

Dayamani Barla: a tribal's tale of struggle and why she can't stop

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The fighter

As a child, Dayamani Barla saw upper castes grab her family's land

[Her tribal parents had to leave for Ranchi in search of work](#)

She and her brother plucked and sold forest fruits to survive

She worked as a maid, sold tea to pay for college

The fight

In 1995, she joined the Koel Karo movement, never to look back

She launched Jan Haq newspaper in 1997 to focus on tribals' issues

[For her activism, she has been slapped with cases, threatened, jailed](#)

She says her struggle is for the Adivasi's land, life and dignity

I belong to the Munda community, an ancient tribe from the Chota Nagpur Plateau in Jharkhand.

My parents were illiterate. When I was in class IV, some powerful upper caste people grabbed our 15 hectares of land in Arhara in Gumla district, forcing my parents to leave for Ranchi in search of work.

For years, my father worked as a labourer and my mother as a maid servant. My brother and I stayed behind, plucking forest fruits to pay our way through school.

After passing eighth standard, I shifted to Ranchi to live with my mother. I scraped through my Masters in Communication at Ranchi University, working as a maid and as a labourer in a soap factory.

I also opened a roadside tea shop, which still earns my living. My husband attends to it all day and when I get the time, I do too.

This is my home, don't take it away

I got involved with the people's struggle in 1995, just when the movement against the Koel Karo hydel project was gaining strength.

The project would have displaced 250,000 people, destroyed 55,000 hectares of agricultural land and 27,000 acres of jungle. We couldn't allow it.

For us tribals, the forest is sacrosanct. It is where we are born and nurtured, and our culture and identity is shaped. The tribal is connected to the forest with an umbilical cord.

I could not let this cord break. So, instinctively, I got associated with the Koel Karo movement, and gave it my all.

To pay for my master's degree, I opened a roadside tea shop. It still earns my living, says @dayamanib

The movement taught me how to fight for our land, life and dignity without fear or compromise. It became so strong that the state had to scarp the project in 2003.

In those heady days of the Koel Karo movement, resonant voices like Faisal Anurag, a veteran reporter of tribal issues and struggles, were urging Adivasis to write their own stories. It was a novel and bold idea for those times.

So, joining hands with some other activists, I took a loan to launch Jan Haq in 1997, a newspaper that focused on tribal issues, people's movements and state inaction. It became quite popular.

Meanwhile, the demand for a tribal state in east India was gaining momentum. In our writings, we were calling this proposed state Jharkhand.

The name embodied the vision of luminaries such as Birsa Munda, the freedom fighter and tribal folk hero.

It carried the hope of tribals having their own state, which would protect their traditional rights over jal, jungal, zameen, and preserve their language and culture.

Statehood, it was hoped, would also allow Adivasis to benefit from mainstream economic development. However, since the formation of Jharkhand in 2000, successive rulers have changed the narrative from rights of Adivasis to bringing in corporations for industrialisation and profit.

It's our battle, we have to fight

In 2005, chief minister Arjun Munda signed an MoU with steel manufacturing giant Arcelor Mittal. The state was to acquire 12,000 hectares of land for a Rs 50,000-crore steel plant in Gumla.

It emerged that some landed middle class people were negotiating not only the sale of their own land with the company but of Adivasi land as well.

The media, too, was projecting an impression that local people were eager for Arcelor Mittal to buy their land.

I filed an RTI request for the precise location of the land being given away. I was told the government didn't have as much land as promised, so it will acquire it from the villagers.

I went to the villagers. They had no idea what the state was planning but said they won't part with their land at any cost.

We built up a movement. The villagers were initially scared; they did not know how to fight the powerful government-corporate nexus. "Tell us how to fight," they said.

I asked them to unite first. Then, we identified the villages that the company was eyeing and visited them to spread awareness about what was coming. More and more people joined the movement, and it gathered steam.

During the Arcelor fight, I'd get threats everyday. They said they'll kill me, abduct me in public

It was a prolonged battle during which I was slapped with 12 court cases and thrown into jail. Finally, however, the government issued a circular in 2010, saying the MoUs with Arcelor Mittal wouldn't apply to Gumla.

The company was reportedly offered land in Bokaro instead, but it has refused to relocate apparently because Bokaro already has a steel plant.

Arcelor Mittal is adamant on not leaving, but we will fight them as long as farmers want to hold on to their land.

Give us what's our right, we don't want charity

Most of Jharkhand falls under the Indian Constitution's Fifth Schedule, which prohibits transfer of tribal land to non-tribals.

Yet, both the central government and several states are trying to amend the laws under the Fifth Schedule in order to allow private players to take over tribal and forest lands.

Of the 104 MoUs that the Jharkhand government has signed with small and big companies in the past few years, nearly 98% are in blatant violation of the Fifth Schedule.

Every project is being sold as a public-private partnership, or PPP. The state has even convinced the courts that these projects are being built to serve "public interest".

In the 1997 Samta judgment, the Supreme Court ruled that all leases to private mining companies in the scheduled areas are null and void. It also gave gram sabhas clear authority to decide what constitutes public interest.

The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 also enables gram sabhas to self-govern their natural resources. Yet, the gram sabhas are rarely consulted on projects in their areas.

In his Mann Ki Baat address, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has asked people, "Don't you want roads, schools, hospitals?"

No village here has ever protested against schools, hospitals, roads. Then why haven't these been built yet?

Today, all national resources are being handed on a platter to corporations. And people's movements that resist this are branded anti-national.

Why, may I ask? Do we talk of saving nature for our vested interests? The river flows for everybody and the forest benefits everybody. Is fighting to preserve them for our children wrong?

A fairer world is possible, let's make it

We stand for sustainable development. Jharkhand has 3.5 crore people living on 79,716 sq km of land. That is 414 persons per sq km. The state must estimate its need for steel and minerals and dig the earth accordingly, not over-exploit it.

The Damodar river, the state's lifeline, and its 33 tributaries are dying slowly from industrial waste. Ground water is depleting, forests are being cut down, land is being given away.

Is this what development means?

If you exploit and exhaust all rivers, forests and minerals, what will be left for our future generations?

I fight for a Jharkhand where agricultural land is saved and expanded, where rivers are protected and forests nurtured.

I want to see a Jharkhand as an education hub. I want to see it open a science centre, set up food processing centres, make lift irrigation possible.

This isn't happening because corruption is all pervasive. Can we change this? Of course.

Meaningful change, I believe, can come through people's movements. But to ignite them, we need to make people aware of what is rightfully theirs and what is being taken away from them.

When we were fighting Arcelor Mittal, I used to get threats everyday. I was sitting with the filmmaker Shri Prakash when I got the first call, and we heard it together.

They said they would pump bullets into my body or blow me up into pieces. When they realised I wouldn't budge, they threatened to abduct me in full public view.

I laughed. I told them it was not possible for me to stop. I haven't.

[Dayamani Barla is a chaiwali, tribal journalist and activist.](#)

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