

To save the Hasdeo river, the forest and the environment, to save our livelihoods, culture and existence

A grand gathering and march

On 2nd October (Gandhi Jayanti) from 11:00 AM onwards, a “gathering of gram sabhas” at Fattepur village

On 4th October a 10 days long march from Fattepur to Raipur

Comrades Johar!

As you all know, our region comes under the Schedule V of the Constitution. Despite this, the federal and the state government, instead of protecting the rights of us tribal and other traditional forest dwellers have joined hands with mining companies and have been working towards devastating our forest and land. The threat of climate change has in one way or another threatened the existence of every creature on this planet, even then governments along with mining companies are eager to destroy the beautiful and huge Hasdeo forest.

As we all know, the Hasdeo forest situated in the borders of northern Korba and Southern Surajpur and Sarguja districts, is a vast stretch of contiguous forests which is rich in biodiversity. It is also the catchment area of the Hasdeo river and the Minimata Bango dam which quenches the thirst of the people and fields in Janjgir-Champa, Korba and Bilaspur. This is a habitat for important animals such as elephants and is also an elephant corridor.

In 2010, the federal Ministry of Environment Forests and Climate Change had itself restricted mining and had announced that the entire Hasdeo forest was a “No-Go Area”. However, under corporate pressure, the same ministry went against the decision of the Forest Advisory Committee of not allowing any

mining in the Hasdeo forest and gave forest clearance to the Parsa East Kete Basen coal mine. The honourable National Green Tribunal (NGT) had cancelled this clearance in 2014. Now, the coal mining in the 750 hectares of forest land continues only on the basis of a stay order of the Supreme Court and at present, this mine does not have any legal forest clearances.

In 2015, 20 gram sabhas of the Hasdeo Aranya region had passed motions to the federal government which stated that no coal blocks within this region should be allocated or put up for auction. That if these allocations or auctions took place we would strongly oppose them and under no circumstances would we let our forest and land be destroyed. We have constitutional rights to protect our water, forest, land, livelihoods and culture which are granted to us via the Schedule V. These rights are granted to us through the Panchayat Extension in Scheduled Areas (PESA) 1996 and under Article 5 of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (FRA) 2006 states that we are capable of this responsibility. Despite this, the corporate prostrating Modi government has illegally allotted 7 coal mines in our region to state government companies. The state governments have in turn appointed Adani to develop and mine these blocks as Mine Developer and Operator (MDO). Along with that, the state governments have put the betterment of their citizens on hold as they have agreed to buy coal from Adani at prices that are higher than the market rate. This is yet another coal scam in the country (*the first being the Coal Gate Scam on which the Supreme Court had given its decision in 2014*).

Following the resistance and campaign against these coal blocks by the gram sabhas, in 2015 the national president of the Indian National Congress party –

Rahul Gandhi, had arrived in Madanpur after having a meeting with and consent of the Chhattisgarh team of the Congress party. There, at a gathering, he had reassured all us adivasis that his party stood alongside our struggle and would not let our lands and forests be destroyed. But today having formed the government in Chhattisgarh, the Congress has turned away from this promise and is supporting the Modi government as it snatches our forests and lands for companies like Adani and Birla.

After witnessing the massive opposition of the villagers and the gram sabhas towards coal mining, the Ministry of Coal under the Modi government is acquiring land from the Hasdeo Aranya using the Coal Bearing Areas Act 1957, which enables them to bypass the consent that is otherwise required from the gram sabhas. The forest clearance for the Parsa coal block has also been obtained by forging gram sabha resolutions by pressurising our authorities. They were taken to a guest house in Udaipur (the nearest town at least 20 kms away from our villages) and forced to sign the forged document. In 2019, in the village of Fattepur, we had all sat in protest for 75 days with demands to 1) cancel the forged document and conduct investigations against the perpetrators and 2) to cancel the land acquisition process which had been done without the consent of the gram sabhas. However, the state government did not take any cognizance of this. There have been no investigations despite submitting a memorandum directly to the Chief Minister. On the contrary, the government has been aiding Adani to start work in the mines for profit.

In these circumstances, we are bound to resist and conduct a satyagrah (*literally – insistence of truth a term coined by Gandhi during the Indian*

Freedom Struggle) to safeguard our water, forest, land and our livelihoods and culture that are dependent on them.

On the event of Mahatma Gandhi's birthday on 2nd October, we will remember him and will repeat his oath of safeguarding villages for the India of his dreams. On the 4th of October, we will bow to him and start our march from Fattepur village to Raipur. We appeal to all citizens who love the Constitution and Democracy, all who are committed to safeguard the waters, forests, land and environment and all sentient citizens to join us in this gathering and the march.

Our demands:

- Cancel all the coal mining projects in the Hadeo Aranya.
- Immediately cancel all the land acquisitions done without the consent of the gram sabha under the Coal Bearing Areas Act 1957.
- Implement the provision of mandatory consent required from the gram sabha before any land acquisition processes in Schedule V areas.
- Immediately cancel the forest clearance granted to Parsa coal mine on the basis of a forged gram sabha motion and register FIR's (First Information Reports or police complaints) against the authorities to orchestrated this.
- Reinstate Ghatbarra with their Community Forest Right and recognise the community forest resources and individual forest rights in every village.
- Comply with PESA 1996.

Sincerely,

Hasdeo Aranya Bachao Sangharsh Samiti