

**Protests and Repression: Struggles in the
Forests of India**
**Campaign for Survival and Dignity has planned a
series of yatras and protests in Rajasthan, Gujarat,
Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and
Orissa in the coming weeks**
SAP Bureau

The last few weeks have seen struggles over forest rights and forest control intensifying across the country. On the one hand there are larger and larger protests taking place, and on the other, the continued use of force by central and state governments is combined with total silence and apathy on protecting people's rights. The Jangal Jameen Jan Andolan undertook a yatra in Rajasthan, crossing Udaipur, Dungarpur, Banswada, Sirohi, Pali and Pratapgarh districts between December 20 and 28. On December 29, demonstrations were held in all block headquarters. The demands are for respect and recognition of community forest rights, a halt to illegal rejections and modifications of titles and respect for people's democratic resource rights over their lands, forests and minerals. Meanwhile, more than 1,000 people rallied and ten sat on hunger strike in Dahanu, Thane District, Maharashtra on December 7 and 8 against violations of people's rights under the FRA; the hunger strike was called off after a written commitment from the SDO. A similar mass protest was held in Gadchiroli, Maharashtra on December 19 against the illegal imposition of conditions on titles for community forest rights. Yatras are also planned in western Maharashtra and Gujarat in January; on January 19 and January 26, mass demonstrations will be held in district headquarters in Chhattisgarh and Orissa respectively. These latter protests will also oppose the land acquisition bill and call for democratic control over resources. Aside from these plans, other protests and mass struggles are underway. On December 15, a "People's Forest Rights Rally" was organised at Delhi by a coalition of organisations. In the POSCO area, more than 20 people were injured and one killed in an attack on December 14 by a contractor's private goondas; unsurprisingly, on that day alone, the police were nowhere to be found. In Assam the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti is leading a mass struggle against the illegal and dangerous Lower Subansiri Dam project, in which huge numbers of people have joined; but on the night of December 25, the police arrested more than 200 people in a raid and are continuing their attacks. The KMSS has also been involved in struggles against the ongoing repression and violence around Kaziranga National Park,

where forest guards regularly shoot those they accuse of being "poachers."

Brutality and violence continues to mark the situation in Chhattisgarh, where the extremely brutal torture of Soni Sori – and the indifferent response of even the Supreme Court to it – gives the lie to all the tales about respect for the "rule of law" and how it is being enforced by "security forces." Chhattisgarh has also seen a string of recent illegal evictions from forest land. In north Bengal, an organised effort to take control of community forests is facing opposition and resistance from the Forest Department.

In addition, planning is underway for the declaration of new tiger reserves and relocation of people from them in violation of the law. Mass protests have begun in Kawal Sanctuary to resist the proposed illegal conversion of this sanctuary. In Tadoba Tiger Reserve, Sarang Dhabekar, a Steering Committee member of the National Forum of Forest Peoples and Forest Workers was arrested and slapped with false cases because he had been involved in resistance to illegal relocation efforts.

The campaign has condemned this ever-increasing repression and the brutal use of force against those who are fighting for justice. Once again, we see all talk of "rule of law" and "democracy" being brushed aside in the hideous loot of natural resources by the ruling class of this country.