
Why are we in jail? A women's fight against injustice and domination in India

It was 6am. Me and other women comrades had to get ready for a rally and meeting at 10am to oppose the new Land Acquisition Ordinance promulgated for the third time in succession by the current party in power in India. I heard jeeps coming in. I heard the sound of the police boots as they alighted from the jeeps. Then, there was a loud banging on the door in the adjacent room where two men comrades sleep. I knew the police have come to arrest us. Meanwhile the men comrades open the door. The police in numbers rushed in. I came out of my room and asked them to wait until I had changed. Some police officers entered my room, slapped one of the other woman Adivasi comrades and stared at the other Adivasi comrade who was kind of frozen in her half dressed position after bath. They seized all the phones they could see. Meanwhile my landlady was called and shouted at by the police officers for renting out this two room space and ordered to vacate the space. I was led by about fifteen to twenty officers and forced to sit inside a jeep. The other Adivasi woman comrade was forced to sit in another jeep. Our convoy left. About six jeeps and one truck load of armed constables! We were driven to the Superintendent of Police office on the outskirts of the city. Me and the other woman comrade were sent to two different rooms and the men comrades were kept outside. Then, as expected, we were taken to the local court, which was emptied and cordoned off, and we were sent 80 kilometres away to a fourteen-day judicial remand, to join 5 other comrades already there for more than two months, at Mirzapur jail. What have we done for the police to swoop down at 6 am and arrest us with such a big armed force as if we were terrorists? There is an *immediate reason* and a *long term anger* which the police and administration have against those of us fighting for peoples' rights.

Immediate reason – the movement against the illegal Kanhar dam and illegal acquisition of land in the Kanhar dam area.

Kanhar Irrigation Project is an inter-state project located downstream at the confluence of the rivers Pagan with Kanhar, near Sugawan village in Tehsil Dudhi of District Sonbhadra, Uttar Pradesh. The project proposes a 3.003 kilometres long earthen dam with a maximum height of 39.90 meters from the deepest bed level, which may be increased to 52.90 meters if linked to the Rihand reservoir. The project envisages the submergence of 4131.5 hectares of land, which includes parts of Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, mostly inhabited by tribal communities. The project claims that it will provide irrigation to Dudhi and Robertsganj Tehsils in the Sonbhadra district via left and right canals emerging from both sides of the dam, however, this region has seen with the Rihand dam - which was built across the Rihand river in the early 1960s and displaced thousands of families from over 100 villages - how the waters are being used to meet the needs of energy companies. The arable command area of the project is 47,302 hectares. The project imposes enormous threats not

only on the environment and ecology but also to thousands of tribal families living here for hundreds of years.

Originally approved by the Central Water Commission in September 1976, there was some foundation work undertaken at the time, but the project was soon stalled due to inter-state issues, lack of funds and strong protests from tribal communities of the region. The construction work was completely abandoned since 1989-90. There were attempts to re-inaugurate the project in January 2011 and in November 2012, however no work could be taken up until December 2014, when construction work began under heavy police and paramilitary presence. Roads were blocked and the project site entry was closed 1.5 kilometres ahead of the construction site. Local Adivasi and Dalit people who have been opposing this project expressed their opposition even more strongly.

The loosely knit movement gathered momentum with their decision to align with the Union of Forest Working People in a public meeting in December 2014. Continuous picketing began a little far from the construction site. Activists filed cases in the National Green Tribunal to challenge the project in terms of the environmental harm it would be causing and the lack of proper environment and forest clearances. The Tribunal passed a stay order and asked the dam project authorities to produce relevant environment clearances.

The Tribunal order noted among other issues that the project is bound to result in a huge loss of forests; with a large number of trees already cut despite strong opposition from the tribal communities, because the cutting is a gross violation of the provisions of the Forest (Conservation) Act from 1980. The Renukoot forest division of the Sonbhadra district is one of the richest and densest forest areas of Uttar Pradesh. It is known for its rich biodiversity, medicinal plants and the traditional and cultural heritage in the form of tribal knowledge which has attracted much scientific and economic attention.

However, in violation of the tribunal stay order, construction work continued. Peoples' anger grew. On 14 April, local people decided to organise a protest near the construction site. As people came together, they were fired upon – one Adivasi suffered bullet injury and several others were injured. But the people resisted with increasing numbers joining the sit-in programme. This made the police force to retreat and thus the sit-in continued. Again, on 18 July people were brutally baton charged and fired at. Arrest warrants were issued against several activists, including me and other women Adivasi community leaders. Orders were also issued prohibiting my entry into the district.

The local district administration and police, hand-in-glove- with the local land mafia and the industrial-builder lobby have decided to trample on peoples wishes and forcibly evict them from their ancestral villages and lands. They do not care for dialogue, they have no regard for the legal system or the constitution of the country. It is their fiefdom and they rule it the way they want – by force. They do not care that this project does not have appropriate environmental or forest clearances and that it will directly adversely affect nearly 10,000 tribal families who will lose their ancestral land permanently. They do not care that Gram Sabhas (Village Councils) of the affected villages have passed a consensus against the project and submitted it to the State Government. They do not care that dense forests will be lost: the Kanhar project document shows that 4 439.294 hectares of land categorized as 'Forest and others' will be affected - millions of trees will be cut down by this project which would cause significant impact on the environment, wildlife and livelihood of tribal peoples. They do not care about the health of the tributary river Kanhar to one of the major rivers of the region – the Sone river, which is in turn a main tributary to the life line of India, the Ganges river. They do not care that losing millions of trees will contribute to climate change because the carbon in the forests will be released to the atmosphere. People of this area do not want this project. They say: "*We do not want*

dams; in fact we don't need it. It is the industries for which they need water, and for which they want us to give up our fertile ancestral land and destroy the forests which we have protected since centuries and put our children in danger."



The long-term anger against us – the fight for people's rights and against injustice

It needs to be understood that the anger of the local administration, police, landed gentry, mafia, is due to the work of more than a decade and a half in the district of Sonbhadra among the Adivasi and Dalit people of this region – for their rights to land, forest, water and natural resources.

Sonbhadra district, tucked away in the south eastern corner of the state of Uttar Pradesh, is the “energy capital of the country” – producing more than 11,000 MW of electricity, millions of tons of aluminium and cement. While the area is highly industrialized, the people are highly impoverished. The whole country is benefiting from this region, which was once full of forests and hills, but this region and its people have not benefitted and on the contrary have been impoverished. The “energy capital of India” does not provide electricity to the people of this region. And the fact that people were uprooted from their lands for the industrialization has only impoverished the people in the region.

It is in the backdrop of this industrial progress but unprecedented impoverishment of the Dalit and Adivasi people of this region that the All India Union of Forest Working People – then not a union but part of the Uttar Pradesh Land Reforms and Labour Rights Campaign Committee and later on as part of the National Forum of Forest People and Forest Workers – NFFPFW, which was actively advocating for the rights of forest based people - sent me to work with the people in this district and build awareness around their rights to land, forests and natural resources. That was in 1998-1999. The work of the National Forum in Sonbhadra added strength to the evolving discussions around the rights of forest workers and forest-based communities. The struggles of forest dwelling communities to assert their sovereign control over forests and other natural resources, waged from the early days of the British rule right up to post-Independence India, are probably the oldest and the most consistent.

But these struggles had so far been marginalised by the political and academic circles. In post-colonial India, the mainstream discourses on forests and environment almost always deal with and describe forest communities as a threat to the environment and hold them responsible for the destruction of natural resources. Hence, the identity of forest workers was never really recognised, neither in the political nor in the labour movement discourse. But our struggle was changing that scenario. Our struggle was empowering local Adivasi, Dalit communities to be aware of their rights,

speak up and, after the passing of the Forest Rights Act, demand it. Large tracts of land have been re-claimed by Adivasi and Dalits in the region and they are collectively cultivating such land. This has posed a direct challenge to the landed class and upper caste of this region.

An added dimension is that the struggle has been primarily spearheaded by women – which has unsettled and angered the patriarchal state and landed gentry. So it is a class struggle with a strong gender aspect linked to it. This kind of repression – sending us to jail, threatening us, will only strengthen the movement. Long live the victory of peoples struggle all over the world for their rights of land, water, forests and dignity of work.

Roma, romasnb@gmail.com

All India Union of Forest Working People (AIUFWP)

**See Press Release from July 15, 2015, “Say No to state violence against democratic protests”,
A joint statement by Forest and Adivasi Movements in
India:**<http://palashscape.blogspot.nl/2015/07/press-release-say-no-to-state-violence.html>