

ORISSA

REPORT ON POSCO VILLAGES

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The situation in the three villages of Dhinkia, Gobindapur and Nuagaon is grim. Three days after the 15th May assault by police forces on the peaceful assembly of villagers in Balitutha, nearly every household in these three villages have people who are injured and traumatized. And because since 15th May, all the exit points from the villages, through Balitutha and Trilochanpur have been sealed by the police, and with the threat of arrest looming large on anyone from the villages who step out, nearly no one has received medical treatment for their wounds. With festering wounds and fractured limbs, many people, including the elderly, are suffering their ordeal silently in the confines of their homes.

Balitutha, where the police assault took place on the 15th, is a scene of destruction. The police, exhibiting a disturbing sign of wreaking vengeance, not only burnt down the shamiana under which the dharna was being held for the past five months, but also set fire to all the roadside shops, eateries and thatched houses on one side of the Balitutha bridge. This has been vividly shown on the Oriya television channels. If setting fire to houses and shops becomes an accepted operational practice of the Orissa police, it speaks volumes about the "keepers of law and order" and their political masters in the Orissa government. Now the entire area is teeming with police forces and their special operations vehicles, and they are preventing anyone from the besieged villages from stepping out.

The villagers' wounds and their description of what happened on 15th April in Balitutha is also a grim testimony of what the state can inflict on peaceful protesters. There are around two hundred injured people in the three villages. Wounds are from rubber bullets, lathis and, something that this correspondent had seen for the first time, from pellets fired from shotguns. These are small spherical pellets, like bicycle ball-bearings, which have been fired in thousands. Many people have five or six of these painfully embedded under their skins. This is a most inhuman weapon, which have been used in the past in Israel and South Africa to break up demonstrations without causing life-threatening injuries. The Orissa police seem to have adopted this as a new means of sowing terror among peaceful demonstrators. Without availability of doctors and unable to reach hospitals, many people are being forced to extract the pellets at home using knives and blades.

Women seem to have been especially targeted for assault and humiliation. Most of the wounded were women. Mounabati Das, in her fifties, who after being hit by a rubber bullet on her leg and falling on the ground, described how she was dragged around by her hair by the police who threatened her in filthy language that this would be the consequence of resisting the government. She has a large

subcutaneous blood clot from the rubber bullet which hit her thigh and walks around with great difficulty. Tikki Bardhan, whose foot seems to have been fractured after being hit by a rubber bullet, cannot even walk. There has been no doctor to see her and plaster the fractured foot. Her husband, Bharat Bardhan, was hit by a rubber bullet and a shotgun pellet on his face. He barely missed losing his right eye, but the bullet broke a tooth and a blood vessel in his nose because of which he was profusely bleeding from his nose. The shot gun pellet is still embedded in his left cheek. Shantilata Mahapatra was hit by a rubber bullet and a shotgun pellet on her leg. She could barely walk. Well, this writer extracted the pellet with difficulty from her leg and dressed up the wound and gave her a course of antibiotics. Gujuri Mahanti, a 72-year-old grandmother, has been hit by three rubber bullets on the back of her head, on the small of her back and behind her waist. She finds it difficult to sit or even lie down, except on her side. She described how the assembled women were attacked by the police on that day. The women had been sitting in dharna in front of the bridge. The police, who were on the bridge, ordered them to move away and clear the path. After around two hours, when they had got up and turned to move away, the police attacked with tear gas, rubber bullets and pellet guns. Many of the elderly women, including herself, choking on the tear gas, somehow moved away from the spot and reached what they thought to be a safe distance, where they tried to gather together. But the police turned their fire on this group and kept firing on their backs as they tried to run away. This is clearly shown by the fact that she was hit by rubber bullets on her back. The police, who had the advantage of being situated on higher ground on the bridge, fired at will on the people assembled on lower ground at one end of the bridge. When the women were running away, the police descended from the bridge and assaulted them with lathis and dragged them around by their hair. Five of them, including a 60-year-old grandmother, were dragged into police vans and taken away. Their relatives do not know till now what has been their fate.

These stories were repeated in every home. The people are now awaiting an imminent attack on the villages itself which the administration has already threatened. However, they say that these wounds have only strengthened their resolve to resist, and there will be a blood bath if the police enter their villages. But 72-year-old Gujuri Mahanti had a question addressed to Naveen Patnaik, "Would he treat his mother in the same way that the police had treated her?" As Naveen Patnaik, with his masters at Tata POSCO, tries to bring "development" to Orissa with rubber bullets and shotgun pellets, this is the question that confronts him from poor village women who are resolved to resist this aggression on their lives and livelihoods. □

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