Doubtful Intentions

A Fact-finding Report on Nagada Child Deaths
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Nagada village in Jajpur district, Odisha hit the headlines of major news media due to continuous child deaths during the period July–August, 2016. The fact-finding team reports that malnutrition made the children vulnerable to such diseases and instant deaths.

Nagada village in Chingudipala Panchayat of Sukinda block, Jajpur district, Odisha caught the headlines of the state and national media due to continuous child deaths during the period July–August 2016. A six-member team of the Ganatantrik Adhikar Suraksha Sangathan visited the place on 4 February 2017 to inquire into the ongoing state programmes addressing malnutrition in Nagada village. The team also visited the neighbouring villages of Upara Nagada, Majhi Nagada, Tala Nagada and Naliadaba in Chingudipala panchayat. Later, our team went to Malkangiri district where more than hundred children died in just a few months, owing to Japanese Encephalitis (JE). This article provides the preliminary findings of the team from the above visits.

In July 2016, the two-month old son of Laxmi Pradhan of Tala Nagada village developed red boils all over his body and face followed by heavy fever, diarrhea and vomiting. The child stopped breastfeeding and died within 48 hours. Similar symptoms were noticed in other children of the same age group (2 months–4 years) in the hamlets of Tala Nagada and Majhi Nagada. Within a few weeks, the disease spread to a number of children and most of them died within two to three days of developing symptoms. The state government confirmed a total number of 19 such child deaths. The team concurs that malnutrition made the children vulnerable to such diseases and instant deaths.

Figure 1: Nagada Village, Chingudipala Panchayat, Jajpur district, Odisha
Whilst speaking with the women of these hamlets, it was discovered that the flagship pulse-polio programme of the Government of India was yet to reach Nagada as of 2016. It is only when the state government came under severe criticism for its negligence and apathy over the child-deaths that two mini-anganwadi centres had been opened in the said village. Laxmi and Kamala Pradhan of Nagada village, parents of one of the deceased children, had been assigned with the work of food distribution in the anganwadi centre without any formal training. The government is yet to post a permanent anganwadi worker to the village.

**Figure 2: A Woman with Her Child in Upara Nagada Village, Chingudipala Panchayat**

Chief Minister of Odisha Naveen Patnaik instituted a task force comprising various...
bureaucrats to address the situation. As part of the task force, Bishal Kumar Dev, Secretary of the Department of Women and Child Development had proclaimed that health camps would run permanently at Nagada. But the fact-finding team did not find any such health camp. At the time of the team’s visit, there were resident women and children suffering from fever without the possibility of any medical attention. The nearest government-run medical facility, a Community Health Centre, is at the Sukinda block headquarters, 50 kms away from the village. The only “nutrition centre” which had been opened at the Tata Mines Nursing Home, Kaliapani in August with the help of the government was discontinued in October 2016. Manoj Ahuja, Principal Secretary of Agriculture and Cooperation, Odisha, had announced that the monthly rations including rice and kerosene to the residents of Nagada village would be doubled. While this was operationalised for two months, it stopped in October 2016. The villagers reported that they were only getting 5 kg of rice per head under the new food security programme.

The intentions and desire of the state government in addressing the problems of Nagada village are questionable. Nagada is a revenue village with its latest survey and settlement last carried out in the 1980s. As per the record of rights, out of a total of 761.45 acres of geographical area only 19.38 acres of land have been designated as private land whereas 618.6 acres have been classified as forestland. The Juanga tribals fall under the category of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). When the government’s negligence in the implementation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA) came into question in the context of the above child deaths, the revenue department hastily initiated the process of the distribution of land titles under the act. The team’s investigation revealed that a few families had received eight decimals of land as homestead in the Sal forest albeit all with the same account number 6 and plot number 174. Those families failed to identify which land belongs to whom when the team members enquired, unravelling the claims of the revenue department. On the one hand, the government claims that it is encouraging Juanga tribals to adopt agriculture as their main livelihood but on the other, it has not given/distributed land pattas (titles) properly. As per the FRA, the families of Nagada are entitled to get 8–10 acres of forestland for cultivation. The villagers also expressed that they depend on the forest for 8–9 months for their livelihood. In their own words, they are attached to the forest “like the head and stomach of a human being.” They gather a variety of roots, fruits and leaves which they showed the team. But the government has not yet given community rights to the villagers over their own forestland.

**Figure 3: Connecting Road from Kaliapani Mines to NALCO Nagar via Nagada Village**
Despite their classification as PVTG, the Juanga tribes have not received any special attention for the protection of their social and cultural life. Rather both central and state governments have started endangering the life and health of the tribals by making false claims of trying to mitigate malnutrition problems of Juangas and provide medical care. Simultaneously, the state department of rural development has drawn up a mega plan of making a two-lane road of 10-14 metres width inside the Harichanpur Telekoi Reserved Forest area. The contractors, appointed for the construction of the road, have already uprooted hundreds of big trees to make way for the road, which would have been the livelihood of these Juangas. This road will pass through the hamlets of Nagada. While the villagers require a village road for all seasons, what has instead been sanctioned by the government is a bigger road connecting the Kaliapani chromite mines to Angul NALCO aluminium city through Kamakhaprasad. This plan entails an investment of crores of rupees by both the rural development ministries of the Government of India and Government of Odisha with an 80:20 ratio of expenses.

**Figure 4: Connecting Road from Kaliapani Mines to NALCO Nagar via Nagada Village**
At different occasions, state officials have entreated the Juangas to have faith in the government’s policies and to leave the forests. They persuaded the tribals to come down to the plain areas and settle near the mining sites. Prafulla Ghadai, a senior political leader in Odisha, said in a TV interview, “the Juanga tribals of Nagada are partly responsible (for the present plight) because they have been persuaded to go to the plain areas. They will be provided with houses and land. But they are refusing.” The question that comes to mind here concerns the government’s failure to rehabilitate 4,00,000 tribals displaced by different mega projects in Odisha, including the Hirakud Dam. The tribals of Kalinga Nagar, industrial area of the same Jajpur district, are running between pillar to post to get justice. What sense does it, then, make for the Juangas to leave their forest?

**Figure 5: Cutting of Trees Inside the Reserved Forest for a Road Construction Project**
The members of the fact-finding team doubt the intentions of the government in constructing roads inside the reserved forest. There are 12 companies which have been operating 13 chromite mines in a 15–20 km radius of Nagada for the last 40 years. These mines include the Sukinda Chromite Mine of Tata Steel; Jindal Chromite Mines; Balasore Alloys belonging to the Birlas; Indian Metals and Ferro Alloys (IMFA); the Sukinda Mines, Kaliapani Mines and Dhaneswar Mines of the Odisha Mining Corporation, a government of Odisha unit; Infrastructure Development Company Limited (IDCOL); Mishrinal Chromite Mines; and B C Mohanty and Sons Chromite Mines; etc. On the one hand, these companies have not done anything for the development of the region—be it the most common activity of supporting plantations or the more committal, running a healthcare unit. On the other, the government claims to be “addressing the malnutrition problem” by constructing a wider road for the industrial development of the area. It is highly objectionable that even today the Government of Odisha has failed to open an anganwadi centre, a primary school and/or a primary health centre in Nagada. If this continues, the Juanga villages will last in the vicinity for long. They will be uprooted from their villages soon.

At this juncture, the fact-finding team demands,

1 Every human being has a right to get proper drinking water, healthcare and educational facilities. These should be provided immediately to the Nagada villagers.

2 The two-lane road construction work should be stopped and instead, a village road should be constructed.

3 More fruit trees should be planted inside the reserved forest which could be useful for the Juangas.

4 The government should distribute forest pattas after conducting a pailisabha (village
meeting) and the villagers should be provided with community forest rights under the FRA as well.

5 The government should stop giving new mining leases and review the work of existing mines with a priority to check industrial pollution and lifestyle of existing Juanga tribals.

We hope that the government would give respect to the fifth schedule of the Constitution and change its stance of disregard and exploitation of the resident Adivasis.