State-sponsored lawlessness at Narayanpatna

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After the November 20 police firing at Narayanpatna, Orissa, which left two tribals dead and many injured, the situation has not only turned grim for the adivasis but a media blackout is helping to hide the complete militarisation of the area.

There are reports that around 73 adivasis and members of the Chasi Mula Adivasi Sangh have been beaten and arrested. While the jailer of Koraput was instructed not to allow the detainees to meet anyone, their lawyer, Nihar Ranjan Patnaik, claims that around 15 of the arrested are minors. Considering they are in Koraput jail, it is a violation of the Juvenile Justice Act for minors are meant to be held in a juvenile remand home.

Added to this was the recent attack on the all-India, all-women fact-finding team by the newly formed ‘Shanti Committee’ with the alleged patronage of the police.

The Shanti Committee itself consists of non-tribals such as the Sondis and Patnaiks and includes numerous Schedule Caste members of the Dom and Paidi Castes. It was formed to curtail the growing influence of the Chasi Mula Adivasi Sangh which reclaimed vast areas of Fifth Schedule land from them. The burning of the homes of the Dalits by CMAS activists had taken place in the villages of Padapader, Tolagoomandi and Upurgoomandi in May this year. The administration had provided the displaced with makeshift shelters, and after the November 20 firing, there are only 329 Harijans out of 674 Harijans displaced at the shelter.

The liquor prohibition diktat of the CMAS had also seriously hampered the liquor mafia whose stronghold over the Narayanpatna tribes had all but vanished. There are reports that the liquor mafia has reclaimed lost territory in Narayanpatna after the firing, after which the Chasi Mula Adivasi Sangh was suppressed and their members went into hiding.

When it came to the fact-finding team, the Shanti Committee was wary of the intentions of the fact-finding team, believing that they were there in support of the Chasi Mula Adivasi Sangh. Superintendent of Police, Koraput, Deepak Chouhan Kumar, had no sympathy for the fact-finding team, “We didn’t beat that so-called fact-finding team, we protected them from the mob.” The activists on the other hand claim that the mob was instigated by the police. Yet their case is not an isolated incident. There are many other activists and party workers who have been beaten, harassed, arrested and killed at Narayanpatna. A few members of the CPI (ML) (Liberation) and the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee who openly support the CMAS were beaten while returning from the funeral of the adivasis killed in the firing.

Tapan Mishra, an activist, who is associated with the CMAS, is an official member of the legal CPI (ML) (Kanu Sanjay group), was arrested under Section 121 (waging war against the state) and 124A (sedition). Amnesty International has already condemned his arrest and called for his unconditional release stating that he has no links with the Maoists and he was only arrested after it became known that he accompanied a seven member fact-finding team to Narayanpatna. Along with him, a member of the legal UCCRI (ML) (Unity Centre of Communist Revolution in India), was also arrested.

The deceased adivasis themselves were activists. K. Singanna was one of the leaders of the Chasi Mula Adivasi Sangh and was allegedly shot ten times in the back. On the day of the shooting, it was alleged that the adivasis had gathered to protest the mistreatment of adivasi women that was taking place during combing operations.

The police claimed that they had fired in self-defence after the adivasis tried to seize weapons. The local press was only allowed into the area, some two hours later. And when they arrived, they found the camp shot full of arrows. Interestingly, the police had also barged into adivasi homes and confiscated traditional weapons during their combing operations.

Yet the murder of activists is not new to Narayanpatna. On May 9, 2008, Narayan Hareka was allegedly murdered on the outskirts of Narayanpatna. The police claimed he was killed in an accident while his wife and his colleagues believe he was murdered.

His body was found brutally disfigured — his eye had been gouged out, his neck was gashed and his hand was smashed in multiple places. He was alive when they first found him but beyond recognition. He was taken to the local PHC around 8 p.m. but he had to be referred to Vishakapatnam. Yet the journey only commenced after a long delay around 11 p.m. Narayan Hareka died just 20 km from the PHC.

As an activist from the Kondh tribe, he struggled against the illegal liquor trade, land alienation of the tribals, the debt trap and he was, during his last few days, investigating irregularities in the implementation of NREGs. It was no secret that Hareka had made a lot of enemies amongst the powerful. Yet it was always the debt trap that led to the growing resentment between tribals and non-tribals at Narayanpatna. It was well known that the tribals often found themselves addicted to liquor, and would end up parting with their lands and their freedom to cover the debts that alcohol had brought on to them. Bonded labour was not a secret in Narayanpatna. Nachka Linga, leader of the Charsi Mula Adivasi Sangh, himself was a bonded labourer who used to receive around Rs. 60 a year, just ten years ago.

When it came to legal or illegal acquisition of tribal land by the non-tribals, the Joint Commissioner (Settlements) was instructed to receive complaints regarding irregularities in the earlier 1961 settlement. However, no one approached him. He instead recommended that the adivasis take the matter to court. The recommendations were accepted by the collector who had informed the lawyer Nihar Ranjan Patnaik, president of the Bar Association, Koraput, to take up the matter.

However, he’s not able to visit the Tehsildar at Narayanpatna to collect land records considering allegations that his life is in danger. He is instead dealing with a flood of cases regarding the arrest of many activists and villagers from Narayanpatna.

Adding to the woes of the tribals and non-tribals, is the threat of rotting paddy as there is no one there to harvest it. Both the collector and the sub-collector have made numerous visits to the area to assess the situation.