari uprising of 1967 occurred. People who are engaged in the insurgency are called Naxals or Naxalites. The movement itself is referred to as Naxalism.

What would happen to Mahendra Karma, who organised the Salwa Judum?

Mahendra Karma would meet his end at the hands of the Naxalites who ambushed his convoy in the infamous Darbha Valley attack on 25 May 2013. In a public statement, the Naxalites

claimed that they had specifically targeted Karma; he had been stabbed multiple times by a group of women Naxalites.