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Sisterhood and Solidarity in the Netarhat Field Firing Range Movement: A Study of Indian Tribal Women’s Struggle and Activism

By Sunita Purty

Abstract

This article examines the understanding of collectivism and sisterhood among Oraon tribal women in the Netarhat Field Firing Range movement. Further, this study discusses tribal women’s consciousness of repressive operations of the state and of their experiences of triple oppression as a tribal group, as women, and as activists. Tribal women’s goals, however, are much more than women’s liberation; they demand tribal autonomy and the right to forest resources so that tribal people can live peacefully in their regions. This study also looks at how a group of women shared their gender-based grievances as well as their everyday struggle under militarized control of their villages. Often, women’s groups are at the forefront of rallies and marches, mobilizing the villagers and attending village meetings, but the male-dominated society rarely views women’s revolutionary accomplishments as an effort of sisterhood. The state government agreed to the tribal demand not to re-notify the Netarhat Field Firing Range Project, not only because of the efforts of the men of the society but also due to women’s willpower, solidarity, and bravery within the movement.

Using the narrative approach, this research aims to explore tribal women’s lived experiences and everyday struggle during the Netarhat field firing range project with reference to fieldwork conducted in the villages of Mahuadnan, Banari, Navatoli, and Sakhuapani where tribal women activists played a key role. Until now, tribal women's lived experiences, narratives, and consciousness during the different contemporary movements of Jharkhand have been ignored by most scholars. Studying this site is very relevant to understanding tribal women’s questions, issues, and feminist standpoints. The fieldwork for this paper was conducted as part of the author’s PhD research in Chotanagpur and the Kolhan regions of Jharkhand state, India. The study found that the Netarhat Field Firing Range movement was based on truth claims and followed the Gandhian ideology of non-violence to achieve rights. Further, this paper explores the sisterhood and solidarity amongst tribal women activists, and how non-tribal activists helped strengthen the tribal movements.

Keywords: Tribal women, Tribal activism, Military, Activism, Feminist standpoints, Sisterhood, India, Triple oppression

Introduction

On August 17, 2022, the Jharkhand government agreed to cancel the Netarhat Field Firing Range Project because it conflicted with the public interest. This historic decision, made by the Chief Minister, ended the three-decade-long struggle of thousands of tribal people. As per the memorandum submitted by the Kendriya Jan Sangharsh Samiti (Central People’s Struggle Committee), the Governor mentioned that this area comes under the Fifth Scheduled Area and the 1996 Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA), and Gram Sabhas (Village Councils) have the right to decide on and manage community resources such as the land and forest areas. To celebrate the cancellation of the Netarhat firing range notification,
tribal citizens held victory rallies in different parts of Ranchi. Former tribal advisory council member Ratan Tirkey, along with Jerome Gerald Kujur (general secretary of Kendriya Jan Sangharsh Samiti), and Prabhakar Tirkey (the founder of the All Jharkhand Student Union) met Chief Minister Hemant Soren, expressing their gratitude over the government’s decision. Renowned rights activists and economist, Jean Drèze, and farmers’ leader, Mahendra Tikait, also extended support to the tribal activists who agitated against the firing range project on March 22 and 23, 2022 (Angad, 2022; Mukesh, 2022).

In this region, the people’s hatred towards military forces began in 1956 when the Netarhat was notified under the Manoeuvers Field Firing and Artillery Practice Act of 1938 (Tigga, 1994; Kujur, 2015). According to the People’s Union for Democratic Rights report (1994), the army had been conducting periodic firing practice in the Netarhat region since 1964. The first heavy artillery firing practice in the region was conducted in 1965. The drill went on for 10 days during which people had to either flee into the jungle or look for alternative shelters. 75/24 mm howitzers, 105 mm field guns, and 120 mm mortars were set up at the firing sites near Banstoli and Jokipokhar village. The shells went up to a height of 23,000 feet and then fell on the impact sites 12-15 kilometers away, close to the villages of Sakhuapani, Khairipat, and Polpolpat in Bishnupur block. The residents of these villages had to evacuate their houses due to the heavy artillery firing practices (Kujur, 2015).

In my interview with Tarshila Khalkho, an activist in the Netarhat field firing range movement and member of Central Committee Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), a regional political party, Khalkho described the horrific conditions villagers faced. While taking shelter in the forest, villagers faced not only wild animals, poisonous insects, and snakes, but also spent their days and nights under the sky in extreme cold or rain. It was very difficult for small children, pregnant women, and elderly people to get down from the hill to the plain area. Pregnant women were forced to give birth under a tree or behind bushes and rocks. Sometimes, they had to live without food and water to save their lives from the bombarding (Khalkho, personal communication, August 2017). With December and January being the coldest months of the year, with temperatures averaging around 8°-11°C, it was very difficult to take shelter in the open jungle without basic amenities in the winter season. Due to no prior information on firing practice, many villagers and their domestic animals were either killed or injured by the bombings. Usually a day or two before, villagers were notified by the military about the routine firing, but the information provided did not reach them on time because the tribal population is scattered in this area. When military firing started, villagers often got confused as to which direction they should go because a bomb could be dropped anywhere. The heavy military vehicles were driven on agricultural land; there were also bombardings and explosions which damaged the villagers’ crops and burnt the paddy fields. The hens, ducks, and other poultry which were left behind by the villagers during the evacuation of their houses were taken by the soldiers as food. They also took the villagers’ paddy, grains, and vegetables, while the villagers could not complain or raise their voices against them for fear of reprisal.

As per the Artillery Act guidelines, at least two months prior notice should have been given to the villagers for such firing practice in their area. Apart from it being published in the government Gazette, advance notice must be published in the local language newspaper, announced through the beating of drums, and posted at a prominent place in the locality (Tigga, 1994). Despite this prescribed law, neither army officers nor the District Collector conducted processes adhering to all the norms and rules of Artillery Act. From 1964 to 1993 the process of firing practice went on smoothly and district authorities compensated for people’s losses by giving each adult a mere 50 paise per day as compensation. It needs to be understood and acknowledged how the state and government pushed tribal people into a vulnerable existence.

According to the government’s official pronouncement in Bihar Gazette notifications number 763 and 764, dated November 25, 1991, and numbers 84 and 85, dated March 28,
1992, the permanent headquarters of the Heavy Artillery Field Firing Range was planned to be established in Netarhat so that the 245 villages of the Palamu and Gumla districts would be abolished. In the name of national security, 2.5 lakh\(^2\) tribal people would have been displaced (Kujur, 2015; People’s Union for Democratic Rights, 1994). The Jan Sangharsh Samiti (People’s Struggle Committee) was formed in 1993 to oppose this project. The main objective of the Jan Sangharsh Samiti is to follow ideologies of Satyagraha (demanding truth) and Ahinsa (non-violence) to restore all rights being denied by the state.\(^3\)

**Tribal Movements Influenced by Gandhian Ideology**

Most of the contemporary tribal movements of Jharkhand pursued Gandhian ideology as well as followed in the footsteps of the Oraon leader Jatra Bhagat who started the Tana Bhagat Movement (1940-1920). Both the leaders followed the path of Satyagraha, Ahinsa, and non-cooperation, as these were the weapons used by disempowered sections to defeat the powerful apparatus of the state.

The tribal regions of Eastern India, particularly the Chotanagpur Plateau of Jharkhand, are known for historic unrest and struggle for the protection of traditional rights and autonomy (Munda & Mullick, 2003). All the Adivasi colonial movements were guided by radicalism or by the ideology of armed struggle, but after the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi in Ramgarh, undivided Bihar Jharkhand, there was a remarkable shift in the mode of tribal struggle, and it was heavily influenced by the Gandhian ideology of Ahinsa and Satyagraha (De, 2022). All the postcolonial movements, whether it be the Netarhat Field Firing Range movement, the Jharkhand Autonomy movement,\(^4\) Koel-Karo movement,\(^5\) or the Nagri movement,\(^6\) have been following the path of Ahinsa and Satyagraha to achieve their goals. The demand of a separate Jharkhand state centered on the concept of Gandhian Swaraj (self-rule): freedom from internal exploitation in undivided Bihar-Jharkhand.

**Tribal Territorial Rights**

Most indigenous peoples have a special relationship with the land and territories they inhabit. The territory has a sacred or spiritual meaning, which reaches far beyond the productive and economic aspect of the land (Indigenous & Tribal People’s Rights in Practice, 2009). Felix Padel (2016) describes how Adivasi communities are rooted to the land by what is effectively an invisible umbilical cord; by displacing them from their land, they would be culturally and economically separated from their roots. Considering the crucial importance of land and territories for indigenous peoples’ lives, the UN Convention contains a series of provisions and articles, ratified in 2007, to protect their right to ownership and possession. As Mukherjee explains: “The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, Article 26, guarantees to indigenous people the right to the land, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned and obligates states to give legal recognition and protection to these lands,

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\(^2\) *Lakh* is a unit of measurement equal to a hundred thousand.

\(^3\) Jerome Gerald Kujur, general secretary of Kendriya Jan Sangharsh Samiti, Netarhat field firing range movement, August 2017, personal communication.

\(^4\) Calling for a separate Jharkhand state, Jharkhand autonomy movement campaigns were taken up by the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) in the late 1960s and 1970s (Munda & Mullick, 2003).

\(^5\) The Koel-Karo movement was the 30-year-old movement of Munda, Oraon, and other tribals against the construction of two large dams of a hydroelectric project planned on the South Koel and Karo rivers of Jharkhand state (Ghosh, 2006).

\(^6\) In 2011, there was a massive peoples’ protest organized in Ranchi against the government acquisition of 227.71 acres of agricultural land in village Nagri for the construction of the Indian Institute of Management, Indian Institute of Information Technology, and the National University of Study and Research in Law (Minz & Dungdung, 2012).
territories and resources” (Mukherjee, 2018, p. 97). The legal recognition of the land was conducted with due respect to the customs, traditions, and land tenure systems of the indigenous peoples concerned.

Along with the constitutional provisions, special laws and acts have been adopted by the Indian state for the safeguarding of tribal land. No doubt, the Indian Constitution gave a certain number of rights to the tribal people such as autonomy and some power over non-tribes, particularly about their land, by imposing restrictions on non-tribes regarding use of tribal land (Roy, 2005; Xaxa, 2008). The Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution protects tribal people living in the Scheduled Area of ten states7 in the country from the alienation of their native lands, and they also have the right to access natural resources (Singh, 2005; Behura & Panigrahi, 2006). The two legal safeguard acts, the 1996 Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) and the 2006 Forest Rights Act (FRA), give considerable power to the concerned gram sabhas, which are aimed at preventing land alienation in tribal-dominated areas. Apart from these constitutional laws, in Jharkhand, there are two colonial tenancy acts: the 1908 Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act (CNTA) and the 1949 Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act (SPTA), which were enacted specifically to protect tribal land from being expropriated by non-tribals (Xaxa, 2008; George, 2005).

Have these constitutional provisions, colonial acts, and special laws lived up to their promise to safeguard the interest of tribals? Have these legislations fulfilled the constitutional objective of ensuring tribals’ control over land and natural resources? Despite constitutional provisions, special laws, and colonial acts, tribal people are being displaced from their native lands, which illustrates the loopholes in the state laws and regulations, as well as inadequate implementation. The contrast in tribal land safeguard acts also violates tribal land rights as Sections 46 and 47 of the CNTA clearly restrict the transfer of land in the Chhotanagpur region. On the other hand, Section 49 in the CNTA and Section 53 in the SPTA make overriding allowances for the state to acquire land for certain specified purposes, including military camps (Xaxa, 2008; George, 2005). In the present scenario, the tribal situation has become even worse. Development projects and militarization go hand in hand and have forced the displacement of tribals in Central and Eastern India. However, in practice, acquisitions of tribal land under special laws such as the Manoeuvers Field Firing and Artillery Practice Act of 1938 often override the protections of tribal interest under PESA and FRA.

Despite disagreement and opposition from villagers, the state again notified the order of firing practice in Netarhat, and villagers again began their protest against the firing range project. From 1994-2002, the military’s routine firing practices had stopped; villagers were living a peaceful life but were always alert for any upcoming re-notification of the firing practices which they faced for years. In spite of the widespread protest and the word given to the people, the government of Jharkhand renewed the notification of the area for routine field firing for another twenty years, from 2002 to 2022. Since the Panchayat system was brought in very late in Jharkhand, the village council was legally not empowered to oppose the Netarhat Field Firing Range Project.

The state has been toying with tribal people by notifying, renewing, canceling, and then again notifying anti-tribal development projects in tribal-dominated areas of Jharkhand. This can be seen when tribal masses protested against government projects and achieved withdrawals, but when they stopped protesting and engaged in their normal lives, the state again began notifying and renewing so-called development projects in the tribal areas. The oppressive nature of the state itself has solidified its negative image in tribal people’s mindset.

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7 Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Telangana.
The people of Netarhat, a tribal-dominated forest area, witnessed all kinds of inhumane torture by the state apparatus. Now the question arises, why are tribal and forest areas targeted for national security projects and mega-development projects in the first place? Is it because the state assumes that tribals will remain silent spectators, as they are peace-loving and might not raise their voices against injustice? The state plays a dominant and oppressive role towards tribal and other downtrodden masses, either through police terror, military incursion, internalized repression, or trickery and illusion (Turner, 2008). Alpa Shah (2007) describes that due to historical injustice, tribals have been opposed to state interference for years. We must understand the different ideas of the state that produce conflict between the elites in power and indigenous peoples. Tribal people’s mistrust of the state was not, of course, based on some kind of abstract image, but on the real exploitation and discrimination that tribals faced.

There are different forms of state repression towards the tribal communities, and the security forces deployed against marginal people is a key example. Most often, the security forces are responsible for arbitrary arrest, illegal detention, torture, rape, and sexual harassment. As per the report of the Asian Indigenous & Tribal People Network (2009), in 2008, across the country, tribal people and local inhabitants faced gross human rights violations by the security forces during several anti-insurgency operations. The tribal-dominated areas face inhumane insurgency crackdowns, and women and children are most often the victims of these operations. Activists are raising issues such as violations of the rights of the indigenous peoples, women, and children by the security forces. Compared to men, tribal women in this region faced greater violence including sexual harassment, rape, and other inhumane and degrading treatment at the hands of the military forces and the police.

The Concept of Sisterhood and Tribal Women’s Understanding

The sense of sisterhood emerges when women from different backgrounds share common oppression and experiences. bell hooks (1986) articulates that the vision of sisterhood evoked by women’s liberation was based on the idea of common oppression. To experience solidarity, women feel that they must have a community of interests, respect for each other’s culture, and shared beliefs and goals around which they ought to unite, to build sisterhood. Respecting diversity does not mean uniformity or sameness; it is truly a supportive way to understand our differences. However, over a period of time, some feminists seemed to feel that unity between women was impossible given our differences (Menon, 1999). From a Western (Franco-American) perspective, sisterhood is conceptualized as a political process, project, and struggle of women’s liberation. Radical feminist Kathy Sarachild (1968) declared “Sisterhood Is Powerful!” (cited in Zaytoun & Ezekiel, 2016). In contemporary times, the concept of sisterhood is expanding as women are sharing their different ideologies and standpoints to understand the gender binary.

Tribal Women’s Collective Approach

The mainstream women’s movement’s belief in sisterhood is a political ideology focused on women’s liberation, but tribal women’s concept of sisterhood differs, because it is rooted largely in a sense of collective belonging to their tribal group. In my interview with Vandana Tete, a writer, poet, and activist based in Jharkhand, she said: “For sustaining the tribals’ basic nature of cooperation and collectivization, so far tribal women are continuing the social system of Madait and Pacha” (personal communication, June 2017). Tribal women value both sisterhood and collective approaches. This can be seen from how they do agricultural activities together and dance and sing together in festivals. Just as they follow a collective approach on the agricultural field, tribal women’s unity, uniformity, solidarity, and sisterhood could be seen in social movements, with evidence of how they walked in a group to attend the meetings, protest, and mobilize the villagers. So far, the state government has not
been able to renew the gazette of the Netarhat Field Firing Range project because of women’s willpower, unity, and bravery within the movement.

In Jharkhand and some parts of Chhattisgarh and Odisha, once every twelve years Oraon women play Jani Shikar (hunting by women) in remembrance of legendary women Singidai, Kailidai, and Champadai, who revolted against the Mughal Empire (Barla, 2015; Toppo, 2018). Hunting by women became a symbol of women’s victory, empowerment, and bravery against enemies. It was not only a revolt against the Mughal Empire but also a testament to the women’s sisterhood and sense of solidarity. The folk songs of Jani Shikar still echo in the tribal villages of the Chotanagpur region which illustrate Oraon women’s glorious past. Even today Oraon tribal women follow the path of these revolutionary women by showing their togetherness, sisterhood, and solidarity to oppose the Netarhat Field Firing Range project.

Most of the indigenous movements have been based on a collectivized approach to regain their rights. Within these movements, the methods and techniques that were used by women to resist powerful state apparatus, such as the government, police, and military, were different in each case. By following Satyagaraha (demanding truth) and Ahinsa (non-violence) women came together in groups to prevent the military force from entering the Netarhat. On the other hand, in the Koel Karo movement, the non-cooperative attitude of the women led to the exit from the village of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), which was guarding the acquired land. When local administration denied meeting with villagers, women decided to demonstrate Jani Shikar and Satyagaraha Andolan (agitation) to show their anger against the land acquisition ordinance in Nagri. The local and national newspapers played a crucial role in bringing national attention to these regional tribal movements, but the important role of women in these movements was not noticed by the media, and thus the women agitators did not gain any national recognition.

There have been many worldwide indigenous movements where women shared their grievances and showed their solidarity against state repression, environmental degradation, gender violence, and discrimination. Whether it be the Greenbelt movement, the Chipko movement, the naked protest in Manipur by the women of Imas against custodial rape and murder by the army, or the women from the Innu community protesting against military flight training in Northern Quebec/Labrador Peninsula, these protests all illustrate indigenous women’s sisterhood to resist structural violence of the state (Shiva, 1988; Chakravarti, 2010; LaDuke, 2015). Today, indigenous women worldwide have shown their sisterhood and solidarity while organizing local, national, and international protests and campaigns to address violation of human rights, sexual violence, and displacement.

**Sisterhood of Women Writers and Non-tribal Women Activists**

The tribals of Jharkhand are historically oppressed groups, but as tribal men and women, they have produced social theories and knowledge from their own standpoint to oppose oppression. In Jharkhand, tribal women writers explore how they construct knowledge instead of being the subject of research by outsiders, where they are often seen as the objects of exploitation. While tribal women of the Chotanagpur and Kolhan regions of Jharkhand are struggling against stronger lobbies of state power, women writers and poets are contributing to

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8 At the end of the 13th century, there was a reference to the heroic role of Singidai, Kailidai, and Champadai who took up arms against the Turkish military and landlords in order to protect their land and avenge the honor of tribal women. The history behind this revolt is well-known. It was a festival of Sarhule in which some men were heavily drunk, and some went hunting; meanwhile the Turkish military attacked the village. In the absence of capable men, Singidai handled this situation by gathering women to take arms against the military.

9 Women used to stand as human barricades to block routes to prevent any access to drinking water or firewood for soldiers.
the building of a corpus of indigenous feminist thought that reflects tribal women’s lived experience. Women authors such as Rose Kerketta, Vandana Tete, Jacinta Kerketta, Vasavi Kiro, and Alma Grace extended sisterhood towards activist women by writing women’s experiences and narratives. In Jharkhand, tribal and non-tribal authors and researchers who are working through feminist epistemology are engaged in writing and documenting women’s narratives and their lived experiences during contemporary resistance movements.

To understand the scholarship of tribal women’s standpoint, there is a need for analysis of the tribal and non-tribal women’s affiliation and their creation of a space where they can share both common and different experiences of discrimination within and outside their society. Although mainstream, Dalit, and tribal women’s struggles and grievances are very different from each other, the sense of solidarity and sisterhood bring them together through a common desire for agency. Vandana Tete shares, “Displacement and human trafficking are the main issue[s] where tribal and non-tribal women come together to raise their voices against it” (personal communication). Based on the ideology of joining “their cause” to “our cause” (Rege, 1998), the two non-tribal women rights activists Sachi Kumari and Ajitha Susan George have been working for tribal women’s rights since the late 80s. In 1995, Sachi Kumari formed a women’s organization named Missi (sister), and in 2000, Ajitha George formed a women’s organization Omon (seedling). Both organizations are based on the ideology of sisterhood and work towards tribal women’s socio-economic and political empowerment. In 2007, based on the concept of sisterhood, a network of 27 tribal and non-tribal women organizations of the Jharkhand state initiated a collective movement called Mahila Garima Abhiyan (Women’s Dignity Campaign), and the aim of this women’s collective is to fight against violence against women, displacement, and human trafficking and to promote the rights of women farmers.

The last three decades have seen the emergence of a wide range of women’s grassroots organizations both in movements that are exclusively women and within others where women play a significant part. Across the globe, women’s resistance often focuses on two areas: movements asserting livelihood needs and movements around rights and democracy (Rowbotham, 1992; Sen, 1990). The patriarchal society often criticizes revolutionary women’s efforts and their collectivized approach by saying, “what can these women do?” Robinson (2013) is critical of Nakata (2007) who treated indigenous men’s experience as universal and ignored indigenous women’s perspectives. Robinson notes that omitting gender from standpoint theory resulted in only men being treated as knowing subjects. Standpoint theory posits that every human being has their own ontology which itself creates an epistemology; in these regards, women and men create their own realities through their different activities and experiences (Hartsock, 1983). Gegeo and Wasten-Gegeo (2001) say that around the world today, indigenous and ethnic groups are asserting the validity of their own ways of knowing and being, in resistance to the intensifying hegemony of mainstream epistemology from the powerful state apparatus. Especially in developing countries, the large-scale exploitation of forest and mineral resources, land alienation, and human rights violations, have brought them into an ethnic consciousness. Across the world, ethnic consciousness empowers indigenous people to resist the hegemonic power structure of the state, yet men and women have different experiences of struggle. Sisterhood is an inclusionary approach of women’s consciousness-raising groups who are working at the grassroots level to raise issues of gender discrimination, displacement, and resource exploitation, yet gender issues often take lesser importance than other concerns in tribal politics.

**Sisterhood during Everyday Struggle**

When the Netarhat area was notified under the Manoeuvres Field Firing and Artillery Practice Act of 1938, soldiers were stationed at the villages, and their camps were situated near the villages. The military started digging holes in barren fields and clearing the bushes while
villagers were watching them as silent spectators, as nobody dared to ask the reasons for these unusual activities. When military personnel made sure that nobody was interrupting them and raising any questions, they gradually started interfering in the villagers’ lives and entering into their personal space. If any woman went alone into the forest or neighboring village for some work and bathed in the village river, she was noticed by the military personnel. Some women were molested or subjected to sexual harassment; some were raped by the military.

But in that period, there was not a single women’s organization in the village that could raise questions on behalf of the victims of Netarhat. In the Jan Sangharsh Samiti’s fact survey report, Jerome Gerald Kujur (2015) says that from 1964 to 1993, two women died due to gang rape, 28 were raped, and 56 women were sexually harassed by the soldiers. Neither the police department nor the local administration took any action against these crimes that were happening to the women of Netarhat. When villagers complained to the police, they denied filing an FIR against soldiers. But the women’s way of resistance proved that without any organizational support, they still had the capability and courage to oppose the firing project in Netarhat. To avoid harassment by military men, women and girls left their houses in groups or completely avoided going to the areas where military camps were situated. As one activist in the Netarhat Field Firing Range movement noted to me in an interview:

> In our village, to fetch drinking water we had to cover a long distance. To avoid unwelcome incidents, we women used to go in groups to fetch water and collect firewood from the jungle. In case of any emergency, if a woman had to go alone, she took traditional weapons with her, such as an axe, knife and arrow-bow (Alphen Sabeng, activist, personal communication)

During the interview, I observed Alphen Sabeng’s expressions of anger against military repression, which were deeply rooted in her childhood and teenage memories of how the patriarchal Diku state had been treating tribal women. She realized as a girl and woman what the challenges of living in a militarized village were and how it was difficult to avoid the soldiers’ surveying eyes. Employing traditional tactics to protect their self-respect was the means of their everyday resistance. This use of traditional tactics is not easily recognized as a form of resistance, a term which might seem more appropriate for public and collective rebellion and political demonstrations. However, it’s important to remember what Scott argues: “Everyday forms of resistance ha[ve] much to do with the small scale of the action” (Scott, 1989, p. 35). By going to fetch water and firewood from the jungle and doing agricultural activities together, women achieve greater safety through sisterhood and solidarity. While experiencing bitter military repression in Netarhat, women’s bonding, togetherness, and beliefs about each other were taking the shape of women’s standpoint and feminist impulses. Villagers’ constant struggle during militarization in Netarhat set the fire inside women like Tarshila Khalkho and Dominika Tirkey to oppose the dominant patriarchal framework of the state. These women formed Mahila Samiti (women’s group) to mobilize the villagers against the Netarhat Field Firing project.

Jan Sangharsh Samiti constituted other members from different communities. Apart from male leaders from tribal, Hindu, and Muslim communities, many tribal women, such as Tarshila Khalkho, Ignatia Xalxo, Sushila, and Magdali Kujur, took on leadership roles. All these educated housewives were in their fifties from the village of Navatoli. They committed

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10 *Diku* means the one who hurts, gives trouble to the tribes living in peace, and disturbs their lives. Initially, the term *Diku* was used by Munda tribal groups of the Chotanagpur region of Jharkhand to refer to the British, and then landlords, moneylenders, and contractors, but later the whole non-tribal society in general came to be called *Diku* (Kumar, 2019).
themselves to the Netarhat movement when they realized that the role of women in the movement was just as important as that of men. An activist in the Netarhat Field Firing Range movement and a member of Central Committee Jharkhand Mukti Morcha Regional Political Party, Tarshila Khalkho was one of the most active women who never hesitated to raise her voice against militarization in Netarhat. Very few women had previously participated in *Jan Sangharsh Samiti*’s meetings or expressed their opinions in public meetings. As Tarshila Khalkho noted in an interview with me:

> From 1993 to now I have been regularly attending *Jan Sangharsh Samiti* meetings. Very few women were members of the committee. Magdali and Sushila were also active members, our ideologies were very similar and were dedicated to oppose the firing range project. We women members used to visit the villages which were most affected by the firing range project. We mobilized the villagers and made them aware of the upcoming gazette which can exterminate the villages and the people be displaced. (personal communication)

To protect the ancestral land and forests for future generations, these women’s groups approached every villager to encourage them to join the Netarhat movement. The women activists realized that they were confident, strong, and empowered women who could fight against any injustice until their last breath. Like Alphen, Tarshila, and Dominika, many women had the same memories and pain which had been cast on them by the state during the land acquisition process and were determined to use their voices to speak out now. As much as women were facing hurdles and problems while the military settled in their village, they were becoming more conscious and vocal about their safety and rights. The Netarhat movement’s strength came much more from the participation of women. At first, many Adivasi communities did not see the need for women to join the movement and speak in public meetings. The Netarhat movement, on the other hand, is a tremendous illustration of the raising of women’s political consciousness.

Many tribal women are good at mobilizing people and command leadership of the grassroots movements, but due to the lack of proper guidance and support, they fail to make connections and network with other women’s organizations. If women activists make their own networks and demonstrate agency for political affiliation, male members of society and political leaders usually do not properly support them. While challenging the patriarchal form of state apparatuses, such as the government, military, police, and local administration, women are entering into public space which further gives shape to their political ideology. Tarshila shares how her political consciousness was denied by her community and how women’s suggestions are hardly accepted in the public sphere:

> Once I went to Rajawar village to attend the *Jan Sangharsh* committee meeting. I proposed a suggestion in the meeting, “whether we should select one member from our committee to contest the assembly election?” Then one old member from the committee shouts at me, “we do not want any politics in this committee.” I remained silent and replied nothing but thought at that moment, without any political ideology how could it be possible to fight with the state? (personal communication)

When the *Jan Sangharsh* Committee was formed in 1993 to oppose the Netarhat Firing Range project, few women were active members of the committee. They started addressing village issues as well, like the violence against women in Netarhat. These women had common questions, ideologies, and thinking, so they started sharing their political thoughts to strengthen the movement. The women were dedicated to the movement and took collective action, but
their participation in formal politics was still low. The role of women leaders was very challenging as they had to face patriarchy within the family as well as in society. If any movement is based on male-centric notions of leadership, then women’s involvement and leadership will be resisted. Grassroots social and resistance movements brought changes in women’s traditional roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers, transformed the way women came to view themselves, and encouraged women to re-examine their old assumptions of what they needed.

Once women gained a new consciousness of themselves as a group, they formed a constituency for a social movement (Klein, 1984). How women negotiate with male-dominated society and what kind of challenges they face while creating their own space in the public domain are important questions (Kumari & Kidwai, 1998). Moreover, tribal women’s standpoint and their activism are still viewed as a private realm. Women’s effort and their role in resistance movements need to be addressed in the larger framework of tribal politics. Even though tribal society is liberal towards women’s participation in the public sphere, the controlling authority and decision-making is often in male hands.

Jan Sangharsh Samiti, called the first Satyagraha Andolan, took place between the 19th and 25th of March 1994, where more than 50,000 people assembled at the Tutwapani-Jokipokhar village to force the military to immediately cancel the order of firing practice (People’s Union for Democratic Rights, 1994). Women prevented the military force from entering the village, and the entire hill area echoed with cries of “Jaan Denge, Zameen Nahi Denge” (Will give life, will not give land). Women confronted the administration, the military officers, and block officers, and questioned them regarding the local issues and how the villagers were facing daily problems due to the military camps present in their village. Women protestors stood in front of the army trucks and did not allow them to enter their lands. They continuously kept up two days of non-violent opposition, forcing the army to leave the village. Women activists were radical in nature by following the legacy of historically rebellious women, such as Singidai, Phulo Murmu, and Jhano Murmu; at the same time, they followed the Gandhian ideology of non-violence by peacefully opposing the military.

Even missionaries have supported many contemporary tribal movements in Jharkhand and showed solidarity towards tribal issues. Sister Emely Kispota, who is a health worker in a Christian missionary health center, said, “If my soul insists me to help someone and do something for humanity then how could I deny?” (personal communication). She had been in the village Banari for 11 years when the Bihar Gazette was passed in 1993 for the extension of the Netarhat Field Firing Range project until 2002. In Jharkhand, a small difference could be seen between the Sarna and Christian tribes, but despite having a different belief system and ideology, they were living a peaceful and harmonious life. This ideological gap widened after the formation of the Jharkhand state because the government, with the intention of taking over tribal lands, has created disputes and sowed chaos between the Sarna and Christian tribes. The government health facilities were very poor in the rural and remote villages of Palamu and Latehar. On the other hand, the missionary health center had reached the doorsteps of tribal people and provided necessary health services. Due to the tremendous influence of the church’s welfare service, women believed in the organization formed by Sister Emely.

Being a tribal woman, she had an affinity towards her community and understood the pain of women who were confronting sexual harassment and molestation at the hands of the soldiers. To this day, she still feels sorrow for villagers who lost their lives during military bombarding. In addition to fulfilling her responsibilities at the health center, she engaged in

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11 According to regional folk songs, in the Santhal Hul (1885) rebellion, two Santhal sisters named, Phulo Murmu and Jhano Murmu were ideologically radical and revolutionary, and they killed 21 British troops before they were martyred.
mobilizing villagers and women against the land acquisition policy, displacement, and military repression. With the help of the villagers, especially women, she formed women’s self-help groups, where most of the women members of these groups had minimum education or were illiterate. Emily organized leadership-building workshops and livelihood-related training programs for the women members of self-help groups. Gradually the women’s numbers increased in the gram sabha, and they were eager to know what was going on in the state and how their rights were being violated. Women’s groups actively visited the villages to mobilize people to participate in the movement. Generally, tribals do not believe outsiders initially, whether someone is their well-wisher or not. Sisterhood and bonding between two different sets of people can take time; someone cannot extend help to others without knowing the concerns of those others and the gender context.

26th January 2004: A Black Day in Netarhat

On 26th January 2004, the army arrived at Netarhat to carry out its firing drill without prior notice to the villagers. Alphen explains how Republic Day got converted into a bad day for the villagers. That day, villagers were relaxing and engaged in their day-to-day activities, and they never expected that the military forces would suddenly descend on them in Netarhat. The memories of earlier inhumane acts by the military pushed Alphen to stop the military from entering the village area. Hurriedly she wrapped herself in a saree, took one blanket, and rushed towards the main road to stop the military force from entering the village. As Alphen recounted to me:

As soon as I reached the village Chormunda, at first, I closed the check gate which was made by the villagers to prevent the entry of the militaries into the village. There was not even a single villager at the check gate; men were rushing towards the forest paths to stop the military vehicles. I was alone there and continuously shouting slogans to not let them enter the village. The military men shouted at me by showing their authoritarian attitude. The soldiers got down from their vehicles and asked me why I am stopping them from going ahead. Despite the military force’s anger and threats, I firmly remained standing in front of the military vehicle without even caring for my life. The military men again shouted at me, “Talk to us, stop shouting slogans.” I replied, “I will not talk alone, we talk in a group.” (Personal communication)

Meanwhile, villagers reached the check gate and then began having a gentle conversation with the military personnel. After a few hours, they turned away and returned to Ranchi, with the villagers following the retreating vehicles for a distance. As soon as the soldiers left that place, villagers decided to stay vigilant on the road that day. Suddenly protestors saw that two military vehicles were returning to that place, and villagers tried to stop them there. The military people came out from their vehicles and started beating and kicking the protestors with their boots and guns; 29 people were severely injured. Two injured women fainted; they were taken to Bishnupur Sadar Hospital. While men were protesting against military action, women’s groups took care of injured villagers and brought them to the health center.

While sharing the incident of the inhumane act of the military and government hospital, Dominika Tirkey, a retired government teacher and activist, said the doctors denied treatment to the injured protestors and did not even give them medicine. Then the villagers decided to collect money for the treatment of injured protestors. Almost Rs. 7,000 was collected, and injured protestors were taken to the Pakripat private health center for treatment. After one week, the Brigadier of the military contingent and media persons visited the protest area. There was a huge crowd of villagers and even school students gathered at that place. All schools of Palamu and Netarhat remained closed against the military force’s inhumane action. Villagers
reported all their problems to the media, how they had been facing day-to-day problems in their life due to the military’s firing practice. Despite hearing all the problems, the Block Development Officer (BDO) of Bishnupur lied and manipulated facts in front of the media. Recalling the incident of protest by women, activist Alphen Sabeng told me that the BDO said to her and other women, “Why are you creating such hurdles in the government’s work? Why are you engaging the people in protest? Leave them and let them do their respective work” (Sabeng, personal communication). After hearing the BDO’s statement all the women rushed onto the stage and started arguing with him.

Villagers held a peaceful demonstration under the banner of the Jan Sangharsh Samiti and did not let the army enter their region. The army resorted to violence again, but the people continued their Satyagraha until the army was forced to go back on January 30, 2004. After six days, on the 31st of January, the military force finally left Netarhat. Tarshila Khalkho further describes how frequently the notification was being sent by the administration to continue firing practice, and how the people’s protests followed. Dominika Tirkey, one of the activists of the Netarhat Field Firing Range movement, testified that state threats against tribal autonomy over the forest and indigenous ways of living still make tribal people alert: “For maintaining people’s consciousness and enthusiasm for the movement each and every household of the village has a tradition to put green twigs (Sakhua leaves) in the corner of the main doors. We women never forget to put leaves in our doors” (personal communication).

Putting Sakhua leaves (Shorea robusta leaves) in the corner of doors is a sign of keeping this movement alive and remaining alert for further action. So far, the state government has not been able to renew the gazette of the Netarhat Field Firing Range project because of the women’s solidarity and sisterhood within the movement. The sense of togetherness and alertness, viewing the Netarhat movement through women’s perspectives, and sharing of gender-based grievances in the meetings, shows how tribal women’s politicization is taking place at the grassroots level. Women took the responsibility of mobilizing and creating awareness at the local village level to protect their land, forest, culture, and identity. The tribal women’s struggle is more than women’s liberation; they are dedicated to the cause of reinforcing tribal autonomy over resources and tribal identity. Tuhswai Smith (1999), a theorist on decolonization, says indigenous women’s epistemology is rooted in their struggle for survival and for their societal collective rights and entitlements. Every year on March 23 and 24, a protest rally is held at Mahuadanr as Sankalp Diwas (Oath Day) to demand the withdrawal of the notification which extended the Field Firing and Artillery practice in Netarhat until 2022. On this date, villagers take the oath to keep this movement alive to protect their land from outsiders, and women sing revolutionary songs.

Conclusion

This study has found that the Netarhat Field Firing Range movement was based on truth claims and followed the Gandhian non-violence ideology to reclaim tribal rights, but the methods and techniques used by women to resist against the military and protect their land show that they were stubborn and radical in nature. In another way, their emotional connection with land, forest, and water resources proved that they were ecofeminists. Vandana Shiva (1988) says that women, more than men, are concerned about ecological issues and are connected with forest, water resources, and land. Tribal women are socially and culturally tied to nature and struggle to protect land and forests. Thus, tribal women’s struggle is much more than women’s liberation. The most incredible and unique feature of the tribal movements of Jharkhand is the large-scale participation of women that is on par with that of men. The Netarhat Field Firing Range movement, the Koel-Karo movement, and the Nagri movement are all gender-oriented, and women led the movements equally with their male counterparts (Kiro, 2002).
Tribal women’s standpoint is different from mainstream and other marginalized women’s communities; they are struggling for survival rights on Earth and claiming their societal collective rights to land and forest resources. To know tribal women’s standpoint, it is crucial to open up feminist debates to include a larger framework of women’s democratic struggle against all oppression. Demonstrating tribal women’s consciousness and their association with different social movements is needed because they are challenging triple oppression of them as tribals, as women, and as activists.

This paper also explored the question of tribal women’s collective voices as well as their affiliation with other women’s groups. This study also delves into a notion of sisterhood in tribal movements that operates differently from the ideology of mainstream sisterhood, solidarity, and affiliations. The concept of sisterhood is not particularly popular today, as it is seen by contemporary feminists as a dated idea from the 1980s that depicts a universal notion of women, erasing specific identities which need to be affirmed. Yet my study affirms that a sense of sisterhood emerges when women from different backgrounds share common oppression and experiences. Common issues and struggles can bring women together beyond nations, caste, and class to resist oppression.

References


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