

January 16, 2022

To,
Mr. Naveen Patnaik,
Chief Minister of Odisha
Bhubaneswar, Odisha

Subject: Brutal lathi-charge, illegal arrest and custodial torture of human rights defenders for protesters in Dhinkia panchayat, Jagatsinghpur district.

Respected Sir,

We want to bring to your urgent notice our concern on the ongoing crackdown on the peacefully protesting villagers of Dhinkia, Jagatsinghpur District. They have been protesting to preserve their land and resources threatened by acquisition for the steel plant planned by Jindal Steel Works Ltd (JSW), ever since the project was proposed in 2017, after the South-Korean corporate POSCO withdrew.

The Civil Society Forum on Human Rights (CSFHR), Human Rights Defenders Alert – India (HRDA) and Indian Social Action Forum (INSAF) jointly undertook a fact finding on December 18, 2021, on the repeated crackdowns reported from Dhinkia. It was found that there were several fabricated charges and attempted arrests of prominent anti-displacement campaigner Mr. Debendra Swain, his family members and other residents of Dhinkia. Police has been unnecessarily harassing local activists and residents, often misusing their powers and provisions of the law, to silence the anti-displacement movement. We are pained to state that our fact finding revealed that the representatives of administration, police and JSW, have acted like goons and destroyed betel vines and other cash crops, causing severe economic damage to the villagers. The local administration and police has turned Dhinkia into a high security zone and placed three pickets with people requiring to produce Aadhar Cards for movement. A copy of the report is annexed here for your kind reference.

On January 12, 2022, the Odisha Industrial Infrastructure Development Corporation (OIIDC) began constructing a boundary wall around the project site with the help of workers hired from outside. Local residents held a demonstration against this and also appealed for support from other civil society groups in Odisha. On January 14, 2022, villagers of Dhinkia organised a peaceful rally demanding a complete halt to the demolition of their betel vines and removal of police pickets from around their village. Around 1.30 PM, when the rally was passing through the village road, it was intercepted by a large, mostly male, police force in riot gear. Police launched an indiscriminate assault on protestors without providing any warning, mostly on women who were leading the protests. Videos captured by locals show police charging at protestors and striking heavy blows on them with their batons and injuring about 30 villagers. Several activists, including women, elderly and children were seriously injured in the indiscriminate lathi charge. It is alleged that more than 1000 policemen entered homes and continued to suppress the situation with force.

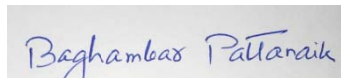
Police arrested local movement leaders Mr. Debendra Swain and Mr. Muralidhar Sahoo, prominent social activist Mr. Narendra Mohanty and three others and an FIR No. 21/2022 was filed at the Abhaychandpur PS. They charged them under the Indian Penal Code Sections 147, 148, 323, 294, 324, 354, 336, 325, 353, 332, 307, 379, 427, 506, 186, 149, Section 7 of the Criminal Law (amendment) Ordinance, 1944 and Section 4 of the Public Property (Prevention of Damage) Act 1985.

There are multiple inputs we have, confirming custodial torture of the arrested human rights defenders. We are extremely concerned for their safety and well-being. The fact that they were produced at 2 AM before a magistrate, when they can have no access to a lawyer, family members, friends and media, and sent to judicial custody, raise serious doubts on the conduct of the local police.

We seek your urgent intervention in the above-mentioned incident of the brutal crackdown on peaceful protestors in Dinkia, wrongful arrest of human rights defenders and them being subjected to custodial torture. We demand that the cases against human rights defenders are immediately withdrawn and a high-level enquiry is ordered into the conduct of the police in Dinkia.

We thank you in anticipation.

Your Sincerely,



Baghambar Pattnaik
President
Civil Society Forum on
Human Rights



Henri Tiphagne
National Working
Secretary
Human Rights Defenders
Alert – India



Vidya Dinker
National President
Indian Social Action
Forum

Annexure: Fact Finding Report – Crackdown on Protestors and HRDs Opposing JSW Plant
in Dinkia, Odisha

Copy to:

National Human Rights Commission
Orissa State Human Rights Commission
District Magistrate, Jagatsinghpur