

'SPONGE IRON' NIGHTMARE

Laying Waste to People and Environment Subhendu Dasgupta

[We are placing below a set of selected documents on the Sponge Iron Units in West Bengal. The documents are interrelated and self-explanatory. The placement is chronological.]

DOCUMENT ONE

West Bengal Pollution Control Board,(WBPCB) Order, 27 January 2005 (excerpts):

It is observed that within the state of West Bengal a number of sponge iron units have been established and operating and during operation of such sponge iron units serious pollution problems are generated from their manufacturing process;

It is observed that sponge iron units are dumping their wastes generated from their manufacturing process indiscriminately in the surrounding areas, which is a serious concern for environmental degradation.

DOCUMENT TWO

Report of the field visit to Sponge Iron Units in Burdwan, Bankura and Purulia carried out on 27-29 March 2005 by Gautam Gupta, Professor, Department of Economics, Jadavpur University and representatives of WBPCB, Kolkata, Durgapur and Asansol Offices and Recommendations submitted to Prof P N Roy, Chairman, Environmental Impact Assessment Committee and Member of the Committee constituted by the Hon'ble Pollution Control Appellate Authority, West Bengal in connection with assessment of pollution load generated by the Sponge Iron Units in West Bengal. (excerpts) :

Sponge Iron Units have initiated operation in the industrial-urban areas of Durgapur, Burdwan District as well as rural areas of Bankura and Purulia Districts. These units have a heavy pollution load.

The adverse effect of these units on society at large depends in part on their location. They are located in (i) rural agricultural areas, (ii) urban industrial areas and (iii) forest areas. They have several impacts on (i) damage to crop (ii) loss of fertility (iii) damage to cattle (iv) damage to forest resources and bio diversity (v) health cost of plant workers (vi) health costs to persons living in adjoining areas (vii) damage to water bodies.

Units surrounded by villages where agricultural activities take place - The damage caused by these units are mainly damage to cattle, pollution to pond water, damage to crops/ less crop yield, affect human health/ worker's health.

Units located in urban industrial areas--These units affect the health of the nearby residents directly.

Units located near forests- These units affect the plants and trees and the biodiversity of the forests.

Since the sponge iron units remain highly polluting units, causing severe damages to human and cattle health besides causing other environmental damages, there is urgent need to address the problem

DOCUMENT THREE

Letter to the Member Secretary, West Bengal Pollution Control Board, from Naba Datta, General Secretary, Nagarik Mancha, Kolkata, 23 February 2009 (excerpts):

Our past surveys and experiences in and around Durgapur (Burdwan) and Barjora (Bankura) lead us to conclude without slightest hesitation that the Sponge Iron Projects have totally devastating effects on human health, on life processes and natural resources.

The proven detrimental effects on fertile lands, air and water resources will be evident on inspection. The pollution of air and water, the damaging effects on the agriculture and crops endangering human and animal feed; the increase in skin, lungs and gastrointestinal diseases are some of the more common side effects.

The West Bengal Government had gone on record in the recent past stating that henceforth it will not allow any new sponge iron unit to be set up in the State. This is wholly in resonance to our past studies, which exposed miserable standards and dark track records of the existing sponge iron units.

DOCUMENT FOUR

Appeal under section 31 of the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act 1981 Before The Hon'ble Pollution Control Appellate Authority (WB) June 29, 2009. (excerpts):

Appellant Hemanta Kumar Mahato, Village and P.O. Gajasimul, Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal, Pin 721513.

Versus : 1. The West Bengal Pollution Control Board; 2. The Member Secretary, West Bengal Pollution Control Board; 3. M/s Reshmi Ispat, Jhargram Paschim Medinipur; 4. M/s Reshmi Cement, Sponge Iron Plant Jitusole Jhargram Paschim Medinipur; 5. M/s Aryabarta Trading Co. Mohanpur, Jhargram Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal.

The appellant time and again moved before the Respondent Nos 1 & 2, but the said respondents failed to implement their own order in respect of Respondents Nos.3, 4 and 5 and therefore the appellant is suffering from the environmental hazards.

Nagarik Mancha made a detailed study on sponge iron units situated in Jhargram area, indicating how the Respondent Nos. 3, 4 and 5 are affecting the concerned area.

DOCUMENT FIVE

A letter to the Secretary, Ministry of Environment & Forests, Government of India, from Naba Datta, General Secretary, Nagarik Mancha, 29 April 2010. (excerpts) :

Siting Guidelines : It has been specifically mentioned in the “Siting Guideline for Sponge Iron Plants” published by Central Pollution Control Board that “ Siting of new sponge iron plants shall be as per respective State Pollution Control Board guidelines. However the following aspects shall also be considered: (a) Residential habitation (residential localities / villages) and ecologically and / or otherwise sensitive areas: A minimum distance of at least 1000m (1 km) to be maintained.”

Violation 1 : The densely populated main Gajasimul village is within 800m from M/s Rashmi Ispat Limited Works, while small clusters of huts are located much nearer. Gajasimul Junior Basic School is situated about 350m away while the KCM School about 250m away from this (Gajasimul) sponge iron unit. A large water body used as the village commons is not even a 100m away. A huge mango orchard, with a few hundred trees is located within 100-200m from the polluting unit. Similarly some of the massive bamboo orchards are within 500m.

“(c) The location of sponge iron plant should be at least 500m away from National Highway and State Highway.”

Violation 2: The National Highway 6 commonly referred as NH6 or the GE Road (Great Eastern Road) is a busy national highway running from Kolkata and passing through Jharkhand and other States. The NH6 is within 150-200m from this sponge iron unit, contrary to Central Pollution Control Board guideline.

“(d) Radial distance between two sponge iron plants should be 5km for plants having capacity 1000TDP or more.”

Violation 3: The distance between sponge iron units at Gajasimul , Mohanpur and Jitushole located at the three corners of a triangle are less than 5km from each other.

It is evident from above that on three counts M/s Rashmi Ispat Limited has violated the “Siting Guidelines for Sponge Iron Plants” as laid down by the Central Pollution Control Board.

Water Extraction: Gajasimul is located in a drought prone area. There is no river in the vicinity and M/s Rashmi Ispat Limited already pumps out millions of tonnes of groundwater everyday. This is having a disastrous effect on the ground water level which is receding fast. Excavated wells in adjoining villages are running dry for larger number of months and the small ponds/water bodies are similarly dry and parched for longer periods. Water scarcity has hit the villagers hard.

For the expansion project the company states that an additional 2508 kl of water per day will be required, which they propose to draw from existing bore wells.

It is strongly felt that without systematic hydro-geological surveys followed by impact assessment by the Central Ground Water Board, EZ (or Central Ground Water Authority) further withdrawal of ground water from a drought prone region should not be allowed.

Symptoms of Pollution: Symptoms of pollution are evident all around the sponge iron factory. Untreated liquid waste from Rashmi Ispat at Gajasimul can be found coming out from a point under the boundary wall. The nauseating black discharge flows freely on to

the adjoining fields and then into the large adjacent water body on which thousands of villagers depend.

Owing to pollution caused by sponge iron units, the vegetation, water bodies, homestead, agricultural fields, human population, birds, animals of the locality are being devastated and it is evident to those who want to see. In Gajasimul, smoke, gas, stone / coal dust and liquid effluent from the sponge iron unit is spreading pollutants like nickel, chromium, cadmium, arsenic, manganese etc.

Socio Economic Profile Of The Affected Inhabitants: M/sRashmi Ispat Ltd. With its sponge iron unit located at Gajasimul is wrecking havoc with the life and livelihood of nearly fifteen thousand villagers in adjoining villages including indigenous population who are scheduled as “primitive” tribe group. There are three Lodha-Shabar villages in the vicinity whose inhabitants have been economically affected.

This area was renowned for its strong bamboos. About 8-10 truckload of bamboos traveled to the coal mine areas in West Bengal and Bihar everyday. These days barely 1-2 trucks roll out. The Gajasimul Ambagan (mango orchard) with hundreds of trees was a popular picnic spot besides being a source of seasonal earning. The fruits have vanished when the factory came up right next to it. Domestic animals are not allowed to graze near it. The tree trunks resemble charcoal blocks and the leaves are black. The rice mill owners are refusing to accept paddy from this area since black spots have appeared on the rice grains.

A two hundred acre water body justifies the presence of traditional fisher folks in the adjoining villages. The rewards were significant but the markets for fresh fish from the area have shrunk significantly over the last few years. The buyers know that the poison from the factory is emptied into the water body. Moreover they find the fish darker in colour and different in taste. One out of ten fish have ulcers on their skin. Scores of families dependent on the daily fish crop have had their earning capacity slashed. Making things worse the villagers unable to sell the fish consume them locally paying little heed to the possible long-term consequences.

We strongly believe that no one has the right to jeopardize the life and livelihood of the poor villagers and it is the onus of the government bodies to act as per the laws of the land.

DOCUMENT SIX

Letter from the Chief Law Officer to Naba Datta, Secretary, Nagarik Mancha. 21 April 2010. (excerpts) :

District Authorities will be requested to stop unauthorized lifting of ground water.

West Bengal Pollution Control Board will take necessary action against the erring sponge iron units in accordance to law.

DOCUMENT SEVEN

More Than Just An Arrest. Prepared and Circulated by Nagarik Mancha, 20 August 2010. (excerpts) :

Since April 2009 Nagarik Mancha has been consistently lending its support and solidarity to the protests at the grassroots against pollution from three sponge iron units at Gajasimul, Jitushole and Mohonpur in the Jhargram P.S. area , West Medinipur. The

pollution has been devastating the life and livelihood of a large portion of the 50000 inhabitants, predominantly tribals, in 50-60 adjoining villages under Patashimul, Lodhashuli, Shalboni and Manikpara Gram Panchayats.

Since 2006 Naba Datta, as the General Secretary of Nagarik Mancha has been leading investigating and fact-finding teams also to the neighbouring districts of Burdwan, Bankura and Purulia where sponge iron units have mushroomed in recent years causing enormous environmental and socio-economic disaster.

Nagarik Mancha has taken up the sponge iron pollution issue with the West Bengal Pollution Control Board and in various courts of law. It has repeatedly petitioned the Left Front Government and its demands have been simple : the Government should follow its own rules and regulations and those of the Central Pollution Control Board in taking immediate restraining measures.

On 7 April 2010 a high-powered meeting was held at WBPCB in which Nagarik Mancha was invited along with the victims of the pollution of the three sponge iron units near Jhargram. It was decided that a Notice will be served to all 55 large sponge iron units in the State asking for facts related to use of groundwater, coal etc. The Review Meeting, where Nagarik Mancha and the victims were again present, was held on 28 July 2010 where it was evident from the facts gathered by WBPCB in response to their official notice that most of the sponge iron units did not have requisite licenses and in gist , as per law, they were operating illegally.

Hence the Nagarik Mancha has, in essence, only stood by the initiative of the people victimized by sponge iron units and has urged the authorities to follow the rules and laws of the land.

THE CONCLUDING NOTE

Naba Datta, Secretary, Nagarik Mancha, was arrested by the police of the Left Front Government on 17 August 2010 under the charges of 'unlawful assembly', 'rioting', 'attempt to murder', 'causing hurt/ grievous hurt', 'theft', 'causing mischief by fire/explosive', 'criminal trespass', 'sedition/conspiracy', 'collecting arms to wage war', 'concealment with intent to wage war', 'using/concealing prohibited arms', 'waging war.' Previously Hemanta Mahato and Upangsu Mahato, the two members of the organization formed by the affected villagers against the pollutant sponge iron units were arrested with similar charges.

It appears from the extracts of the documents presented here that according to the Left Front Government, waging protests against pollutant factories is synonymous to waging war against the State. Pollutant factories and the State are thus coterminous.

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