

Indian Villagers Confront Military, State

Theater of War, Theater of Displacement

Pablo Kala

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In North Orissa, on the coast of India's Bay of Bengal, a three-year conflict between the Central Government and local farmers and fisherfolk continues, virtually ignored by the international media.

In the village areas of Baliapal and Bhograi—a region known as the granary of Orissa because of its great fertility and high-yielding cash crops—approximately 100,000 people face eviction from their homes and lands. The cause of their imminent displacement is the government's National Testing Range, a military base costing an estimated \$840 million (U.S.), designed to test and launch satellites, rockets and missiles.

Thousands Resist 'Rehabilitation'

Determined to resist eviction and prevent the construction of the Testing Range, the villagers have organized a resistance movement adopting non-violent and non-cooperation tactics. The movement is comprised mostly of peasants, agricultural laborers and sharecroppers, with some middle class and wealthy landowners giving support. An "outside front" of trade unions, student groups, writers' forums and political parties in opposition to the Congress Party ruled state government are also providing support to the movement.

In order to pacify local resistance to the project, the government has proposed an elaborate "Rehabilitation and Compensation" scheme, to relocate the villagers in "model villages" and set up industries to provide alternative employment—transforming traditional farmers and fisherfolk into unskilled and semi-skilled factory workers and destroying their culture and communities. Skepticism and resistance to the "Rehabilitation" scheme is deepened by the knowledge that of the 30,000 people made homeless by the Rengali Dam project in 1977, 22,000 have yet to be rehabilitated.

The villagers have set up a "Janata (people's) Curfew," whereby no government official or representative is allowed into the area. To enforce this, checkpoints have been set up barricading the entry roads into the area with bamboo, and trenches have been dug to stop any approaching government vehicles. The checkpoints are staffed around the clock and conch shells are blown and thalis (metal plates) beaten to warn the villagers of approaching vehicles.

When the alarm is sounded, thousands of women, children and men gather at the barricades to form human road blocks. In February 1988, for example, 24 magistrates accompanied by 3,000 armed police attempted to enter the area but were prevented from doing so by a human wall of 20,000 people. A maran sena (suicide squad) comprised of 5,000 people has also been created to prevent, at all costs, government vehicles from entering the area in the event of an emergency.

The area has been effectively sealed off for the past 33 months. The villagers have refused to pay taxes. They hold people's courts to settle internal disputes. The movement has also held strikes, printed posters, held public meetings, conducted demonstrations and painted wall slogans in an effort to popularize the struggle.

In April 1988, demolition squads were set up to destroy the “model villages” under construction by the Orissa state government, since the government had declared that evictions would only begin once the “model villages” were completed.

India Responds with Repression

In response to this resistance the government has set up an unofficial economic blockade of the area, preventing commodities such as kerosene and sugar from being made available. Additionally, as a deterrent, it has imposed fines on bullock carts and vehicles leaving the area with betel leaves, coconuts and cashews bound for market. By late May, 1988, 8,000 armed police had been deployed in the area and police repression against local activists had increased.

In the past two years over 100 activists have been arrested. In an interview, Bhograi activists related their experiences of arrest, torture, and being held in custody without being brought before a magistrate within the 24 hours stipulated by Indian law.

“I have been arrested six times because of my work against the National Testing Range and (have) been beaten up (by the police) on several occasions,” said Jagabandhu Ghose, an organizer in the area.

Shankar, a fisherman, echoed his friend’s experience. “I was arrested without a warrant and held by the police for six days, which is against the law,” he said.

When asked about the future tactic of the resistance, Ghose replied that despite police provocation the nonviolent resistance would continue. However, when asked about a response to increased violence by the state (leading to fatalities), he replied, “If the government becomes violent, who can control the response of the movement and their actions? The Gorkha National Liberation Front is armed and the government has not been able to tell them what to do...”

Proliferation—or People?

The Indian government seems determined to establish the National Testing Range. The Testing Range forms part of a military network that spans the state of Orissa and includes naval and air force bases, radar observation stations, a munitions industry and a MIG fighter assembly plant.

According to V.S. Arunachalam, the scientific advisor to the Defense Ministry, the basic function of the test range is flight trials for the design and development of rockets, pilotless aircraft and ballistic missiles. It will also be used for practice firing of long range missiles with a range of up to 5,000 kilometers, electronic warfare dynamic testing, and the testing of facilities to monitor the path and efficacy of missiles.

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi claims the proposed range will dovetail with the government’s space program. In 1986, he said, “Our polar satellite launch vehicle (PSLV) project will be very much more feasible from this site, as will our surface-to-air and other tactical missile projects.”

Defense analysts have pointed out that the PSLV can be modified and developed into an intermediate range ballistic missile. Since 1974, when a nuclear device was exploded in the Pokhran desert, India has been slowly piling up plutonium reserves by enriching spent uranium fuel from its nuclear reactors.

Refusing to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty or submit to the treaty’s full safeguards, India retains the nuclear bomb option but lacks a delivery system. Apprehensions that India may be developing such a system have been heightened by the knowledge that the Bharat Dynamics section of the Department of Defense is involved in a missile manufacturing project in collaboration with the Soviet Union. The missiles—short range, intermediate range and integrated guided missiles including SS20s and SS30s and, in due course, intercontinental ballistic missiles—would be tested from the National Testing Range.

At the time of this writing (February 1989) the area remains in a state of tense uncertainty, as the final phase of the struggle has yet to be acted out. It is possible that the Orissa state government is waiting for the outcome of

the state elections (the results of which are still unknown though they were held in January) to be decided before making a decision about the use of armed personnel against the movement.

However, one of the movement's spokesmen, Sasadhar Pradhan, says that will not end the struggle. "We are ready to give our lives in front of armored vehicles and tanks," he said. "But, if that kind of incident occurs, its protest will not be limited to India alone. The whole world will condemn the Indian government, saying that these messengers of peace have built the missile range on the corpses of innocent Orissa peasants."

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