

A new port at Dhamra

(Based on news reports and a note from Banka Behary Das, Orissa Krushak Mahasangh, Parivesh Bhavan, 14, Ashok Nagar, Bhubaneswar 751009. India)

The Dhamra port project in Orissa is on the verge of getting environmental clearance from the Union Government. The clearance will be granted by the Empowered Committee for Environmental Clearance of the Ministry of Surface Transport. In a recent amendment to the CRZ rules, the MoST can grant clearance for coastal development projects if (1) the port is within existing port limits (2) the coastal zone is not CRZ 1, and (3) it is the expansion of existing port. In this instance, the government have taken advantage of the fact that a port existed at Dhamra in the 19th century and early part of the 20th century. Currently, the 'port' at Dhamra is little more than a fishing jetty. It is absurd that this proposal involving a highly sensitive area has not been passed through the Ministry of Environment and Forests.

The all weather, deep water, modern bulk terminal port is being built by the International Seaports Private Limited, a joint venture of between Precious Shipping Company Ltd of Thailand, Stevedoring Services of USA, and Larson & Toubro Ltd. The port area will occupy 900 acres, and will have a total berth length of 550 metres. The 62.5 km rail corridor to Bhadrak will be 200 metres wide, and include a railway, a highway and land development, occupying 3000 acres. The facility will cater to bulk cargo like coking coal and iron ore and the ultimate capacity will be 25,000 tons per annum. The 1200 crore project is being developed and operated on a Build, Own, Operate, Share and Transfer Basis (BOOST) and the Concession

Agreement has been signed with the Government of Orissa.

The port area and the rail corridor adjoin the Bhitarkanika National Park and the port site is part of the proposed extension of the Park. Needless to say, increased shipping activity in this area would be extremely damaging to the mangrove forests, which are the last of the remaining mangroves on the Orissa coast. While it may be true that coastal development in Orissa indeed calls for the construction of such a port, it is not at all clear that it needs to be at this particular site. In fact, there are studies which indicate that other sites along the coast may be suitable for the construction of the port. It is quite evident that ecological costs have not been factored into the equation. The developers and the Government have also taken advantage of the fact that the area in question is economically backward and the port would have the support of the local people.

Apart from the ecological importance of Bhitarkanika, the sea turtle rookery at Gahirmatha is a part of India's natural heritage that deserves every consideration possible. As it is the largest rookery in the world, conservationists and ecologists the world over would call for any effort or measure required to protect this population. There is an urgent need for the port construction to be reviewed with detailed environmental impact assessment studies. Neither Bhitarkanika nor the Olive Ridleys can be compromised. The port must simply stop or go elsewhere.

Those who wish to voice their concern can write to:
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