Our Present is “Struggle for the Future”
(Ground Zero Reality of the Anti-POSCO Movement)

“I will not let the Government of Orissa take away our land from any one of us!” says, Subhatra Mondel (Female age 11), Govindpur Village of Jagatsinghpur District in Orissa, India.

Subhatra is one of the several hundred children who are struggling along with their parents for their homeland, their identity, their livelihood, their present and their future. The reason is that the State Government of Orissa has embarked on a process of land acquisition which it will hand over to a Korean based Phoang Steel Company called POSCO who came with 58,000 Crores of Rupees to engage in land ‘unearthing’ and steel production business in Orissa. This project is one of the highest Foreign Direct Investments Schemes in the country, and so both the State and Central governments are giving it importance and priority. This commercial enterprise requires 4008 acres of land in the 1st phase for establishing plants, ports and infrastructure and an additional 10000 acres for their unearthing works. So far, the government was able to buy only 400 acres from 204 land owners. Realizing and considering the serious negative impact of the POSCO project on their lives and land, the village people have unitedly come together, and have organized themselves to oppose the process of forceful land acquisition. They have engaged themselves in this non-violent campaign for the past six years at various levels. There have been ups and downs in their struggle, but the people have never given up their hope and are continuously struggling for their land and rights.

Now, the people have adopted a simple non-violent strategy of lying on the ground and ‘hugging Mother Earth’ in the face of police and government authorities who are trying to forcibly acquire their land. The children lie in the first row, women in the second row, and senior citizens, men and youth respectively in subsequent rows. This is indeed a very powerful strategy, which has attracted the attention of the public and the entire media world. Several civil society leaders have started visiting these villages and are expressing their solidarity by being with them. Many solidarity campaigns both physical and online have been organized all over in India.

Subhatra says, “Land is our future, we think of the future only and not of the present. Our present is our ‘struggle for the future’!” A senior lady from the same village says, ‘We do not want any kind of compensation or money. Please leave us to live peacefully in our own land’. Similar voices are expressed by several others in Govindpur and the surrounding villages.
On June 11 and June 12, 2011, a delegation of 28 Ecumenical and Church Leaders including the General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in India, Social Scientists, and Civil Society Activists from the Student Christian Movement of India, Young Men’s Christian Association, Church of North India, Marthoma Syrian Church, Jaipur Evangelical Lutheran Church, Indian National Social Action Forum (INSAF) and Orissa Development Action Network (ODAF) visited Govindpur village to affirm our solidarity with the Dalits and Other Backward Class people who are struggling for Land, Life, Livelihood, Identity and Future on the shore village of Govindpur in Jagatsinghpur District of Orissa.

It was a heart breaking experience: These Economically Poor, Dalits and Other Backward Class people who are struggling for Land, Life, Livelihood, Identity and Future on the shore village of Govindpur in Jagatsinghpur District of Orissa.

Projects, are fighting against the powerful. They are like Naboth struggling against Jezebel (the Government authorities) who wants to deceitfully and forcibly acquire their land and hand it over to Ahab (POSCO).

The delegation experienced how under the scorching sun, children of Govindpur village sat in groups along with their parents and village elders, without any shade over their heads, to block the approach roads on roasting sand. The children constituted the first line of defense in the movement to save their land. While Isaiah portrays how in the eschatological days of peace, “a little child shall lead them” (Is.11:6), here in the valley of the shadow of ‘looming disaster’, little children are in the forefront for protection and justice. When a child was asked why she did not go to school, she replied, “How can I go to school when my father is imprisoned, my mother is being beaten by the police, and my home is being taken away?”

Neither the hot burning sun, nor pouring rain, nor severe cold waves (the movement has been going on for six years) dampen the spirit of the villagers, including the children. Their slogan is “POSCO HATAO, GOVINDPUR BACHAO”- “Send POSCO away! Save Govindpur today!”

(In Solidarity with PPSS leader Abhaya Sahoo)
Our interaction with the leaders of POSCO Pratirodh Sangram Samiti (PPSS) and with the people of the region was very challenging. The PPSS President Abhaya Sahoo said to the delegation “With unabated spirit of determination, our people have been repeatedly asking the same question which they have been raising all these years, ‘Why are the governments at the centre (Delhi) and the state (Orissa) mad after the so called biggest FDI, when we for generations have been content with, and are progressing on the basis of, our vibrant economy of Pan (betel leaves), Mina (fish) and Dhan (paddy), without the existence of any such project like POSCO which spells only doom and destruction for us?’ No one is answering their question!

Abhaya Sahoo went on to say, “We are determined not to yield an inch of the land on which we grow betel vines and other cash crops. We will continue our protest and will not allow them to enter the site.”

The presence and participation of women in the struggle is the encouraging empowering strength of anti-POSCO movement. Every woman we encountered in Govindpur was strong in unwavering commitment to free the lands of the villagers from the hands of the powerful. (Like Vashti she spurns the ruler’s command; like Esther she risks her life for her people).

Since the warrants are issued against them, the men and women do not venture out of the village area. Therefore they are not able to have access to medical care and assistance since the past six years. Health care is an important issue, which needs to be addressed immediately.
The delegation was deeply impressed by people’s insistence to continue on with the struggle, and with their eagerness for networking and cultivating linkages with other people’s movements inside the country and elsewhere. We have been informed that they have been encouraged by the visits of leaders of several peoples’ movements as they expressed their solidarity with them.

One cannot but be impressed by the unity, solidarity, mutual encouragement, sacrificial compassion and undiminished hope of the people in Jagatsinghpur District.

But at the same time it is rather very heart breaking and mind churning to see that for 24X7 hours a week, they have to go through so much suffering under the hot sun and burning sand to safeguard their own land from bureaucratic and police sharks without proper food and water and the needed health care facilities.

When some social activists like Anna Hazare and Baba Ramdev came out on the road and called for a fast in order to fight against corruption, a team of ministers had several sittings for negotiations with them; even a special ministerial cabinet under the leadership of the Prime Minister of India met to discuss their demands and sought to pacify them to withdraw their fast against corruption. Several solidarity events took place all over the country in support of Anna Hazare and Baba Ramdev. But in the case of the anti-POSCO movement when several hundred people including children women and senior citizens have been coming out, day in and day out, from their homes to a public place and staying on till evening without food and water - the entire community has been struggling for a cause for the past six years - political authorities and the public at large are hardly concerned about them.

Over the recent past, at least 26 Platoons of riot police (over 1,000 police personnel) have been deployed to ruthlessly beat women, children, the aged, and men who through their day-night vigil have not allowed any State functionary, police or company official to enter their villages. Thus the phenomenal act of peaceful resistance to the POSCO project has been going on, being sustained for six years under the leadership of POSCO Pratirodh Sangram Samithi.

Having seen the situation with their own eyes, and having been touched by the ‘satyagraha’ of the people in the midst of trying and threatening circumstances, the ecumenical delegation came up with the following plan:

- Dissemination of the updates on the struggles of the movement should be done widely.
- An in-depth and comprehensive research to be done on the impact of POSCO from people’s perspective.
- A fact-finding team, constituted of renowned people, be sent immediately to the region.
- “Withdraw stakes!” Campaign be initiated among the POSCO stake holders.
- A signature campaign be launched against the Land Acquisition Bill which would be tabled in the parliament during the forthcoming monsoon session.
- A public hearing be organised on the POSCO issue.
Mobilizing the Korean Ecumenical Organisations, Churches and Civil Society organisations to initiate a Korea based Anti-POSCO campaign.

Therefore, the National Council of Churches in India along with the Joint Ecumenical Task Force (constituted by the visiting ecumenical delegation) calls for the following immediate actions:

- Join the NCCI’s Anti-POSCO campaign.
- Mobilize Resources for Livelihood and Health care initiatives.
- Organize solidarity visits to Jagatsinghpur district in Orissa especially to Govindpur, Dhinkia and Patana villages.
- Organize or join Solidarity Events and Campaigns in your own places and institutions.

_Land does not belong to us but we belong to land._

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