

Environment and Politics

Author(s): Dunu Roy

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# Environment and Politics

Dunu Roy

SEPTEMBER 27, 1986 was a memorable day in the history of Anuppur, a small sleepy township in Shahdol district of Madhya Pradesh. On that day 500 peasants and workers marched through its narrow streets raising revolutionary slogans and bearing red flags. This event represented both the painstaking efforts of the young cadre of the Anuppur CPI unit as well as the frustrations of the peasants and workers of the district. But the direction given by the district political leaders to this upsurge of hope and enthusiasm marked another woeful passage in the long history of the difference of aspirations between these leaders and the led.

Three basic demands were presented by the leaders during the course of the mass meeting that followed the procession, when they called afresh upon the people "to move towards socialism". These demands were:

- 1 Withdrawal of retrenchment orders on 203 workers at the Birla-owned Hindalco bauxite mines at Amarkantak.
- 2 Distribution of surplus land among the landless tribals of Taradand village.
- 3 Nationalisation of the Birla-owned Orient Paper Mills at Amlai.

The focus, however, was on the first demand. Speaker after speaker indicated that the workers were being retrenched at Hindalco because the mine was being closed down. The reason put forward for the closure of the mine was that the government had not granted permission for further mining on the grounds that extensive deforestation was taking place. As the leaders put it, this was part of an imperialist design of pitting environmental issues against the interests of the working class. However, interestingly enough, none of the leaders cared to mention the actual facts of the case.

Amarkantak has two bauxite mines. One belongs to the public sector Balco, and the other to the private sector firm, Hindalco. Hindalco has been leased 500 hectares of land in Shahdol district, of which so far permission has been given for mining on only 100 hectares. Balco, on the other hand, has been leased a total of about 2,200 hectares (2,039 in Mandla, 136 in Bilaspur, and 35 hectares in Shahdol) of which at present they have permission to mine on 1,000 hectares. In other words, Balco has ten times the amount of land under mining as Hindalco and, furthermore, it is heavily mechanised. Despite this, a peculiar situation prevails wherein productivity at Balco is half that at Hindalco.

The roots of this peculiar situation lie in the fact that, on the 500 hectares leased to Hindalco, bauxite reserves are estimated at 34 lakh tons, which is almost four times the 9 lakh tons of estimated reserves in Balco.

Consequently, it is much easier to exploit the very rich ore in the Hindalco mine, even though it is a manually-operated mine. Curiously enough, the government takes the same royalty of Rs 18 per ton from both mines. Hindalco has 325 workers while Balco has 825. The Hindalco workers are on an average paid half the wage paid to Balco workers because they are considered to be unskilled manual workers. In this manner Hindalco has double the productivity at one-fifth the labour cost. One indication of the extent of labour exploitation is that the number of injuries at Hindalco has risen from 14 to 65 per year in seven years.

Hindalco is thus a prime example of exploitation of both labour power as well as natural resources. In 20 years 100 hectares of rich bauxite-bearing mine have been exhausted so fast because the Hindalco aluminium plant at Renukoot will only accept bauxite with a maximum content of 2.5 per cent silica. Balco, on the other hand, accepts ore with a 5 per cent silica content. So Hindalco has rejected as waste lakhs of tons of low-grade bauxite which would be acceptable to other aluminium plants. This waste is steadily disfiguring the ravaged Amarkantak plateau. Now Hindalco has asked for permission to mine in the remaining 400 hectares of the leased land. No attempt has been made to restore the 100 hectares already mined to any productive use. Hindalco claims to have planted 7,000 saplings on this barren waste land but these "have been eaten up by cattle". Balco, to its credit, has, at least, replanted on 27 of the 35 hectares that it has mined in Shahdol, although most of the saplings are of exotic varieties and of no use to the local people. It is important to note in this context that the total leased land occupies 10 per cent of the area of the Amarkantak plateau and deforestation would severely affect the headwaters of the Narbada and Sone rivers. These two rivers are important sources of livelihood for thousands of people living in the downstream valleys.

Given this context, who is to be held responsible for the retrenchment of 203 workers? Several demands were possible to protect jobs. For instance, nationalisation of the Hindalco mines to exploit the low-grade bauxite rejected by Hindalco could have been a valid demand. Another demand could have been a move to pressurise Hindalco to extract and use this low-grade bauxite itself and at the same time generate additional employment through reforestation schemes. A third possibility is linked to the overall development of the Amarkantak plateau. Yet another possibility was a demand for payment of higher wages and

provision of greater safety for a heavily exploited labour force. All these require a perspective of rational use of national resources and fulfilment of social obligations. However, what the leaders demanded at the mass-meeting at Anuppur was, in effect, pressure by a labour union on a government department to condone the existing anti-people and anti-nature policies of Hindalco. By this move the labour leaders seem to have deliberately chosen to ignore the essential contradiction between labour and capital at Hindalco.

In this process the local CPI unit revealed another paradoxical weapon in its rusted theoretical armoury. The leaders claimed that the environmental issue supposedly responsible for the closure of the mine was essentially part of a much larger imperialist design. They argued that if industry were to be shut down on grounds of environmental pollution and degradation then the nation would lose its capacity for indigenous production and would have to rely increasingly on imports from the western nations. Consequently, Indian labour would fill the coffers of imperialist industry and India would again become another colony of the US. Thus, the leaders proclaimed all environmentalists to be agents of imperialism. In the specific context of Anuppur vitriolic charges of being CIA agents, missionaries, and government stooges were levelled at a local group of researchers working on environment and its political aspects. With a fine disregard for factual veracity this group was linked into the 'unholy' company of PUCL, KSSP, Delhi Science Forum and the Scientific Workers Forum!

In their infantile tilting at imaginary windmills the Don Quixotes of the Shahdol CPI forgot that real giants exist in the real world of social relations in production. By repeatedly bringing up the environmental issue they successfully obfuscated the relations between labour and capital. That the real battle still lies within the domain of industrial relations was sharply defined when the SDO Pushprajgarh placed Amarkantak under Section 144 and declared a stay order against retrenchment of 203 workers, but for a period of one month only. The real issue will still have to be settled between the management and workers either through direct action or in the industrial tribunals. The workers themselves know that this is only the latest manifestation of a long and arduous struggle. They are also emphatic in stating that all these past years the union had done nothing for them. Why then, this sudden caterwauling over the environmental issue? Perhaps the answer lies in the interests of the labour leaders in keeping the labour movement within the narrow confines of the economic arena in which these leaders have thrived for so many years.