

King Ahab vs Naboth Revisited

Eye of the Storm

As I was edging closer to the cluster of villages that has been the battleground between the forces of 'greed' and 'need' for the past six years, I was filled with a sense of nervous excitement. What increases the sense of uncertainty in the region is the conditional go-ahead of the Ministry of Environment and Forest that permitted the State government of Orissa to proceed with the land acquisition in accordance with the agreement made with POSCO a Korean industrial behemoth intent on setting up an Integrated Steel and Captive Port Plan in Jagatsinghpur, Orissa. I hesitate to visualize the agony and uncertainty of the 'targeted' communities who have to undergo this ordeal on a daily basis.

There is a siege mentality in Gobindopur, one of the villages identified for land acquisition, along the coast of Orissa. It is only natural that the people fighting for their very survival would view anything out of place with suspicion. Once I reached the borders of the villages 'identified' for land acquisition, I was welcomed with a sign in bold letters, WE WELCOME POSCO, which emphasizes the chasm that the government is trying to create in the community. There are about 5 houses in a row that could hardly represent the view of the majority of the residents of the villages. They are the minority among the minority. Beyond this, there are no other indicators that extend a welcome to the state government-POSCO initiative thereby reflecting the Anti-POSCO intentions and commitment of the majority.

Ahab's Avatar

The story of King Ahab, King of Samaria, and Naboth, the Jezreelite vineyard owner, in 1 Kings 21 1-16 cannot and should not be relegated as a story of its time but be retold time and time again in the context of land acquisition. Although Ahab no longer reigns, his avatar in the form of the state government and POSCO continue their reign of terror over the people in Orissa.

Let us put things into perspective alongside the biblical narration to draw modern day parallels:

While Naboth was the proud owner of a vineyard, his adversary was King Ahab, whose palace shared a boundary wall with that of Naboths' property. Naboth had only the vineyard, while Ahab was the ruler of the land....and yet he wanted more. Fast forward to 2005, when the Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the state government of Orissa and POSCO, and 4000 families that will fall prey to the desires of the modern day Ahab of which 95% are engaged in paan farming, 5% in agriculture, fish farming, cashew that is seasonal and the migrant laborers for the paan farming for which they get a

continuous remuneration. The state has in its possession 2957 acres in forest land, 535 in govt land and is eyeing the 400 acres of private land.

Not so long ago, the Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) has set its eyes on the region for setting up of its plants. Today, that piece of land belonging to the IOC is nothing more than saline land that has no scope for agriculture and has a dry yellow hue signifying loss in land fertility. A river divides the two worlds that clearly provides one with a glimpse of the before and after effects of setting up a plant in the region. On this side of the region is a veritable paradise on earth with the sea a kilometer away and the landscape is surrounded by betel-leaf plantations, cashew plantations, a breeze that makes air-conditioners redundant, sweet water so clear that it quenches your thirst better than any Pepsi /Coke, thriving fishing cultivation and local agriculture that sustains the lives of seasonal migrants. It is often referred to as the Kashmir of Orissa. It is then that I get a glimpse into the future of the degradation of the environment if POSCO is allowed to set up its plant. In an eerily horrible manner, there is an uncanny resemblance to Kashmir: violation of human rights has become the medium of communication. It is this vineyard that the government-POSCO is eager to get their hands on and destroy. The state government is the biggest landlord and it is intent of destroying the remaining vineyards to ensure that the poor shall never rise against the forces of darkness.

Land and Legacy

When Ahab approaches Naboth for the first time to acquire his land Naboth speaks from the heart and “said to [Ahab](#), The LORD forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee”¹. It would have taken some courage to speak up to the King and refuse him his request. It also places in context the reasons for which the refusal was made: that which is mandated by God cannot be broken. At the same time, there is an emotional attachment to the land that provides the land holder a spiritual bond with the land that cannot be paid for in cash or any form of compensation. It is the land of their forefathers. God and forefathers symbolizes the spiritual and historical mandates to hold onto the land that tugs at the very essence of man. Interestingly in the context of this area, the forefathers are an integral part of the livelihood and symbolize right to life with dignity. During my conversation with the seniors, it was apparent that theirs is the meticulous responsibility of tending to the betel leaf plantations while their sons engage in other livelihoods. They feel wanted and are still an active part of the labor force thereby cementing their belief to a right to live life with dignity. It is this life force of their fathers that they are also fighting to sustain. What our fore-fathers give us is a legacy, not be whittled away, but to be further developed on the foundations of justice and peace. The forces of globalization believe in

¹ King James Version: 1 Kings 21: 3

desecrating all that is sacred to mankind and leave in its wake a gigantic dump of broken legacies.

Sustainability vs Loss of Identity

If one was look closely at the passage, King Ahab offers Naboth, “a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money²”. What has seemingly become an inhumane trend that we have adopted is that everything has a price and we tend to reduce relationship to monetary compensation. At least, we can we can give Ahab the credit of offering Naboth something better than what he currently owned. Fast forward to 2011 and the state government of Orissa along with POSCO is offering a differential rate of compensation depending on the type of loss amounting to a maximum of 21,00,000/- (Twenty one lac rupees) . How can you place a price on sustainability that will provide for the lives of many generations from the land, water and jungle? The compensation package has always proven to last no more than 2-3 years even with the wisest of investments. What Ahab, POSCO and the state government of Orissa fails to understand is the intrinsic relationship of man with man, nature, animals and land. It is heart-wrenching to begin to visualize the loss of identity, humanity, livelihood a complete re-location would incur. The government and POSCO are masking the fact that the compensation would only further lead the families into a world of oblivion and add to the already skewed numbers of people benefitted by ‘development’.

Lies and Manipulation:

Further into the narrative, we witness the wounded King Ahab sharing his cup of woes with his wife Jezebel, who in turn, plots the murder of Naboth through the succession of lies and manipulation of the religious and national sentiments. In the current context of Orissa, all of this is to be destroyed permanently to make way for a company's capitalist dreams. The state government has taken on the role of the Jezebel and plotted the downfall of the resistance. The state government has made all the right noises proclaiming the setting up of the plan would benefit the economy of the state and create a lot of employment. The state government has resorted to the lodging of FIRS against the resistance under false pretences of goat stealing, threats and causing unrest. The violation of human right s can be summed up in the experience of Mr. Prakash Jena, who is a panchayat samiti (local governance unit) member who had arrested for 8 months, beaten up, prevented visits from his family based on an FIR lodged by a so-called-eye-witness who later admitted to lying about the incident. *He goes on to state that ‘my pain for fighting for my land was eight months in jail with no surety of tasting freedom’.* He went on to state that the local governance resolutions were not regarded as legal documents while the Supreme Court has categorically stated that the Panchayat Samiti’s have to right to refuse the land acquisition.

² King James Version: 1 Kings 21: 2

Mr. Ranjan Swain, a village representative of the PPSS³, narrates the way the economic blockade has affected his life. Prior to the economic blockade, he was engaged in the betel leaf plantation from the production to the marketing to Mumbai, Kolkata and Delhi wherein he was able to provide for his family. Now he is reconciled to the fact that he is dependent on the middle-men and their dismally low rates for the betel leaf that has ensured that a downward spiral into near debt.

Ministry of Misdemeanors

The actions of the Ministry of Environment and Forest and the state government of India with respect to this project show a scant regard for the basic norms of law, democracy and environmental protection. The government of India had conducted independent studies and in all the cases the studies revealed that there would be catastrophic effects if the POSCO plant was set up in the region affecting the bio-diversity and lives of people. The dubious role of the MoEF reveals itself when the 2 statutory commissions set up by the MoEF corroborated the existing reality recommended to withdraw the forest and environmental clearance due to non implementation of Forest Rights Act 2006 and stated very clearly that the plant and port would have catastrophic results. Though they have the proof and evidences showing that they have been living here for generations and depending on the forest land for our livelihoods, they are being asked to relocate. And only a few months later, the MoEF rescinds on its stance based on the reports and sanctions the project raising serious doubts over the independent stance based on justice and facts. The total disregard for the voices of the people and the falsification of data for their own benefit requires civil society action. The economic, political and social blockade has created undue tension in the region. Anti-POSCO protestors have not been allowed to leave the region for medical treatment, government rations have started drying up, and education for children is halting at best, with the fear of being arrested on false charges. The police dare not enter the region and the people dare not leave the region for fear of outbreak of violence. In this context, people are not fasting but are being starved to death undermining their right to life and that too with dignity.

Rise of the Alternative

The PPSS was started in 2005 as a form of resistance to the land acquisition. It has gathered force through the public awareness initiatives, foot marches, public discourses and protest rallies. The Anti-POSCO movement is taking a turn for the worse as the government along with the Pro-POSCO faction are entering the demarcated villages of Nuagaon and Gudurigaon and proceeding with the land acquisition. On 21st and 23rd February, 2011, the gram Sabha (Village Council meeting) was conducted separately at the village Dinkia and Govindpur and passed resolutions opposing the POSCO project. We have also made fresh

³ Posco Pratirodh Sanghram Samiti, a local people's organization that is resisting the setting up of the POSCO plant.

claim under the Forest Rights Act 2006 to regularize our land. Despite of all our claim and concrete evidences, the government of Odisha is ignoring our rightful claims and recognizing us as other traditional forest dwellers (OTFD). It is a clear violation of the forest rights act and has trampled on the authority of the gram sabha, the foundation of democratic decision-making in the country. The MoU has expired and there has been no process of renewal. There is an effort by the government to conduct a global positioning survey to re-define the land holding patterns of the community which would reduce the land holding patterns of the farmers. At the same time, the PPSS acknowledges that the forces working against them are bigger and stronger and they need the support of the people of Korea to withdraw the POSCO project from that site and re-locate to a less disastrous location.

In this context, Elijah the prophet, on the instruction from the Living and Transformative God, admonishes King Ahab for his deeds threatening him with dire consequences. Today, the same Living and Transformative God is speaking to you and to me, as was with Elijah, to admonish the government of India, state government of Orissa and POSCO for attempting to kill 4000 families and for conspiring to destroy the integrity of creation. For when we stand up for justice, the blessings will be showered on our children. But if we fail to follow God's instruction and stand up for the poor and marginalized, our children will surely face the wrath of God for our acts of omission. So the question before us is: whether we will answer the call of our Creator God and advocate for the voiceless in Orissa or are we going to sit back and invite the wrath of God on our future generations?

We appeal to the churches, civil society organizations and like-minded individuals to 1) kindly apply pressure on the Korean government to reconsider its decision to set up a port and plant in Gobindopur, Orissa 2) to relocate the plant and port to another location that would not destroy the live of man, flora and fauna.

TOWARDS COLLECTIVE CHANGE AND TRANSFORMATION

Bibhudutta Sahu

Program Facilitator / Team Leader

CNI-RCSA in Odisha

1st Floor, Plot No. 27,

Gayatri Vihar, Nr. CSpur Police Station,

Chandrasekharpur,

Bhubaneswar, Orissa

India – 751024

Ph/Fax: 06742741622

E-mail: cnircsa.odisha@gmail.com

Website: www.cnisbss.org