

Citizens' Charge Sheet

Sponge Iron Units

Brief

Presently we are witnessing the extremely chaotic activities of the Government of West Bengal in its efforts to set up industries. At places fertile multi-crop land is being acquired in the name of industrialisation. Elsewhere permissions are being granted to sponge iron units which are causing extremely adverse effects on the water, air, soil and human health. By repeatedly speaking about huge investments and employment generation, the government is trying to garner support in favour of their misdeeds.

It may be relevant to mention that some of us in the recent past have spoken, knowingly or unknowingly, in favour of land acquisition for industries in relatively 'less fertile' regions like Purulia, Bankura, Birbhum and West Medinipur. However we are perhaps unaware about the havoc already created by some industries on the life and livelihood of a large number of people living in localities around Durgapur, Bankura, Purulia and Jhargram areas. It is a picture of devastation.

As per the records of Central Pollution Control Board there are about 150 large sponge iron units besides many more smaller units in India. Many more such units have received clearances. World wide sponge iron units are deemed to be highly polluting industries. Unfortunately in sponge iron production, India is one of the world leaders. The total direct and indirect employment in the Indian sponge iron industry is 41,817. Of these about 7000 are employed in 42 large units in West Bengal comprising majorly of migrant labourers. Paradoxically, citing reasons of fresh employment, the Left Front Government is accepting the unrestricted authority of the investors. With patronage from the Government they are violating all laws and rules related to environment, labour and factories with impunity.

The local inhabitants are learning from their experiences. They can see that the highly polluting sponge iron factories are destroying their land, livelihood, water sources and health. Hundreds of families are being displaced. As a result they are refusing to accept both fresh proposals and expansion programmes. More than one such project have been obstructed or withdrawn in face of protest and peoples resistance cutting across political the divide.

Responding to the state of affairs caused by sponge iron units in and around Durgapur the Government had announced that it would not give clearance to any more sponge iron units in the State. However clearances are being given to these behind the façade of iron and steel manufacturing units. The State environment department is inactive. No effective steps are being taken by any monitoring agencies like the labour and industry department or the Inspector of Factories.

The Left Front Government in West Bengal stands accused of charges of violating their own legislations and for not initiating appropriate actions against the illegal and unbridled activities of the investors.

Charge Sheet

Charge 1

In places like Durgapur, Bankura, Purulia, Jhargram etc. smoke, gas, stone / coal dust and liquid effluent from sponge iron units is spreading pollutants like nickel, chromium, cadmium, arsenic, manganese on to the vegetation, agricultural fields, wells, rivers, water bodies and also affecting humans and domestic animals. Despite this the West Bengal Pollution Control Board has not taken any effective measures as 'The Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act 1981' and 'The Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act 1974'.

Charge 2

During the public hearings in connection with the Environment Impact Assessment as per the 'Environment Protection Act, 1986' the concerns, apprehensions and oppositions of the local

inhabitants have not been given cognizance.

Charge 3

'Hazardous (Management and Handling) Rules, 1989' is being flouted totally during transportation and storage of raw materials to and at the factories. Moreover during operation the solid and liquid effluents are polluting the surroundings. The State pollution Control Board is taking no action.

Charge 4

In the absence of appropriate measures the inhabitants, specially women and children, are suffering from multiple ailments. Cost of treatment is becoming a burden. Experts say that the nature of pollution is causing diseases of the lungs, kidney and skin. They also fear that child bearing capacity of women may also be adversely affected. Despite full knowledge the respective departments of the Government initiate no corrective measures.

Charge 5

Owing to pollution caused by sponge iron units the vegetation, water bodies, rivers, homestead, land, human population, birds, animals of the locality are being devastated. Domestic cows, buffaloes, goats, sheep, hens and ducks have become diseased and are perishing.

Charge 6

The smoke, gas, vapour, stone / coal dust and liquid effluent from these sponge iron units have polluted the water, air and land and thereby the productivity of crops, vegetables and fruits. Pollution of village commons have affected the grazing of domestic animals. The Government has done nothing to combat this crisis.

Charge 7

Laws concerning conservation of forest have been flouted at will and trees have been felled to create vast spaces for storage/dumping of raw materials required for sponge iron units. Such illegal activities are being ignored by the State.

Charge 8

In these sponge iron units laws concerning minimum wages, contract labour, factories are being consistently flouted. Social security laws are not being followed. However the concerned authority is taking no steps.

Charge 9

Most of these highly polluting sponge iron units are taking advantage of Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) and declaring that they are controlling/combating the effects of pollution. Consequently they are getting involved in Carbon trading under pretty dubious circumstances and reaping huge profit unscrupulously. Instead of restraining them the concerned authority is patronising such nefarious activities.

[Prepared and circulated by Nagarik Mancha in connection with the Convention on Sponge Iron at Mahabodhi Society Hall, College Square, Kolkata held on 4 April, 2009, 3pm]

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