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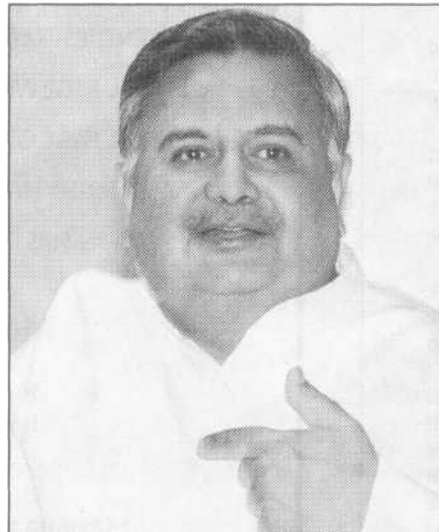
People's war

Bastar district of Chhattisgarh is another Singur in the making for the Tatas

Sanjay Sharma

THE PEOPLE OF Bastar district in Madhya Pradesh have warned the state government to stop the proposal of acquiring land for setting up Industrial units by the Tatas. Chhattisgarh is a tribal state with 42 percent of the people living below the poverty line despite the state having more than 20 percent of the country's iron ore reserves and about 18 percent of its coal deposits.

Around 82% of the total population in Chhattisgarh works as seasonal agriculture laborers with little opportunity of employment throughout the year. "The government is setting up industries to generate jobs, reduce poverty and stop migration," says an official. But the people see it as a ploy to grab their land. The local people not only complain of injustice in compensation but also allege harassment by the authorities.



Chhattisgarh CM Raman Singh

The genesis of the controversy lies in the land that was being acquired for a project of Tata Steel that signed a deal with the

Chhattisgarh government in June 2005 for setting up a five million tonne per annum steel plant in two phases with an investment of Rs 100 billion.

The project sought 2,063.06 hectares of land in the insurgency-hit Bastar district. It includes around 1784.22 hectares of private land and 278.84 hectares of government land.

Strong resentment is brewing among tribals as they fear that they might lose their land. "I won't give up an inch of land," Sumaru Mandawi, whose 50 acres of land in Sirishguda would be submerged to an artificial lake meant to supply water for the proposed plant, said.

Protests against the forcible land acquisition without proper compensation are gaining momentum in several

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districts. Tribals, armed with traditional weapons, recently marched through the roads of Jagdalpur district shouting slogans

against the proposed industrialisation and eviction of tribes from their land.

Over 1,000 farmers blocked the Jagdalpur-Chitrakote road and refused to move till the administration agreed to return their land and released 40 farmers arrested early this month for protesting against the project.

In Bastar district hundreds of farmers formed road blockade near the proposed site and demanded their land back that has already been acquired for the plant.

Tata Steel is trying to woo villagers by promises of jobs, compensation and development. "The project represents progress and has a chance of ending Naxalite violence," Baliram Kashyap, Bharatiya Janata Party MP from Bastar, says.

The district administration has stepped up the land acquisition process from November 5, 2007. Officials say that the district administration has so far acquired 775.22 hectares from the eight villages and paid compensation of Rs. 300 million to the villagers. The villagers led by the Communist Party of India (CPI) have put forward 13 demands, including free education, hospitals and burial grounds. They are also demanding that the project should be a public-private enterprise with 49 per cent government equity.

Around 23% of the land in Bastar district is for agriculture, mostly paddy. The CPI has accused the administration of forcing locals to give up their farmland without offering adequate compensation. "We tried to bring these things in the notice of

Chhattishgarh governor E S L Narasimhan but we were not allowed to meet him," Manish Kunjam, president, Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Mahasabha, said.

"Some 100 farmers, who refused to accept the compensation package of Tata Steel, wanted to lodge their complaint with the governor against the local authorities' pressure tactics to surrender land in favour of the Tatas. The district administration forcibly stopped us from meeting the governor," he said.

"The government is acting undemocratically and is trying to silence the protesting tribals. Anyone refusing to take the rehabilitation package is being threatened," he added.

Another senior CPI leader, Chittaranjan Bakshi, alleged that the police have booked several tribals on false charges, accusing them of being involved in criminal activities.

But the administration refuted all these charges describing them as false. "It is all a cooked-up story. The administration was in no way involved in any excesses against anyone," Ganesh Shankar Mishra, district magistrate, Bastar, said, adding that farmers have been accepting the compensation package and giving up land their own.

Tata Steel has recently had a brawl with residents at some places including Singur in West Bengal where the company is setting up the facility to make a Rs 1,00,000-car.

"If Tata Steel goes any further, it will have to face consequences worse than Singur," said Kamal Gajviye, another CPI leader.

A 3.2-MPTA plant by Essar Steel in Dantewada district with an investment of Rs 70 billion is also proposed.