

Kanhar Dam - Legitimate demands of dalit farmers in UP being crushed ruthlessly, Chhattisgarh adivasi peasants being kept in the dark – says a fact finding team of Chhattisgarh Bachao Andolan

A fact finding team of the Chhattisgarh Bachao Andolan consisting of Alok Shukla, Sudha Bharadwaj, Jangsay Poya, Degree Prasad Chouhan and Bijay Gupta visited the dam affected villages of the Kanhar Dam in UP and Chhattisgarh on 19th April 2015.

The team first visited Village Bheesur which is closest to the dam site and interacted with the affected families who are mostly of the Dalit community who were still deeply affected by the repression of the 14th April and 18th April.

The affected men and women were very articulate about their grievances and extremely legitimate demands. They explained that they were first told about the Kanhar Dam in the year 1976 when the then Chief Minister ND Tiwari promised 5 acres of land, one job in each family and a house measuring 40'x60', apart from full facilities of education, health, electricity and water to the 11 affected villages of Uttar Pradesh namely Sundari, Korchi, Nachantad, Bheesur, Sugwaman, Kasivakhar, Khudri, Bairkhad, Lambi, Kohda and Amwaar. In 1983 it is correct that compensation payments were made at the rate of Rs. 1800 per bigha (approximately Rs. 2700 per acre) to the then heads of households. After this the villagers have got no notice whatsoever.

On 07-11-2012 the Irrigation Minister laid the foundation stone of the dam. It was claimed that now a consolidated sum of Rs7,11,000 would be given to the heads of households as identified in 1983 and houses of 45'x10' dimensions would be constructed for them. The farmers are rightly arguing that they have been in physical possession of the lands all these years and therefore they should be compensated as per the 2013 Act. The government must be sensitive to the fact that the earlier households have multiplied and the compensation must be provided to all adult families who will lose their livelihood. It is also very pertinent that in the meanwhile the Forest Rights Act, 2006 has come into existence and we found that many of the farmers have been granted Pattas under the Act; however the government is refusing to compensate them for the loss of such lands, which is absolutely against the spirit of the Act.

The work of the dam was started on 04.12.2014 and from 23.12.2014 the villagers were sitting in continuous dharna. On that very day, efforts were made to intimidate them. While the SDM and District Magistrate did not intervene till about 6pm, at about 7pm the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) of which about 150 jawans were deployed at the dam site interfered. After the Tehsildar assaulted a young man Atiq Ahmed, people rushed in from the weekly market and a fracas ensued. Right from that day cases were foisted on 16 named and 500 unnamed persons.

Despite this, the villagers continued with their peaceful protest, however since the government was not carrying on any negotiations and at the same time the dam work was progressing, on 14th April they decided to shift the venue of the dharna closer to the site. The PAC opened fire and a bullet passed through Akklu Chero (Cherwa) – an adivasi of Sundari village. 39 persons were injured, 12 of them seriously. The deployment of the PAC was increased to about 500-1000 jawans.

On 18th April early in the morning the administration was determined to remove the protestors. The district force and PAC surrounded the dharna site, uprooted the pandal and mercilessly beat and chased the villagers right up to their villages. They entered Village Bheesur and not only beat up men and women, but vandalized a motor and motorcycle of Ram Lochan. Colesia showed us her injured arm and fingers and was in tears because she did not know where her husband Mata Prasad was.

People were not certain where missing family members were since the injured have been taken to the Dudhi Health Centre and if any person tries to contact them they face the threat of arrest since between the cases made out against them for the events of 23rd December, 14th April and 18th April cover about 956 persons. But the team found out that the following had been injured mostly with fractures and were possibly hospitalized. The number of women injured is significant:-

Village Bheesur – Rajkalia, Kismatiya Mata Prasad, Uday Kumar and Phoujdar (all ST)

Village Korchi – Phoolmatiya, Butan.

Village Sundari – Ram Bichar, Shanichar, Zahoor, Azimuddin, Jogi.

Village Pathori Chattan – Bhagmani, Ram Prasad, Dharmjeet.

Similarly the PAC people chased the protestors of Village Sundari too right up to the houses on the outskirts of the village. They damaged motorbikes and cycles even setting fire to them.

We observed that the work at the dam site seemed to be progressing fairly fast. The height of the dam which was earlier stated to be about 39.90 m appears to have been increased subsequently to 52.90 m increasing the apprehensions of the people. The Police had cordoned off the area and there were still a large number of PAC trucks and personnel in their makeshift camp of sheets.

When the team reached Village Sundari, there was an extremely tense atmosphere. Some dominant caste-class persons were holding a meeting in which others seemed to be quite subdued. Some very vocal local leaders told us that they do not want any interference from any outside NGO or organization. Most of them were quoting the DM Sanjay Kumar belligerently saying that he had said that all protest and movements should stop. Otherwise he would foist so many cases that they would rot in jail for the rest of their lives and use up all the compensation in paying lawyers. Some persons who seemed to have been sent by the administration were clicking our photos when we introduced ourselves. The leaders told us that they had decided to accept the compensation and would be going to the DM to inform him so as that was the only way the cases would be lifted. While it was clear that not all the persons in the meeting were in agreement with this “decision”, they were clearly cowed down by the cases and the pressure being brought by the administration.

However our most tragic experience was in the affected villages of Chhattisgarh in block Ramchandrapur of district Balrampur. They fall in the “Sanawal” constituency of erstwhile Home Minister Ram Vichar Netam who had assured the villages that there would be no submergence whatsoever in Chhattisgarh. Even when the current MLA Brihaspati Singh of Congress tried to hold a meeting at Sanawal in which he

invited the protestors of UP, lumpen supporters of Ram Vichar Netam made it difficult for him to educate the villagers about this.

We were shocked to find that the Water Resources Department of Chhattisgarh admits that the following 19 villages are to be submerged – Jhara, Kushpher, Semarva, Dhouli, Pachaval, Libra, Kameshwarnagar, Sanawal, Tendua, Dugru, Kundru, Talkeshwarpur, Chuna Pathar, Indravatipur, Barvahi, Sundarpur, Minuvakhar and Trishuli; and 8 to be partially submerged – Chera, Salvahi, Mahadevpur, Kurludih, Tatiather, Peeparpan, Ananpur, and Silaju. Yet the villages are in blissful ignorance.

Only after the incident on the UP side of the dam occurred, on 18th April an Engineer came to Jhara village and stated that 250 acres of land would be submerged out of which 100 acres was private land. But even this is not the truth since it is clear that the entire village is to be submerged. As we were leaving Jhara village we saw a whole convoy of 6 Government Scorpios rushing through the village. Clearly, the state at some point has to begin some legal acquisition proceedings and seem to be at a loss as to how to do so.

Strangely enough, keeping up the pretence of no submergence Shri Netam has had many constructions sanctioned in Sanawal and surrounding villages whereas ordinarily, once there is an intention to acquire, government expenditure is kept to a minimum.

As we returned to Ambikapur, we heard that another fact finding team from Delhi who were to meet with the injured in hospital and the Collector Sonebhadra, had been detained for questioning.

The rapidity and the ruthlessness with which the dam is being built, at any cost, indicates that is unlikely to be for the stated purpose of irrigation. With large industrial projects coming up in Sonebhadra UP and even in neighbouring Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, on the cusp of which this dam channelizes the waters of Kanhar and Pang rivers, it appears to be that providing water to these projects and also hydel power are likely to be the real causes.

The Chhattisgarh Bachao Andolan comes to the following tentative conclusions on the basis of its fact finding –

1. The demands of the project affected farmers, particularly dalits and adivasis, are eminently reasonable and the administration should enter into sympathetic discussion with them to redress their very legitimate and legal grievances. Work on the dam should be stopped during such negotiations so as to create an atmosphere of good will.
2. The PAC used excessive and unnecessary force on the protestors on both 14th April and 18th April. The complaints of the protestors should be registered as FIRs and action should be taken against the errant police jawans.
3. Using the threat of false cases against the protestors to arm-twist them to accept unjust compensation and rehabilitation is a form of state terror. The cases must be reviewed particularly the practice of filing cases against “unknown” persons, and malicious cases must be withdrawn.

4. In the State of Chhattisgarh, there has been absolutely no transparency, information or following of legal procedure with regard to affected 27 villages. The provisions of the 2013 Act beginning with the pre-acquisition procedure of Social Impact Assessment, Gram Sabha Consultation (all these areas are Scheduled areas), determination of Forest Rights, Public Hearing on Rehabilitation and Resettlement packages etc must be strictly followed.
5. Finally, the attitude of the Uttar Pradesh Government and the district administration of Sonabhadra in restraining activists from entering the area or making an enquiry into the facts on the ground is undemocratic and reprehensible.

