



REACHING OUT  
CM Hemant Soren with the families of the slain villagers in West Singhbhum district

# Terror Run

The recent beheading of seven villagers in the forests of Jharkhand has shown that there is disagreement among the tribals over the Pathalgadi movement and that Maoists may be involved

By Neeraj Mishra in Raipur

It's a tragedy of terrors in Jharkhand. The Pathalgadi movement, which started as an assertion of tribal rights, may have descended into mindless violence. While the previous BJP state government imprisoned thousands of tribals and filed 14,000 FIRs, that at the centre now sends probe teams to investigate the violence.

Seven villagers were beheaded last week in West Singhbhum, Jharkhand, allegedly by supporters of the Pathalgadi movement. The bodies of the victims were recovered from a forest in Burugulikera village, south of Ranchi. The victims were identified as James Budh (30), Jabra Budh (22), Lomba Budh (25), Koje Topno (23), Etwa ▶

Budh (27), Nirmal Budh (25) and Bobas Lomga (25). James Budh was the deputy *mukhiya* of Burugulikera. It appears that the seven had been part of a rebel group of nine men who had opposed the Pathalgadi movement in their area.

They had been vocal against those proposing to erect Pathalgadi slabs in Singhbhum forest villages. After an altercation on January 16 at a *panchayat*, the seven were found dead in the forests near the village with their heads severed. An axe was recovered from the spot.

Hemant Soren, whose JMM was elected just two months ago riding on a pro-tribal wave, promised that the perpetrators would be brought to justice. He held a high-level meeting with Chief Secretary DK Tiwari and DGP Kamal Nayan Choubey. This resulted in the arrest of Ransi Budh, Sukhram Budh

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and 13 others. Ransi is the husband of a former village *mukhiya* and Sukhram is a former *mukhiya*.

The matter may be more complex than it appears to be. Even DGP Choubey believes Pathalgadi may have caused polarisation in the village, but investigation will have to cover all aspects of the murders. This may include the possibility that Maoists might be involved and may have contributed to the violence, taking advantage of disagreements between the tribal groups.

Large swathes of the Chota Nagpur plateau extending well into the Jashpur region of Chhattisgarh have been in the grip of the Pathalgadi movement since 2016. The region is primarily occupied by Munda tribals and they have been

insistent that the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution which promises self-rule to villages be implemented. To assert their demands, they erected tall stone structures outside several villages with the Fifth Schedule imprinted. Many villagers have forced government officials out of their villages or have disallowed their entry.

**M**unda custom involves the placement of a huge stone on the death of a community ancestor. The movement derives inspiration from the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA), so some of its key provisions are imprinted on the stones in order to enlighten adivasis about this law.

“Pathalgadi is basically a way to demarcate our territories and tell outsiders (government officials) that the law of the land does not apply here. It is a movement of the tribal people,” said Balram Samad, a young leader of the



movement based in Jharkhand.

In Arki block, in Jharkhand's Khunti district, which is the birthplace of tribal freedom fighter and folk hero Birsa Munda, the Pathalgadi movement is at its strongest. Police and paramilitary forces are reluctant to enter the villages and local journalists keep away. Every outsider is quickly intercepted and interrogated in these areas.

**The Pathalgadi movement is led by Vijay Kujur (above, centre) in Jharkhand, former IAS officer of the Chhattisgarh cadre, HP Kindo, and former ONGC officer, Joseph Tigga, in Chhattisgarh.**

Singhbhum region, unlike Upper Chota Nagpur, do not want the peace in their village to be disturbed in the name of a violent resistance movement.

“It is 70 years since we got independence but our living conditions have not changed. If today the government wants to enter our area, they should come through the *gram sabha*. We are the original inhabitants of this country, others are *dikus* (foreigners),” said a young leader of the Pathalgadi movement. Their leaders are raising legitimate concerns of the tribals against occupation of their mineral-rich land by power and mining companies.

The government of former BJP Chief Minister Raghubar Das had been trying to amend two 150-year-old laws—the Chhota Nagpur Tenancy (CNT) Act and the Santhal Pargana Tenancy (SPT) Act—which protect tribal tenancy rights. This led to the Pathalgadi movement. The amendments to the two Acts, passed by the BJP government in November 2016, enabled the acquisition of tribal land for “development” purposes.

The Chhattisgarh government made a similar amendment to its Land Revenue Code which made buying tribal land with the “consent” of tribals easier.

Under pressure from the Opposition parties and their own tribal leaders, both governments had to withdraw the bills but the damage was done. The Jharkhand government remained adamant and seemed to not have learnt its lesson and came up with the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 (Jharkhand Amendment) Bill again and got it passed in the last monsoon session of the assembly.

The Bill was awaiting the assent of the governor and the president. Opposition leaders claimed that this Bill was even more dangerous than the earlier CNT and SPT amendment Bills in terms of undermining the land rights of tribals. It is very much on the lines of the amendment that Raman Singh's government wanted to make in the Chhattisgarh Land Revenue Code.

The Pathalgadi leaders claim that it's a legitimate people's movement and believe that their *gram sabhas* under the PESA Act are actually above the elected state government.

They have their own charter of demands: All the funds earmarked for the tribal sub-plan should be given to the *gram sabhas* for the development of tribal people; the government should stop sending tribal people to jail on the pretext that they are Naxals and all police and paramilitary camps should be withdrawn from the Scheduled Areas.

The allegations of Maoist backing of the Pathalgadi movement may be true. There has been no record of involvement of the Church so far but most leaders of the movement are Christians.

But the big question remains: has the ordinary tribal benefited the same way that others have? Tribals have forced a change in the governments in both states and now may be the time to test their trust in those they have propelled to power. ■

**WRIT IN STONE**  
A Pathalgadi stone slab in Siladon village, Khunti district

