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Headline : Iron in the soul

Intro:

This fortnight 12 tribals were killed in a police firing in Orissa. Their crime: protesting against the acquisition of their land for an industrial park. The state says that it had 'acquired' some 4856 ha of land some years ago and paid handsome 'compensation' to people who held land rights. It is another matter that it sold the same land to Tata Steel company, against whose *bhoomi puja*, the local tribals protested, for six times the price it paid to poor landowners. But for the state government this protest is about the anti-development lobby in the state — ideologues at best and agents of foreign governments or its competitors in industry. Or it is simply about more violence from Naxalite tribals, who want to terrorise the state, without reason.

But when its first (extremely hamhanded and brutal) efforts to quell dissent failed, Orissa government has responded with offers of enhanced compensation to the dead — from Rs 1 lakh to Rs 5 lakh; jobs for one member of the bereaved family; and transfer of the district magistrate and superintendent of police. It is another matter again, that the officials have been transferred (not suspended) to higher postings. But with this done, and talks of a new committee to work out future rehabilitation packages, the government hopes to ride the tide once again.

The state is working feverishly on the fact that it sits on huge reserves of minerals — 25 per cent of the country's iron-ore; 60 per cent of its bauxite and 90 per cent of chromite reserves to name just a few. In 1994, the country amended its mining legislation to allow private and foreign investment to explore and exploit 13 minerals, including iron ore and in 1997 added bauxite to the list. Since then, things have not been the same. Investors — Indian and foreign — are beating down the doors of the poor state's poor government to be allowed land for industry and for mining raw material. The state sees itself on a roll.

This is not to say that it has not seen earlier skirmishes. In Kashipur, the bauxite mining project of Utkal Alumina International — a joint venture of the Canada-based ALCAN with the Aditya Birla group of India, ran into a decade-long struggle. Tribals furious at their lands being taken away for mining agitated; the state responded with police firing in which tribals died, once before and once again. The million tonne a year refinery and its mines in biodiversity rich forests of the Sterlite group faces protests. As was the Jindal group's steel plant and its acquisition of land for its mining. The list goes on. And will.

The problem is that there has been virtually no learning from any of these protests. The truth is that the state is sitting on a real tinderbox. Nearing half the state's area is classified as schedule V area —inhabited by tribals. This same land is also forest and enormously rich in biodiversity. The tribals who live on this land, practise subsistence agriculture, are poor and do not in many cases have recorded rights over the land they work. This is part of the history we have inherited. Lands occupied by tribals, worked by them for shifting agriculture was taken over by the state and designated as forests. It is for reason that these lands are even more contested. When the state looks at compensation, it can only understand the private landholdings, which is a minuscule part

of the land-use system of the region. These forested lands, inhabited by poor people, are also the watersheds of central India. These lands, only then incidentally happen to be mining reserves of the country.

Conflict is then inherent in the situation as there are competing needs and competing values for the same land. But the government remains mute and dismissive. In its mental poverty, it argues that anything it does to recognise the concern, will stymie its plans to develop feverishly. Its investment will move to other countries, even to other states of India – Jharkhand, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh.

In this situation, the government becomes not the protector of public interest it becomes the indecent middleman of industry. It will ensure cheap land, which it will acquire at throwaway prices and using less than fair means. It will make preferential allocation, without payment, for its raw materials – minerals, forests and water. Orissa has reserved 18 rivers and reservoirs for exclusive use by industry.

But the fact also is that there is a real problem. People live on these lands. The industry, which uses these lands, will not bring local benefits. The industry extracts local resources; displaces local people; overuses their water and destroys the country's forests and because it is modern and mechanised, it does not even provide local employment. There are no local benefits, only losses.

But answers will need going beyond the impasse — between the opponents of mining and the proponents of mining at all costs. We must understand that while we have liberalised the mining regime we have not reformed mining policy. For instance, we have no policy about how much we should mine; where and whether we should allow exports of our primary products. We have no policy about how the cost of raw material should be ascertained in the market place. Currently, the royalty paid by mining companies is a pittance. In cement, we know that the cost of limestone — its basic raw material is only 4 per cent of its turnover. In steel or alumina the situation is the same. Then, there is a question about how this royalty, cess or price, should be shared. The fact is that poor people live on the richest lands of the country. If it is their land, it is also their resource, which they will share with the nation, under certain conditions. Policy for mining is then not about minerals, but about people, lands, forests and water.

Let us be clear, the tribals of Kalinganagar are not against development. They are only against development on the cheap, at their cost.

— Sunita Narain

Editor's Quote :

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