

India: twelve protestors killed in police shooting

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Twelve tribal villagers in India were shot dead by police on January 2 during a demonstration against the development of the Kalinga Nagar steel complex in the eastern state of Orissa. The impoverished protestors were demanding a halt to construction by steel developers on their traditional land. A 13-year-old boy and three women were among those killed.

In 1992, the local government in Orissa seized the tribal land, paying the villagers a pittance in compensation. The 12,000-acre area was then designated as a steel complex, and lucrative leasing contracts were negotiated with local and foreign investors. Local people have repeatedly protested against the decision over the past decade.

The massacre on January 2 occurred as villagers staged a demonstration against the construction of a boundary wall for a site leased to TATA Steel, India's largest private steel producer. The local government, led by a coalition of the right-wing nationalist Biju Janata Dal (BJD) and Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP), dispatched several hundred police to secure the site. According to *Frontline* magazine: "There were strict instructions from the State Secretariat to facilitate the construction, and the district administration was more than eager to obey."

After tear gas and rubber bullets failed to disperse the crowd, police opened fire against the tribal people, some of whom were armed with bows and arrows and fought back against the police attack. As well as the 12 protestors, a policeman was killed in the hour-long clash. About 25 people were wounded, including four police.

Adding to the misery of the families of the dead, police later severed the hands of five of the victims during the post-mortem examinations. According to the police, this was "standard procedure" in recording the fingerprints of unidentified bodies. Demonstrators insisted, however, that police mutilated the bodies in revenge for their colleague's death.

The massacre triggered ongoing protests throughout the

region. Steel workers at the Jindal and Mesco steel plants in Kalinga Nagar went on strike in solidarity with the villagers. Thousands of workers and tribal farmers attended the cremation of those killed. The funerals took the form of mass protests, as mourners blocked a highway and chanted slogans against the police and state authorities.

The Orissa massacre once again brings to light the widespread police brutality and torture inflicted on impoverished workers and peasants, particularly those belonging to tribal communities and oppressed castes. The killings at the steel complex follow a series of similar incidents across India in recent years.

Tribal people constitute more than five percent of India's total population, and have long been among the country's most oppressed and marginalised strata. Access to their traditional lands, which are typically remote but resource rich, has come under sustained attack in recent years. Successive Indian governments at both the local and federal level have promoted India as a haven for foreign investment, and have encouraged transnational companies to launch projects on land requisitioned from the tribal inhabitants.

In Orissa, local authorities have made large sums of money from this process. As one tribal protestor explained to the BBC, "We were paid only 37,000 rupees (\$US823) per acre of land whereas the government has sold the same land to the companies for over 300,000 rupees per acre." In many cases, even the small amount of money promised to the inhabitants has been held back by pending lawsuits. Promises of jobs have also failed to materialise. Local officials admit that just over a quarter of the displaced families have been given alternative employment.

Eighty percent of the Orissa population are farmers and agricultural labourers, and inadequate public spending in agriculture and public infrastructure has led to a serious

lack of employment opportunities.

Until recently, tribal villagers living within the Kalinga Nagar steel complex area continued to cultivate the land, despite the state seizure of their property. They have demanded proper compensation for their land at current market rates and an adequate resettlement package that provides them with a means of securing their livelihoods. None of these demands have been met, however, and as the steel companies have expanded their operations, the tribespeople have come under government pressure and police attacks to vacate the area.

The massacre has had political repercussions throughout India as well as Orissa. The local BJP considered withdrawing from the Orissa ruling coalition in an attempt to deflect popular outrage over the killings. The national BJP—which has been marked by a series of internal crises following its defeat at the last federal election—quickly overruled the proposal however. As a sop to local anger, Orissa authorities announced that a judicial inquiry will be held into the killings, and the district magistrate Saswat Mishra and superintendent of police Binaytosh Mishra have been transferred.

All of the established parties have tried to capitalise on the outrage felt by ordinary working people. Sonia Gandhi, the ruling Congress Party's leader, visited the area and laid a wreath at the site where those killed had been cremated. She also announced that compensation to families of those killed would be raised to 500,000 rupees, from the 100,000 rupees initially pledged. A further 50,000 rupees and the payment of medical expenses was promised to those injured by police. These pledges have been denounced by the victims' families and tribal protestors, who are demanding that at least 2 million rupees in compensation for each person killed.

The local Orissa Congress Party joined the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) in calling for statewide strikes, which resulted in the ransacking of several government buildings on January 7. Strikes called by Stalinist parties were held the same day in the states of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, while the Communist Party of India (Maoist) announced a one-day strike in West Bengal on January 16. All of these measures are designed to divert public anger into politically safe channels.

The entire political establishment in India—including the Stalinist and Maoist “left”—bears responsibility for creating the social and economic conditions for the Orissa massacre. The integration of the Indian economy into the international capitalist market, which is backed by all the established parties, has been accompanied by a sustained

assault on the social position of the country's workers and peasant masses. The Indian ruling elite has sought to assure foreign investors that the extraction of profit from its resource-rich and low-wage country will not be threatened by strikes and protests.

The deepening gulf between rich and poor is evident in Orissa. Around 30 percent of India's iron ore reserves and 24 percent of its coal reserves are located in the state. Despite this natural wealth, Orissa remains among the poorest in India, with about half of the total population living below the official poverty line. Indian and international companies, on the other hand, are expecting make huge profits in the eastern state. The local government has signed contracts for establishing steel plants with 43 Indian and transnational companies, of which 13 have reached the commissioning stage. The contracts are worth a total of \$40 billion to the state government, while the steel companies are no doubt forecasting tens of billions more in future profits.

Among the foreign investors is Australia's BHP-Billiton, the world's largest mining company, which together with the Korean steel company POSCO, has invested \$12 billion in an iron ore mine in Orissa. The operation is the single largest foreign direct investment venture in India. The rapid growth of the Chinese economy is also fuelling investment in Indian iron and steel. Total iron ore exports, now standing at 5 million tonnes, swelled five-fold in the last five years. Half of the country's iron ore exports now go to China.

The Indian ruling elite has ambitions beyond merely supplying China with the raw materials for its industrial expansion however. India is competing with China to attract foreign direct investment and to develop value-added manufacturing industries and cannot afford to allow protests to interfere with this strategy. For this reason, the Orissa massacre will not be the last.



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