

Brutal Attacks by Police on the Villagers of Dhinkia

While the Odisha State administration was continuously warning people to stay indoors to remain safe from the impending cyclonic storm, the Jagatsinghpur district police entered the village Dhinkia under Erasama Block to arrest some people around 4.30 am on 4th December, 2021. People resisted the police attack and a bloody fight ensued. The media reported the incident next day.

According to villagers of Dhinkia, the allegations of hurling of bomb and snatching away of pistol are stories concocted by the police and it is a conspiracy to suppress the anti-Jindal voices of the people. According to the statement of SP some 11 policemen have been injured by the people and police have not even slapped anyone. But the team saw in its own eyes that bandages have still been wrapped around the wrist of right hand of Santi Das, an elderly woman, of Dhinkia.

After this incident, nearly 500 people belonging not only to Dhinkia but to Mahal, Patana and Govindpur held a protest demonstration despite rains in the morning. On the other hand, in the two FIRs filed by the police Dhinkia villagers have been booked under various sections of IPC.

After the incident police have been deployed at three entry points (Trilochanpur, Patana and Mahala) to the village. Villagers are being asked to show their Aadhar Card at these entry points when going outside of the village. They are not being able to go to their fields and betel vines. They are under siege in their own village. They apprehend that at each police picket the police have kept a list of names of the people to be arrested and they are checking accordingly. When villagers of Dhinkia are living under such condition, people of neighboring villages are also being harassed and humiliated by the police. One such incident happened while the team was there in the village Govindpur. A fellow villager was complaining before Pravat Rout that police pulled his collar. In short, heavy police presence and checking in the area has created an atmosphere of fear and terror.

The Developments in the Area Leading to the Incident

The way the Public Hearing for JSW integrated steel plant was conducted by Odisha Pollution Control Board with heavy police arrangement and people outside of the project affected area were given preference than the local ones to participate and express their views, created an atmosphere of resentment against the district administration.

During the time of first wave of Covid-19 and cyclonic storm 'Amphan', local people, especially betel-vine cultivators, suffered heavy economic loss. While the district administration remained indifferent to it, anonymous application forms were circulated in the area purportedly asking people to intimate to the government that they were interested to hand over their land and betel-vines to the company. People felt that without helping them

the district administration and company were taking advantage of their distressed economic situation. This intensified their resentment and doubt.

In August, 2021 the arrest of Tuna Baral, a known anti-project face in the area, on the charge of stopping company vehicle. and issue of show cause notice to Debendra Swain for removal from the post of Samiti Member caused more doubt towards the administration. Debendra Swain has been removed from the post on 8th December.

On 18th August, the Tehsildar, Erasama issued a notice to the people of Govindpur and Dhinkia with regard to acquisition of land – 793.97 and 746.76 acres of land respectively. It was also mentioned in the notice that the land will be transferred to IIDCO for setting up industry (without naming any project) and people could file their objections with a court fee of Rs. 20/- and relevant documents within 30 days from the date of issue of the notice. But the notice was fixed at the Panchayat Office on 15th September for public knowledge. That means people were practically given only two days to respond to it. People of Dhinkia exposed this deceit and submitted their written objection to the concerned authority. So did the people of Govindpur.

In this atmosphere of distrust and doubt, the district administration organized public hearings in the month of November to listen to the grievances of the people against the proposed JSW project. The hearings were held at the headquarters of all three affected Panchayats and in Govindpur – a constituent village of Dhinkia Panchayat. In the perception of people it was to be a dialogue and discussion between local people and administration. But when they saw that shamianas and food arrangements for the hearings were being made by the company and company officials were present on the stage and being allowed to speak then they felt that it was more of an exercise in garnering support in favour of the company. Still, people participated in the hearings and objected to the presence of company officials. Especially in Dhinkia hearing people did not allow the company officials to speak and categorically spoke against the project. People put forward many demands and raised issues like environment pollution, security of livelihood, to give patta to landless people, forest rights and withdrawal of false cases slapped on them at the time of anti-POSCO movement.

The most important issue is that while there is no environment clearance has been granted for the project till date, yet the administration is acquiring land and doing all sorts of thing to push the project through. Besides, the government has been ignoring the demand of the people to implement the Forest Rights Act-2006 since the time of anti-POSCO movement. The two Committees set up then by the Central Government had clearly recommended that the forest land was to be distributed to the people first and thereafter, if people wanted they could give it to any project. It is ironic that even today the government is trying to acquire forest land for JSW project violating the Forest Rights Act. People of Dhinkia are strongly opposed to this.

In such a situation, notice was served to villagers to be present and co-operate in demarcation of village boundaries for the newly created Revenue villages Patana and Mahala (for Patana – date 30.11.2021, for Mahala – 01.12.2021) which were earlier two hamlets of Dhinkia Revenue village. This further complicated the situation as people doubted the motive of the administration. It may be noted that though the creation of new revenue village is a routine administrative exercise there are prescribed procedures for this. Demarcation of boundaries is the last stage of the entire exercise. The two hamlets i.e. Mahala and Patana

were officially recognized as revenue village in April and August 2021 respectively. However, the administration by passed the provision of hearing grievances of people before such recognition. People were served notice to cooperate only the process of demarcation began. People of Dinkia and Mahala strongly felt that this is a conspiracy being hatched by the administration to divide people as the common land to be divided between the newly created revenue villages is the same land to be handed over to IIDCO for setting up of Industry. So, people of Dinkia and Mahala strongly opposed the demarcation work and had a confrontation with the administration, on 1st December. And two days after this police came to Dinkia village and tried to forcibly enter Debendra Swain's house. People of Dinkia strongly believe that as Debendra Swain has been taking leadership in all these things the administration is after him.

Findings and Demands

The team feels that the normal day to day lives and activities of people have been hampered due to police presence. Hence, the team demands that administration should take steps for immediate withdrawal of police force from Dinkia and restoration of normalcy.

The process of fresh land acquisition and fencing etc. should be suspended immediately as there is no environment clearance for the proposed project of JSW.

Immediate steps should be taken to address the issues raised by people in public hearings. The key issues raised are implementation of the Forest Rights Act-2006, distribution of land and patta to the landless, withdrawal of old cases filed against people during the anti-POSCO movement and larger environmental concerns.

The team feels that larger sections of the population in the proposed project affected area are not in favour of the project. But, the administration is using all sorts of tricks and trickeries to win the support of the people and entangling them with criminal cases. It is actively working towards creating divisions among villages to safeguard the interest of the company.

The team clearly states that instead of brushing aside the larger popular opinion, the government should seriously address the issues like environment and livelihood raised since the time of anti-POSCO agitation.

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