How Many More Arrests Will Orissa See?

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Much before Operation Greenhunt, people’s movements have been facing repression on a sustained basis in Orissa. This state has seen struggles of different ideologies and political persuasions coming up as people’s lives, livelihood and natural resources are at stake. While the question of land for the adivasis remains unaddressed by the government, protesters are often met with bullets. Against this backdrop, this article analyses how and why the popular movement in Narayanpatna, a predominantly tribal populated block in Koraput district, became so threatening to the state and local elite.

On the evening of 27 January 2010, Gananath Patra, aged 70, was picked up by plain clothes police from the road in Bhubaneswar. He was on his way home from a meeting with members of a proposed fact-finding team to Narayanpatna. Within barely five minutes of this incident, the electronic media announced it as a significant feat of the Orissa police, whereby criminalising the leading member of a mass movement of hundreds of thousands of adivasi agricultural labourers, some emerging from the oppressive bonded labour system (gori) in feudal Orissa after generations. He has been charged with sections pertaining to kidnapping, assault, attempt to murder and murder.

Other leaders of people’s movements have been arrested in the past too, such as Narayan Reddy of Gana Sangram Samiti spearheading the agitation against the joint venture of a steel plant by Tata Iron and Steel Company (risco) and Nippon Steel, Japan in 1996 and Abhay Sahoo, leader of the popular movement Pohang Steel Company (posco) Pratirodh Sangram Samiti on 12 October 2008. The assertion of people’s rights in a democratic state is being increasingly criminalised and the right to dissent coming under severe attack.

Gananath Patra is close to the Chasi Mulia Adivasi Sangha (cmas) that has fought for adivasi land rights in poverty-ridden south Orissa for over two decades. cmas became a grave threat to the local sahukars (traditional moneylenders and landlords), the liquor traders, the forest mafia and ultimately, the district administration, as it fought to eradicate the slave-like conditions of agricultural labourers, the widespread production and sale of country liquor, and for the redistribution of land among agricultural labourers.

Protest against Combing Operations

Far more shocking and tragic, however, has been the Narayanpatna police firing of 20 November 2009 in which two adivasis were killed, several injured and many in the area tortured and arrested. The people were protesting against the harassment and violence they were subject to during combing operations in their villages. According to a cmas spokesperson, in spite of their repeated requests to allow the leaders to go inside to meet the inspector-in-charge (nicc) on that day, the police station gate was not opened. A hot exchange of words took place between the police officials and the people standing on the other side. Impatient at the behaviour of the nicc, who had assured them earlier that they would not be harmed by the “combing operations”, people broke open the gate. The nicc ordered the firing at this time. Kendruka Singana, a leader of the cmas and Andru Nachika were shot in their backs and fell dead.

The electronic media, in its evening bulletin, reported that cmas members were trying “to loot weapons” from the police station and two people have been killed as police fired upon them in “self defence”. The same story was carried by all large-circulation Oriya dailies like The Sambad, The Dharitri and The Samaja the next day. Such reports overlook the horrors of combing operation carried out by the Central Reserve Police Force (crpf) in the area and that on that fateful day the adivasis had, in fact, come to the police station to complain about the harassment and violence inflicted on them by combing squads.

Police brutality towards the adivasis was witnessed by a member of the People’s Union for Civil Liberties (pucl) during a visit to the area on 23 November 2010. While waiting in the vehicle for the mandatory police permission required now to move anywhere in Narayanpatna, one saw three adivasi youth, one of them around 14-15 years old, being mercilessly beaten up by the police/crpf personnel inside the police station itself, surrounded and watched by a large number of police and paramilitary forces. The lynching of adivasis and the uninhibited expression of hatred towards them is nothing but a severe class assault on the poorest of this country by its own government and police. It has been alleged that during the combing operations, women have been molested and even children not spared. The destruction and scorching of houses got reported in the
The division in the CMAS

Most unfortunate has been the situation of some dalit families that suffered at the hands of CMAS. Their houses were damaged and they left the village and took shelter at the tahsil office. However, CMAS leadership claims that they have left the village being misled by the local sundhis (liquor producers and traders) and sahukars. The peace committees, formed in this context and largely populated by these sundhis and sahukars, organised a series of protest meetings against the struggle of CMAS during August-September 2009. This only further vitiated the situation.

The split in the CMAS around this time had a bearing on the situation; Naryanpatna, in particular, became the target of intense police repression. Among many other issues, the two sides of CMAS today are in two different blocks; Narayanpatna and Bandhugaon. The CMAS in Bandhugaon led by the CPI(ML) has emphasised the assault and hostility against poor adivasis and poor non-adivasis and appealed that the land seized from the dalit families be returned and the destroyed houses reconstructed. The CMAS in Naryanpatna, instead, views the Bandhugaon section as being close to the sahukars and liquor traders. What gets explained as “excesses” by either side overlooks the simple cardinal point that the rights and protection of dalits and women should be non-negotiable in any struggle.

Both the electronic and print media have started dubbing the CMAS active in Naryanpatna area as a Maoist outfit. The actual increasing presence of Maoists also provided the rationale for deployment of security forces and combing operations. People protesting against the excesses of combing operations were met with bullets, while the question of land for the adivasis remains unaddressed by the government.

Narayanpatna Struggle

Narayanpatna is a predominantly tribal block in Koraput district in south Orissa. As per the 2001 Census, of the total population of 88,117, adivasis constitute 79.4% and dalits 8%. Literacy rate in the block is only 20% and female literacy rate is further low at 13%. The adivasis primarily depend on subsistence agriculture in hilly areas and the collection of forest produce. The dalits too primarily depend on agriculture for their living and resort to petty trading. A large number of adivasis work as agricultural labourers in the fields of non-tribal landowners.

As forests and hills cover the major part of the land mass, cultivable agricultural land is scarce. According to one unpublished report, revenue land constitutes 20% of the total area of Koraput district. Out of that nearly 70% is in the hands of non-tribals and rest 30% with the tribals, that too of low quality. Historically, as is seen in other tribal-dominated areas, the best cultivable land has gone into the hands of people locally called sundhis, sahukars, etc.

Endless Spate of Violence

Adivasi resistance has gone up with corporates and the state setting their eyes on the forest and mineral resources that also happen to be the habitat of the adivasis. This resistance has invited the wrath of those who are implementing many policy level changes in the neoliberalisation era as it had done in the colonial times.

Without even necessarily looking at Bualiapal, the anti-Balco struggle in Ganghamardan region, the Chilika Bachao Andolan and the struggles against the steel plant at Goplapur of the 1980s and 1990s, we can see the endless spate of violence by the state and its intensity in curbing popular protest in Orissa since the
year 2000 when the globalisation mantra gained ascendance. The police shot dead three adivasis of the Prakritik Sampad Suraksha Parishad in Mailkunch, Kashipur on 16 December 2000. Another round of state repression started in December 2004 when over 300 people demonstrated against the set-up of a police outpost. This continued for more than one year with the deployment of India Reserve Battalions, CRPF and Orissa State Armed Police forces. The entire area turned into a police camp with regular flag marches in the villages and picking up people from streets and haats. Fourteen activists of Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti were arrested in April 2004 for opposing Vedanta Alumina Project at Lanjigarh, Kalahandi. On 11 May 2005, when the villagers of Dunguripalli protested the foundation ceremony for the Lower Sukhtel Dam project, Bolangir, police dragged the people out of their homes and beat them mercilessly. On 9 May 2005, 25 adivasi women were arrested protesting against the steel plant of Maharashtra Seamless at Kalinganagar. As a result, two infants died without nursing. On 2 January 2006, police killed 14 adivasi protestors of Visthanpan Virodhi Jana Manch at Kalinganagar when they opposed the construction of a campus wall by Tata Steel. Abhay Sahoo, the leader of POSCO Pratirodh Sangram Samiti was arrested on 12 October 2008 and subsequently 30 more for resisting POSCO's steel project at Jagatsinghpur.

Any questioning of this paradigm of “development” invites the brutal iron hand of elected governments today. However, people’s movements have also exhausted myriad democratic means to draw attention to basic needs or in saying no to forms of development that will impoverish them further. These movements have from the very beginning flooded the local administration and higher echelons of the state and central government with letters, demands, memorandums and pleas since years and continue to do so. The judiciary has been approached in many cases too as in the case of the people of the Niyamgiri Hills. But when brute force is used to meet dissent and paramilitaries used to acquire people’s land and natural resources, people are not ready to give up without a fight. The collective will of the toiling class to end years of oppression is therefore gaining momentum in Orissa.

Much before Operation Greenhunt, people’s movements have been facing repression on a sustained basis as shown above. Today, the war against Naxals is but a plea to suppress all people’s movements per se. The hysteria whipped up by the euphoric media over the entry of big corporations and the deafening silence of the privileged educated sections is helping the state intensify the repression in ways most undemocratic for the majority people in Orissa. What are the people and their leaders of mass movements guilty of? Of having a vision of an Orissa for its people? Of saying no to injustice and exploitation? Of fighting for their own lives and livelihood in a state that shuts itself to democratic dialogue with its own people in this era of aggressive capitalism? How many more arrests Orissa will see?