

India: Indigenous Activists in Jharkhand Charged With Sedition

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The 20 adivasi (indigenous) activists have been slapped with sedition cases for publishing critical posts against the Raghubar Das-led BJP government on Facebook and for allegedly playing a prominent role in the Pathalgadi movement.

New Delhi: The Jharkhand police on July 26 slapped sedition cases against 20 senior adivasi activists for publishing critical posts against the Raghubar Das-led BJP government on Facebook and for allegedly playing a prominent role in the Pathalgadi movement.

The activists, who include prominent activists like Father Stan Swamy, former Congress MLA Theodore Kiro, and Aloka Kujur, have also been charged with creating communal tension, violating the IT Act, and causing law and order problems.

Although the police have not arrested the activists, a significant section of adivasis believe that the state government was using intimidation tactics to silence those who have been campaigning against its “communal-corporate” agenda.

The FIR was filed by police inspector Rajesh Prasad Rajak of Khunti police station in the context of the June 26 incident in which people from Anigarha village of Khunti attacked former Lok Sabha deputy speaker and BJP leader Karia Munda’s house and allegedly abducted three of his security guards. Munda and his family were not present when the incident took place. The violence took place after the police personnel lathicharged and beat up the silently-protesting villagers.

Rajak, in his FIR, said that the activists played a leading role in “manipulating the innocent and uneducated villagers” against the government and prodding them towards “anti-national activities”. He also accuses the activists of “misinterpreting the constitutional provisions” and spreading their interpretation among the villagers of Khunti through their “anti-national speeches and propaganda”.

“These people (activists), who use social media, Facebook to spread their anti-national propaganda and work against the unity of our country are disrupting communal harmony,” Rajak said this in his report, adding that they were trying to fuel riots in the state.

Scare tactics

However, the activists dismissed these allegations and said that the FIR was just the state government’s way to threaten them.

Speaking to *The Wire*, one of the accused Theodore Kiro said, “Jharkhand is facing an undeclared emergency. Here, the state government is targeting all those who do not support its policies. We have been raising a whole range of issues that are of concern to the adivasis. At the centre of our struggle is the conflict over land.”

“Any native of Jharkhand now understands that the state government is working for corporate interests and wants to acquire adivasi land by introducing repressive land acquisition policies. The amendment that it introduced in the the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act and the Santhal Parganas Act are a case in point. Similarly, it is trying to rearrange the demographic balance in the state by changing the domicile policy. The changes would skew the balance in favour of non-advasis.”

He said that the ostensible reason for all such measures, advasis understand, is to “finish the advasis both financially and culturally”.

“The BJP government knows that if they do not nullify the constitutional protection that the advasis enjoy, it wouldn’t be able to serve corporate interests. This is a Sangh parivar conspiracy to uproot the advasis. One can easily see how the interests of the BJP/RSS/VHP and the big corporate groups converge in a state like Jharkhand. The corporates want land to set up their industries and mines. The BJP wants the advasis to come under the Hindu fold. Only when the advasis are uprooted, the corporates will get land.”

On the sedition case, he said, “The FIR is ridiculous. The police has also charged us under the IT Act, Section 66A, which has been repealed by the Supreme Court in March 2015.”

Many adivasi villages across Jharkhand, especially in Khunti district, over the last few months, have used the age-old ritual of Pathalgadi (installation of a memorial stone on a grave) to lay multiple stones to quote constitutional provision to declare their gram sabhas as sovereign. The Pathalgadi movement [stemmed from the two-year long adivasi agitations](#) against the government’s proposal to introduce land acquisitions laws and state domicile eligibility. The adivasi activists have viewed these reforms as infringing upon their land rights under ninth schedule of the constitution.

A senior journalist in Ranchi told *The Wire* that the Raghubar Das, in the wake of land struggles over the last two years, has been systematically targeting the institutions of the Church. In large parts, these institutions have openly supported the adivasi movements.

“The state government has thus been especially repressive with the Catholic church. The police has booked many Church officials in false cases all over. Even in this case, Father Stan Swamy, who is more than 75-year-old and is a well-known civil society activists in Jharkhand has been booked. Only recently, he documented more than 6000 cases in which innocent adivasi villagers were picked up by the police on frivolous accusations but later branded them as naxalites,” he said.

The former Congress MLA Kiro concurred, “It is clear that whoever is raising the people’s voice will be booked. It is just the beginning. Today, it is the Church, tomorrow all critical voices will be suppressed if we do not fight.”

The conflict between the civil society and the state government has been on an upward swing in Jharkhand. This has pushed the state into multiple crises ever since the Raghubar Das government has taken over. Slapping as serious a charge as sedition on activists who chose to criticise the government on Facebook is yet another incident which may escalate the mistrust among advasis even further.

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