

Fighting neoliberalism in Bengal

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[Lohandiguda, Bastar: The threat of a desi East India Company?](#)

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By Krishnamurthy Ramasubbu. *Oct 25, 2009*

Jagdulpur, Bastar district headquarters town in Chhattisgarh, looks like a ghost town. Large areas around the collector's office have been cordoned off. Around 50 tribals sit in a hall waiting for a public hearing of the environmental impact assessment report of Tata Steel's proposed Rs 10,000-crore greenfield steel project in the district's Lohandiguda block.

It's noon by the time officials of the district administration and Tata Steel arrive. Sashi Bhushan Prasad, head of Tata's environmental division, is presenting the report. His start is dramatic: "One hundred and twenty-five years ago, Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata had a dream for a village in Jharkhand, and that is Jamshedpur. It was many times worse than our Bastar."

This is followed by, "Carbon steel...electrostatic precipitators...sodium and nitrogen oxides...automatic combustion control systems. Our technology will be better than the best in the world or at least equivalent. I will skip the technical things because you won't appreciate them."

The audience pays no attention. For a project that will take up around 5,000 acres of tribal land comprising 11 villages, use a large quantity of water from the river Sabari and will pollute the Indravati, the audience is surprisingly disinterested. After the presentation, the collector asks if there is any objection. Total silence. No one has any objection, but Tata's project has not progressed beyond paper work and presentations since it signed an MoU with the state government in 2005.

Guarded tour

3 pm - 4 pm — The hearing is over. The audience walks out towards a waiting posse of security personnel. Asked about the hearing, some pretend not to hear. One of them says, "We are from around Bastar...we have come on a tour." They are loaded into a convoy of jeeps arranged by the government. That was the public hearing.

Reportedly, the collector told the press later, "The public hearing was successful. The people of Bastar should be congratulated."

Two days earlier, on October 10, people from about a dozen villages near Raigarh expressed their opinion on another proposed plant, of Visa Steel and Power, by burning public property worth Rs 20 lakh at a public hearing.

At Lohandiguda village, where Tata Steel is setting up shop, village panchayat chairman Budram Kashyap is asked why he did not attend the public hearing. "We were not allowed," he says. "There was a blockade outside Lohandiguda." People at Kumli village nearby say Tata men blocked the roads.

In these villages, Tata Steel is not a happy name, although they claim to have paid compensation for 70-75 per cent of the land in Lohandiguda and the 10 surrounding villages.

"Some people here were willing but others were not. In the other 10 villages, they don't want to give land at all," says Kashyap. "Even people who took compensation money were pressured. There is pressure from the government that is difficult to resist."

Fear of imprisonment

The people of the other 10 villages, Badanji, Bade Paroda, Belar, Beliapal, Chindgaon, Dabpal, Dhuragaon, Kumli, Sirisaguda and Takraguda, feel likewise.

It is harvest season and a group of farmers are loading a trailer with the new paddy at Kumli. Farmer Pandey Nath says his land is not being acquired but he still opposes Tata. "Tomorrow they will have a factory near my land, pollute it and edge me out. No one wants to sell but they have all taken money now. No one was taking initially, so they sent three or four people to jail to set an example. They did impersonation, faked papers and everything they could to show that compensation had been paid," he says to the collective nods of 10 other farmers whose lands are being acquired.

Tata and the state government have promised jobs, better infrastructure, education and healthcare, but people seem unmoved. "I have been to Jamshedpur," says Kashyap. "The children of Tata employees are educated. When Tata opens here, will they give us jobs or them? If Tata were serious, they could have trained the unemployed youth of Lohandiguda."

Tribal lands are shared and each parcel has 10 to 50 people dependent on it, according to the tribals. A single job for each piece of land will not help. Sources say Tata Steel has spent more than Rs 150 crore over the last four years to "create goodwill". But in villages like Kumli, the charm offensive has plainly not worked.

Pankaj Nath is clear about the general mood. "We will take up weapons," he says bleakly. "The men will fight with their hoes and the women with their sickles."

Kamal Gajviye, a CPI member and farmer at Kumli, is losing his land to the project. "The collector has often accused me of being a Naxalite. I am not. But I will become one, if this continues. They will all become Naxalites."

The government says there is no resistance to land acquisition, or blames it on Maoists. A high-ranking police official says people "right now" are unsafe because of the Maoists and subject to their pressure. "Once people are secure, they can decide freely. Then if they do not want the project, it should be fine."

Ask Kashyap about this pressure from Maoists, who allegedly eliminated Vimal Meshram for acting as Tata Steel's broker in Lohandiguda, and his reply is, "This man was killed for doing brokerage work for Tata. But there is no Maoist pressure. We never see them. How can they intimidate or pressure us?"

Lohandiguda does not have CRPF deployment, but later this year, along with other places in north Bastar, it could see paramilitary units, as part of Operation Green Hunt, a central government offensive against Maoists. Once they arrive, it might be difficult to express such dissent freely.

Three hours away by bus, in the south Bastar villages of Dhurli and Bhansi in Dantewada district where Essar is planning a Rs 7,000-crore greenfield steel plant, the CRPF's constant presence makes a difference. At Bhansi, a group of men from the paramilitary security force are having breakfast when the village panchayat chairman comes. He refuses to talk about Essar, "I won't talk about Essar. Two of my friends were murdered over it."

'Kill us first'

At Dhurli, the panchayat chairman has run away, "Oh..." says one of the men at a tea stall. "He stays in Dantewada fearing the Naxals. He probably took money from Essar." Samruram Markam, the village kotwari, says it is "a little peaceful now", but last year it was bad. "The collector is with them (Essar), so they come in with the force and threaten us. Essar came in 2005 and along with them came the CRPF camp."

The restive mood of Lohandiguda is missing in these villages. "In case our land is taken by force," says Markam, "we have decided to assemble all the men, women, cattle, goat, chicken and dogs, and ask them to kill us before taking the land. We will die anyway without our land." There's a note of despair in his voice.

In Raipur, N Baijendra Kumar, principal secretary to the chief minister, says mining projects have not taken off in Bastar because, "44 per cent of Bastar is forest and most of our mineral resources are beneath that. Environmental issues come with the application of the Forest Act. Also, with tribals we have seen emotional problems when it comes to land."

He denies any direct relation between Green Hunt and mining or related activities, "There is no direct link. Some activists are trying to show a correlation. The operation will improve everything, health, education, infrastructure. Obviously it will also improve mining."

At Dhurli, an old woman drops her washing to chat, "Is it true that many soldiers are going to come next month? They say they will cut us up and throw away our bodies, after Diwali.... Is it true?" It's hard to answer that.

The threat of a desi East India Company

The Chhattisgarh government has been insisting on setting up steel plants in the state to ensure value addition. Chief minister Raman Singh had said that companies should not behave like the East India Company and cart away only mineral raw materials from the state. As part of this plan Tata's plant is planned in North Bastar, while Essar's plant is planned in South Bastar.

Company: Tata Steel

Location: Lohandiguda block, Bastar district

Displacement: 11 villages

Land: 5,050 acres approximately

Product: Steel from iron ore

Capacity: 5.5 million tonnes per annum

Estimated cost: Rs 10,000 crore

Company: Essar Steel

Location: Dhurli and Bhansi villages, Dantewada district

Displacement: 2 villages

Land: 1500 acres approximately

Product: Steel from iron ore

Capacity: 3.2 million tonnes per annum

Estimated cost: Rs 7,000 crore

This report was first published in [Expressbuzz](#)

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