

STRUGGLE OVER FORESTS: STATE, PRIVATE ARMIES AND ADIVASIS IN THE HINTERLANDS OF JHARKHAND

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the three decade long struggle over land and forest resources that continue till now in the hinterland of Jharkhand. The focus of the paper is on the regions of Latehar and Palamau that has witnessed sanguinary battles between the Adivasis and the private armies of the landlords named Sunlight Sena. Fashioned after the notorious Ranvir Sena, this private army was raised to bulldoze all forms of resistance by the Adivasi population and their attempts to reclaim the land that was concentrated in the hands of a few Zamindars. Till the late 1990s the land owned by some of the local landlords ran into thousands of acres (the highest being 6000 acres owned by Jagjit Singh Mahuar) and the private armies were raised to safeguard these huge land holdings. The paper along with exploring the stories from that violent past also looks into the present day coercive attempts of the government to acquire land for mega mining projects. The state that did not intervene in the massive land holding or the violence unleashed by the landlords, is currently waging a war to acquire the lands reclaimed by the Adivasis. The paper seeks to explore these continuous violent battles in the past three decades against the feudal forces and the state.

Keywords: Adivasi, Jharkhand, Maoist, Sunlight Sena, Operation Green Hunt, Latehar, Palamau

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A substantial section of the population in this country, especially the Adivasis, has lived in a symbiotic relationship with the forests. They have at the same time, been most systematically exploited and denied their claim over the forests, forest produces and agricultural land within the forests. In many parts of Jharkhand, people have often protested, resisted and fought bitterly, to reclaim their rights over the same. This paper is based on the ethnographic study done in the forested regions of Latehar and Palamau districts in Jharkhand. I have spent around six months in separate stays and interacted with the people on the questions of the continuing struggles around land and forest produces. If one tries to map the socio-economic history of Latehar and Palamau districts in the last three decades, what emerges is a scenario of expropriation and dispossession as well as people's resistance against the same. This region has evolved into one of the most important zones of the Maoist movement, as a systemic reaction to the atrocities of the feudal forces and also the forest department in the guise of 'scientific forest management'.

A brief socio-economic sketch of Latehar and Palamau

Palamau used to be a single district which was formed in 1921. Later after the formation of the state of Jharkhand, it was fragmented into three separate districts of Palamau, Latehar and Garhwa in 2001. This entire region is covered with dense and semi-dense forests and the hills of the Chotanagpur range. Total forested area that falls under the Latehar Forest division is 132384 hectares, out of which 20648 hectares are reserved while 111736 hectares are protected forests.¹ According to the census of 2011, the total population of Palamau is 1936319. There are a few rivers and many small and large streams flowing in this region, among which Koyel and Auranga are the main. The name Latehar means *Lata ki har* or string of creepers which describes the forested nature of this region. The total population of Latehar is around 725673, of which the total Scheduled Caste population comprises 20.70 percent of the population while the Scheduled Tribes consist of 45.17 percent population.

The main occupation of the people in this region is agriculture and collection of Minor Forest Produces (MFP). People from most of the families also go out as seasonal migrant labourers to work in various cities across the country. They, however, come back to their villages during the agricultural season, which is roughly between June to January. Among the villages that I studied, only three had electricity connection. Here too, only two phases of electricity are provided, which is not enough for irrigation and is only used for lighting bulbs in the homes.² None of the

¹ http://www.jharkhandforest.com/forest_area.html

² In Latehar district, only 36 percent of net cropped area is under irrigation. Agriculture production is largely characterised by mono-cropping. 83 percent of the land holdings are owned by small and marginal farmers. Source: Nabard Consultancy Services, 2012, 'District Agriculture Plan, Latehar District, 2008-09 to 2011-12', Ranchi.

villages I visited in Latehar and Palamu had a *pucca*³ road. The only concrete road ends in Maneka, the nearest small town. The only nearby private hospital in the villages I studied in Latehar is also at Maneka. The government hospital is in Daltonganj which is the district headquarter.

The control over agricultural lands formally rests with a few dominant landlords, all of whom belong to the dominant caste of Rajputs and Bhumihars. Their ownership extends to hundreds (even thousand) of acres that simply defied the stipulated government ceiling on the possession of land. The forest department is notorious amongst the people and is widely held responsible for forcefully evicting people and denying their rights over land and MFP. The people share a relationship of animosity with almost all government officials. However, the government welfare bodies are allowed entry and in fact people even launched mass movements demanding anganwadis, health centres, and the implementation of schemes under the Indira Awas Yojana and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). But the entry of any representative of the forest department has been strictly resisted in these villages for the past ten years. Forest guards, forest rangers, and other forest officials all now work from their office in Daltonganj town and none have been allowed entry in the past decade in any of the villages I worked in. This complete rupture between the forest department and the people and the vitriolic anger that the people showed against it has its roots in the history of the preceding decades. I would like to delineate the struggles of the people for their rights over land and forest that spanned a little over three decades (1980-2010). These struggles can be mapped in three broad phases. The first broad phase was the organised movements of the Adivasis against the local feudal landlords as well as the forest department. The second phase would see attempts by the Adivasi and other oppressed people of the region to secure and retain the land that they captured. The third phase is a renewed attempt by the state to re-capture these lands, through massive military assaults in a bid to dispossess the people once again.

The warfare with the feudal forces and the forest department

Till the late 1980s, the terror of the forest department was pervasive in these areas. In this context, it needs to be stressed that there were direct linkages between the forest department and the local feudal forces. Land, including agricultural and non-agricultural land, in this region used to be owned by a few landlords. The area was dominated by Zamindars such as Jagdishwar Jitsingh Mauwar, who owned around 500 *mouzas* which amounts to around 6000 acres of land. Shyambihari Singh (owned 484 *mouzas*) and Hasnat Khan (400 *mouzas*) were the other major landholders. Laxman Uraon of Shashank village, a man in his early sixties, recalled how they were forced to plough, as bonded labourers or *begaari* (unpaid labour) where they were made to work merely in lieu of daily food. Such *begaari* was

³ This is the Hindi term for solid or permanent.

extracted from the people not only for agricultural work but also involved wood and firewood collection, bamboo and basket making, as well as for *mahua* and *tendu* leaf collection. The same tale of immense exploitation and dispossession that was prevalent in Palamau and Latehar till two decades back reverberated in the narratives of the people. While talking to me they also recalled the feudal oppression that the people were subject to till the late 1980s by dominant landed sections. Jagdishwarjit Singh for example is a legendary figure of terror known as *Adamkhor Mahuar* (the man-eater Mahuar) as he used to maintain a pet tiger for which the villagers were compelled to provide cattle. What was worse, he was known for feeding rebel peasants to his pet tiger. People who dared to rebel were tied overnight to pulleys of wells in an upside down position as a public display of feudal power. There were around 16 landlords till the early 1990s in the region who owned more than 500 acres of land each. Among them, Gaya Singh of Abun village and Dhuru Prasad of Birbir village, who was also a Rajya Sabha MP, were notorious for their feudal exploitation and oppression. These landlords belonged to the dominant castes in this region which included Bhumihars, Rajputs, Sahoos (*marwaris*), Brahmins and the Pathans among the Muslims.

The clash with the private armies of the feudal forces

As the organised resistance of the people started taking shape in 1989-1990, the attack and repression over the people became multi-pronged. The main issues of contention became the spread of the mass movements under organisations like Mazdoor Kisan Sangram Samity (MKSS) and Jan Mukti Parishad (JMP), for the right to collect *mahua* from the lands owned by the Zamindars by the cultivating peasants. This became a major point of confrontation between the Zamindars and the peasants. This led to the formation of the private militia, led by the Bhumihars, Rajputs and the Pathan Muslims.

The two initial but short-lived private militias of these regions were called the Kisan Sangh (1984) and Krishak Sevak Samaj (1985). Both were patronised by a landlord Bhishm Narain Singh, his brother Vijay Bahadur Singh and Congress (I) leader Jogeshwar Tyagi. These militias were active in Chhatarpur, Bistrampur and Hussainabad of Palamau. The Kisan Sangh killed the secretary of MKSS, Krishna Singh who was a popular leader in Baryadih Dalit tola on 17 June 1984. A few months later, MKSS supporters were attacked in Kachhra and Kaunipur village. In the same month, when a bonded labour from Haidernagar, supported by the MKSS, filed a case against his owner, he was shot dead. The Krishak Sevak Samaj also unleashed terror among villagers who were associated with MKSS. The police also simultaneously stepped up its activities against the people's organisation. Following the police firing in Arwal in 1986, MKSS was banned by the state. In March 1986 the police open fired on a mass demonstration killing an activist of MKSS, Siddha Ram. In 1987, Dr Bashir Ahmed who was associated with JMP was dragged out of his clinic and shot dead in Tisibar village, Bistrampur Block. In 1987, at least five JMP workers were killed by either the police or the Krishak Samaj. In 1988, three more JMP activists were killed by the police after they open fired on JMP's meeting. This

meeting was being held in Barwadih where the people successfully managed to collect *mahua* from all the trees, including those belonging to the Zamindars. In 1988, two leaders of the Krishak Samaj, Jogeshwar Tyagi and Ram Vilas Singh were killed by the MCC. Extensive social boycott of the Samaj took place which forced them to surrender by 1989 (PUDR 1990).

Fashioned after the notorious *Ranvir Sena* which was operational in North Bihar, the most dreaded private army formed in Jharkhand was called the *Sunlight Sena (SS)*. This was initiated by the Pathan landlord Sani Ali from Garhwa in alliance with the Rajput and Bhumihaar landlords from Latehar and Palamau like Dharmendra Pratap Deo Singh. This Sena was active from late 1990s to early 2000s and carried out a series of atrocities and ruthless killings. Leaders and MPs of various parliamentary parties also actively backed the Sunlight Sena to violently suppress the people's movement. Leaders of the Sunlight Sena consisted of Arun Singh, the son of former minister and BJP MLA of Ranka, Gopinath Singh, Congress leader Vijay Kumar Singh of Ladigarh, Congress MLA Rajendra Pratap from Nagar Untari, former union minister and governor of Bihar Bhishm Narain Singh of Chhatarpur, Janata Dal leader Avadesh Kumar Singh of Barwadih, and former Congress MLA Jagat Narain Pathak of Ranka (PUDR 1990).

The Sunlight Sena, unlike its preceding two militias, was much well organised and militarily structured, with commanders, assistant commanders, etc. Lallan Singh, a landowner who later started his own business as a contractor later was one of its notorious commanders. They launched several attacks, targeting mainly Dalit tolas. Kutmu, Pandepur, Lakrahi, Dawarpur, Naukadi, Kajru, Tekhipur, Tisibar were among the villages which were severely attacked. In all these attacks the police and the SS used to co-ordinate blatantly. There were a series of armed clashes between people and SS. The armed Sena members used to roam in groups, surround Dalit tolas, shoot down people, loot households and harass women. They used to specifically target the political activists of JMP, Khet Mazdoor Union of the CPI or the Indian People's Front of the CPI (ML) Liberation. In many instances, in Sigsigi village, in 1990, the SS entered and shot down around four people in cold blood. The police did not arrest any of the SS goons but eight landless labourers who had nothing to do with the incident, were arrested and charged with murder and arson. The police bias became clear, as it was reported that until February 1990, 157 cases of violence were filed out of which 12 were related to the activities of the Sena. While 250 landless labourers or marginal peasants, all of whom were either Dalits or Adivasis, were lodged in jail for being 'extremists', only 30 people who were aligned to the Sena were arrested (PUDR 1990).

However, the Sena gradually got alienated from the middle and small farmers, who earlier supported with food and shelter. Relentless campaign by the various Left parties including the Maoists, particularly among poor Muslims – who formed the foot soldier of Sunlight Sena – also resulted in successful disbanding of the SS. The Muslims in particular, refused to participate in Sena activities by the late 1990s. By 2000, the SS was gradually decimated.

Struggles for *Jal, Jungal* and *Zameen* (Water, Forest and Land)

Forest reservation has always acted as a regime of restriction which secured monopoly over commercial value of the forests. Till the 1980s, forest bungalows were major sites of terror. In Latehar, for example, the forest bungalows were regular sites of sexual exploitation of women by forest rangers and forest guards. A major ban existed on procuring MFPs. Chopping of wood, even firewood, was banned as was grazing of cattle within forest areas. Grazing cattle were promptly seized and were only released after paying bribes. The forest department had to be regularly bribed in order to ensure some relaxation over these restrictions. In the 1980s, particularly between 1982 and 1989, the government-backed '*jungal katai andolan*' took place. Miles of forests were cut down as government tenders were issued for clearing forests. This process of felling was called '*koop*' in local parlance. Teak and other valuable timber designated as major forest product were taken away by contractors whereas the remaining parts of the trees were burnt to make charcoal.

The resistance of the people was waged on three fronts. The first was to reclaim land occupied by the landlords. The second was to reclaim rights over the minor forest produce. Third was to secure the overall livelihood with alternative developments. The resistance started in 1989, with the second claim to establish people's rights over the minor forest produce and to secure entry of the people within forest areas. A major struggle was launched in 1989 around raising the price for beedi and tendu leaves, as these were the only products on which tender was issued to contractors. The people organised under *Beedi Patta Mazdoor Sangharsh Samiti* which was established in 1990 and consistently fought for the increase in charges of beedi leaves per bundle. The price of a bundle consisting of thousand leaves was Rs 5 till 1988-89, and this increased to Rs 35 by 1992 after the first round of struggles. When I was in Latehar, Palamau, it was raised to Rs.110 and the price is revised every two years by the Krantikari Kisan Committee.

Along with beedi/ tendu leaves, other MFPs in this region are bamboo, bawba grass, *mohlam* leaves, *mahua*, *sagwan*, *amla*, *harek*, *bahera*, *pear gond*, *khair ka kaththa*, *kironjhi*, *mohlam ka rassi*, *kheron ka rui*, *chironji*, *ghyon ka latha*, *kusum* etc. People were prohibited by the government from accessing all these MFPs. The dominant *marwaris* and *sahoos* had a monopoly over these produces. People, instead of any cash payment, were forced to collect them in exchange of food, or to assuage debts. After the people's movement intensified in these regions, the aim of the movement expanded from securing rise in the labour charges to gradually establishing ownership over the produce. Currently the ownership, distribution and selling of MPF is overseen by the Jangal Suraksha Committee (JSC) which is formed by the villagers and is prevalent in almost every village. Outside traders come to buy these produces. Any villager can obtain MFP from the earmarked forest region allotted to their villages.

The forest is divided into regions by a border made of white stones which is called *Tehara*. It marks the zone of forest for each village and the villagers can obtain minor forest produces from within its own *Tehara*. Scheduled Tribes and Traditional Forest

dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (commonly known as FRA) acknowledged the 'historic injustice' done to people and has vested the rights of the MFP to the local villagers. In fact some of its provisions are selectively evoked, such as giving people individual ownership to promote commercial plantation. However, the important provision of vesting people's rights of MFP is hardly effective in most other places. In the forests of Jharkhand the masses have broken the collusions and strongholds of contractors and have to a large extent reclaimed their ownership over these forest produces successfully.

The current military offensive of the state

Operation Green Hunt, (OGH) as this military expedition is generically called, was launched with much media fanfare in 2009. It followed shortly after the CPI (Maoist) was declared as a 'terrorist' organisation and its members/supporters/sympathisers were declared liable to be booked under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA).

Jharkhand – one of the most fermented regions of the Maoist movement, with 18 out of its 24 districts declared officially as 'Maoist infested' – is a prime target of OGH. As is suggested in the name, this military operation *hunts the green*. This war on the Maoist is also therefore taking mostly within the forests. OGH in Jharkhand is more intense in Western Singhbhum in the vast swathes of Saranda forests and Porahat district, followed by Latehar-Palamau-Garhwa districts, where I did my fieldwork and also in Bokaro and Santal Pargana. Huge cache of para-military, elite forces and special task forces have been so far deployed in Jharkhand for OGH. This includes the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (CoBRA), Jharkhand Armed Police (JAP), the Jaguar Force etc. The OGH, as is evident from various media reports, independent tribunals, and fact finding reports is a major assault on the people, especially the Adivasi and other forest dwelling communities. It is not a co-incidence that OGH is intense in the areas where maximum MoUs have been signed. The OGH so far has entailed glaring violation of human rights and flouting of other democratic and legal rights of the people, including right to live. Numerous instances of torture, arrests, illegal detention, rape and sexual assaults of women and even murder showcased as 'encounters' characterise OGH as a whole. The rampant militarisation of the regions and criminalisation of any kinds of protests are turning these regions practically into a civil war zone (CDRO 2012).

In the name of 'fighting the armed Maoist militants', the security forces through OGH have time and again targeted unarmed civilians and villagers. The Maoists draw their main support from these people. What one witnesses here is the time tested counter insurgency tactics by the state of targeting the unarmed masses in order to intimidate them from actively joining or supporting the Maoist movement. Needless to say, the assaults of the state forces, can never distinguish between Maoists and non-Maoists. Hence, the targets often include people who are social activists not related to Maoists, members of other parties/ organisations or ordinary citizens without any affiliations or particular allegiances. Apart from the armed

encounters with the Maoists, the Security Forces mostly target the unarmed masses, after branding them as Maoists, often post-facto after their death. These regions after all have been officially declared by the state to be affected by 'Left Wing Extremism' and therefore every villager in the eyes of the state and the security forces remain a potential suspect. Being in or around a forest count directly as a 'suspicious activity' and any person caught in such circumstances is liable under any kind of punishment including death.⁴

As the villagers describe, the forces move in a number of 300-1000 when they 'raid' a village. These raids generally involve indiscriminate beating and torture, molestation of women and at times destruction of crops, household property and cattle. This has resulted into gradual closing down of village markets in many places Jharkhand. The people en-route to the village markets are regular targets by the security forces. These villagers go to the market with some amount of money, which is looted by the same forces.⁵ Arrests after being branded as Maoists and even killings have become a common feature in Jharkhand. There are about 6000 people lodged in various jails across Jharkhand who have been persecuted or arrested as Maoists. More than 550, men and women, have been killed as 'Maoists' (Sharma 2012).⁶ And this is despite the Supreme Court ruling that even mere membership of a banned organisation cannot be held to deem someone a criminal who is liable to be arrested.⁷ Many times these raids are either aided or carried out by the police backed vigilante gangs like the Tiritiya Prastuti Committee (TPC), People's Liberation Front of India (PLFI), Nagarik Suraksha Samity (NaSuS), Jharkhand Liberation Tiger (JLT), etc.

While tribes make up only 8 percent of 1.2 billion India's population, the Central Government estimated in 2004 that 55 percent of those displaced by development were from the tribal communities. (Another twenty percent are Dalits, and yet another 20% are from other impoverished rural communities such as fisher folk and quarry workers).⁸ As is obvious from the above, the forests and the forests dwellers have been the ones sacrificed at the altar of the 'greater common good' as dictated by the state, for 'national interest', for 'Glory'. The Adivasi cultural gathering, like the *Baha Parap* of the Santhals where they offer the first fruit to their god, and the *Sarhul* by the Oraons which mark the beginning of the cultivation had been banned in many places by the security forces in Jharkhand. The security forces see such huge gatherings of the Adivasi population dangerous for their own safety. They suspect such gatherings can aid Maoists who will remain camouflaged while hatching 'conspiracies' to launch attacks. It is probably for the first time in 2010, that in

⁴ Joint Statement of Forest People's Movement, 'Halt The offensive against People and end the Militarization of Forest' <http://sanhati.com/excerpted/1824/>

⁵ Incidents narrated in personal communication. Also see, Stan Swamy, 'CRPF violating PESA Act in Jharkhand Villages', SANHATI

⁶ Ajay Sharma, 'In the name of Maoists in Jharkhand', Hindustan Times, 08.02.2012

⁷ Supreme court, Criminal Appeal of 889 of 2007.

⁸ Data taken from www.nsvk.in/displacement.html#

centuries such traditional mass programmes of the Adivasi population were forcibly stopped by the security forces. Interestingly, although the Jharkhand state was formed in 2000, the State human Rights Commission in Jharkhand was set up as late as 2011. It is yet to look into a single instance of violation of human rights by the security forces in the state (Dungdung 2010).

The last three decades therefore has only seen relentless blood-shed and multi-pronged attacks on Adivasi rights along with restrictions on their livelihood and mobility. This relentless struggle is being waged continuously on the question of the primary resource of land, along with the minerals that lie beneath the land and the forest produces that lie above it. The state in collusion with the feudal forces in the past and the MNCs currently has only facilitated the loot of land, dispossessing the people, primarily the Adivasi and Dalit population from the same. The desperate fight back of these dispossessed masses has resulted into a civil war like situation. A war that hardly has any witnesses.

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