

India: one year after revolt, indigenous people in Jharkhand face police occupation, harassment

In Jharkhand's Khunti, Aftermath of Pathalgadi Movement Likely to Be a Poll Issue

Sunday 28 July 2019, by [ALAM Mahtab](#) (Date first published: 19 April 2019).

People in the region are still afraid the police will harass or arrest them if they speak out.

Khunti (Jharkhand): A sense of fear prevails in the villages of Jharkhand which witnessed the Pathalgadi movement last year. In several villages in the Torpa, Murhu and Erki blocks that *The Wire* visited, villagers, especially the youth, are not ready talk about the movement. They fear they will be arrested or harassed.

"I don't want to talk about the issue, as this will attract police action," said a young resident of Andidih village who did not want to be named or photographed. Asked if his name is in the FIR, he answered in the negative.

Why is he afraid, then? "Most cases registered by the police are against unnamed people. So if someone speaks out, they are harassed or arrested," he claimed. "That's why it is difficult to speak our mind." Another young man standing near him expressed similar concerns.

Village headman (*gram pradhan*) of Kochang, Sukhram Munda, confirmed that there is an atmosphere of fear, though the situation has been largely peaceful. "The situation is peaceful. However, there is a sense of fear amongst people as cases are still there and most of the arrests are yet to be made," Munda told *The Wire*. He also said since there are no names in the FIR, people feel they may be implicated if they try to highlight the issue.

A local social activist who requested anonymity echoed Munda's claims. The situation in the Japud block is similar as well.

However, the superintendent of police (SP) Khunti, Alok, claimed that the situation is normal. "I don't know who all you have met, but as far as I know, there is nothing like that. The situation is totally normal in the area," the SP told *The Wire* on the phone. "This is totally new information for me."

The Pathalgadi movement peaked mid last year, asserting villagers rights to administer their own areas based on provisions like the Fifth Schedule of the constitution and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996. Thousands of locals and Adivasis from neighbouring districts such as Lohardaga, Gumla, Simdega and Ranchi participated in the movement for several months. The state, however, claims, the self-styled leaders of the movement are working with the Naxals, violating the constitution and creating lawlessness.

The police has registered several cases against named and unnamed people who have allegedly

participated in the movement. They are charged under different sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) including 124A (sedition). According to Aloka Kujur, an Adivasi rights activist and writer, cases have been registered against nearly 25,000 villagers, most of whom are unnamed and unidentified. She also claims that cases against 44 gram pradhans have been registered.

There is heavy presence of the state police and paramilitary forces in the villages. At least three panchayat bhawans and school building have been occupied by the Jharkhand Armed Police (JAP) and the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). One JAP official *The Wire* spoke to said the situation is under control.

Ahead of the Lok Sabha polls, political parties are yet to start their full-fledged campaign. It seems, though, that the demand for the withdrawal of these cases is going to be one of the key issues. "Though it is not visible, people have been talking about the cases," said Ranchi-based journalist Anand Dutta, who has covered the movement extensively.

"Leaders of both the major political players, Bharatiya Janata Party and Congress, contesting from the area can't afford to ignore the issue as those affected by it will be playing a decisive role in the upcoming elections," argued Dutta. According to him, while Congress candidate Kalicharan Munda is likely to address the issue openly, BJP candidate Arjun Munda may not talk about it publicly because it his party's government which slapped these charges.

However, what is to be also noted, added Dutta, is that Arjun Munda provided some sort of tactical support to the movement by not speaking against it. In fact, in an interview he had said that "the state will have to understand the reason behind dissatisfaction among the tribals".

Meanwhile, some villagers told *The Wire* that they will vote for the candidate who promises to ensure the implementation of provisions under the Fifth Schedule of the constitution and withdraw these cases. Khunti votes on May 6, and as of now BJP candidate Arjun Munda, who is also a former chief minister of the state, seems to have the edge.

Mahtab Alam

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

The Wire

<https://thewire.in/politics/elections-2019-jharkhand-khunti-pathalgadi>