Why is the Chhattisgarh Police hounding Soni Sori?

Soni Sori is being harassed by the Dantewada police for more than a year now. She has consistently refused to be an informer for the Chhattisgarh Police. She is also an aunt of Lingaram Kodopi, a young outspoken journalist who was being hounded by the Chhattisgarh Police since mid-2009 after he resisted their efforts to enrol him as an SPO. Lingaram was arrested on September 9 2011 and has been charged under the dreaded Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) among others. He is now accused of being a go-between for bribe being paid by Essar to the Maoists. The police allege that Soni Sori is involved in the same case, and have also charged her in several other cases. Publicly available material clearly shows that the charges against both of them are false and politically motivated. If anything, it is a well-known fact that as a journalist, Lingaram had acquired damning evidence of police atrocities which the Chhattisgarh police wish to suppress/discredit by filing false cases against him.

Why did Soni Sori flee to Delhi?

After Soni Sori’s nephew, Lingaram Kodopi, was arrested by the Chhattisgarh police in the Essar case, the Chhattisgarh police tried to extra-judicially execute her, apprehensive that she possessed evidence to prove that false cases have deliberately been lodged against her and her nephew. Fearing for her life, she fled to Delhi to seek legal help and expose the police atrocities.

How is Soni Sori’s life threatened by the Chhattisgarh police?

Soni Sori was arrested in Delhi on October 4th 2011, before she could initiate legal action. Fearing vengeance from the police, whose workings she had exposed before the media in Delhi, she pleaded with the Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate, Saket District Court, and the Delhi High Court for permission to stay in Delhi for an additional few days till she could file her petition in the Supreme Court. (The delay was due to the court holidays on account of Dussehra). However, she was remanded to the custody of Chhattisgarh Police by the courts, albeit with explicit directions to the Police to ensure her safety and an order that a report be filed before the Delhi High Court, outlining steps taken to keep her safe.

However, in what can only be termed to be an act of flagrant contempt of court, the Chhattisgarh police brutally tortured her for the two days she was in their custody. As physical evidence about her torture is mounting, she is being continuously pressured to withdraw her allegations, and her entire family is now being harassed by the Chhattisgarh police, and being prevented from accessing her. Additional cases have been heaped on her nephew Lingaram Kodopi, her brother is also facing arrest and the compensation money due to her father is being withheld.

Considering the impunity with which the Chhattisgarh police has behaved so far, Soni Sori is in an extremely precarious situation as long as she is in proximity of this police force. If anything, the police have even more reason wreak vengeance against her now. It is imperative that Soni Sori be
immediately removed from their territory of power as early as possible, and her family be given protection from any retribution meted out by the police.

**What is the evidence of her custodial torture?**

Evidence in cases of custodial torture is extremely rare to come by, since torture is usually inflicted in circumstances fully controlled by the perpetrator, i.e. the police. However, this is one of the rare cases, where there is incontrovertible proof that the victim was subjected to the most inhuman forms of torture.

- Custodial torture first came to light when Soni Sori had to be produced in front of the Dantewada Magistrate the end of two days of police custody. Soni, who had been in perfect health on the 8th of October, when she was remanded to police custody, was in such a bad condition on the 10th of October, that she could not get down from the police van and go to the courtroom; her statement was taken by a court babu, and the Magistrate, in a clear travesty of justice, passed an order without even seeing her. The police claimed ‘she slipped in the bathroom and had hurt her head’. The examining doctor at the District Hospital said ‘she was brought in unconscious, the X-ray showed injuries on her head and back, and black marks were observed on her fingertips’ – indicating she had received electric shocks. A video clipping of her, writhing in pain in the hospital, confirmed fears of custodial torture.

- Initially Soni herself said that she had fallen in the bathroom. Later, it emerged that she said so as she had been threatened by the police that her brother, the sole caretaker of her three children, would be arrested if she spoke of her torture.

- Subsequently, in her statements to relatives and in a letter addressed to the Supreme Court, Soni Sori has clearly stated that she was ‘pulled out of her cell at the Dantewada Police Station at midnight of 8th/9th October and taken to SP Ankit Garg’s room.’ There she was stripped and given electric shocks. When she woke the next morning she had severe aches and pains all over her body, injuries to her neck and spine and acute pain in her lower abdomen.

- In response to a petition filed on her behalf in the Supreme Court, a three-Judge Bench observed that the injuries against her person did not appear to be as simple as the State was making them out to be, and ordered an independent medical examination in NRS Medical College Hospital in Kolkata. The report, presented in court on the 25th Nov, 2011 states that three stones had been found inserted deep inside her private parts, which were the primary cause of her abdominal pain. The MRI scan also shows that she has annular tears on her spine.

**What has been the Chhattisgarh Government’s response to this?**

In face of undeniable evidence of custodial torture, the Chhattisgarh government, instead of trying to take action against the perpetrators, has been actively shielding them.
Despite Ms. Sori’s complaints of severe lower back pain, her inability to stand, tenderness in the lower back and difficulty in walking, none of the three hospitals in Chhattisgarh which ‘examined her’ found inflammation in her private parts, the stones lodged in her vagina and rectum or the injuries to her spine. In fact, Dr. Vivek Choudhary, Medical Superintendent of the Ambedkar Hospital in Raipur, was quoted in the Hindustan Times as saying: “Medical tests reveal Sori is a malinger.” This denial extended to the highest levels of the Chhattisgarh government. At a meeting with Principal Secretary, N. Baijendra Kumar in Delhi on 14th October 2011, concerned women’s groups were assured that she was ‘safe in jail and that her wounds were not serious.’ He also said that the Health Secretary had ‘confirmed the fact’ so there was no need for concern about her safety; that he had been told by Dantewada Superintendent of Police Ankit Garg and state DGP Anil M Nawaney that Ms. Sori had not been ill-treated!

When Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh, Raman Singh, arrived in Delhi on 1st December 2011, several Delhi-based women’s groups, democratic rights groups, and progressive individuals staged a protest at the Chhattisgarh Sadan, comprising of around 40 representatives from various organizations demanding justice for Soni Sori, Lingaram Kodopi and various tribal activists in the state. Instead of meeting the protesters, the Chief Minister instead ordered the Delhi Police to forcibly remove them from the premises and had them dragged out of the way so that he could proceed to ‘his next meeting!’

So far, no step seems to have been taken against any of the errant police officers – not even the Constable Mankar, who has been caught on tape by the news magazine Tehelka, admitting that false cases had been registered against Soni Sori and Linga Kodopi, or against the Superintendent of Police, Ankit Garg, in whose custody Soni Sori was subjected to the inhuman torture, including sexual violence.

What are the charges against Soni Sori?

Soni Sori has multiple false cases lodged against her—from being a participant in a Naxalite raid at a Congress worker’s house, to acting as an intermediary for the Maoists. All these cases were lodged by the police during the last year, with each of the charge sheets showing her as an “absconder”, and containing statements by the police saying that all efforts were made to locate her, but in vain. Not only was Soni Sori regularly attending to her duties as a hostel warden all this time (as evidenced by the school attendance register), but she had also met with police authorities to complain about her own harassment, had come to Delhi seeking legal advice and had attended court hearings in the trial against her husband, who too has been falsely implicated in a case.

Even a cursory examination of the charge sheets against her shows that these are crude fabrications of the Chhattisgarh police. Different charge sheets for crimes committed on different dates have the identical testimonies by different witnesses. It is also difficult to fathom that if she were a real Naxalite, then why would her father’s and uncle’s house be burnt and looted by the Naxalites, and her father shot in the foot by them, at the same time during which she is allegedly joining the Naxalite in a rampage throughout the countryside.

What steps need to be taken by the State and Central governments to ensure Soni Sori’s safety?
· Prompt and exemplary action against the SP and other police officials involved in the custodial and sexual violence inflicted upon Soni on the night of 8/9 October 2011, in Dantewada police station

· That the state government stop challenging Soni Sori’s demand to be moved out of the state on grounds of fear for her life in Chhattisgarh

· Publicly prove the safety and well-being of Lingaram Kodopi who is currently in jail in Dantewada and charged under UAPA, CSPSA and Sections 121, 124A and 120B of the Indian Penal Code – for criminal conspiracy, sedition and waging war against the State.

· Immediately stop the persecution of Soni Sori, Lingaram Kodopi and the rest of their family

· Put an immediate end to the offensive that has been declared on the tribals and activists in the region