

## POSCO Versus PAAN

Kujang(Jagatsinghpur)

“We reject a job in the Posco’s mega steel plant or in the state government. We are self-sufficient and earn more than a government servant in Bhubaneswar. Our monthly income is not less than any officer,” said Magi Tarai, an illiterate woman at Govindpur village under Kujang block, the proposed site for the South Korean steel major. The Posco may be bringing the biggest foreign direct investment (FDI) to India. But the people here have scant respect for the amount.

Tarai’s statement is echoed across the villages in densely populated Dhenkia, Nuagaon and Govindpur. “What is FDI and what is mega, and steel giant?” asked 70-year-old Panchu Behera of the village who claimed to be getting Rs 70 as daily wage by working in betel vines in the locality. “Which industry in the world would facilitate an old and frail man like me to earn till death,” asked Hrushikesh Das (65) adding that it is only betel cultivation that provides employment across the year.

The people here are apparently seething with fury over the name of the Posco after the Orissa government entered into an agreement with the South Korean company to set up a 12 mtpa capacity mega steel plant at the investment of Rs 51,000 crore. According to sources, the government has to provide 4021 acre of land for the project of which the government land is 3566 acre. Interestingly, more than 10,000 betel vines are being grown on the government land in the locality. The betel cultivation in the locality is estimated to be fetching Rs 50 crore per annum, according to Basant Rout, a betel vine merchant.

The government, on the other hand points out that very few people would be displaced if the project is set up in the proposed area. But the villagers claim otherwise. “It is direct attack on our livelihood, if the betel vines are sacrificed for the project,” claimed Manorama Khatua and Majulata Samatray of Dhenkia village. The entire betel growing is done on the government land since generations, pointed out Renubala Lenka, adding that the real owner of the land is the people who change the government in every five years. Therefore, the government has no authority to sale the land to a foreign company by pushing thousands into the ambit of hunger.

The villagers are in no mood to sacrifice an inch of land for the project. "We are not opposing the industry. Let the government do not think of destroying a well developed agrarian economy of Kujang," argues Sisir Mohapatra of Dhenikia village who is also the secretary of the Posco Pratirodh Sangram Samiti (PPSS). The Samiti has meanwhile, launched a massive agitation opposing Posco's entry into the locality.

A unique movement is gradually gaining ground here ever since the government issued notice to acquire homestead and agricultural land for the Posco's proposed plant. After Baliapal, Chilika and Gopalpur, the Kujang movement is also witnessing voluntary participation of old, infirm, women and children. There seems to be no requirement of a leader to lead the movement. A small child with open chest and an octogenarian old woman with stick do not need some body's call to join the agitation. "I would be first person to sacrifice my life, if the government takes an inch of land for the Posco," announced 86-year-old Jhaji Samal of Govindpur village.

According to Nuagaon sarpanch Swarnalata Rout, the betel vine is a boon for the people here. "No one in this area is unemployed and dies of starvation. It provides employment for the people from the age of eight to eighty. Even a school child can earn Rs 40 a day by extending a helping hand to farmers in betel vines in three hours. Women too can earn a handsome amount by just arranging the betel leaves before they are sent to the market," she pointed out. Swarnalata belongs to the ruling Biju Janata Dal (BJD). But she has no regret to oppose her government's decision to hit the food bowl of the people. Her husband Anadi Charan Rout also heads the Posco Virodhi Mancha.

"We have faced super-cyclone in the year 1999. But it could not kill more than 15 people of Nuagaon village because of the nearby forest. Now Posco is eyeing on our forest. Posco seems to be more dangerous than the super-cyclone," pointed out Dhaneswar Mohapatra. Nearly 845 acre of forest land will be handed over to the Posco for the project. The villagers have been guarding the forest and rejuvenating it that was damaged in the super-cyclone. "We do not feel the heat during the summer due to the forest cover," said Raghunath Mantri, president of the Dadhibana Vana Surakshya Samiti.

PPSS president Abhaya Sahoo is also worried over the environment issue. He says that allowing Jatadhar mouth for the Posco's proposed port would dig death knell for the entire district. The whole area would be submerged in flood water destroying paddy cultivation. "The Samiti has proposed two alternative sites for the project- one near the Budha Gahira and another near Ambiki village where no human habitation would be affected," Sahoo says adding that both the places are close to the Paradip Port.

But the government is adamant on its decision. According to an official spokesman, it would take another four years, if the site is changed at this point of time. "The government has formulated a policy to suitably compensate the betel vine owners," he said.

Now that there is no sign of change of mood in the government, the people are worried. While the women of the area have raised battalions to face the government machineries, the men have started mobilizing support from different quarters. "If one of our 100 member women group is suppressed by the police, another group would jump to the fighting arena," said Renubala Lenka. The women self-help groups have also thrown their strength behind the women's movement against the Posco. (EOM)

By Braja Kishore Mishra

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