

## **Odisha government has resorted to hasty, coercive action to evict thousands of villagers: EAS Sarma**

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EAS Sarma, former secretary to the Government of India (GOI) and resident of Visakhapatnam, has condemned the forcible eviction of villagers at Balitikra along Govindpur-Nuagao border in Odisha for the POSCO project. He says that it is illegal and involves violation of human rights. He has made an appeal to the Odisha government to stop it forthwith.

From visual media reports and other sources, it is evident that Odisha government has resorted to hasty, coercive action to evict thousands of villagers, including women and children, near Balitikra along the Govindpur-Nuagao border, with a view to accommodate the interests of POSCO. Such action violates the human rights of the villagers and defies the basic norms of democratic governance.

EAS Sarma clearly points out, “The latest coercive action unleashed by the state government represents the culmination of crony capitalism that seems to characterise both the Centre and the states. The mining franchise is under suspension. The environment clearance has been held invalid. However, the state government seems to side the foreign company rather than its own people.”

The story of POSCO is the story of how low can our country’s leaders stoop in order to promote crony capitalism of the worst kind. To the best of our knowledge, the selection of POSCO was through a highly non-transparent process that raised questions on the propriety of the state government in granting permissions to the foreign company. What followed thereafter was highly predictable in today’s environment of the close nexus between the politician and the businessman.

The arguments put forth by EAS Sarma are as follows: First, The PMO (Prime Minister’s Office) and MOEF (ministry of environment and forests) acted in an orchestrated haste to throw all the environment norms to the wind and accorded environment clearance for POSCO. Second, under civil society pressure, the then Union minister of state for environment & forests appointed a committee to examine forest rights violations and other statutory infringements involved in the clearances given in favour of POSCO but he chose conveniently to reject the recommendations of the majority of the members of that committee and accept the report of the minority member to uphold the environment clearance for the project. Finally, it was the National Green Tribunal (NGT) that overturned the action of MOEF and quashed the environment clearance for POSCO. NGT ordered a fresh appraisal of the project.

Despite this, the local political leaders and the officials continue to act for the foreign company, forgetting that they are accountable to the Constitution, the law of the land and the public at large.

While some 'expert' institutions tried to exaggerate the benefits of the project to justify the remuneration they had received from the project proponent, an independent evaluation would show that the social costs of the project far exceed the social benefits. Both the central and the state governments have chosen to close their eyes and work for POSCO!

An independent investigation by the CBI under judicial oversight will unravel the numerous improprieties that were committed at different stages of pushing through this project.

EAS Sarma has made an appeal to the state government to close the doors to POSCO permanently and act as a genuine representative of the people who have elected them to head the government today. The Union government should review its own stance on POSCO and on its mis-conceived approach to 'development' in general and persuade the State to respect the Constitutional rights of the people, the law of the land and the basic dignity to which the citizens of this country are entitled.

EAS Sarma concludes by saying, "We hope that good sense will prevail over the minds of our rulers even at this belated stage and they desist from unleashing state violence against men, women and children living in the area."