

BALIAPAL-BHOGARAI STRUGGLE - A SHORT NOTE

Baliapal and Bhogarai are two blocks in Orissa's Balasore District, which has seen the growth of a peaceful non-violent struggle against the location of the National Test Range (NTR), India's first missile test base, in this area. This project intends to acquire, in a revised scheme, fifty five villages, covering an area of a hundred and two square kilometers and affecting, according to the government, more than six and a half thousands families. However according to the Uttara Balasore Khepanashtra Ghati Pratirodh Samiti, (KGPS), which is spearheading the struggle, nearly one lakh people will be displaced, if fisherpeople and migrant labourers now settled, are also accounted for.

In a state where agricultural productivity of its main crop, rice, is decreasing and where industrial production and employment is very low. Baliapal is an oasis of innovative indigenous development. It cultivates five cash crop, rice, groundnut, cashewnut, coconut, and betel leaf (Paan). The last three are being cultivated on homeland, giving an opportunity to agricultural labourers, artisans and fisherpeople, to initiate cultivation and earn additional income. Profits from these activities are high as Baliapal holds the monopoly in the production banarsi patta. In addition, fishing has also become commercialised. From paan alone, the area earns an estimated income ranging from 29 to 56 crores (1987-88 prices).

This agitation, launched four years ago, is one of the most interesting mass mobilisations that have emerged in the political landscape of contemporary India. Not only has it been able to mobilise every individual, irrespective of class, caste, gender, age and political affiliations, but it has also been able to use innovatively the strategy of non-violent satyagraha to question the state's intention and demand that they be directly consulted and their opinions sought before a decision of such magnitude is taken. Barricades have been erected on all approach roads into the area. The entrance of government have been stopped by forming human blocks, consisting mainly of women and children. As a result, from March 1986 onwards, no government official other than the ones associated with the departments of education and health, have been allowed entry. Law and order is being managed by the KGPS. Crime has thus registered a dramatic decrease.

The Baliapal-Bhogarai struggle seems to raise some fundamental questions. First, it highlights the problem of democratic functioning of our political institutions. Should not the displaced people be consulted directly and their wishes taken into account before a decision of such magnitude is taken, which affects and dislocates the society and culture of more than a lakh of people? Secondly, what is the criteria for selecting a site for a large scale project, like the NTR? Should these be restricted merely to the technical dimensions or should they also include the social and economic dimensions? Should such a naturally rich area which not only provides more than adequate livelihood for its people but also generates incomes for the state of Orissa, steeped as it is in poverty, be taken over for such a project.

These three questions need detailed discussion as the country has not come to an adequate consensus on these issues. They concern larger problems relating to priorities and choices of development. But we have to consider these questions and, in this context, listen to the voice of Baliapal-Bhogarai.

To initiate this debate at the national level we had a national convention on August 19, 1989. The speakers were Mr Claude Alvares, Dr Hargopal, Mr S Kundu, Dr Sujata Patel, Mr Rajeev Vohra, Mr Anil Aggrawal and Dr Manoranjan Mohanty. The convention was chaired by Dr Aswini K Ray. After this, we decided to initiate a signature drive restricting ourselves to a limited demand, asking the government to reconsider the location of the project. We hoped that this initiative will help to build up a larger campaign on wide ranging issues raised by this agitation which we have outlined earlier. We have submitted to the President this appeal with around three thousand and five hundred signatures, of which hundred and fifty signatures of distinguished individuals from different walks of life are enclosed here with.