

A talk with Abhay Sahoo

Anti-posco Agitation

Musab Iqbal

[Musab Iqbal, Chief Editor of newzfirst traveled to very heart of resistance in Odisha to understand the overlapping phenomena of resistance and development. He interviewed the leader of anti-POSOCO PPSS Abhay Sahoo, a man who architected this movement from ground zero and led it through its all tough time. Lived a period in underground, jailed for months and now confined to a small home of a PPSS worker in Jagdishpur village far from his native village to shape and lead the movement.]

Q. Tell me about PPSS.

A. When on June 22, 2005 the MoU was signed by state government with POSCO it was clear that the steel plant is coming. A protest was organized that very day in state capital in which I was also present. Then my party (communist party) decided that thus this project area comes under home block of Abhay Sahoo, so he must go back there and prepare a mass movement. I came here and organized 10-12 people and started educating the villagers about POSCO project. On July 11 we launched our first campaign in a Rickshaw rally with microphone and covered 3 Panchayats and did street corner meetings, on that very day PPSS was formed and I became its Chairman and Sisir Mahapatra became its General Secretary. This is a mass resistance, not political resistance-BJP, Congress all are supporting this movement.

Q. Since 2005 what PPSS is doing?

A. We felt that educating the people should be first priority. So we decided to do high level campaign across the villages to educate people about the imminent danger and for that we invited lot of high profile leaders as well. D Raja also came and addressed the villagers of almost all villages, after him many other leaders came. After these campaigns govt felt that even pro POSCO protestors are coming to PPSS then ministers decided to come to us and explain the rehabilitation policy.

Q. And when the protest began?

A. So on 21 January 2006 we protested on main entry point against the ministers and we said clearly that we will not allow you to enter and there must be no POSCO. This was the first major protest outside the village with thousands of women protesting as well. So they went back.

But again they did same programme in Nuagaon, there also we protested and they did similar programme in Dhinkia. In that programme 4000-5000 people gathered with us and protested against the pro-POSCO rally. There was severe confrontation with them. So Dhinkia show was flopped and ministers failed to do their programmes.

Q. When the first case was registered on your name?

A. First case against me and 52 others under section 307 was slapped immediately after the Dhinkia protest.

From 11 April 2006 we went underground and we didn't step out of the village but the spirit of protestors was high. Police also arrested nine people and later it was declared on behalf of villagers that police and administration cannot enter in village and we also detained police and administration when they entered. So police remained outside the village and we remained inside as the warrants were against many of us.

Q. When you were arrested?

A. On October 12, 2008 I came out of village for treatment and then only I was arrested .I was charged with 33 cases and when I was in jail 4 more cases were slapped. I was in prison for 10 months 14 days. Now 49 cases are against me. Govt has charged me for doing movement, keeping officials in detention etc.

Q. Who are in favor of POSCO? What is Pro-POSCO?

A. Actually the POSCO Company identified few villagers, gave them money and formed a unit or committee in their favor to break the protest movement which resulted in riot in the village among pro and anti. 52-56 people formed united action committee in favor of POSCO.

In every village there are 10-20 supporters—pro-POSCO people are very less but they are patronized by Govt, administration and company.

Q. Is Nuagaon supporting POSCO?

A. Nuagaon have maximum 100 supporters. Palli sabha passed judgment against POSCO.

Q. What's your take on Transition camp?

A. Transition camp is among the 'mistakes' of company. Now the transition campers want to return under administration. We don't have problem with them but they must not come back with administration.

Q. When police started camping in school?

A. On 29 November 2007 when we were protesting day and night at Balitut the POSCO goons came and burnt our camps. So we withdrew from main entry point. More than a hundred of men and women were injured. After our withdrawal police made camp in every school building except Dhinkia for 4 months.

We gave the slogan 'Save Dhinkia' and on 1st April 2008 activists and members of various mass movements from across the state almost 10,000 – 12,000 came here breaking the police barricade and forcing the police out. Then we recaptured many villages.

Q. How Tapan Mandal was killed?

A. We were doing digging activity near the mouth of sea. 59 goons were hiding in Govindpur School and they started bombing. Tapan Mandal died then only while 2 became severely injured.

Q. How the firing happened?

A. In January Govt announced that South Korean president will visit POSCO project villages ; so we did meeting and sat on dharna on 26th January day and night at Balitut and his programme was cancelled.

30 platoons entered in May and fired rubber bullets with lathi charge and used water canon injuring over hundreds and then arrested 5. Section 144 was called and all meetings were banned and police took control of the village.

A B Bardhan then asked state govt to lift section 144 else he will break it, so the Govt lifted 144.

Q. You never spoke to POSCO?

A. We never spoke to POSCO, they came but we detained them. It's decided we will not talk to them. I met CM in June 2010 ; he agreed to conduct a survey to calculate the loss and damage but not under police supervision. I invited him to the village and he promised he will come. Survey guys came but CM did not.

Q. What is the status of project now?

A. Meena Gupta committee recommended that this is violation of forest right but after clearance by the ministry the land acquisition is done under supervision of police. Govt and ministers are talking about peaceful land acquisition—then why police is there. Police is basically trying to crush the opposition and creating fear psychosis among villagers.

1600-1700 acres have been acquired so far in Polang and Nuagaon. I can't go there as I will be arrested. Forceable land acquisition is underway; if there is no police, no acquisition can take place. Main land is in Dhinkia—the valuable one. Plant is impossible without Dhinkia. We have to think how to get back the acquired land too.

Q. And what do you think why POSCO want this very land?

A. They say it is a port based plant. They want captive port and also sand dunes will help them. All infrastructures are ready for them. In the name of diversion Govt is giving the forest land for free to them. And also they are getting the iron ore with a royalty of just Rs 27 per ton.

Q. Why you are opposing POSCO?

A. All agriculture is on Govt land—forest land is people's livelihood. It's a profitable and self-reliant economy and it should not be destroyed for industrialisation. Cultivable land should never be destroyed. Water is not available for irrigation—how shall it be given for industry.

Q. What about the mining license?

A. Without mines there will be no factory. If mining license is cancelled the industry is not possible.

Q. How do you see the future of POSCO?

A. POSCO is not possible. Dhinkia movement will never break... it's united... they will have to shift. In Dhinkia it's not possible. Only force can destroy this resistance.

Q. Your message for other movements.

A. Agricultural economy should be preserved and developed. Industrial growth should be for all. All India united movement of farmers is needed. Farmers' movement and project-affected people's agitation across the country need to be centralised. ॥॥॥

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