

The Simmering Dissent in the Indian Countryside – The Story of Special Economic Zones.

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The Special Economic Zones have become serious zones of conflict in rural India. The ghastly blood-bath at Nandigram was a stark indicator of the discontent raging through the Indian countryside, there the West Bengal State Police fired on the protesting farmers, who didn't want to part with their lands, which the West Bengal Government had proposed for a Special Economic Zone to be promoted by the Salim Group of Industries of Indonesia. Apart from Nandigram, farmers have been protesting all over the country against the forcible acquisition of their land for the proposed SEZs. Some of the prominent zones of conflict vis-à-vis are Jagatsinghpur, Orissa against proposed Posco SEZ, Kakinada in Andhra Pradesh, Jhajar in Haryana against the proposed large SEZ by Reliance Industries, Karla area in Pune district in Maharashtra. Of late, there is news of farmers' protest from various SEZs from Gujarat and Tamilnadu, as well.

Under the rubric of Globalization, when the neo-liberal offensive is devastating the 'Culture and Commons' of the indigenous people of India appropriating the land of the peasants in this process, thousands of acres of land have been taken away from people, forcibly dispossessing millions of Adivasis and Farmers in the name of high GDP growth and attracting foreign direct investments. The whole issue of Special Economic Zones has to be seen in the context of cataclysmic changes taking place in the global scale which had devastating impact on third world societies. Much has been written on the global restructuring by Civil Society Groups and the Political Left. India shared the fate of most of the Third World societies where the national liberation movements inspired hopes for millions of peasants that they can lead a life of dignity free from the colonial yoke. The post-independent journey of India started with a vision of self reliance and egalitarianism with the state whose elected executives would play the role of prime-movers. The Nehru Era saw 'Abolition of Landlordism and Investment in Irrigation'. Land Reforms released the forces of production in the countryside and the coming in of the Green Revolution brought in relative prosperity in rural areas of Punjab, Haryana, Western U.P. and Coastal Andhra, where high input intensive agriculture was adopted. This path of "Nehruian" Model of growth had a flip side which the mainstream Media concealed until social movements like Narmada Bachao, Koel Karo , Kalinganagar, Kashipur, Kalahandi, Tehri, etc. brought the other side of post-independent rural reality and the simmering discontent. This path of heavy industrialization and emphasis on modern infra-structures created massive displacement. According to various sources, by mid-nineties, there were more than 40 million farmers and Aadiwasis who were displaced by various mega projects like dams, mines, factories and industrial township. This is a whooping and revealing figure of the number of people displaced which was more than the population of England. As mentioned earlier, social movements like Narmada and Tehri were indicators of the refusal of rural masses to part with their land and homes in the name of development. As a result of global restructuring. The Indian rulers adopted

the neo-liberal ideology ushered in through the new economic policies of 1991. All the welfare provisions, concept of self-reliance, pro-farmers and labor regimes were gradually dismantled, leaving vulnerable segments of the population like women, dalits, farmers, Aadiwasis, etc. at the mercy of the market. Thus, market became the new god in the era of Globalization. The Indian rulers who had completely turned neo-liberal in the new millennium adopted the Special Economic Zone Policy when the entire country was undergoing acute agrarian crisis, the most horrifying symptom of which was the high number of incidences of farmers committing suicide by mid 2005 more than 1.5lakh (hundred and fifty thousand) farmers had committed suicide , this phenomenon goes on unabated till today. Agriculture is having its lowest growth rate since past five years . The Massive and forceful acquisition of land had accelerated the on going misery and marginalization of the rural population. As result farmers are up in arms. Special Economic Zones were the logical culmination of anti-people, anti-Farmers path pursued by the Indian rulers which has other hazards apart from the massive dispossession of the farmers and rural artisans. Large scale land acquisition for Mega-Industrial projects, infrastructure projects and SEZs is transforming the whole of the rural scenario in the country from bad to worse. To cover up the devastation, the State Governments are half-heartedly bringing rehabilitation and re-settlement policies. The land acquisition by the Government ostensibly in the name of Public Interest, is in fact transferring thousands of acres of fertile land to Multi-national Mega Corporations like Posco, Salim and Indian big business houses likes Tata, Jindal, Ambani and Birla. Through this process of displacement, land and livelihoods are being alienated from the farmers and other sections of the population, as mentioned earlier. Tens of millions of farmers and rural artisans have already been displaced in the name of development.

Displacement has converted farmers, Aadiwasis and rural artisans into destitutes most of whom have been forced to become casual workers in urban centres without any rights. Fear of displacement from their homes, from their lands and livelihoods, from their community and thought of living the rest of their lives as destitutes has suddenly become a reality for vast masses of India. The very people, who according to the Government are supposed to be benefiting from so called Industrialization in the form of R & R benefits, jobs urban facilities, social and hospitals etc. are seen to be opposing these policies the most. The fact is that no State Government to have the intention and capacity for the rehabilitation of the displaced people. The land grabbing through displacement is not only restricted to the rural areas. In the urban areas, the slum dwellers are being forcibly evicted to make way for city, beautification and gentrification, establishment of huge malls, real estate development, widening of roads etc. often without any compensation and alternate dwelling place for slum dwellers. The slum dwellers of most of the large cities are now resorting to protest movements against their growing dispossession and marginalization. The establishment of SEZs is playing havoc with the rural population of India. Primarily India is an agricultural country and more than 70% of Indian people are dependent on agriculture and its ancillary activities. To develop India any sensible policy will have to develop agriculture sector. But for the past 60 years, The Indian ruling elite have never seriously attempted apart from the high tech Green Revolution package, no attempt was made to upgrade agricultural land both availability and quantitatively by disturbing arable waste land to the poor and creating irrigation facilities. Such measures

would have increased agricultural production making farmers prosperous which would have created demand for manufactured goods and stimulated industrialization with employment opportunities, but instead today the Indian agriculture is facing its worst crisis. The development of India is impossible without the development of agriculture as in most villages of India agriculture and allied livelihoods such as fishing, animal husbandry, forestry are the only sustainable livelihoods for the majority of the people. Today the Government is unable to provide any other sustainable livelihood after taking away land and common property resources such as forests, streams, ponds, grazing lands, etc. which are the basis of agriculture and allied occupation. Implementation of pro-agri-business agricultural policies in the name of Green Revolution imposition of GM seeds, contract farming and corporate control of agricultural sector are the basic elements of the neo-liberal agriculture policies which is extremely harmful for most of the farmers and rural artisans. Farmers' suicides are serious indications of this agrarian situation. This grave crisis will also have a serious impact on food security for Indian rural population which is, anyway, under tremendous strain. Therefore, the rural population is up in arms to save their agricultural land, livelihood, common property resources like forests, sources of water etc. We have to seriously campaign and support the struggle for protection and restoration of Indian agriculture. There is a necessity for instilling confidence amongst farmers and rural artisans for alternative development models is possible different groups across India are trying to implement alternate development models on a small scale, different political forces, mass movements and civil society groups working with people have their own version of alternative development models on a small scale, different political forces, mass movements and civil society groups working with people have their own version of alternative development models. The farmers have realized that even in the prevailing situation of agrarian crisis gripping the country there is no other option but to stick to agriculture and allied occupations. Industrial development of India has to be in the interest of the masses and it can only happen on the basis of development of agriculture and the rural economy on the whole. Therefore, the demand should be the development of agriculture and rural economy in the interest of the vast masses of India.

The forcible displacement of the people from their lands and livelihoods for establishment of mega- industries and infra-structural projects and establishments of exclusive economic enclaves by multi-national corporations and Indian big business in the name of SEZs is the anti- poor, pro-national and Inter-national Big Business.

The Government of India has adopted policies which have left the urban and rural poor including the medium farmers and urban lower middle classes in a precarious situation when for even the basic necessities of life people have increasingly become dependent on the market forces, which again are controlled by the National and Inter-national big business houses viz. World Bank, IMF, WTO, etc. The industrialization policy of the Government is not aimed at supplementing the production capacity of those products which are in demand by the masses, nor it is creating any additional employment for the vast army of unemployed of the country as Mega- industries which are encouraged by the Government and are established by the Global and Indian big business are high-tech automated industries, having a very low employment prospect. On the other hand, such

industries are responsible for large scale displacement and massive loss of employment. The present emphasis is on those industries which would exhaust the mineral resources of India in next 3 to 4 decades, while these semi-finalized and low value added intermediate products will be exported for manufacturing high and costly products which will be again imported to India at a huge cost. This anti-farmer-pro-big-business-industrial and mining policy is encouraging establishment of huge mineral based industries, industrial infrastructures like roads, rail, power plant, water treatment plant, townships, SEZs, smart cities, EPZs, etc. Especially the SEZs have resulted in farmers losing their land and livelihoods. Massive unemployment is being caused, natural resources are being exhausted at a rapid rate and nature is getting devastated. The implementation of SEZ policy is leading to creation of exclusive zones where no laws of land are there to protect the rights of the labour and that of the farmers. Infact these laws are anti-people. This path of industrialization that is displacing vast masses of the farmers and rural artisans, will spell disaster for the country as a whole. Therefore, the establishment of SEZ is playing havoc with the lives of the entire rural population including the adiwasis. This path of industrialization through Foreign Direct Investment and Foreign Institutional Investment have given priority for establishing SEZs throughout India solely for the super profits of the International and National big business. For the establishment of SEZs, the various state Governments have ruthlessly used the "Colonial 1894 Land Acquisition Act", forcibly evacuating people, destroying their cultural moorings, social peace and livelihood, all in the name of growth, while on the other hand SEZs which have been described as a foreign territory in the SEZ Act of 2005 have been given the status of separate enclaves where no law of the land or Constitutional provisions will apply. The development commissioner appointed by the State Government will govern the SEZ with private security, own laws and own regimes of justice and maintenance of law and order. Neither the Civil Laws and Labor Laws nor any other laws of land will be honored in these enclaves. This status of separate foreign territories enables the corporate houses to exploit labor ruthlessly. Working conditions will be deteriorated; working hours will be arbitrarily increased to 12 to 14 hours. No work safety measures will be taken. Since the work in these zones is given to contractors, the workers will be paid low wages. No payments for weekly offs, no lease with wages, no medical leave, no Provident Fund, no ES, no recreational facilities, no gratuity, almost no social security will be provided to the workers. Accidents in the work places are bound to increase. No workmen's compensation will be paid. Women workers will be even more exploited.

The SEZs are the most advanced and deadliest weapons of the neo-liberal re-structuring apart from disposessions of millions of farmers and artisans it devastates their cultural milieu and these enclaves here no laws of land will apply is akin to re-colonization of the Third World.

The massive outburst of anger of the people of Nandigram, the ongoing struggle against POSCO SEZ in Jagatsinghpur, Orissa , the struggle in Raigar and many other places and the country-wide resistance against forcible acquisition of land by the Government for the SEZs to be developed by Indian and International big businesses has forced the Government of India to announced the rulers under the SEZ Act 2005, according to which the private corporate sector will purchase land straight from the farmers even after

this decision of the Government of India everywhere Police is intervening on behalf of the corporate sector the case in point is struggle against the Korean giant POSCO SEZ in Orissa. After the local people confronted the Posco officials, the police intervened on behalf of Posco with an intention of terrorizing the people and forcing them to surrender their land, these interventions of police force on behalf of the corporate sector against struggling farmers happens all over India, the list is endless. This exposes the dual face of the Central and State Government, who go out of their way to acquire land for the corporate sector while mouthing pro-people platitude in public platforms and legislatures.

In the light of the above importance of the peasant resistance to the Special Economic Zones, a study was undertaken to understand the concrete reasons of farmers' opposition to the SEZs. The Maha-mumbai SEZ promoted by Reliance Industries in Raigad District in Maharashtra and the Mahindra and Mahindra SEZ promoted by Mahindra Group at Karla in Pune District of Maharashtra were selected for the study.

The field work was done between 20th, July, 2007 and 5th, September, 2007. The methodology adopted was 'Qualitative" interviews of respondents from different castes, occupations and gender in the Panvel, Pan and Uran Tehsils of Raigad Districts and of 6 villages in Karla area of Maval Tehsil of Pune district.

In the next 20 days, the field data will be analyzed and the report will be drafted.