

From the States:

Foisting of Fresh Charges on Batakrushna Swain by Odisha Police Is a Grave Travesty of Justice

Jan Adhikar Manch, a coalition of trade unions, democratic rights groups and other progressive forces in Odisha, strongly condemn the manner in which Comrade Batakrushna Swain was arbitrarily foisted with fresh charges by the state police on 12 April 2022 as he was ready to leave the Puri jail. Comrade Batakrushna Swain, the Convener of Upakuliya Jami o Jangal Surakhya Samiti and activist of Sipasarubali land movement, has been targeted by the local administration in Puri because of his untiring efforts to support the demands of the local people who are fighting for their lands and forests. These lands, coasts and forests are constantly under threat because of the Odisha government's unbridled mission to promote eco-tourism.

As matters stand, Comrade Batakrushna Swain, after spending eight months in jail, was released on 12 April 2022. The Puri police immediately picked him up from outside the jail gate and later produced an FIR with charges in a case of dacoity and other offences registered on March 05, 2022.

It is well known how both the state and central government have been trying relentlessly to hand over Sipasarubali land for construction of an International airport and Shamuka Hotel project under a tourism development project. The fresh arrest of Comrade Batakrushna Swain this time is an attempt to suppress the voice of resistance to this project that he has been leading along with villagers.

Expressing dissent and protest to protect people's rights is the essence of a democratic society. But the way the government is criminalising and suppressing all such voices at the behest of Corporates is an assault on the democratic rights enshrined in the Constitution for all citizens.

This fresh FIR and arrest is a message to warn all those who are opposing anti-people policies of the government like promoting tourism industry in Puri, transferring land for the Hotel project, snatching the livelihood of peasants and destroying the eco-system.

The Odisha government had once arrested Comrade Batakrushna Swain under National Security Act (NSA) in 2015. Later the advisory board of the High Court revoked the detention. Raising one's voice for the protection of life and livelihood and protection of the environment seems to be the biggest threat to national security.

After the Supreme Court direction that the arrest of the accused is not necessary under CRPC 41(A) if the punishment of the crime comes upto 7 years of imprisonment, the police have been registering sections of dacoity, attempt to murder etc. against activists of various people's movements to continue their repression. This extends the confinement of the accused to the jail and also prolongs the time period of securing bail. It is shocking to see the police and administration resorting to such heinous ways of using their power to exercise their authority.

As constituent organizations and individuals of Jan Adhikar Mancha, we demand:

- Release Comrade Batakrushna Swain immediately and withdraw all criminal cases foisted against him.
- Withdraw all criminal cases foisted against activists of Dinkia and Mali Parbat.
- Stop using the criminal sections of the IPC to suppress voices of the people's movements.
- Stop criminalising voices of dissent and opposition to projects that loot the people and the land and destroy the ecosystem.

Biswapriya Kanungo

Convener,

Jan Adhikar Mancha, Odisha

Bhubaneswar

Date: 14 April 2022