
India: Indigenous movement in Jharkhand challenge plans for industrial development that threatens to destroy Adivasi forests, farmlands and way of life

Like State governments in many other parts of India, the government of Jharkhand State is planning large-scale industrial expansion across the entire region in the name of “development” and “poverty reduction”. To the dismay and disillusionment of mass movements in Jharkhand, newly elected government officials plan to uphold agreements struck by the previous State government with leading steel and mining companies. In return for 169198 Crore Rupees (c. US\$3.8 billion) of investment, these agreements promise companies massive land acquisition, which will deforest no less than 57,000 hectares of forest and displace 9,615 families, many of them located in legally protected Scheduled Areas set aside for indigenous Adivasi peoples in the State.

In Ranchi District, for example, the UK-based company Arcelor Mittal plans to take over tribal land and forests in Karra Block to develop a huge steel plant with backing from the State government. The whole plan has been developed without consultation and without the prior consent of the affected Adivasi people – in direct violation of legal protections for indigenous peoples, including the 5th Schedule, the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (1908) and the Samata Judgement.

In the last two years indigenous and mass social movements in Jharkhand, have mobilised to challenge these official plans for massive industrial development across the State. Peoples’ movements are categorically saying ‘no’ to industry-related displacement and they reject interference in their local affairs and decision-making by company “community liaison officers” or political party activists and politicians.

In Karra Block, the Adivasi people have started a campaign to save their traditional lands and forest and have formed a campaign organisation called Ottehasa Horo Sangathan (Organization of People of the Earth). Udikel village is one of the 144 communities threatened with displacement where the people have organised themselves to oppose top-down development.

Nandi Pahan, leader of Udikel Panchayat, affirms that his community will never exchange their forests and fields for industrial development:

"Everything is here on our traditional land: our homes, our fields, our forests, our burial grounds and ceremonial sites. This land is sacred for us. This is where we hold our Baha (flower feast) festival and other ceremonies. The forest has our special sarna 'prayer places'. So, our land is part of our way of life. We will not give up our land. If we surrender our lands: what will we eat? Where will go to plant our crops?"

He is backed up by other leaders of the community:

"The forest is of great importance to us. We gather fruits like karanj from the forest and medicines. We collect minor forest produce for sale. We have our orchards where we grow mangoes and

tamarind. We use the forest to get construction materials for our houses and to make tools, including our agricultural implements. How can a factory replace all this? It is our culture and our livelihood. We cannot and will not give up this land." [Devar Pahan, Udikel Village]

In Seraikella Karshwan District mining and steel companies have put pressure on Adivasi villages to give up their traditional lands and forests for "development". No less than 39 villages in 4 Panchayats in the District report that Company agents have visited them in recent years to try to persuade them to give up their forests for mining. Dalbhanga Panchayat, for example, has been under constant pressure to open its lands up to limestone mining and has only stopped harassment by company agents following a massive protest rally against the proposed mine. In Rugudi Panchayat, Magila L Phonta Ltd has applied for a permit to mine gold that would affect Ramdih and Mutugarha villages.

Here too, villagers have opposed these plans and rejected approaches from company agents, partly by organising numerous rallies in 2005 and 2006 to protest against unwanted mining development on their lands.

"We do not want to surrender our land and customary rights to anybody – whether it is the government or private companies. Our land and our forest are the source of life for our communities. For us, the forest and the land is everything! We will never allow companies or the State to take them away from us!" [Mangal Singh, Batani village, Torandih Panchayat]

"If the mining companies come this place will become like Kolapani Island (remote and lonely): it will be like hell. It will become a miserable place. All the greenery will be gone and our land will be lost. Our health will be damaged and our medicinal plants will be destroyed. The company may promise to replace our forest, but these will be poisonous trees that will suck the water from our land. Those trees (eucalyptus) are no use to anyone here. Not to humans and not to animals. This is why we will not give up our rights." [Ghopal Singh Munda, Siyadia village, Rugudi Panchayat, Buchei Block, Bakas Mundari Khuntkatti and General Secretary of Samiti Rakshe Evam Vikas]

For more information on threats to forests and indigenous and mass movement opposition to mining and industrial development in Jharkhand, contact Sanjay Bosu Mullick of Jharkhand Save the Forest Movement, email: rch_sanjay@sanchart.in, and Tom Griffiths, Forest Peoples Programme, email: tom@forestpeoples.org. See also a more detailed article with pictures at http://www.forestpeoples.org/documents/asia_pacific/india_jharkhand_feb07_eng.pdf