

Violence on Adivasis continues in Jharkhand; Killing of Bramhadev Singh of Piri (Latehar) by security forces

On June 12, 2021, many online news portals reported an exchange of fire that took place between security forces and Maoists in Kuku-Piri forest, which comes under the jurisdiction of the Garu police station of Latehar (Jharkhand). According to reports, one Naxalite was killed and guns were found. The next day, many local newspapers highlighted that 24-year-old Bramhadev Singh of Piri Village had died in counter firing by the security forces. He had gone to the forest with other villagers to hunt on the occasion of the Sarhul festival.

Jharkhand Janadhikar Mahasabha investigated the matter by conducting a fact finding that included representatives of various organizations, journalists, lawyers and social workers. The group formed by the Mahasabha included the following social and media organizations – Adivasi Adhikar Manch, Adivasi Women's Network, Human Rights Law Network, The Gram Sabha. On June 17, the team visited Piri village, met the villagers and victims, analysed the response of the local administration and police, the registered FIR and reports published by the local media.

The team found that the incident of 12 June was not an "exchange of fire". Innocent villagers were fired upon by the security forces. The six Adivasis associated with the incident (including Bramhadev) were out on a traditional hunting ritual, as every year, for the Sarhul festival. They all carried a Bhartua gun, which has been in their families from generations. This single fire gun is used to hunt small animals and birds like rabbits, pigs and chickens. and to protect crops from animals.

On the day of the incident, as a group of six villagers moved about 50 feet towards the forest, one of them saw security force personnel at the edge of the forest. He took two steps back and asked others to move back. This caused a panic and the people who were behind started running. Suddenly, the security forces started firing without any warning. The villagers, however, did not fire any shots from the Bhartua gun they were carrying. They instead raised their hands, shouted that they are common people, not Maoists and requested the police to not shoot. But the security personnel kept firing. One of the bullets fired by them hit one of the villagers Dinenath in the hand. Another bullet hit Bramhadev in the body. The firing continued for about half an hour. Fearing being shot at, the five men ran away from the forest. Thereafter, the security forces took Bramhadev to the edge of the forest and fired three shots at him, which led to his death. The villagers also told the fact-finding team that none of the six victims was associated with the Maoist organization.

The FIR lodged by the police makes it clear that the police is trying to hide the truth. The FIR does not mention Bramhadev's death by the police firing. According to the FIR, this incident was an exchange of fire in which the first shot was fired by the group of armed villagers and some people fled into the forest. The FIR also mentions that Brahmadev's body was found at the edge of the forest. These statements are contrary to the facts. The police has filed a case against the six Adivasis, including Bramhadev, under various sections (including the Arms Act). This too exposes the true intention of the police – it wants to maintain pressure on the villagers to prevent them from questioning the police firing and the murder. In the police station, all the five victims were made to sign (or put their thumb impression) on many pages (some blank and some written) without informing them about the content of these pages.

Such incidents are continuously taking place in Jharkhand. For example, in June 2020, Adivasis of Chiriyabeda village in West Singhbhum were brutally beaten by the CRPF during a search operation. Although the Chaibasa superintendent acknowledged the role of the CRPF in the violence, the FIR lodged by the police does not even mention about the CRPF. Till date neither the victims have got any compensation nor any action has been taken against the responsible CRPF soldiers.

Under the leadership of Chief Minister Hemant Soren, the mahagathbandhan got a clear mandate against the oppressive and anti-people policies of the previous BJP government and its violence against Adivasis. But human rights violations and police atrocities and violence against tribals have not stopped. On behalf of Jharkhand Janadhikar Mahasabha and the fact finding team, we make the following demands from the state government:

- Government should formally make the truth public – this was not an exchange of fire with the Maoists. Nor was it a retaliatory action by the security forces. The Adivasis were going for their traditional hunting festival and did not fire at the security forces. The security forces fired at innocent Adivasis and shot dead Bramhadev. Then an attempt was made to cover up the matter.
- A judicial commission should be constituted to ensure an independent investigation into the actions of the security forces. An FIR should be lodged against the security force personnel and officials responsible for the killing of Bramhadev and firing on the villagers. The FIR registered by the police on six Adivasis including Bramhadev should be quashed. Administrative action should be taken against the local police and senior officials for filing wrong statements and FIRs.
- All the statements, affidavits etc. taken by the police from the victims and their family members till now should be made null and void because the victims were forced to sign / put their thumbprints on these papers without even being informed of the content. Testimonies of victims should be taken only in the presence of their lawyers.
- Wife of Bramhadev Singh should be given a compensation of at least ten lakh rupees. The government should take full responsibility of their son's upbringing, education and employment. Also, the remaining five victims should be compensated for harassment by the police.
- Give clear instructions to the local administration and security forces not to exploit people, especially Adivasis, in any way. People should not be harassed by security forces under the guise of anti-Naxal operations.
- Before running a search operation in a village area in fifth schedule areas, the consent of Gram Sabha and traditional village heads should be taken; in other areas, the consent of Panchayat representatives should be taken. Fifth Schedule provisions and PESA should be fully implemented.
- Local administration and security forces should be trained and sensitised about Adivasi language, customs, culture and their world view.

Download the documents, photos etc. related to the case from this link –

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/11VrDMZLqwjVN2svyH9-F2zJg08Lfxjvn?usp=sharing>

Some video testimonies can be seen on Mahasabha's twitter account - <https://twitter.com/JharkhandJanadl> .. For more details contact - Aloka Kujur (9934120747), Celestin

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