

Press Meet by

Prafulla Samantara (National Converg, Lok Shakti Abhiyan)

Prashanta Paik Ray (Spokesperson, Anti-POSCO & Anti-Jindal Movement)

Rabi Das, Senior Journalist

Statement on Press Meet

Bhubaneswar (5.4.2023) Recently the High Court of Odisha has stayed the process of land alienation for steel major Jindal Steel Works (JSW) in our Jagatsinghpur area. On March 20, 2023, The National Green Tribunal also suspended the ECs obtained by JUSL due to lack of proper evaluation of sourcing water from river Mahanadi and public hearing before the social impact assessment study. We thought NGT will cancel the licence all together but it didn't happen. Our villagers have been telling that the process of diversion of forest land has been initiated by the administration without taking any steps for recognition of rights of forest dwellers of the area in violation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. The government has been illegally occupying agricultural forest land, setting the forest on fire, and demolishing the betel vines of the petitioners. As per the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, no member of a forest dwelling Scheduled Tribe or other traditional forest dwellers shall be evicted or removed from forest land under its occupation till the recognition and verification procedure is complete.

These two judgements supported our long drawn claim that the government of Odisha and the government of India both are facilitating the land acquisition and environmental clearance process illegally . Henceforth we very strongly resume our demand that both the government of Odisha and India must beg unconditional apology to our villagers and withdraw the police force from our area immediately.

On March 24, 2023 , The Orissa high court has stayed the process of land alienation for steel major Jindal Steel Works (JSW) Ltd's ₹65,000 crore greenfield steel project in Jagatsinghpur district of Odisha till the provisions under the Schedule Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 are complied with. The high court directed the state government to move the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) for compliance with regard to the rights of other traditional forest dwellers living in the area, where the steel project is proposed to be set up. It was acting on a petition filed by the 24 petitioners belong to villages of Dhinkia, Mahala and Gobindpur of Dhinkia Gram Panchayat in Erasama block. They challenged the destruction of their betel vines asserting that it violated of the provisions of the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. This claim is substantiated by the Survey of India map from 1928-1929, which depicts these villages as being situated adjacent to a

“dense miscellaneous jungle” with cultivated plots and betel vine sheds scattered throughout the forested area. The Final Report on Settlement of Kujang Forest Block 1959-66 also talked about the nature of this disputed stretch of land as being a forest region. The Committee headed by Meena Gupta constituted in 2010 by the MoEF&CC has referred to in its report the village settlement maps of 1927-1928 for Dhinkia, Govindpur and Nuagaon villages. These depict gramya jungle and jhaun jungle, as well as tree symbols in and around these villages.

On March 20, 2023, The National Green Tribunal suspended the ECs obtained by JUSL due to lack of proper evaluation of sourcing water from river Mahanadi and public hearing before the social impact assessment study. NGT also ordered that the matter will need fresh appraisal by the Environment Appraisal Committee as well as a fresh decision by MoEF&CC within three months. Till such a decision, the ECs will remain suspended.

However, the saga of repression is continuing in our villages. As we have shared that The Police have turned 11 village of three Gram Panchayats (Dhinkia, Nuagan, Gadakujanga) in to an open house jail in the last 12 months . Amidst rampant arrests and targeting of activists, residents are now fleeing the village and living in fear. Villagers are now fleeing the village in a bid to escape arrests, the crackdown is brutal. On 21st March , 2023 , the police has arrested Mr. Gitanjali Bhoi Age – and Village- Dhinkia-Charges -GR case no. Mr. Debendra Swain, the leader of our movement is languishing in the jail. The police are threatening and beating up those who go out even for their daily work. Even today the police along with the administration are illegally cutting trees, forcibly destroying the betel vine plots, and demolishing the houses and asking people to sign on plain paper.

A total of 451 cases have been filed against human rights defenders working to resist forcible displacement for the POSCO and JSW project . Till now 7 people are in the jail . In addition, warrants have been issued against 2,500 people, including 500 women. . They remain at permanent risk of getting arrested anytime. Thus they live without liberty.

The situation in Dhinkia Gobindpur Nuagan and Gadakujanga Nolia sahi Forest area is also getting worse day by day. The Jindal company staff (Sajjan Jindal's JSW), local Police administration have been cutting trees in the proposed Jindal steel plant Cement Plant Power Plant captive Port project area and also outside the project area. With the depletion of the jungle the wild animals like deer, jackal, rabbit, bear, rhinos etc came out in open. Now the Jindal staff and local Police administration with help of police have set the jungle in fire. This will not only destroy the remaining jungle (Forest) but also kill the wild animals. This will also have severe repercussions on the climate and also the wildlife. One one hand while the government claims to take steps to protect climate, such steps are highly condemnable.

Hence, we demand for the following

1. The government should stop all types of repression on our people and withdraw all false and fabricated cases against our people.
2. The government must also immediately stop the construction of a boundary wall around the land and allow our communities to access common lands that we have traditionally depended on for our livelihoods.
- 3 Urgently process individual and community forest rights claims on land it had taken over for a POSCO project instead of transferring the land to a land bank.
4. The government of Odisha must follow the Supreme Court's ruling on the Singur issue in which the land of farmers bought for the Tata Nano plant was returned to them,
5. The government needs to replant the trees in our sensitive coastal areas where more than two lakh trees were indiscriminately cut down by the Government for POSCO.
6. Proper and adequate Compensation should be paid by the government to the widows and children and the injured family members attacked by POSCO goons in the year 2008 and 2013.