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Nalco offload move adds to anti-Centre mood in Orissa

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BHUBANESWAR: Centre-bashing has become a pastime for politicians in Orissa. And, the Centre, too, seems to be handing it to them on a platter, what with its continued neglect of the state.

Last week, the political atmosphere in Orissa heated up even more when Union coal minister Shibu Soren hinted that royalty revision was not coming forth immediately, even though it had been delayed by almost a year.

To add to this, tempers flew high when the Union mines ministry approved the proposal for 10% disinvestment in Nalco. As such, the people of Orissa have been feeling betrayed because of the shifting of the National Institute of Science (NIS) to another state, and the proposed All India Institute of Medical Science not taking shape. They are also not happy with the Centre for the delay in setting up the much-hyped Paradip Oil Refinery.

Interestingly, Orissa witnessed a series of protests and demonstrations on the issue of the Centre's neglect. State chief minister, Naveen Patnaik, took Mr Soren head-on over the issue of coal royalty revision. "We have raised the issue with the Centre several times", he said. In fact, coal royalty on selected grades have increased 132 times between 1971 and 2002 but in case of power grade coal (E&F), mostly available in Orissa, the hike was 38 times during this period. That is the reason why Orissa has been losing about Rs 100 crore every year. According to one estimate, the highest royalty rate was just 11.76% over the lowest royalty rate in 1971. At present, it is over 300%.

Even before the wordy-duel between Mr Soren and Mr Patnaik could die down, the din over Nalco disinvestment started. The state was quick to disapprove the Centre's move.

"Nalco is making a huge profit and if the Union mines ministry is so keen on its expansion, this can be funded from out of its profit," Mr Patnaik argued. The state government has found an ally in Communist Party of India general secretary, AB Bardhan.

BJP activists, too, demonstrated in front of Nalco's corporate office here, burning effigies of Congress president Sonia Gandhi and Prime minister Manmohan Singh. The tone for this was set by BJP national leader, Sushma Swaraj's recent visit to the state, when she raked up the issue of AIIMS.

Union labour minister Chandra Skekhar Sahu, too, had to face a hostile media as he failed to convince them on the issue of the Paradip Oil Refinery project and the NIS.

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