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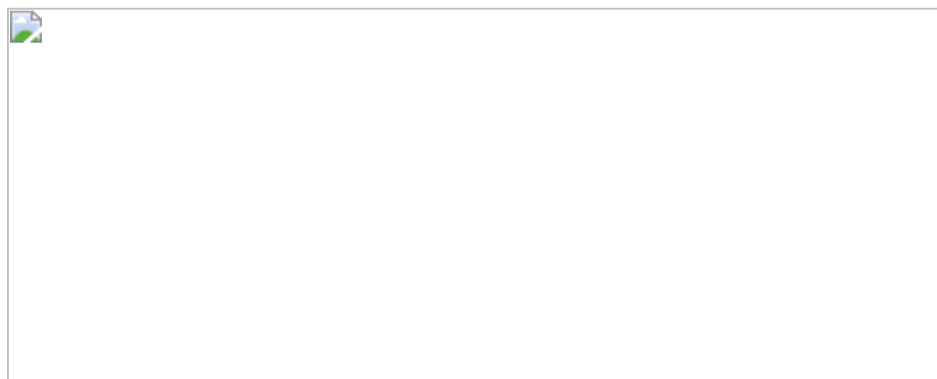
I married a Maoist

Swati Sengupta gets up close with Ranjit Pal and wife Anita, both Leftist ultras who recently surrendered, and tells a very personal tale

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Swati Sengupta | Published 05.03.17, 12:00 AM



GUN DOWN: Ranjit and Amita Pal (in camouflage caps) at the time of their surrender; Pic: Biswanath Banik

On a public holiday the stretch outside Lalbazar, the Kolkata Police's headquarters, is unusually deserted. I am still dizzy from the events of the day before, when my father passed away. And when I reach my destination, I am actually, selfishly, hoping the chat with surrendered CPI (Maoist) state committee member Ranjit Pal and his wife Anita - also a Maoist commander - will help me briefly escape the inexplicable numbness that has gripped me.



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Ranjit stands charged on 50 counts in West Bengal and Jharkhand, including the high-profile murder of Jharkhand Mukti Morcha MP, Sunil Mahato; for that, the Jharkhand government put a Rs 25 lakh reward on his head.

After climbing several flights of stairs and walking through the deserted and musty corridors of Lalbazar, I am asked to wait in a sprawling conference room.

Ranjit and Anita walk in seconds later. She is in her late twenties and he in his mid thirties. Anita's presence instantly lights up the dank room. She is wearing a white salwar-kameez with orange floral prints and grey-and-white sneakers, her hair is in a neat plait. Ranjit is in denims and a loose bottle green winter jacket. They look rested and calm, an indication that they may have surrendered well before the formal announcement was made the day before, in the presence of the director-general of West Bengal Police, Surajit Kar Purakayastha.

Ranjit is eager to tell his story; he is also meticulous, never wanting to miss a detail.

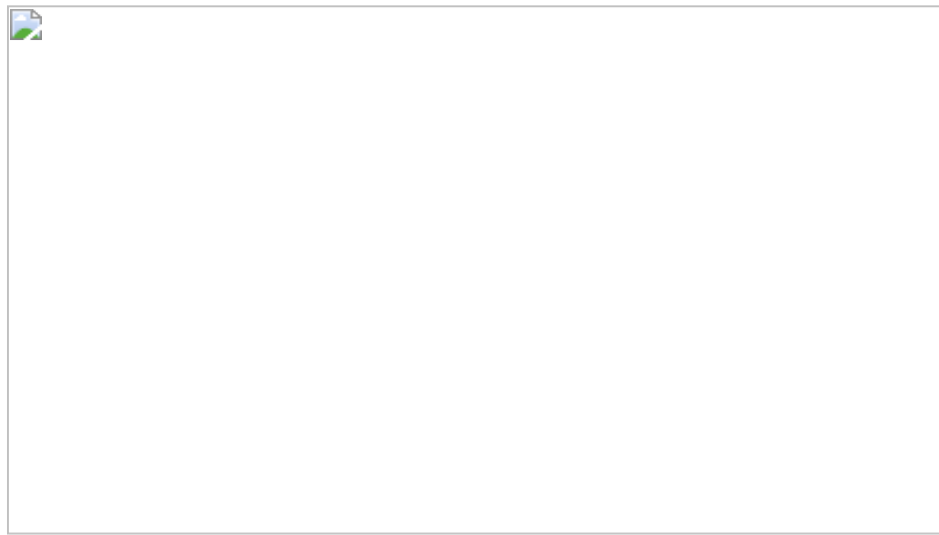
There was a time, years ago, first at Chaltakend in West Bengal's Bankura district, about 150 kilometres from Calcutta, and subsequently in adjoining Khejurmehra, when his family - Ranjit, his parents, younger brother and sister - struggled to make ends meet. "We were among five families fighting against the state for our rights over forestland. But forest and police officers would either beat and drive us out, or set fire to our homes," he says. "It was depressing - poverty and torture made life miserable."

Some nights, however, brought flickers of hope. Whenever the Naxalites quietly visited their village, they invited Ranjit and other children to join their adventurous and unpredictable world filled with infinite possibilities.

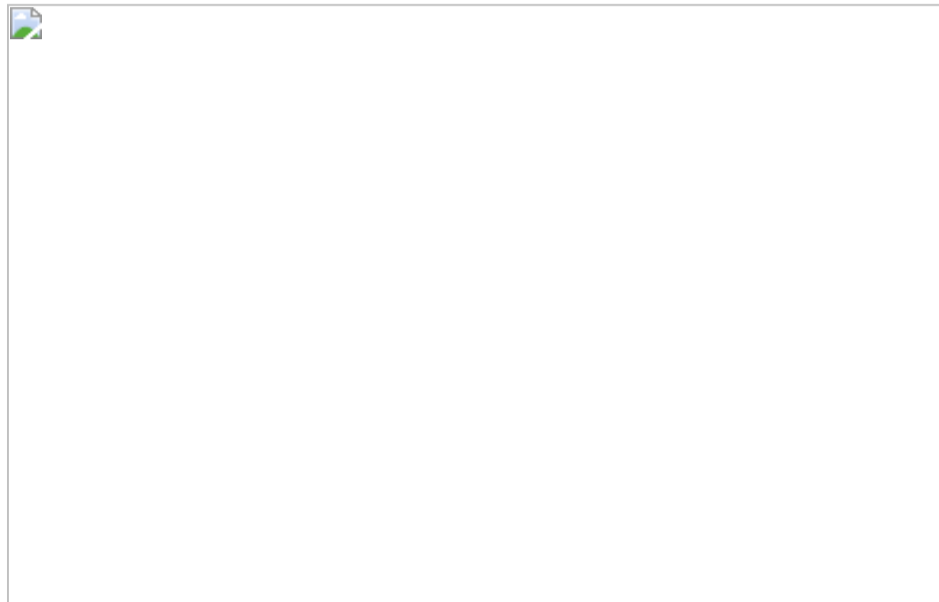
They would leave behind party documents. "I started reading them from Class V," says Ranjit. "There came a time when I realised that even though I stood first in class, I would perish in the face of exploitation from rich landlords and state authorities... My only option was to join the Naxalites." And so he did in 2000. He was in Class IX then.

Ranjit and other cadres formed armed squads, snatched firearms from zamindars and policemen, and inspired poor villagers to join the armed war against the state.

In 2001, he was arrested from Bethola village and taken to Ranibandh and Khatra police stations (in Bankura). He tells me how the constables broke his fingers, one by one, and took turns to tug at his legs from both sides "as if they were trying to sever them from my body... A senior police officer stood on my body - repeatedly stamping his feet on my thighs with his boots".



Pic: Partho Chakraborty



Scenes from the aftermath of Maoist-related violence ; Pic: Ashok Majumder

Torture by the police made his resolve so strong that after he got bail Ranjit headed straight to the forests instead of going home.

Within a few years, he became a senior leader of the party. By the time he surrendered in January this year, he had risen to become the Bengal-Jharkhand-Odisha border commander. He worked closely with the CPI (Maoist) politburo member Koteswar Rao, alias Kishanji, and also played an important role in stoking and channelising the Nandigram movement.

What makes a state committee member of the CPI (Maoist) surrender before the police?

Many senior leaders as well as junior Maoist footsoldiers have been surrendering over the past few years, especially after the central government's Surrender-Cum-Rehabilitation Scheme was framed in 2013. Apart from financial assistance ranging from Rs 1.5 lakh to Rs 8 lakh or more, other forms of assistance include jobs, payment against arms surrender, grants for building houses and so on.

"I had to surrender due to my family concerns," Ranjit tells me, now looking at his wife Anita, who is sitting by my side. She inclines her head, and maybe she has hinted with her eyes that he may disclose to me the reason, so Ranjit tells me that Anita has been ailing for some years now and needs treatment urgently. "It is difficult for her to move around forests and mountains carrying heavy arms now."

Now, the woman with the ravishing smile who every now and then lets out a hearty laugh, finally joins our conversation. " *Shob theke boro katha, didi, amra etodin party korlam, kintu jakhon ami shorir-e ar parlam na, takhon kono somobedona pelam na* (The thing is we have worked for the party for so long, but we got no sympathy when my health deteriorated)," says Anita.

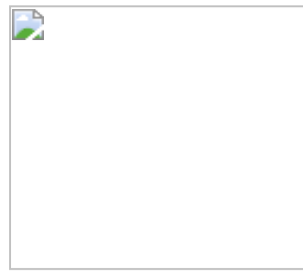
Anita's father is also seriously ill. He was part of the Nandigram land movement of 2007 in East Midnapore district where villagers (backed by the Maoists) protested the setting up of a chemical hub. Anita too joined the movement, and subsequently went into the armed Maoist squad. That is where she met Ranjit.

"Could I leave my wife and her family in this condition and continue to work for the party?" Ranjit asks. Had Ranjit surrendered to Jharkhand Police, he would have got Rs 25 lakh - the reward on him. But he insists he surrendered in Bengal to avoid being used by the state to hunt down his former colleagues. "The Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand governments ask surrendered Maoists to hound out their former colleagues from forests," he says.

Senior officers, however, say that Ranjit was left with no choice because the Central Bureau of Investigation and the Jharkhand government were likely to treat him harshly in the Sunil Mahato case.

Ranjit reveals other reasons, practical concerns, behind the surrender. "Maoists have been completely overpowered in Bengal... with the setback that began with Kishanji's death in November 2011, the party must start from scratch. Under the circumstances, I would perhaps need to give the party another 17 years of my life. But I am not in a frame of mind to believe I can achieve that," he says.

This failure to sustain and to motivate himself for another 17 years perturbs Ranjit. He says: "The situation is different in Chhattisgarh, where the administration had hardly ventured into certain areas of the forests. For Maoists and villagers in those areas, forming their own administrative system [the Jantana Sarkar], rejecting the administration, police, turning some areas into liberated zones is justified. But the same cannot be applied everywhere in India."



In West Bengal, the Maoists had fought for years to remove the dictatorial Left Front from power, he says, "perhaps this party (Trinamul Congress) too will turn autocratic in some years. But till then, Maoists have no major role to play".

He is almost overcome by profound restlessness as he adds his views on the need for CPI (Maoist) to do a fair rethink on some of its policies. "The party's hardline position in killing people must be reviewed. By the time the party regretted the random killings in Lalgarh publicly, it was too late."

According to the government's surrender policy, Ranjit will possibly be offered the job of a home guard in the state police force, the cases against him may be treated leniently and he and his wife may be able to earn Rs 10,000 each a month. How would he feel working in the police? Ranjit smiles nervously, "It is not really a matter of choice."

We would have gone on talking for hours. But we are told that Ranjit and Anita have to meet different state and central government police agencies.

Before I leave, Anita tells me how her ailments and the difficult work of the forest hasn't been quite the ideal situation for her to have a child, "despite" her marriage of eight years. She would eventually want to have one though.

She gives me a tight hug and wishes me happiness - it exudes warmth and childlike excitement of trusting and liking someone easily. As I take slow, unhurried steps, I do not know what I have achieved as a journalist from this interview, but I got the warmth I was looking for, and it will stay with me forever.

Swati Sengupta is the author of Out of War, narratives of surrendered Maoists, published by Speaking Tiger Books

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