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Will sacrifice life, but not give up land: Adivasis of Sonbhadra Blog by Special Invitation


13, Aug 2019 | Roma


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“Jaan de denge lekin zamin nahi denge” (We will sacrifice our lives, but not give up our land) continues to be the echo from the Adivasis of Sonbhadra, 24 days after the brute firing at Village Umbha, Ghorawal Block by sections of the upper castes of the region.

These were the words on the lips of the martyr who was killed July 17, 2019 after the upper caste lobby open fired on innocent tribals who had been struggling to assert rights on their ancestral lands since Independence. The entire region of Kaimur as it is popularly known, comprises of the three districts of UP Chandauli, Mirzapur along with Sonbhadra in Uttar Pradesh (UP). Two districts of Bihar also fall within Kaimur, as does Gadwa in Jharkhand. The Kaimur region is the stuff that legends are made of, it has been the site of an intense battlefield, against the eminent domain since independence: here, the Adivasis and other forest peoples are and have been in direct conflict with vested interests represented by feudal landlords, corporate houses and the state.

CJP stands with the millions of Adivasis whose lives and livelihoods are threatened by the shocking order by the Supreme Court. We are working to ensure the forest rights of Adivasis in Sonbhadra, Uttar Pradesh, and to deepen our understanding of the Forest Rights Act and support Adivasis' struggles across the country. Please support our efforts by donating [here](https://cjp.org.in/donate/) (https://cjp.org.in/donate/).

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you might be interested in this area. It is the tribals, the Dalits and the landless who are fighting against such unjust policies and practice. It is crucial that we understand the background in which such incidents are taking places.

I have been working in Sonbhadra for the last two decades. My work started here by studying the country's most disputed forest and land issue. I never realized that this study will take me deeper in transforming into a forest and land rights activist. We choose eight villages from eight blocks of Sonbhadra. All the villages had very serious land disputes. The year was 1999. In village Baiswar of the Ghorawal block we found, how, Adivasi land, some 700 acres granted to Kol adivasis were cancelled overnight to accommodate the compensatory afforestation project of the Hindalco company. Actually, 700 acres of rich forestland was granted to Hindalco Industries to set up an aluminum plant in Renukut as far as 150 km from the village of Baiswar. This land was to be compensated for through 'forestry' and the land of Kol tribes was snatched to make this happen! The situation was no different in other seven villages that we studied: there was a serious land dispute with uppercase feudal forces in Village Kanach, Chopan block, Village Basauli in Robertganj block and also in other blocks.

Sonbhadra is the country's most disputed land area just like Kashmir. The entire Kaimur plateau is very rich in forest, minerals and fossil fuels. The British made a very late arrival in this area unlike other areas. Discovering its abundance in beauty and vast rich mineral resources, the exploitation of these resources began.

There is an important point of mention here. During and after independence, the forests and the forest land acquired from the princely estates and landlords did not vest with the Forest people especially the Adivasi and other communities living there. It was illegally transferred to a colonial Forest Department (FD) based on appeal (https://mailchi.mp/d1de21338105/we-did-it-trainin)

you might be interested in the gazette notification *alone*. This was also made to happen on the eve of Independence when 'new independent India' had to be freed of land-lord-ism, a class of persons earlier created by the British to loot the lands and indigenous peoples of our country. In fact, land-lord-ism was further strengthened by this move of vesting public lands with the FD, railways and other departments in the name of national development of our country. This on the one hand and the fact that, on the other, land reform measures and laws that were enacted in the revenue areas were also not implemented properly and had lot of loopholes made the goal of 'land to the landless' a far, distant dream.

It was after independence that most of the acquired forestland was transferred to FD. If we look at the whole of India, around 23% of land, that is 73 million hectares of land was transferred by the 1970s. Most of this land, that is 14% does not have a forest. So after Independence, the FD became the biggest land lord of our country against the spirit of our Constitution that directed States to enact laws to abolish land lordism.

No land reform measures were carried out in forest areas and the colonial Act of 1927 Indian Forest Act (IFA 1927) ruled here, that is in the forest area. These steps took away all the democratic and constitutional rights of the forest peoples. "The forest people became *"gulam"* (slaves) after independence and saw a real ray of hope (and true independence) only after the enactment of Forest Rights Act (FRA) in 2006" (*Munnial, Forest Village Pradhan from Haripur Taungiya, Haridwar*)

The jungles and forest are the home lands of Adivasis of the Sonbhadra Kaimur area (this district was carved out of Mirzapur in 1989). This area was also the victim of these disastrous policies. There was no cadastral survey conducted before or after independence. In village after village, forest and gram sabha land was illegally encroached upon by the FD. Secondly the Zamindari

Abolition Act of 1950 came into force in this area only in 1968. In appeal (<https://mailchi.mp/d1de21338105/we-did-it-trainin>)

you might be interested in 18 years the vast tract of pastures, commons and gram sabha land were appropriated by the feudal landlords, upper caste, dominant sections. The land was also appropriated in names of dogs, cat and animals.

It was through this process that around 533 villages of forest and the land of lakhs of Adivasis became 'disputed' and their houses, agricultural land were converted into reserve forest u/s 20 of the IFA 1927. According to their own working plan (official) around 8 lakh hectares of land has been transferred to the FD. No effort was made to bring these areas under the scheduled areas and neither were the 16 tribes of this area granted ST status. Rather, whoever came to this area from outside got and grabbed land in Sonbhadra while the Adivasi and other forest dwellers kept getting marginalized. Even the Raja of Vijaygarh fort was compensated a staggering Rs. 90 crore in 2007 (!) for vesting his *zamindari* forest and land with the state!

With the dream of building new India, big public sector units were established in this far flung forested area that were seen as 'temples of India' by the Nehru Government. Vast tract of forest land were granted to the National Thermal Power Plant, the National Coal Limited and other allied companies. The irony is that these public sector units also encroached vast tracts of forest land and then sold this land to private players in Shaktinagar, Beejpur and Obra.

In the name of national development, the mega Rihand dam was constructed between 1960-1970 displacing 141 villages in both UP and Madhya Pradesh (MP). The fertile agriculture land and forests were submerged without any compensation granted to the families. The scale of displacement was so large that there was no trace of 50 thousand people and there is no record of the missing people. The displaced families took shelter in the upper hilly tracts forests around the dam. There are many villages in the

Singrauli area, which consist of Adivasis and forest dwellers, who

you might be interested in three to four times for various industrial projects such as coal mining, railway expansion, power projects etc. Later, the FD tried to claim even those lands which Adivasis thus occupied, trying to uproot them.

Mining on a massive scale began in this area. Sand, dolomite, silica, and coal — mining of all these minerals. Asia's Largest cement factory was set up in Dalla, Churk and Chunar. After liquidation this company has been sold to Jaypee Industry Pvt. Ltd. around 2008. The Birlas established the largest Aluminium plant "Hindalco" in Renukut. Six mega power plants were erected in Shakti nagar and Beejpur. Sonbhadra is known as the "energy capital of India". But 70% of the villages still grope in darkness. Apart from this, various small industries came in along with the big ones. All of them were and are involved in looting and grabbing public land, forest and land being held by the Adivasis. There are documents with us that prove how Birla Hindalco company was "given" prime forest land that was "sold" to them on a notary by the then Governor. This is when forest land cannot be sold at all since it is a national heritage. Under the garb of a 'sale' of 700 acres of land (bought by this company), in actuality, thousand hectares were grabbed illegally by displacing many Adivasi peoples.

Similarly, in Dalla the cement factory took away forest land for mining. More than 10 thousand hectares of forest land was appropriated in connivance with the revenue officials and land was illegally transferred to the company. The former, chief conservator of forests, AK Jain had taken this matter to Supreme Court. Instead of getting justice he was killed in a road accident in Agra last year. Name anyone and you will find that any society, NGOs, company, or feudal family, all have grabbed lands in this area. The famous Van Vasi Sewa Ashram (affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) too possesses around 400 acres of prime forest land in Govindpur, Dudhi. The Robertsganj,

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you might be in Naxal, Ghentawal, Chopan block are the areas where the feudal and upper caste rules. All police stations are under their pressure even now. (https://cjp.org.in/)

It is in the background of such serious disputes and unrest in this forested area that various government(s), in time, began slowly addressing the issue. In 1972, the then Bahuguna Govt. set up a high level committee, the "Mangal Dev Visharad Committee" to study the land distribution and the situation of the landless in UP. This report records the highest numbers of revenue, forest and land disputes in the region of Sonbhadra.

After the Forest Conservation Act came into being in 1980, this land conflict deepened further in both Mirzapur and Sonbhadra. The Kaimur Survey Settlement Agency was formed to study the land disputes after the Ban Vasi Sewa Ashram moved Supreme Court in 1982 to save its own acquired land from getting declared as a reserved forest u/s 20 of Indian Forest Act 1927. This survey agency brought a plethora of problems along with its formation: it resulted in more disputes; even more land was illegally transferred to outsiders. Before the Agency could start its operations another high level committee headed by the then chairman, Revenue Board UP, Maheshwar Prasad was formed to study all the land disputes with a mandate to suggest measures to rectify the issue.

The forest and land disputes of Sonbhadra, being in such a critical state, also find mention in 29th report of the SC/ST Commission of the government of India (1989) headed by Dr. BD Sharma. The period of the 1990s saw the growth of left extremist activities and armed conflict in Chandauli, Mirzapur and Sonbhadra. It was in March 2001, that a massacre like Umbha took place in village Bhawanipur (within 30km of Umbha) where 13 tribals were killed branding them as "naxals". One of them was 14year old Kallu studying in Std VIII. Then chief minister of the state, thereafter

India's minister for home affairs (MHA) Rajnath Singh had made appeal (https://mailchi.mp/d1de21338105/we-did-it-training)

you might be interested in this controversial statement: "If they kill two of ours, we should kill four of theirs". It was very clear that the target for the administration was the Adivasi. From 2001 to 2004, a large number of extra judicial killings (read fake encounters) took place in this entire region. The author has conducted a detailed study and research on this. Even the draconian anti-terror law, POTA was used to implicate 42 Adivasis in 2001. Many of them were bonded labourers of a feudal lord (Raja), Narain Giri of Village Kanach in the Chopan block. These charges under POTA were finally lifted by the BSP Govt when it came in power in 2002 after the persistent effort of our organization, the "National Forum of Forest People and Forest Workers". It was the public hearing, organized by this forum that focused on the issue, especially on the killings of Adivasis in Robertsganj, Sonbhadra in 2001, that drew political attention to the event.

It was only after the successive governments run by the BSP and SP that such massacres and extra judicial killings came to halt. Finally, the enactment, in 2006, of the "Forest Rights Act" brought some relief to Adivasis and forest peoples. From 2009, the implementation of the Act began under BSP rule. Age-old and entrenched injustices still continued however, and in 2015 too, the SP government resorted to firing on Adivasis while they were protesting against illegal land acquisition in Kanhar dam. The single most significant impediment in blocking the implementation of the 2006 Act—enacted to ensure the recognition of rights of traditional forest dwellers and Adivasis over land—has been feudal, capitalist forces and above all the nexus of the Forest Department and police that have allied with dominant sections combined with an absence of political will of both the centre and state governments.

Against all odds, faced with such entrenched repression and conflict, the fact is that Adivasis are not giving up their land, they are fighting back, as is in the case of Umbha village. This recent massacre will have a repercussion for the ruling government, appeal (https://mailchi.mp/d1de21338105/we-did-it-trainin)

you might be which, by denying basic rights, is trying to push communities towards left extremism and through this, trying to crush the available democratic space. (https://cjp.org.in/)

As an activist working in this area for the past two decades, struggling for reclaiming the lands of Adivasis and Dalits, one can foresee the movement snowballing into an even more vibrant struggle against this brazen land grab.

The struggle to save the lands, the jungle and the environment in this region have been fought through innovative democratic means and more democratic struggles will unfold in coming days. The forest land reclamation movement has only been able to survive in such a conflict-ridden zone by organizing democratically, building up a mass people's organization and linking these with the national level organisation like the All India Union of Forest Working Peoples (AIUFWP).

This is not to say that the recent brutal attack was not carried out against organized people. This author and around 10,000 members of the union (AIUFWP) have also been booked in hundreds of false cases under various existing draconian laws. These acts of repression and malicious prosecutions by wings of the state began after the FRA 2006 was enacted. This author and many women tribal activists were jailed twice, once in 2007, working for the implementation of FRA 2006 and the second time, in 2015, during their protests against the illegal land acquisition for construction of Kanhar dam. Last year in 2018, organization leading activist Sokalo Gond, Kismati Gond, Sukhdev Gond was falsely implicated after filing community rights claim in Lilasi village of Sonbhadra. They were jailed for five months.

It was only through the strength and solidarity of a people's organisation that the members of the union got protection, fought back consistently over the past two decades to get their lands back. This movement, led by women has reclaimed more than
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you might be interested in 20,000 acres of land in this region. They are now engaged in collectively cultivating the land and planting forests. Lands have been claimed under Community Resource Rights under FRA also on 23rd March 2018. [donate \(https://cjp.org.in/donate/\)](https://cjp.org.in/donate/) [\(https://cjp.org.in/\)](https://cjp.org.in/)

The current regime, is trying to dilute the FRA 2006, by bringing in various amendments to the British law, Indian Forest Act (IFA), 1927. The Supreme Court order of February 13, 2019 ordering the eviction of millions of forest people from their land has also drawn widespread protest. (This order was thereafter stayed on February 28, 2019 and the matter will now be debated in court!)

It will not be easy to silence these voices. On the ground, the struggle will intensify: it will be a battle royale between Adivasis, Dalits, the Landless and the corporates. A national level platform of more than 150 organization, the “Bhumi Adhikar Andolan” has emerged to resist this brutal attack on the forest people, peasants and farmers. A nation wide call was given against this attack on July 22, 19. Protests took place in the far corners of the country demanding a pushback of the controversial eviction orders of the SC. In the upcoming Parliament session scheduled for November 2019, a mass rally to Parliament will be organised to counter the anti-people onslaught of this regime.

“Zalim ko jo naa roke woh shamil hai zulm mein....

Qatil ko jo naa toke woh qatl ke saath hai.....”

(Those who do not work to stop the oppressor, become participants in oppression,

Those who do not speak against/criticize the murderer, bend to his side)

(The author is deputy general secretary, All India Union of Forest Working Peoples(AIUFWP)

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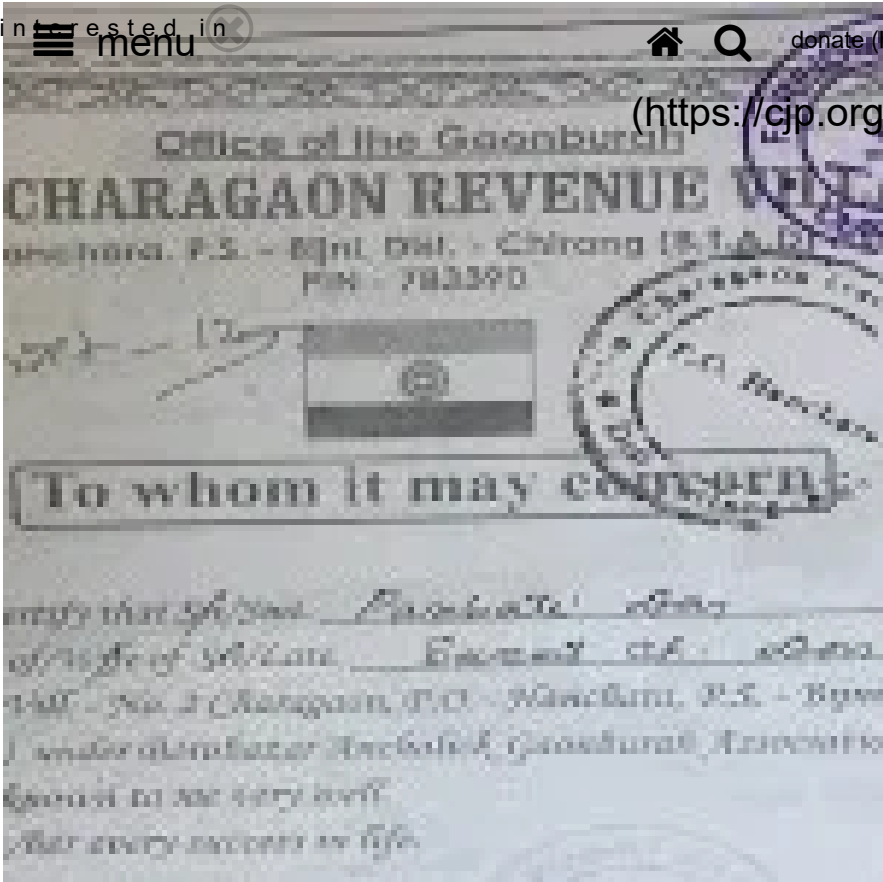
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