

Adivasis on the March - Crisis and Cultural Genocide in Tribal India, with Glimpses of Alternative Paths

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India's tribal people are in ferment after a Supreme Court (SC) judgment in February 2019 ordered eviction of over a million tribal families from traditional lands where claims under the [Forest Rights Act \(2006\)](#) have been rejected - as the majority have been, due to obstruction from forest officials and a multitude of murky [vested interests](#). [Adivasis are on the march](#) in many states, despite a stay on the [judgement asked for by the main political parties](#).

The case at the SC was brought by several conservation groups. [Yet evicting Adivasis is the last thing likely to save India's surviving forests](#). Despite hard work by hundreds of dedicated people in conjunction with thousands of tribal families battling mindless bureaucracy, government officials overall have failed outrageously to implement the Forest Rights Act, that was meant to start [correcting the massive historic injustice towards Adivasis](#).

The SC order and Adivasi reactions unfolded in February-March 2019, following vicious government repression of an Adivasi resurgence known as the Pathalgadi movement, in Jharkhand, Odisha and Chhattisgarh. Pathalgadi ('installation of stone slab') represents a highly original attempt to assert Adivasi autonomy and

control over land, territory and resources, which has been recognised through several laws, that have not been properly implemented by most state governments ([See here](#)).

The context is one of vastly [accelerating dispossession of hundreds of tribal communities in India](#); and the (often admitted) overall failure to implement the PESA (Panchayat [Extension to Scheduled Areas]) Act of 1996, that was meant to decentralise control in tribal areas, giving tribal people the real autonomy supposedly guaranteed under Schedules V & VI of India's Constitution. Similarly, the Forests Rights ACT (FRA) of 2006 was meant to correct a historic injustice by giving tribal people their due rights to the forests they have always lived in. The SC order appalled [tribal rights activists already reeling from the scale of repression](#). Government representatives failed even to appear in court to answer the highly [distorted charges brought by the 'anti-Adivasi' conservation groups](#).



Erecting megaliths is an ancient custom among many of India's tribal peoples, for commemorating the dead among other purposes. The custom of erecting *pathalgadi* stones with quotations from the Constitution or PESA Act was initiated by B.D. Sharma along with senior police officer Bandi Oraon, after PESA was passed in 1996. The practice was revived in 2016-17, in Jharkhand, Odisha and Chhattisgarh, in the face of a rising tide of looming land grabs. One part of this was an unprecedented '[Land Bank portal](#)' started by the Jharkhand (and other) governments in 2016, which involved listing Adivasi common or unregistered lands, including sacred groves, as available for investors to buy. By January 2019 this Land [Bank listed over two million acres of Adivasi lands in Jharkhand](#), with a similar phenomenon [in Odisha](#), and other states.

Erecting these large, inscribed stones therefore responds to an urgent need to spread recognition of [Adivasis' legally recognised rights](#). The stones are inscribed with words from India's Constitution and the PESA Act, that delegate authority to

village councils (Gram Sabhas). By April 2018, [the Pathalgadi movement](#) was spreading fast, with its epicentre in Khunti district.

Then an event occurred in June 2018 that led to a wave of extreme repression. Several women actors were reported to have been abducted and raped on 19th June after performing at a Catholic school near Kochang village in Khunti district, and the perpetrators were said to be leaders of the Pathalgadi movement. Many elements of the story did not add up however ([See here, The Wire report](#)), and those arrested included the [school principle, who was certainly innocent, and is still jailed](#). Police kept the women under ‘protection’ for two months, with no media access, and on their release, they were reportedly told not to speak out, with death threats to them and their families if they did so. No-one who has investigated the incident closely believes that the rape really happened at all.

Extreme levels of repression

Just one week later, a police firing took place 50 kms away, after Ghagra village erected a Pathalgadi. Police were angry about the new stone, and threatened villagers with death if they erected more; supposedly, they were also searching for two of the leaders accused of the rape (Joseph Purty and John Junas Tidu, of Udburu village), as well as three Adivasi security guards, who had been abducted from an Adivasi MP’s house (that of Karia Munda in Charidih village), in a bid to insist on dialogue with the police after several Pathalgadi activists had been beaten up. The police firing took place on 26th June, when an estimated 2,000 villagers were opposing the entry of about 500 armed police into Ghagra. One man was killed, and several badly wounded. The slain Adivasi was named Birsa Munda, after the iconic leader who resisted British regulations and died in jail in 1900. This [young Birsa Munda](#) was from Chamri village, one of the first to erect Pathalgadi stones in Khunti in 2016-17.



[Repression soon became very severe](#), involving many arrests and charges brought by police against over 10,000 Pathalgadi activists. The movement has been

[branded ‘anti-national’, and Maoist-instigated](#), with revered non-tribal supporters such as [Stan Swamy targeted too](#). The climate of terror intensified with the [murder of Amit Topno](#) in December 2018, a Hindi language journalist covering the Pathalgadi movement in Khunti and its suppression, with no signs of proper investigation, let alone justice as yet.

Recently, a new spate of forced takeovers of Adivasi lands has occurred in several parts of Jharkhand, especially for a new coal-fired power plant by Adani situated in Godda district in the region known as Santhal Parganas, since this is an area where many Santals have long lived, bordering Bihar and West Bengal, in Jharkhand’s northeast corner. The siting of the power plant is planned with a view to selling energy to Bangladesh, though [the economics of the project seem unlikely to benefit rural inhabitants of Godda](#).

Inhabitants of ten villages whose land is being acquired for Adani have protested, and their protests have been suppressed. Many testify that they never assented to part with their land, despite Adani officials’ claims that government regulations have been observed in the land acquisition process. Villagers have been beaten up and their crops bulldozed, with widely circulated photos of a woman touching an Adani official’s feet, begging him not to do this. Land acquisition started in Motiya village on 16th January and 7th February 2018, bulldozing farmland of villagers who had not given their consent, and in clear violation of the Santhal Parganas Tenancy Act of 1949 (which the Jharkhand government recently tried to amend, backing down in the face of mass protests). Many villagers have testified that they were barred from attending Social Impact Assessments ‘Public Hearings’ in December 2016 in Motiya and Buxara villages, for which 2,000 police were allegedly deployed, and which were [falsely reported as if all villagers had given their consent, when they had not](#).

On 31st August 2018, Adani officials brought heavy machinery to actualise their claim on Adivasi lands around Mali village, bulldozing standing crops, on which many people’s livelihoods depended, and cutting down huge numbers of large trees within minutes, also destroying the community’s ancestral burial ground (*jang baha*), despite pleas from villagers. An adivasi woman was photographed begging an Adani official to stop the destruction, while he stands in white shirt, blue jeans and polished black shoes, refusing to respond. Afterwards, Adani officials tried to offer compensation for the destroyed *jang baha* to some villagers, who found the offer insulting, as expressed by a village woman: ‘the officials offered them to give a small piece of land near the burial ground. “They said they will give us a small piece of land and will also build a platform, where people can sit,” she said. However, the furious villagers said that it is their burial ground, not a garden.’ As for Adani’s response,

‘Some recent anti-developmental reports are surfacing, especially in the social media, which are targeting Adani’s Godda project. Obviously, instigated by vested interest, such reports lack substance, veracity and appear highly prejudiced against the Company. The reports can at best be called prejudicial and malicious since they start with a wrong premise and purport – their main objective being to thwart and undermine the attempt to put Godda on the developmental map. The reports have stooped as low to make it appear as if Adani group is colluding with the local Government to usurp

the land in Godda and damage the future of its inhabitants. It almost stops short of accusing the Company of victimizing the poor Godda lot and making the Government dance to its tune in exploiting the region. Nothing could be farther from truth.

In simple words, this news is one-sided and bereft of facts. The social media report doing rounds seethes with contempt and tries to belittle and jeopardize an honest developmental effort. On the basis of news coming from internet, social media and other sources, social media has been trying to keep the gossip mills churning with this news and also inviting newspapers to join the incriminating bandwagon. Another report was brought up, a few days back, in the social media by an Australian based international organization (NGO) with the sole purpose of stopping, spoiling and damaging the largest coal project of Australia (Carmichael Coal Project). Probably that is the reason the report emphasizes only on the project drawbacks. Such media groups have now focused on and targeted the Godda project and their only objective, it seems, is to harm the Godda project.'



Adani's 'ultra super-critical thermal power plant' is planned as one of the most efficient and 'sophisticated plants in the world'. To pacify local opposition, the company is making lavish promises of schooling and other benefits, promoting its ['on a war footing'](#).

The idea that compensation is fair or generous is [strongly repudiated by villagers](#). Since [Adani's plan for a mega-power plant near Godda](#) involves using coal brought from the company's highly contentious Carmichael mine in Australia, with electricity sold at a large profit to Bangladesh, it is to be expected that news of the injustice and opposition in Jharkhand is likely to link up with protests in Australia. Similar opposition and [extreme repression has taken place against Adivasi protestors](#) against a huge Adani coal project in Hasdeo forest in Chhattisgarh, that was cleared



by the Forest Advisory Committee in January 2019. Opposition is organized across many villages by the Hasdeo Arand Bachao Sangharsh Samiti.



This follows years of mining takeovers in many tribal areas of central India, where open-cast coalmining has devastated hundreds of square kilometers of forest, displacing hundreds of villages, despite strong Adivasi-led movements against this, for example in North Karampura valley in Hazaribagh district of Jharkhand.



As Virginius Xaxa, one of India's most respected sociology professors of tribal origin, has pointed out, depicting the Pathalgadi movement as 'anti-national' is deeply ironic, [since its aim is to disseminate the established and neglected laws of the the Indian Government.](#)

[Jharkhand's Adivasis](#) have been marching in large numbers, as have Adivasi groups in other states. It is well recognised that [tribal communities have preserved India's forests better than anyone](#), and [over 100 conservationists have joined calls for rescinding the Supreme Court order.](#)

There are too many vital struggles by tribal communities in India to summarise briefly, [including uproar on several issues in Northeast India](#), some involving mass [displacement by big dams, oil and infrastructure projects](#). Adivasis in north Odisha have [vowed to boycott the upcoming elections](#), since the main parties

are so apathetic towards their essential needs and rights. Asurs, Birhors and other members of 'Particularly Vulnerable Groups' (PVTGs) are neglected and discriminated against outrageously ([see here](#)).

Niyamgiri has witnessed escalating levels of repression, with the [arrest of Lingaraj Azad](#) on 6th March 2019, on old and spurious charges; perhaps to give impetus to Vedanta, since he has been a constant leader of the movement opposing Vedanta's attempt to mine bauxite from Niyamgiri, just above the Lanjigarh refinery. Lingaraj was [released on bail](#) five days later, after widespread protests; but a few days after this another event occurred that dented Vedanta's reputation. [On 18th March, deaths occurred in a confrontation between police and protestors](#) concerning unfair dismissal of an employee, outside the main gate of Vedanta's refinery in Lanjigarh. A Dalit employee of a Vedanta contractor, Dani Patra by name, was killed, as was a member of the Odisha Industrial Security Force, who made a lathi charge that, according to local witnesses, was completely unprovoked.





This incident highlights the extreme lack of job security among local people working for [big industrial projects](#). The Lanjigarh confrontation in March 2019 follows in a sequence of repression of Vedanta protests, exemplified in the [Thoothukudi police firing](#), in which 13 people were killed when police opened fire on about 20,000 marching protestors, demanding closure of Vedanta's notoriously polluting copper smelter. Similarly, violent suppression of labour movements for fundamental rights is reported throughout India. One poignant example is the repression against legitimate concerns at the [Maruti Suzuki car factory in Gurgaon](#), near Delhi, in which 300 workers have been sacked, over 100 jailed, and 13 condemned to life imprisonment for a murder that, according to evidence (and lack of evidence) presented in court, they never committed. In other words, extravagant promises of employment opportunities as 'development' for Adivasi villagers in Godda or anywhere else are highly unlikely to be fulfilled while labour rights in India are so curtailed.

Adani's [Godda project links materials from Australia to Bangladesh via Jharkhand](#) in a way that seems intended to prop up the Carmichael mine. Protests in Australia have focused on huge levels of pollution, with damage to the world-famous coral formations in the Great Barrier Reef, as well as takeovers of Aboriginal lands, and insecure finance. Deals made for the Godda project, involving the Jharkhand and Bangladesh Governments among many other entities, guarantee a market for the Carmichael coal and lavish profits from the [sale of Godda's electricity](#).

Adani and [Vedanta](#) are among several high profile [corporations in India who have failed to pay their taxes, electricity or water bills](#), or to [repay huge bank loans](#), while [Adani electricity prices for example have risen unduly high](#).

Back in Khunti district of Jharkhand, Sukhram Munda, the headman of Kochang village, near where the alleged gang-rape took place, has spoken out courageously about how he was manipulated into signing land acquisition papers by police bringing a completely bogus case against him, while other villagers were tricked into signing land away through police gifts of sarees and dhotis. [The school](#)

[for which he donated land has been occupied by armed police](#), who are seeking more land to set up a permanent camp.

To say that tribal people are being displaced by ‘development’ compounds the [injustice](#). What is forcing the displacement is financial investment, that is making a small number of people rich by sacrificing tens of thousands of those human beings living most sustainably in ecosystems they have lived in symbiosis with for centuries, that are now getting destroyed and turned into wastelands at an unprecedented speed – ecocide unfolding alongside cultural genocide.

‘Extraction Education’

The setting up and [expansion of boarding schools for tribal children is making this cultural genocide much more intense](#), promoting an unacknowledged policy of assimilation into the mainstream, that follows very closely the pattern of [‘stolen generation’ boarding schools](#) into which indigenous children were forced throughout North America and Australia – a deeply harmful policy for which the Prime Ministers of Canada and Australia have [apologized to their indigenous citizens](#). The first ‘industrial school’ was set up for native American children near Pittsburgh in 1878.



Although this model of ‘industrial schools’ was discontinued from the 1920s, a new model of assimilation-oriented boarding schools for indigenous communities has been promoted nearly 100 years later. This time, key funding and impetus comes from extractive industry mega-corporations involved in mining and carbon/energy projects, with a missionary mindset promoting industrialization and technocratic power more than religion. This phenomenon has been termed [‘extraction education’](#) in the context of a gas project in Canada, referring to how indigenous children are

extracted from their communities, land and traditional values, in education projects that are supposed to benefit local populations, and that are funded by companies that are extracting huge quantities of carbon deposits or minerals.

The policy of assimilation through boarding schools in north America and Australia ended in the 1970s-80s. In India, boarding schools for tribal children are getting more numerous and bigger, and [recent government directives are for more boarding schools](#) and greater digitalization of education, removing learning even further from community control. In ‘Ashram schools’ for tribal children, which number several thousand and are now complemented by many more models of private and government tribal boarding schools (such as ‘Eklavya’ and Kasturba Gandhi residential schools), [it is regular practice for children to have their hair cut short on enrolment, and to be given a new Hindu name – just as they were assigned Christian names in North America](#). Traditional languages, ornaments and even religious practices are regularly banned. In many such schools, Sanskrit is taught – a wonderful, ancient language, but alien to tribal culture, while no less ancient languages such as Gondi and about 400 other tribal languages find no place in the curriculum. As a result of the humiliation and denigration associated with these languages, most show a sharp decline, even though Article 350A of India’s Constitution insists on every child’s right to be taught in their mother tongue. The result is a situation of linguistic genocide, and [‘miseducation’](#).

The world’s biggest boarding school right now is called KISS (Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences) in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, which houses about 27,000 children from all 62 of Odisha’s Scheduled Tribes (STs), and increasing numbers of tribal children from other states too.



Parents are enticed into sending their children to this distant school, even though the experience often alienates them from their families, communities and natural environment. This happens through recruitment agents throughout Odisha and beyond, with tribal development agencies, principals of local schools and even police

officials persuading parents to send their children to KISS for a free education, with extravagant promises. Use of the word ‘primitive’ to describe the Dongria Kondhs, in the KISS-Vedanta MOU for example, raises many questions about the neo-colonial ideology still being used to justify the ‘civilising mission’ of large scale boarding schools like KISS.



The screenshot shows a mobile website interface. At the top, there is a navigation menu with links: Home, About KISS, Mission & Vision, Courses, Admission, Placement, Facilities, and Achievement. The header includes the KISS logo and the tagline 'KISS - A Social Revolution A home for 25,000 tribal (indigenous) children'. To the right, it says 'KALINGA INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES (KISS) (India's Second Smartest)' and 'Organisation in Special Consultative Status with the Economic & Social Council (ECOSOC) SINCE 2015'. The main content area is titled 'KISS Signs MOU with Vedanta Foundation & Vedanta Aluminium Limited, Lanjigarh'. Below the title is a photograph of three men holding certificates during a signing ceremony. The caption below the photo reads: '24.07.2012 (L) Mr. Koustav Ratan Kundu, APV-HR, VAL-L, Vedanta, Dr. P. K. Routray, CEO, KISS and Ms. S. Chammundi GM, Vedanta Foundation at the MoU signing ceremony'. Below the photo is a section titled 'KISS Signs MOU with Vedanta Foundation & Vedanta Aluminium Limited, Lanjigarh'. The text describes the signing of a tripartite MOU between Vedanta Foundation Mumbai, Vedanta Aluminium Limited, Lanjigarh, and Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS) on 24th July 2012. It states that the MOU aims to identify tribal children in the vicinity of Vedanta Aluminium Limited, Lanjigarh (Kalahandi) for admission to KISS from Class 1 to V from the academic session 2012 onwards. The footer of the page includes the KISS logo and contact information: 'Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS) Bhubaneswar-751024, Odisha, India Tel: +91 674 2225386'.

Children at KISS are allowed home only once a year. Special foods that their families send with them back to school are confiscated from the children when they arrive in the school premises. Mobile phones through which they could keep in touch with their families are reportedly completely forbidden, and if found on children are confiscated or even broken in front of them. Since children can only go home once a year, this banning of mobiles, even to older children, who cannot phone home easily even when they fall ill, greatly accentuates children’s sense of isolation and incarceration at KISS.



The institution has won accolades from all sides for the free education on offer ‘from KG [kindergarten] to PG [post-graduate level]’, and its founder Achyuta Samanta’s claim to be doing a major social service to India’s tribal people has won him a recent award from the [National Commission for Scheduled Tribes](#). This promotion is being done by [government officials, some very senior](#), even though the model is a private one. In effect, the government is abdicating its responsibility towards education, [with day schools being closed in large numbers](#).

In addition to the cultural genocide that boarding schools are contributing to, they are also directly damaging a huge number of individual children. Thousands have died in residential schools across India and sexual abuse has been reported repeatedly from tribal boarding schools in [Odisha](#), [Chhattisgarh](#), and elsewhere.





What is particularly sinister about this trend towards large boarding schools is that much of this industrial scale, regimented schooling is being funded by the very mining companies that are seeking to grab tribal lands. Adani is setting up a tribal boarding school called '[Adani Vidya Mandir](#)' in Surguja district of Chhattisgarh, where it is grabbing tribal lands for coal mining, funded through its CSR ('corporate social responsibility'); with another project spreading computerised education in tribal schools in Godda district of Jharkhand where it is using force to acquire land for its power plant. The NMDC (National Mineral Development Corporation) that is expanding iron-ore mines and trying to set up a steel plant in south Chhattisgarh, has set up an '[Education City](#)' in Dantewada district, with several more under construction. As for KISS, it has MOU (memoranda of understanding) with Vedanta, Nalco, NMDC and Adani. [The Vedanta MOU](#), for example, promises 20,000 rupees per year from the company for every Dongria Kondh child sent to KISS for education. In other words, it looks as though tribal children are being brainwashed and alienated from their communities so as to facilitate massive further land grabs in the near future.

Quest for Alternatives

[Other educational models exist!](#) An expanding number of culturally sensitive, small-scale schools in different areas make learning fun, and use tribal languages – a multilingual model that educational research shows produces far better results for improving literacy than imposing a mainstream language from the start. Nagaland has a model in which every [village community exercises responsibility over local schools](#). [Is it possible that we can reverse the learning?](#)

K K K Loordipa school in Gumla district of Jharkhand is [revitalising use of the ancient Kurukh \(Oraon\) language](#). Imlee Mahua school in Kondagaon district of Chhattisgarh uses Gondi and Halbi alongside Hindi and English. The Muskaan

educational initiative in Bhopal working with children of the Pardhis and displaced Gond communities sees education as a political act, and uses the Pardhi and Gond languages along with Hindi.

India's Constitution, followed by Nehru's Panchsheel Declaration (1959), the Elwin and Dhebar Commission Reports (1960-62), and several vital laws, including PESA



and FRA, have all attempted to encourage autonomy in decision-making processes, devolving authority to the Gram Sabha. The Pathalgadi movement is one expression of this legitimate need and requirement under the spirit of Indian Law.

Movements for education under local control are another much-needed manifestation. It is time to stop seeing education in isolation, in set institutionalized spaces, and to start reclaiming the power of land and forests as teachers and spaces of learning. As tribal societies show us, these are embodiments of knowledge and value systems of inestimable value. Pathalgadi is a step towards assertion of self-determination and autonomy, in line with Nehru's Panchsheel (5 principles of tribal policy), by reclaiming rights to forest and land. The awakening of land-based pedagogies could further advance the realization of this goal in a holistic way.



How else can the cultural genocide be stopped? The real wealth of India's resources lies not in the raw materials that corporations are extracting very fast for huge but short-term financial gain, but in its 'human resources': ancient cultures that have maintained sustainable lifestyles, in ecosystems of immense biodiversity and cultural significance, that are being obliterated in the name of 'development'. The mainstream world needs to start learning the values of sharing and sustainability from tribal communities, while education for Adivasi children has to become something that is fun and genuinely liberating, while serving their interests and under their own communities' control.

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