

Public Hearings Opera

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Public Hearings for Environmental Clearance of various Developmental Projects was made mandatory under the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) notification in 1997. Public Hearings allow for people's participation in the decision making of developmental projects and is the only opportunity for people to raise their concerns about the proposed project. It is the responsibility of the State Pollution Control Board (SPCB) to call for a public hearing when a project is proposed in an area.

The story of UCIL-Jaduguda and the struggle of the mostly Santal Adivasi People against the company is not unknown to the general public. UCIL has been operating for over four decades now. Many of the social problems like the just compensation for the land acquired, cost of medical treatment for radiation-caused illnesses among the workers and the local population, contamination of land, water and air have not been addressed at all.

People have been demanding (a) no new uranium mine (b) bring the existing mine under the international safety guide lines (c) return of tribal land acquired earlier, but not utilized for mining (d) provide livelihood and rehabilitation to the displaced people (e) clean up of the contamination (f) an independent study about the environmental contamination and health effects among the people (g) continuous monitoring of the water bodies to ensure that the radionuclides do not seep into the aquifer, the life line of more than 100,000 people.

The 'Public Hearing' on 26 May 09: This hearing was held to get the people's consent for a capacity addition of 20% (from current 2020 tpd to 2500 tpd or uranium ore to be milled) and for another tailing pond to house the radioactive mill tailing. The total tailing that will be let off in the pond will be about 850,000 tons per year. About 15 acres of forest land has also been sought for these.

As per the law, the venue of the meeting should be near the affected communities. But on 26th it was held in the UCIL colony whereas the affected people are not usually even allowed to enter. However, the affected Santal tribal people together with their organisation Jharkhandis Organisation Against Radiation (JOAR) wanted to enter the hall, they were prevented by the employees of the company who had already occupied the hall.

The public hearing was held in the private land of UCIL, near the camp of the Central Industrial Security Forces. Early morning, hundreds of UCIL workers and other beneficiaries had occupied the chairs kept in the hall for the public hearing. The real public, who have lost their lands for the mines and whose health has been damaged due to radiation, had no place in the entire process. There were lots of public and there were also lots of policemen and members of different security forces. For every one person not in uniform, there was one person from the forces in uniform, some wielding batons, others with rifles and some in riot gear. Though most of the workers are exposed to dangerous levels of radiation, most of them consider themselves fortunate and lucky. That is quite expected in a country where the wage rates/returns in farming is very low and there is not any other job opportunity.

At around 11 AM, the General Manager of UCIL read out a document listing the details of the project. The presentation by the general manger lasted for about 30 minutes. After this, the organizers announced the names of the speakers from the 'public'. Everybody was unanimous on one issue – UCIL provides jobs, food, clothing and houses. All talks about radiation is anti-national propaganda. UCIL has to be protected at any cost. There is no need to hear any viewpoint which is against the interests of the company.

JOAR and other organizations fighting on environmental issues related to radiation, livelihood issues related to loss of land due to mines and contamination of farmlands and water bodies decided to boycott the drama called public hearing, as there was no possibility of presenting the view of the affected people.

“When compared with hunger, pollution is a small issue” is the slogan raised by the workers and other employees of UCIL. Is this the mental attitude to which the ruling class in India is bringing the poor and downtrodden in India? Such an attitude would in the long run prove disastrous. If allowed to continue, pollution will become a bigger killer than hunger itself. □□