

Anarchism in India: Theory and Praxis

An interview with comrade Aranya from The Scarlet Underground collective

Union of Green Libertarians

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UGL: Ok, let us start with the basic things like the project itself. What is it?

TSU: Okay, well, the scarlet underground's got three parts of the project—the first part of course is the immediate mutual aid that we need to be using as a direct action for the rural community where we're based. So what we're doing is 1. spreading awareness, something the state should have done long ago and because of which most people don't get why they need masks, etc 2. making and giving out free masks and 3. delivering products like rice, daal (lentils), soybeans and sanitizers etc to the poorest of the villages here, who are Lodhas and Santhals, indigenous peoples of India. After the lockdown is over and by the time it's december we're planning on building a community centre which will act as a school for permaculture, and also as a health clinic and legal aid that would be built in a land that the collective will buy together, and we're planning to figure out the contours and dig swales to hold the rainwater and basically practice permaculture there and the idea is that once the locals see the difference between permaculture and monoculture, they'll be changing the way they grow plants too. The other bit is the other plan is to build a shallow well during december (or maybe even later, but before summer) because if the rains don't come then the farmers lose all their paddy and shallow wells will help them be able to harvest rice all year round.

Okay, the last thing is to build another community centre in Calcutta which is around 3 hours away, a sort of part library and part free hostel and soup kitchen, for the unemployed and the homeless. It also gives us space to bring in volunteers let more people know about our permaculture project in Jhargram, among other information that would be more political. Like there's a sponge iron factory here and we'll need to begin organising people here to fight them. The last time the leader of the protest was found hanging from a tree in the jungle. So yeah, it's pretty dark.

Now the thing is we need people to contribute as a show of solidarity and not charity—which most people obviously don't get, so international groups like FAU from Germany are helping us, and then there are comrades here who helped us too but they can't really afford so much (even 10,000 rupees is a lot for us). I haven't added the Calcutta plans there because we're

planning to do that once Flo and other comrades from abroad get here in december. Most of the TSU right now is just farmers, local workers, students and anarchists: all in all i would say 10 people, out of which 3 are in Calcutta right now. Hence everything is being done by the 7 of us at the moment, and another farmer, who's a commie, wants to join so we'll be talking to them soon about it. Next week we're hoping to get enough funds go to Aulgeria which is an adivasi village, and begin our work with them.

UGL: So pretty much you are building a commune from the start and it's a pretty good start. My second question is, how did you folks came up with this project? Did you have land from the beginning or had to purchase?

TSU: My family used to be liberal land owners until my grandfather became a commie, so we have land here which we bought from anglo-indians who were leaving during india's partition and since my whole family is leftist, we've kept that praxis alive, which is why my mother wants to be a part of this too and doesn't mind us working from here—in fact she's full of ideas

The land that we wish to turn into the commune is a literal forest—it's next to a forest reserve and is full of sal trees among other fruit trees etc, so there will be a lot of work to be done once that begins. But the main, immediate work right now is the covid-19 mutual aid drive, for which we're raising funds. Yesterday the cops beat up and humiliated locals in the village for not wearing masks, for example.

So right now it's imperative that we give out free masks to as many families as possible and spread awareness about covid—one of our comrade's already made posters for it so that's what we'll be doing this week, printing up the posters and pamphlets and spreading them around along with the masks

By next week if we get enough funds we'll go to aulgeria, where we basically buy the rice they harvest and distribute it to the people and then also get them the rest of the products and soap and sanitizer, etc. We'll document the whole thing too, so you'll get to see the aid work once it begins

UGL: What is the name of the town your project's taking place?

TSU: It's actually a village, but it's close to Jhargram. It's within the jhargram district. This place is called Niribili, you can find it on google, my mother and father used to run it as a homestay (father died of covid last november). The village is called Garh Salboni.

Anyway, until we get enough money to buy our own acres of land, we'll have to use this land as our base, which is fine by the collective as well as the "owners" because of the similarities in ideologies

UGL: That's pretty nice. How do the locals think of what you're doing. Have you recruited any new members yet?

TSU: Well out of the 7 of us working here, 3 are locals and there's another one joining. The local folk are pleased regarding our project—it's the political parties within the villages that often try to say that the mutual aid work was done by them etc but this sort of direct action always seems to have a positive impact in my experience. There's also another man called kabir who will possibly join us—i'm waiting to meet him once his work gets over in a few days. So yeah,

we're really trying to make this as local as possible, found that to be the best way to promote solidarity and the idea of autonomy.

UGL: Seems like your project is a flame of hope in a world of darkness. Do you cooperate with other collectives? Both on national and international level I mean.

TSU: We cooperate with FAU Germany who has helped us a lot. IWW England hasn't really helped, but when have the British ever helped Indians? Many anarchists, on individual level, cooperate with us, but it's mostly been FAU who helped us a lot with funds; and on national level there are individuals that contribute through either work or funds but they aren't many.

We're trying to be more in touch with Araj and BASO which are based in Bangladesh, but that's still in its embryo as it were, but we haven't had the opportunity as of yet to cooperate with anarchist collectives from Greece or Spain or Latin America.

UGL: Glad to hear the FAU is helping, do they plan on making a visit down there? As for the Bangla comrades, please tell me more about them. I know nothing about autonomia and anarchism in Bangladesh.

TSU: I don't know much to be honest, but there are way more anarchist groups in Bangladesh (BASO is a syndicalist union), Araj I think is an anarchist co-op. Araj basically means Stateless in Bangla.

UGL: We should confederate and help each other. With this interview I plan on making Greek comrades learn of you. However geography also plays its role and it's a good thing you came in contact with Bangla comrades. How about Pakistan though?

All of us here would love nothing more than to confederate with your group! We'd love to know more about it too, and maybe we could visit and learn from each other in the future. Well I'm not very well versed with Pakistani anarchist groups—the demonization of the people there is enough to shield what is really happening there. I'm sure there are groups there, but I'm guessing they have to be very secretive because of the State and also religious fundamentalism. A Pakistani anarchist once wanted to meet me, he had even arrived here but he was made to go to the police station every day and was basically harassed so much that he literally cried for a long time and just left for Pakistan.

I've been in touch with Food Not Bombs in the Philippines though, they're very very cool and really figured out their own way of reaching out to people through punk concerts for example.

UGL: how will you proceed after completing the Kolkata project? Do you plan on creating a network of communes based on solidarity within India?

TSU: Yeah that's our basic plan. So in much the same way we try to influence different people in cities through agitprop, seminars and volunteer work what anarchism and mutual aid really means, and then help them organise their own co-op or commune, which I think is important because doing it the first few times, you'll fail for sure. But you'll still learn so many things out of it and bit by bit you can perfect your flow. If everything works out well then I'm hoping that by 2040 (when climate change will most definitely become extremely destructive, something we can't even fathom as a species) that we will have these communes set together as a federation where we're always cooperating and figuring out problems autonomously instead of hoping that the chief minister notices that your whole village is starving and devoid of any

paddy. But yeah that's just a dream until we manage to stick to our own plan to make a commune.

I think once we start the community centre both in Salboni and in Kolkata, things will start flowing. We're still trying to figure out where we can make money (as a co-op, to support ourselves) or if our production is enough. We'll figure something out. Up til december none of this is going to happen, we're only going to be working in villages in the jhargram district with food and supplies, free masks and hold awareness campaigns, etc.

UGL: I see a lot of similarity between yours and ours project, especially now that you've mentioned climate change. You earlier talked of co-ops farms and permaculture as far as I know Indian plains are pretty suitable for farming. Do you plan on starting more farms?

TSU: We *love* permaculture. That's what we're trying to do in the forest here! I've obviously never learnt it anywhere but I've been trying to learn about it and read about it, and I've practised with companion plants and some other tactics, it's amazing how different permaculture can make your forest. Flo only told me that you're green anarchists, so I gathered you were probably practicing permaculture, so yeah, I got pretty excited. I'd love to know more about what you do and about your farm and your experiences.

UGL: Well, I'm not an anarchist, I'm an autonomist that has been influenced by the anti-civ and green anarchists currents. The rest of the folk is mostly composed of green anarchist comrades. We've started working on the farms from early November and have good progress since then. Right now we're waiting for the crops to be ready and a portion of them will be distributed among poor proletarian folk. Permaculture saved us a lot of cash and we're working also on food forests and wood cabins where people can be hosted. We also practice animal herding, what about you?

TSU: I'm an anarchist, I've been heavily influenced by kropotkin, camus and goldman, and bhagat singh, who was an indian revolutionary. I've always been torn between red and green anarchism, because to me climate change has always been the biggest cause for radical change and the ones responsible for it are the capitalists. so i've worked wth MLs, maoists and we had our own zine and collective called Eyezine, after which there was Kaloberal Collective, which failed again, and then in 2020 we started People's Solidarit Collective, which was a mutual-aid collective, which basically turned into The Scarlet Underground. So this project is a mixture of black and green and black and red, one could say.

We've had some cows before, now we have lots of chickens and dogs. And elephants; Lots of them here now, to eat the mangoes and jackfruits.

UGL: That's pretty cool. So you've got some past from which you can use the reputation to have the project grow in numbers and quality. Eggs, milk and cheese can be good and nutritious source of food for the poor folk. I see that you activities are pretty much like ours, rural-based. However, since you plan on expanding towards urban centers, how will you proceed there? We thought of creating vertical gardens on squats, but nothing more than that. How about you?

TSU: Unfortunately here in urban areas it costs a fortune to get a house with land to use. At best I think it will have to be an indoor community garden where we practice permaculture but on big plastic or clay circular vats. That way whoever enters the community centre leaves with some idea and maybe curiosity about permaculture.

UGL: What about squats?

TSU: Squats are difficult in Calcutta, they're usually taken up by homeless people, however we could cooperate it with them and provide them with food. Problem is that it's much harder to do your daily work because the police here will beat you up.

UGL: I see. Those squats in Calcutta, are they located in the slums? Is there a lot of police in the region?

TSU: Loads of them. There are a lot of protesters in the region too yeah but they make those houses themselves in the slums the state does fuckall for them or any NGO.

UGL: We hope your project goes well. We will proceed with the confederation and let us hope that more collectives will join us into creating a global network of solidarity. Cheers to you comrade!

TSU: Cheers to you!

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