

ASSAM'S EVICTION SQUAD

Why Adivasis' Soldier is Silent?

Gladson Dungdung

On August 26, 2010, the Congress leader and self-proclaimed soldier of the Adivasis, Rahul Gandhi visited Niyamgiri in Orissa just two days after the Indian government denied clearance to the Vedanta Resource's Rs 4500 crore bauxite mining project in Niyamgiri Hills. While addressing a rally of 3000 colourfully dressed Dongria Kondh and other Adivasis at Jagannathpur village who have been fighting to save their holy mountain he said, "I am your soldier in Delhi. Whenever you need me, I will be there for you." He got a huge clapping when he said, "True development takes place by respecting the interests of the poor and Adivasis." However, just after two months, the migrant Jharkhandi Adivasis were attacked by the Forest Department in Assam but the Adivasis' soldier is still silent. Therefore, the Adivasis want to know why their soldier is silent. Is he shocked on the incident or he is silent because if he opens his mouth the Congress Government may face severe problems in Assam?

The State sponsored attack on the migrant Adivasis took place on October 30, 2010, when a gang of 200 people of 'eviction team' comprising Bodo youth (deployed by Haltugaon Divisional Forest Officer), Forest Protection Force and Task Force entered into Lungsung Forest Block of Gaurang Range under Haltugaon Forest Division to evict the Adivasis alleging them of encroaching the Forest lands. This area comes under Bismuri police station of Kokrajhar district in Assam. The eviction team started abusing, threatening and frightening the adivasis, and asked them to leave the areas and when they denied it the eviction team started chasing them, beating them and set fire in their houses. Consequently, within a few hours, the hundreds of houses with movable properties like paddy, rice, utensils, bicycles, ploughing instruments and clothes were burnt into ashes.

The Forest Department carried on attacks on the Adivasis till October 31. Besides, burning the houses and properties, the eviction team cut down the trees of mango, banana, bamboo, bettle nut and papaya. The eviction team hunted the livestock like hens, ducks, pigs and goats and took away those with them during the eviction. The family members who were found in the houses including men, women and children were physically and mentally tortured during the eviction. The women who protested against the atrocities were molested and beaten by the eviction team. The eviction team did not even spare the children. Many small kids were half burnt and got injury in their bodies and heads. When the atrocities crossed the limit, the Adivasis started protesting against the Forest Department. As a result, the men who led the protest against the atrocities were arrested by the Police.

The Forest Department with the help of Bodo youth burnt down 400 houses of 53 villages into ashes. Consequently, 5975 Adivasis of 1143 families became homeless and 33 Adivasi village heads of Santal and Oraon communities were arrested and sent to Kokrajhar jail. Besides, 9 Primary Schools, 1 Manjhi Than (place of worship), 6 Churches and 7 Lakhi Mandirs were also burnt into ashes. The vegetables and other crops were also destroyed in the move. The Adivasis were tortured, their houses burnt to ashes and they were thrown behind the bars in the name of eviction. They were portrayed as encroachers of the forest land though they have been living in the vicinity since 1964, much before the enactment of the forest conservation Act 1980. Ironically, the Forest Rights Act 2006 emphasises on righting the historical wrongs done to the Adivasis but in Assam the historical injustice is still continuing with the Adivasis merely for the vote bank politics of the Congress government. Is the Forest Rights Act not enforceable in Assam or the Act is brought to ensure lands to the

corporate sharks after dividing the Adivasis and other forest dweller communities in the name of giving them rights over the forest and forest land? The Adivasis are living in the state of uncertainty in Assam.

The ancestors of Jharkhandi Adivasis mostly the Oraons and the Santals had been taken to Assam by the Britishers to work in the tea garden approximately 150 years ago. Later on when the population increased, they scattered and some of them settled down in Lungsung forest after clearing the land in 1964. The Forest Department had evicted the Adivasi and Bodo people from the area in 1977. The district administration rehabilitated the Bodo people in different places of Kokrajhar district but the Adivasis were left out and they remained in adjacent vicinity. In course of time, when the Adivasis faced livelihood crisis they again went back to Lungsung forest and settled down. In July 1996 the Adivasis were driven out from the forest by Bodo extremists and took shelter in different relief camps, where they were given merely 400 gram rice per person for 10 days, which threw them in the livelihood crisis. Consequently, they again went back to the Lungsung forest to earn their livelihood and settled down in their old villages.

Perhaps, the Forest Department is very bias, arrogant and undemocratic. Firstly, the Forest Department didn't issue any notification before evicting the Adivasis as per the eviction procedure. Secondly, Bodos, Nepalis and Adivasis have been living in Lungsung forest since 1964 but the Forest Department took action only against the migrant Jharkhandi Adivasis. Ironically, the Assam Government and the Bodoland Territorial Council justified the inhuman acts of the Forest Department. The Congress-led UPA government counts the Forest Rights Act 2006 as one of its biggest achievements but the question is why the Jharkhandi migrant Adivasis were not given entitlements of the lands they have been cultivating for years? How does the Forest Department become protector of the forests and the Adivasis encroachers, whose life, livelihood, economy, culture and identity are based on it?

The Member of Parliament of Kokrajhar S K Bwiswmuthiary accused Ram Dayal Munda, Babulal Marandi and other Adivasi leaders, who visited the affected areas of Assam, of attempting to create a mini-Jharkhand and bringing in the Maoists in the forests of Bodoland. According to Joy Raj Tudu, the leader of Jharkhand Initiatives Desk, who met the victims, S K Bwiswmuthiary has been playing a biased politics towards the Adivasis, in his third term being an MP of Kokrajhar, has been successful in denying the existence of Adivasis in the region and has been the staunch enemy of the Adivasi sentiment. In fact, he was the ring master in instigating the ethnic violence between Adivasis and Bodos in 1996 and 1998.

In fact, the whole dispute is based on the issues of the land, the migrant Adivasis' demand for ST status and sharing of the power. The migrant Adivasis have occupied very fertile lands, which the Bodos are eyeing to capture, therefore they don't want the land to be regularized to the Adivasis. Secondly, there are 70 lakh migrant Adivasis in Assam, 25 percent of the total population of the state. In that case, if the migrant Adivasis are given ST status they can acquire many posts and positions through reservation. The Bodo and other Assamese Adivasis see it as cutting in their share. Therefore, the Bodos are against the migrant Adivasis be given the status of Schedule Tribe in Assam. If the migrant Adivasis are given ST status the total Adivasi population would come to 40 percent, which can make a huge difference in the political arena of Assam. Therefore the non-Adivasis do not want the migrant Adivasis be given the status of 'Scheduled Tribe'.

However, the migrant Adivasis are sticking to their demand for the 'Scheduled Tribe' status, which will ensure their constitutional rights. In these circumstances, if the Assam government gives ST status to the migrant Adivasis and entitlements of land, the Assamese Adivasis and non-Adivasis both may go against the Congress Party. Therefore the Assam government is not only reluctant to give the ST status to the migrant Adivasis but it has been

also sponsoring the exploitation, torture and forceful eviction of the migrant Adivasis of Assam for years.

Though most of the Adivasis of India have voted in favour of the Congress Party for decades but the party has all along been betraying them even today. For instance, if all the migrant Adivasis who have settled down in different states of the country were honestly counted in one category, the numbers of the Adivasis might have reached to 12 crore in India whereas only 8 crore is mentioned in the Census 2001 and rest of them were put in the general categories. Of course, it is one of the biggest injustices done to the Adivasis by those who called themselves as soldiers of the Adivasis. When the elite Indians are targeted in Australia, UK or US, it becomes the issue of racism for the Indian State and the national Media, whereas the Indian state has been racially discriminating against the Adivasis for decades but nobody is bothered about it. Why 70 lakh migrant Adivasis of Jharkhand are counted in general category in Assam? Why the upper caste people get the same status across the country and the Adivasis don't?

Perhaps, Rahul Gandhi is much worried about the matter of Adivasis deserting the Congress Party rather than protection of their rights. So, he intends to get back the lost Adivasi vote bank by projecting himself as their soldier. The relevant question here is if he is Adivasis' soldier then whose government has been carrying on eviction of the migrant Adivasis in Assam, Salwa Judum in Chhatisgarh and Operation Green Hunt in the so-called Red Corridor? However, if Rahul Gandhi still wants to become a real soldier of the Adivasis, he should ask his government to give ST status and land entitlements to the migrant Adivasis of Assam, to enforce the United Nations declaration on the rights of the Indigenous People 2007, to recognise the Adivasis as indigenous people of India, to protect their constitutional and traditional rights and stop their alienation from the natural resources. □□□