

Sponge Iron Factories

Devastation in the Name of Industrialisation

West Bengal, India, April 2009

The Government of West Bengal, in its new investment friendly *avatar*, had gone on a land grabbing spree. Fertile multi-crop land was being forcibly acquired for setting up industries. There was massive resistance at the grass root. Urban protest swelled in solidarity.

Some urged the government to acquire land for industrialisation in relatively 'less fertile' regions like Purulia, Bankura, Birbhum and West Medinipur. The majority of them were unaware that sponge iron units were already mushrooming in the district, unaware of the massive devastating effects of this brand of industrialisation.

Water, air, soil, human health, local economy was being degraded and in more senses than one we are hurled back two hundred years. All in the name of industrialisation, development and prosperity.



The black monster of devastation at Gajasimul

Industrialisation at 'any cost' seems to be the government's motto. Attracting huge investments and generating huge employment are its two propaganda planks.

Till date, as per official figures, about 7000 workers have been employed in 33 large coal-based sponge iron units in West Bengal. Of these about 10% are hired against daily wage from nearby localities. Around Rs. 10-12 crores are required to produce 100 metric tons per day, whereas the monthly profit could be as high as Rs. 60 lakhs. In a matter of 15-18 months the initial investment can be realised. No wonder more than a 100 small, medium and large sponge iron units have sprung up in West Bengal over the last 5-7 years.

The Government is resorting to goebbelian strategy, harping repeatedly about how huge investments can create huge employment. It is actually allowing investors to reap mind-boggling profit thereby projecting West Bengal (along with Chattisgarh, Jharkhand and Orissa) as favourite destinations for technologically 'dirty' capital. They have done this with flying colours.

Industries At Any Cost

Rashmi Ispat at Gajashimul, **Reshmi Cement** at Jitushole and **Aryavrata Trading** at Mohonpur owned by Patwari's of Jhargram, are representatives of this unique brand of industrialisation. Located on the three corners of an imaginary triangle situated within Jhargram Police Station in West Midnapur District of West Bengal, they are about five kilometres from each other by road.

Pollution from these triumvirate is having devastating effects on the life and livelihood of a large portion of the 50,000 inhabitants, predominantly tribals, in 50-60 adjoining villages under Patashimul, Lodhashuli, Shalboni and Manikpara Gram Panchayats.



Reshmi Cement at Jitushole: no black smoke – they knew we were coming!

It is a common practise of polluters to take 'necessary' steps (which includes, most often, the shutting down of plants) so that the chimneys don't spew the tell-tale smoke when they get advance news about any fact finding team. Conversely it is also the common practice of fact finding teams to look for other 'symptoms' even when the plant has been shut down temporarily.

Effluent – Black and Red

Untreated liquid waste from Rashmi Ispat at Gajashimul was gushing out from a point under the boundary wall. There was not even a pipe to act as an outlet! The nauseating black discharge was freely flowing on to the adjoining fields and then into a large adjacent water body.



Model effluent treatment!



The wall, the effluent and the water body

We wanted to collect a sample of the gushing waste discharge from the point under the wall and an enthusiastic villager volunteered. Within a few seconds his feet were covered with a black layer.



The effluent was black!

The piece of land between the factory wall and the water body was green with grass and no surprises to see the cows helping themselves to that which they desire! However a closer look revealed the effect the effluent was having on the top soil. No wonder the number of stillborn calves are increasing alarmingly, adversely affecting the bovine population and the local economy.



They seek green grass



...and don't care about the soil colour

The Rashmi Ispat does not own the land and water into which it ruthlessly empties its liquid effluents. It cannot care less about villagers since it cares more about the unbridled profit. On the other hand, to the villagers, the water body is more of a lifeline acting as the only perennial source of water, howsoever polluted.

Water scarcity is hitting the villagers hard. The Rashmi Ispat pumps out 2.5 million tons of groundwater everyday. There is no river in the vicinity to fall back on. This is having a disastrous effect on the ground water level which is receding fast. Excavated wells are running dry for more months and the small ponds are similarly parched. So it is this sprawling water body which is like a saving grace.

“They have bought the vested land from the Government, but have they bought the water under our land too?” a villager asked. A million dollar question which the votaries of 'industries at all cost' must answer!

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.



Red waste water gushes out ...



... and flows along the perimeter wall

The villagers led us to another side of the same factory wall from which, they said, a red liquid gushed out after every shower. Locals have put up a makeshift earth work so that this factory effluent does not drain into the adjacent paddy field. However it does find its way onto the same piece of land between the wall and the water body mentioned earlier. And here the soil turns red!



It gets inundated with this red effluent



The 'iron-crust' look

In places like Gajashimul, Jhargram as also elsewhere in Durgapur, Bankura, Purulia, etc., smoke, gas, stone / coal dust and liquid effluent from sponge iron units is spreading pollutants like nickel, chromium, cadmium, arsenic and manganese etc. The vegetation, agricultural fields, wells, rivers, water bodies besides human and domestic animals are being affected. 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'. Vested land which could have been distributed among the local tribal population had been given to the Patwari's of Jhargram for setting up Rashmi Ispat "When you can see all this, can't the WBPCB officials see anything?" a young man asked with a quizzical look.

Fish and Fisherfolk

A two hundred-acre waterbody justifies the presence of traditional fisherfolks in the adjoining villages. They use fish-traps and fishing nets with equal dexterity. The rewards are significant but the markets for fresh fish from this area have shrunk significantly over the last few years.

The buyers know that the 'poison' from the factory is emptied into the water body. Moreover they find the fish darker in colour and different in taste. One out of ten fish have ulcers on their skin.

Scores of families dependent on the daily fish crop have had their earning capacity slashed. Making things worse the villagers unable to sell the fish consume them locally paying little heed to the possible consequences.



The usual fish catch



...but would we buy one of them?

The Scorched Look



The soil surface, bare branches of shrubs and fallen leaves had a scorched look...



Life and Livelihood Under Threat



Losing out – the highly polluting factory is within 150 yards of their field, waterbody and home

The local tribals (Lodha Shabars) are learning from their experiences. They can see now that the highly polluting coal-based sponge iron factories are destroying their land, livelihood, water sources and health. Hundreds of families are being displaced. The promised jobs have not come. There are only about 20 young villagers working in the Gajashimul factory. As a result they are refusing to accept expansion programmes of the highly polluting factories.



“It was not so bad before the factory came”

In the absence of appropriate measures, the inhabitants, specially women and children, are suffering from multiple ailments. Cost of treatment is becoming a burden. Health 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.

Near the Reshmi Cement factory at Jitushole the village pond, the only water source in the vicinity, the surface of the water has a layer which is clearly visible. The factory is about 200 yards from this pond. “See it is already shallow now. The water level is going down each year. And then there is this dust. The factory is giving us nothing and taking away all we had,” said one of the irate bathers.

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 taken into consideration. Moreover, despite requests from the villagers the public hearings are not held nearby and are held at Jhargram instead.

There is a layer on the water surface

Dump Yards



Solid waste dump – school in the background



Iron-ore dump near the village

It is not just the factory which is polluting. By the side of the Bombay Road (NH-6) there are huge fields where the solid waste from and raw materials for the factory is being dumped. The fine particles are swept up in the wind and blown far and wide.

'Hazardous (Management and Handling) Rules, 1989' is being flouted totally during transportation and storage of raw materials to and at the factories.

Bamboo, Mango, Rice and the Leaf



Bamboo groves – thinning out



Mango orchard – or charcoal forest?

The hinterland of Lodhashuli was renowned for its strong bamboos and *sal* leaves. About 8-10 truckload of bamboos travelled to the coal mine areas everyday. These days barely 1-2 trucks roll out. Similarly instead of 1-2 truckloads of *sal* leaves per day nowadays 1-2 truckloads per week can be dispatched. The Gajashimul *Ambagan* (mango orchard) with hundreds of trees was a popular picnic spot besides being a source of earning. The fruits have vanished when the factory came up right next to it. The birds have gone and so also the picnickers. Villagers don't even allow their domestic animals to graze near it. The tree trunks resemble charcoal blocks and the leaves are black. The rice mill owners are refusing to accept paddy from this area since black spots have appeared on the rice grains.

A child in a primary school at Gajashimul, in response to a MCQ which asked about the colour of a leaf, ticked on black since that is the colour he sees all around, a teacher informed us.



Leaves are 'green' if rubbed with water



... or when they are only a few days old!

Appropriating Forest Land and Dumping

Jhargram is referred to as *aranyo sundari* ('forest beauty') in Bengali. Laws concerning conservation of forests are being flouted at will. The Reshmi Cement Factory at Jitushole was allegedly built on forest land. Trees have been felled to create spaces for storage/dumping of raw materials/solid waste of the sponge iron units. Vast tracts of forest land, it is clearly visible, has been cleared near the Reshmi Cement Factory at Jitushole and dozens of dumper trucks move in and out. The surrounding forest shows signs of degradation.



Trees in the background are parts of the forest – it had been cleared for dumping and storing



Dumpers carry some of the solid waste away only to dump it almost anywhere and everywhere

Workforce



Workers – don't work for too long!

In most sponge iron units Minimum Wages Act, Contract Labour Act, Factories Act, Industrial Disputes Act and so on are consistently flouted. There are hardly any social security network in place. Besides the handful of local hands predominantly employed as 'loaders/unloaders' at Rs. 40-50 per day, a large contingent of migrant workers from Jharkhand, Chattisgarh and Orissa are employed on short-term contract basis. They work and reside within the factory premises mostly for 3-6 month stints and are then replaced by another group. Technically the migrants doing heavy duty are replaced to allow for 'rest and recuperation' but actually very few return for the next stint. The skilled workforce, technicians and supervisors come from other states as well, but are offered comparatively better deals. The Sponge Iron units are hazardous units categorised as 'Red Category' and 'Special Red Category'. Workers working in these units are vulnerable to occupational diseases. Personal protective equipments are not in use excepting the all-purpose *gamchha* which they wrap around their head and face.

Dust and Smoke

“Wherever you go, whatever you touch, there will be a lot of dust – we want to see our lives free from this black smoke and dust – life is becoming hell,” they say.

When we reached Bikash Bharati Sikshayatan, a school with a boarding near the Reshmi Cement Factory (actually a sponge iron factory) at Jitushole, we saw a water tanker standing in front of the gate. Coming to know about our fact-finding team the factory authorities had arranged for 'cleaning' the classrooms. The ground floor had been freshly washed before our arrival but they did not have time to 'clean' the first floor.



Just a swipe on the table surface...



Roadside 'Airtel' hoarding was originally red?



Thatched roof of a nearby tea stall

Between Jitushole and Jhargram on the Lodhashuli-Jhargram road, in the region called Garh-Shalboni, there were more than a dozen resorts. Most of them have downed their shutters. “Dust and smoke have driven away most of the tourists from Kolkata. Occupancy is about 20% now. And things are going from bad to worse,” said the Manager of Hotel Kaushalya Heritage (under the aegis of the Tourism Department, Government of West Bengal), at Garsalboni, Jhargram.



Way to dusty death...

Jhargram Town – Pollution of a Different Kind

Jhargram railway station is virtually in the middle of the town. Without prior discussion with the Jhargram Municipality a railway siding was constructed next to Ward No. 8, which is purely residential. This was presumably in order to cater to the needs of the three sponge iron companies located 5-10 km away, namely, Rashmi Ispat at Gajashimul, Reshmi Cement at Jitushole and Aryavrata Trading at Mohonpur, all of them owned by the Patwari's of Jhargram.

Most of the approach roads to this new railway siding are narrow and the surface unsuitable for the hundreds of truck-trips every day to and from the railway siding through residential areas. This is causing sound pollution, automobile pollution and creating hurdles to the

safe passage for residents.

Loading and unloading activities are being carried out incessantly and the entire area gets enveloped in a cloud of dust during the process. Since coal, iron ore and dolomite are involved, continuous exposure to such dust is having a detrimental effect on the health of the residents housed in Ward Nos. 7 and 8 of Jhargram Municipality, located perilously near to the said new railway siding. Materials are also dumped in open spaces well within the residential areas in Ward No. 8. Moreover the loaded trucks moving along bumpy roads is also spreading this dust all along its 5-10 km journey to the sponge iron factories.

The residents have taken up the issue with concerned authorities since early 2007. However till date there is no improvement of the ground reality. They have urged all concerned to relocate the railway siding to an area at a suitable distance away from thickly populated Jhargram Town.

Peoples Resistance – a Silver Lining

There have been incidences of resistance in the recent past. It is heartening that all of these are from the grass root level and better still, cutting across party lines.

- Construction work at a sponge iron unit in Kalaikunda, Kharagpur, Midnapur has been stopped by local villagers. They were told initially that a steel factory would be set up.
- Ramswarup Sponge Iron factory at Neempura Sahachowk near Kharagpur in Midnapur District has been closed down as a result of massive resistance from the locality. Here too it was not disclosed initially that a sponge iron unit was being set up.
- Villagers of Dhasna/Bijaynagar, near Jamuria in Burdwan District have collectively resisted the proposed sponge iron unit during a public hearing.
- Closure notice has been put up at Amiya Steel next to Tarapur near Mejia in Bankura District owing to concerted protest from villagers of the area affected by rampant pollution from this sponge iron unit.
- Villagers around Gajashimul, Jitushole and Mohonpur along with residents of Ward 7-8 at Jhargram town have resisted plans for expansion of existing sponge iron plants.

Purandarpur about 7 km from Bankura Town is another such place where a groundswell of protest is not allowing the Singhanias to even start on construction work. A huge area has been walled off on the Bankura-Ranigunj road. However residents of 17 little-known villages namely – Tilabheddia, Purandarpur, Arjunpur, Mayakanan, Kamaladanga, Kanchanpur, Moukura, Ladyapur, Dharmadaspur, Moulaganga, Balarampur, Khejurbedia, Goura, Bhangabandh, Bhedua Chhatarkanali, Emakundi have come together under the banner of 'Purandarpur Anchal Paribesh Suraksha Committee' (Purandarpur save environment committee).

Initially it was said that a power plant was going to be set up. Land owners as usual were told that 150 from among the local youth will get direct employment. The required land was purchased and the boundary wall came up. It was only then they came to know that it was not a power plant but a sponge iron unit behind the façade of a captive power plant. They knew how highly polluting these factories are from the experience of villagers near Mejia and other nearby areas in their district. They resisted during the public hearing and shot off mass signatures to local administration, Government Departments and the Human Rights Commission. “We are united – we will not spare any political party – we will resist,” was what they had to say. “It is now or never”, was the spirit.



Purandarpur – the right time to resist!



Walled-off but no construction allowed

Polluting is a Profitable Business

Beyond doubt these sponge iron units are emitting carbon, a fact that even the votaries of this unclean technology will have to concede. According to the laws of the land, polluters these days are compelled to pay. The polluters are allowed to pollute at will, provided they cough up 'fines' which the cash-strapped West Bengal Government accept with alacrity. Whatever ends up as revenue is considered 'clean money' by the Government irrespective of the level of disaster and havoc such unclean activities cause.

The West Bengal Government appears to have struck a resonating chord of mutual understanding with the sponge iron factories. On the one hand these factories pay taxes to the tune of Rs. 6600 million per annum. The prominent polluters also don't mind paying half a million rupees per year by way of fines. One of the reasons for such an forthcoming attitude towards paying up is that this industry at present offers the highest return against initial investments. However there is another rather ominous reason. There is another avenue of 'money making' as a result of which they don't mind paying taxes and fines to the State Government. Such expenditure guarantees that the concerned authority looks away while the polluters profit.

The Kyoto Protocol has put its seal of approval on the carbon 'offset' market. This is a windfall for sponge iron unit operators. These highly polluting units do little to check pollution as otherwise they would make less profit. Instead they make vague 'claims' to the international community saying that "We have changed our boiler design" or "Hey! We are planting trees" and so "We are helping to remove carbon from the environment". These 'claims' are false in some cases and are inconsequential in most cases, when compared with the vast quantities of carbon/carbon dioxide that are being emitted by their own units. However, the global capital market allows these compulsive liars/polluters of our country to 'sell' their 'claims' at the Carbon Markets. Interestingly, Stock Exchanges dealing with carbon instead of shares are located world wide. When sold these 'claims' become 'carbon credits'. Now for the other side of the story. Emitters of carbon in developed countries buy these 'carbon credits' in dollars or euros. They can now emit more carbon than stipulated by the law of their because they have bought 'carbon credit' and hence have the license to emit more carbon.

So the polluters from developing countries WIN because they can sell their 'claims' and earn millions of dollars. The polluters from developed countries WIN as they can now pollute at will having paid for it. Our Governments WIN as revenue boxes keep clanking, and project developers, consultants, validating agencies and brokers involved in carbon trading WIN by earning legitimate fees/commissions and bribes to hush up falsehood. Overall clearly a uniquely

designed win-win model where the only losers are the victims of pollution – the indigenous tribals in the Jhargram belt.

Carbon Trade is rightly said to be 'the greatest legitimised hoax to have hit the world'. Maximising profit while pollution load increases – provided the Government remains constantly indifferent. This formula makes pollution a profitable business.



Who monitors the CDM Projects and who certifies/validates them?

Afterword

Citing reasons of fresh employment, the Left Front Government is accepting the unrestricted authority of the investors. With patronage from the Government the sponge iron factory management are violating all laws and rules related to environment, labour and factories with impunity.

To the Left Front leaders, setting up of factories at any cost is top priority. They don't care about who loses land or who are affected by industrial pollution or what brand of labour standards get followed.

However does the Government have the right to destroy the life and livelihood of thousands of villagers by choosing to set up such polluting units in rural areas of West Bengal?



Bankura...it could be anywhere in fact

[Fact Finding teams from Nagarik Mancha had visited Lodhashuli-Jhargram on 8 March 2009 and Bankura-Purandarpur on 14-15 March 2009. This report has been prepared and circulated by:

Nagarik Mancha, 134 Raja Rajendra Lal Mitra Road, Room 7, Block B, First Floor, Kolkata 700085, India. Phone & Fax: +913323731921; Email: nagarikmancha@gmail.com]