

State for Corporate World

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Is there any difference between a corporate and a state? Is the state more concerned of its people than the corporate of its investors? This correspondent was dumbfounded in Kashipur in Orissa when he went there in September last year. By that time already nearly two hundred people died of bacterial cholera. It was already in national news. Then the visitors were mainly state ministers, bureaucrats and few journalists. They were visiting few selected villages where death occurred at the initial stage. Thanks to the local media, it highlighted the names of the villages including the names of the patients who died. This forced the government to act though it was already late.

The struggle in the area of Kashipur for protecting life and livelihood of Kondh and Paroja tribals from the onslaught of bauxite mining companies is now an old story. In 2001 too starvation deaths occurred in Kashipur.

Then the Congress party did not leave space in blaming the ruling BJD-BJP government led by Naveen Patnaik; his lackadaisical approach in setting up the bauxite mining project of Utkal Alumina International Limited, the project of Alcan of Canada and Hindalco of Birla group of India. "Had there been the project local people would not have died due to starvation", Janaki Patnaik of Congress leader and former chief minister said in a public meeting at Kashipur in September, 2001. The UAIL also then promised, in its literature, 'all round development' of the area. Then afforestation, health care, education and employment were its motto.

Meanwhile, the second phase of state repression started in the area in December, 2004 just four years after Maikanch police firing. Indian Reserve Battalion, CRPF and state armed police were used to cow down undeterred local people. Nearly fifty activists of the organization that was spearheading the movement were picked up by the police in a year or so. The UAIL started its construction work with police protection which was impossible for them earlier. The company started its work without any official permission of mining and environment clearance but with the blessings of 'state government'.

In April, 2007 Alcan withdrew from the UAIL. Earlier Tata in 1998 and Hydro of Norway in 2001 withdrew from the joint venture 'blaming' the resistance to the project. This time Alcan blamed Hindalco, the other partner. It withdrew because, "the project limits Alcan's ability to participate in key decisions" as per its press release. Robert Goodland, the former environment advisor of World Bank, who came before such withdrawal, to Kashipur blamed the UAIL and advised the company at least to "obey existing law" specifically on "human rights norms, transparency, free, prior and informed consent" while dealing with indigenous people.

During the cholera epidemic the Congress, now in opposition, did not talk much about mining. But it did everything to take political mileage out of people's misery. It called an Orissa Bandh on 12th September. But none of outside agencies except a very few reached with medical help. Cholera deaths reached to five hundred in August and September only. Neglect of health dept. and money mindedness of local health staff are primary reasons for so many deaths. After 2001 there were six doctors for one lakh and thirty five thousand people. But in due course of time they left their duty places; either went for

higher studies or got transferred. But they successfully trained the ANMs (Auxiliary Nurse and Midwives) male attendants and quakes about allopathic treatments. When the doctors left the place these hospital employees became highly mobile, started locating wealthy patients who could pay. Many patients died because nothing was free. They could not fulfil the charges of these pseudo-doctors.

Government started emergency work in September, 2007 in the areas for immediate monetary relief. Emaciated people, mostly once diarrhoea patients came in queue to do earth work against a day's wages. They were not certain whether they would get payment soon. They did work under NREGS in February and March this year. Ironically they have not been paid yet. But official website of NREGS says people got work of 10-15 days in 2006-07. Malamba village of Kucheipadar panchayat got one hundred days of work as per the website. But the villagers deny it.

The Centre for Environment and Food Security, a Delhi-based organization conducted a survey of 100 villages to assess the implementation of the NREGS in Orissa. It alleged that government officials had misappropriated Rs 500 crore of NREGS funds in those districts. The CEFS says this amount would have given about 90 days of employment to 10 lakh poor families in Orissa.

The death scenario of 2001 did not differ much from that of 2007. Only difference : the people of the area became more poorer. Market has already penetrated into the tribal life. The necessity of life is increasing but not the produces. State has intervened in a different way. People faced the state repression in black and blue. For which this oppression took place, the UAIL, did not come to help the displaced people. Its only medical van entered into a very few selected villages and vanished within a few minutes, But its big vehicles like bulldozers, earth removers, Lorries etc. are plying on roads with well protection from armed police. There is no wage labour and no local employment by the company. Still the company has not occupied yet the total 3000 acres of land needed for the project. Even after so much repression people of the area have not left it. So policemen are in continual search of the activists who have refused to surrender.

The company's eye is on sensex. Eyes of big, small and marginal investors are on dividend of the company. The UAIL is pulling funds from stock markets. Aluminium is a growing sector. The UAIL is speaking loudly "we are achieving our goal". So investors are investing. The eyes of leaders, politicians, bureaucrats and police are on 'development fund' of the company. This fund is for 'educating' those who are close to the 'power'. This money goes unwritten. The company is not speaking how much they have already spent in what ways. Government officials and company bosses, all are looking for immediate gains. Thus, there is absolutely no difference between a 'democratically elected government' and a corporate in Kashipur. □□□