

DANTEWADA CRYING

Plight of Soni Sori

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Three months ago, an adivasi woman called this correspondent from Dantewada, "Sir, Dantewada SSP Kalluri threatens me that if I don't handover my nephew to him, they(meaning the police) would destroy my life and livelihood." And now three months later, she complains, "Sir, you did not do anything, and meanwhile police has imprisoned my husband, and has registered 2 FIRS against me, of which one accuses me of attacking a police station, and the other of being complicit with the naxalites in attacking the house of Rajput Congress leader Avadhesh Gautam." Crying inconsolably, she says, "Sir, I have three small children. How can I possibly attack a police station or a Congress leader? I met Kalluri and pleaded with him, but to no avail. He told me that until I handover my nephew Lingaram Kopodi who is currently studying Journalism in Delhi, they would not free my husband." 12 years ago Soni Sori, this adivasi girl was a 12th grade student. Padma-shree Dharmapal Saini, a disciple of Vinoba Bhave, runs educational institutions in Bastar. Her uncle Nanda Ram Sori was a CPI (Communist Party of India), MLA from Bastar at the time. October last year, she came to this writer again and said that police had picked up her nephew and was pressuring him to become an SPO, that they had hidden him in the toilet of the Dantewada police station, and that they constantly beat the daylights out of him.

She was advised by this writer to file a Habeas Corpus petition in the High court immediately. On Soni's advice, Linga's elder brother Masaram Kopodi filed an application in the Chhattisgarh High Court requesting that Lingaram Kopodi be produced before the court. Police defended its actions by telling the court that Linga was not coerced and that he had voluntarily decided to become an SPO. The Court ordered that Linga be produced before the court, who told the bench that he did not want to become an SPO and that he wanted to return home. The Court then ordered that Linga be immediately released and be allowed to return home.

On the way, Lingaram realized that police would not allow him to reach home safely, because during his confinement, DIG Kalluri and SP Amaresh Mishra had warned him and his family that even if they managed to free Linga through petitions in the court, the police would shoot him dead, later claiming that Linga was killed in an encounter. Remembering this threat, midway through his journey, Linga got off the car that was taking him home, and decided to stay at a friend's place instead. Meanwhile, police had imposed a blockade and were waiting expectantly on the way to arrest him again. When they realized that Linga had outmanoeuvred them, Kalluri and Mishra were aghast. In order to find Linga's whereabouts, they kidnapped Linga's elder brother Masaram Kodopi.

When Linga came to know about these shenanigans of the police, he came for advice, somehow managing to escape police's ubiquitous presence. Immediately a fax petition was sent to the court intimating that police had abducted the original petitioner Masaram Kodopi himself. After receiving the fax the next day, the High Court reprimanded the police, and consequently they released Masaram after 2 days of custody.

However the police were not about to give up. They attacked his village at night in order to kill Lingaram. Since Linga already feared such an attack, he had enough foresight not to sleep at home, but in the ruins nearby. The police looked for him in every house of the village, and when they could not find him, they picked up his elderly father and five other

adults from the village. With frustration of a hunted animal, he intoned, "Alright, if the Government wants to kill me, then I might as well join the naxalites". ...This is exactly what the Government wants—that the adivasi youth pick up guns, because this gives the Government an excellent pretext to kill them with impunity. Again a petition was sent to the President, the Supreme Court, the Prime Minister, the National Human Rights Commission, the DGP and the SP. The police released Linga's father after one week. The other five were released after a month, partly due to the constant efforts of Soni Sori. Meanwhile several posses of policemen would constantly go to the village looking for Linga in order to kill him, although he had committed no crime, and he was under protection by court orders. But the Chhattisgarh police and Government have complete contempt for the judicial process.

Meanwhile Soni Sori and her husband Anil met with SSP Amaresh Mishra and DIG Kalluri, who told them in no uncertain terms that since Linga has dishonored the police in court, they have the freedom to shoot to kill him with impunity.

Chhattisgarh police were quite disconcerted when they discovered that Linga was now studying journalism, since Linga was a witness to the various atrocities the police had committed over the years, and he could become their nemesis after becoming a journalist. Vishwaranjan and Kalluri immediately issued a statement during a press conference, claiming that Lingaram Kodopi was a dreaded naxalite leader, and after the death of Azad, the Maoists have elected him to be their spokesperson, that Linga was sent to the USA for training in Naxalism, and that he was in touch with Arundhati Roy, Medha Patkar, Himanshu Kumar and Nandini Sundar.

After this statement from the police, Swami Agnivesh held a press conference in Delhi and said that Lingaram Kodopi is an innocent adivasi youth studying journalism in Delhi, and challenged the Chhattisgarh police to provide evidence for their insidious insinuations. Chhattisgarh Police then offered a public apology and Vishwaranjan issued a statement acknowledging that the police had made a mistake issuing their last statement about Linga. But police have not yet given up conspiring to nab Linga. They have concocted a false report against Linga's aunt Soni and her husband Anil who has been in prison for the past three months. The police have also issued a warrant against Soni. Notwithstanding the warrant against her, Soni went and pleaded with SSP Kalluri a few times, but he told her that the only way her husband was going to be released was if she handed over Linga to the police. Soni is principal of a Government school, and goes to school everyday. Nevertheless the police have declared her a fugitive from law, so that they can kill this adivasi woman any time they want. Will someone rescue this innocent woman? Where are the much heralded media stalwarts of this country? Where is more patriotic than thou BJP? And where is the self-appointed soldier of adivasis, Rahul Gandhi? Is there no one in this largest democracy, in this soon to be a superpower, who can rescue this innocent woman from the cruel claws of the powerful? Ten years after it was formed, Chhattisgarh has become a blot on the democratic credentials of this country. However it contains immense and immeasurable mineral wealth which must be looted to fill the coffers of the rich and the powerful, and in which everyone from Manmohan Singh to Chidambaram to Raman Singh, from Congress to BJP is complicit. That is why there is this disconcerting silence over the terrors unleashed by the Chhattisgarh state machinery. But all of them are playing with fire, which in the end would only benefit the naxalites. □□□

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