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We'll fight for Jangalkhand autonomy: Chhatradhar

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Like the Gorkha and Koch outfits in North Bengal, Peoples Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCPA) the tribal organization in Jangalkhand in south Bengal has raised the call for autonomy.

Speaking exclusively to TOI from his hideout near Lalgarh, wanted PCPA leader Chhatradhar Mahato declared, "We, the sons of the soil, want the rights to the land, jungle and water of Jangalkhand. We want total autonomy because our people and land should be ruled by us." He did not rule out the possibility of a statehood demand. "We will soon set up an united ethnic platform to raise our demand for autonomy." This is the first time the tribal leadership has expressed a clear autonomy demand.

With this fresh issue, PCPA which had emerged as a resistance group to counter police excess in the far-flung tribal villages has morphed into a full-fledged ethnic organization.

Criticizing the role of both state and union governments including Mamata Banerjee Mahato said: "The government is still ignoring the people's voice here. We want the security forces to be immediately withdrawn as the majority of the residents of the area depend on the forest for their livelihood and they have been forced to stay away from the jungles by the security forces. This is driving people to starvation."

Talking about the success of their indefinite strike in Jangalkhand since August 18, Mahato claimed that people in the area were with them. They wanted the right to rule over their own land after being neglected for past the six decades, he maintained. "By branding each protesting voice as Maoist, the state is trying to smother the people of Jangalkhand. Two months back, senior state government officials visited the area and promised several developmental projects. But till now no work has started."

His allegation was echoed by villagers of the area. "Helicopter chepe asa sarkari babura to onek kotha bolehhilo. Eksho diner kaj debe, haspatal hobe, sorkar kom dame chal debe, khabar joler byabastha korbe. Kintu kichhui to holo na." ("The officials who came by helicopter had promised so much 100 days' work, proper medical facilities, subsidised ration and drinking water. But nothing happened," said Monoj Soren, a villager. Most schools in the area are still closed as security forces have camped there, causing much resentment among the people.