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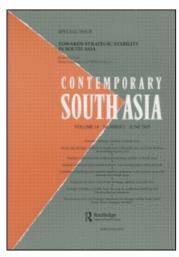
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#### **VIEWPOINT**

## Cultural genocide and the rhetoric of sustainable mining in East India

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In mining projects and metal factories proliferating in tribal areas of eastern central India, a gross disparity is evident between the dispossession and violence experienced by tribal communities on the one hand, and the rhetoric of 'sustainable development' put out by mining companies through public relations companies and the media on the other. While a large section of India's middle classes accept and identify with this rhetoric, grassroots movements of resistance to industrial displacement are gathering strength. 'Sustainable mining' is a concept promoted by mining companies through the International Council on Mining and Metals through its Mining, Minerals and Sustainable Development report. Yet long-term sustainability is the essence of the tribal communities being dispossessed of their land and resources, and a 'reality gap' exists between the rhetoric of development and events on the ground. Poverty is increasing, and 'cultural genocide' is a fitting description of the displacement process experienced by hundreds of tribal communities, while the war against the Maoists is in many ways a classic 'resource war'.

Keywords: sustainable mining; rhetoric; Orissa; Adivasis

## Is sustainable mining possible?<sup>1</sup>

Orissa and neighbouring states are witnessing a new wave of mining and metal factory-based industrialisation (Kalshian 2007). Foreign financial institutions funding these projects are gaining a stake in India's prime assets, including land, minerals and ports. Effects on tribal and other farmers involve removal from the land and an abrupt discontinuity with their past – a process amounting to cultural genocide. Alongside this is a widespread denial of the injustice and atrocities being committed – producing a kind of 'counterfeit universe' similar to that explored by Robert Lifton (1995) in his article 'Hiroshima in America: Fifty years of Denial'. The rhetoric driving this industrialisation has a history going back to eighteenth/nineteenth-century Britain, America and other countries, but is now rooted in neoliberal economics, using the rhetoric of 'sustainable development', promoted by industry lobby groups, the Department for International Development (DfID) of the UK Government, and the World Bank.

How can social anthropologists contribute to understanding this process? Apart from simply 'bearing witness' to the momentous events unfolding in India's tribal areas, our mode of analysis is to examine changes in the social structure of displaced

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communities, contrasting this with the highly dispersed and stratified social structure of the mining/metals industry. This essay draws on our anthropology of the aluminium industry, and on activist/reverse anthropology to bring forward tribal forms of knowledge as a means to conceptualise modern forms of power (Kirsch 2006, Padel and Das 2010, Padel 2010).

The whole issue of displacement is often rationalised in terms of 'poverty reduction' (Mosse 2007, 2009), when it is clear to most observers that the displacing projects are benefiting the rich and making the poor poorer.

The Kond area of central/southwest Orissa is now facing an invasion of aluminium companies, because the region's 4000-foot mountains are capped by high-quality deposits of bauxite, and form one of the world's largest deposits, in mountains whose base rock was named Khondalite after the Konds (Fox 1932, 136). This corporate invasion tramples on India's Constitution, in particular its Fifth Schedule, which guarantees tribal people certain fundamental rights, especially the non-alienability of their land, within extensive, defined areas where they predominate.

#### Cultural genocide: the attack on Adivasi social structure

Most mining projects throughout India are in tribal areas. In many ways, the patterns of mining company behaviour and rhetoric replicate patterns established during the mining-based industrial revolution in England, Wales and Scotland, along with the enclosures and highland clearances, forcing agrarian populations of the land. In contemporary India, a similar kind of impoverishment is being imposed – often in the name of reducing poverty – a similar 'Rape of the Fair Country' (Cordell 1959). Mining companies throughout East India are building metal factories to process iron, chromite, manganese and bauxite in order to produce steel and aluminium, with vast new coal mines and a new generation of coal-fired power stations accompanying these developments. Often the factories are built before mining clearance comes through, to force the granting of leases. Mining companies find that cheap labour and big subsidies on land, labour, transport, water and electricity make factories in India an attractive proposition.

Against this, local opposition has been strong, especially to mega-plans by Posco (Pohang Steel Company of South Korea), Tata and Vedanta. The corruption involved in mining projects has come increasingly under the spotlight, with several government officials arrested in a multi-crore scam in August 2009. Posco's attempt to build a steel plant and port has met determined resistance from betul-vine farmers and fishermen, whose villages of Dhinkia, Nuagaon and Gadakunjanga have been under siege by police and *goondas* (pro-company thugs) for over two years, with frequent violent episodes that culminated in the killing of a villager named Dula Mandal in June 2008.

Tata steel made its first steel plant at Jamshedpur in the 1920s, for which its first iron-ore mine deforested the mountain of Goru-Mahisani in Mayurbhanj district, north Orissa, leaving it an impoverished wasteland. North Orissa has witnessed many mountains devastated by iron mines. Tata has come under attack for the police firing that killed 13 Adivasis opposed to its steel plant at Kalinganagar in January 2006. The communities of Kalinganagar experienced another round of violent attacks at the end of March 2010 focused around a new attempt to force-start construction, this time starting with roads. This follows the Orissa Chief Minister's

first visit to Kalinganagar since the police firing (December 2009), where he publicly thanked the steel companies for paying for a new hi-tech police station, making manifest a conspicuous collusion between mining companies and police. Similar attempts to cow cultivators off their land have been witnessed at the site of Tata's proposed steel plant at Lohandiguda (Chhattisgarh), and at Singur in West Bengal, where its joint venture with Fiat to build a factory for nano-scale 'people's cars' was defeated, after numerous killings. In the early 1990s, Tata's plans for a steel plant at Gopalpur were opposed by a *Nari Sena* (women's army). Several women were killed, and several villages displaced.<sup>3</sup>

Vedanta Resources plc is a UK-registered company, set up on London's Stock Exchange in December 2003, with help from JP Morgan and other international financial houses. Among individuals instrumental in this process were: Brian Gilbertson (one of the world's highest paid mining executives who merged BHP with Billiton), who became its Executive Chairman to help this London entry; senior figures in the Indian administration, including P. Chidambaram (who resigned as Director in mid-2004 to become India's Finance Minister, and is currently Home Minister) and Naresh Chandra (ex-Home Secretary and exambassador to the United States); and Sir David Gore-Booth (ex-UK High Commissioner to India, now deceased). Vedanta's greenfield alumina refinery at Lanjigarh was built in the face of strong local protest. Next to it, Niyam Dongar stands at the northwest of the Niyamgiri range – its best forested mountain, and one of the best in India, due to protection of primary forest on its summit by the Dongria Konds, who are still classed as a Primitive Tribe. The summit is sacred to their supreme deity, Niyam Raja (Law King), in whose name they preserve a taboo on cutting forest on the summit (unlike most of the other bauxite-capped mountains). Eighty to 90% of the 660-hectare mining lease area on the summit is sal (Shorea robusta) forest.4

Each of these areas has become a battleground between people for and against the projects. Those opposing are mostly cultivators, due to lose everything in an enforced transition from farmers to industrial labourers. They are supported by activists campaigning for human/political rights and/or the environment. Many middle-class people support the projects, identifying with the idea that these projects will make Orissa a modern hub of prosperity. They are supported by an influential section of the government (politicians) and administration (bureaucrats and police), who frequently label protestors 'anti-development', 'anti-government' and 'Maoists' (for the most part quite false), while anti-project people call those pushing the projects 'anti-people', because of the authoritarian, anti-democratic means employed.

A similar division is visible in literally hundreds of areas facing enforced industrialisation, including those subject to dam-reservoir projects, such as Hirakud, Rengali, Upper Kolab and Upper Indravati, each of which displaced 40,000–250,000 people (1950s–1990s), and supply water and power to metal factories (Gitlitz 1993). In north and central Orissa, about 90 sponge iron factories are in operation and over 40 new steel factories are in various stages of construction. In addition to numerous iron-ore and coal mines (many illegal), the chromite mines at Sukinda (near Kalinganagar) are classed as among the most polluted places on earth. The only major bauxite mine is still Nalco's on Panchpat Mali (Koraput).

An estimated three million people in Orissa alone have been displaced by industry since Independence (Padel and Das 2008). About one-half of these are

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Adivasis, and one-quarter are Dalits. In the words of Bhagaban Majhi, a leader of Adivasi resistance to the Utkal alumina project in Kashipur:

We have sought an explanation from the Government about people who have already been displaced in the name of development. How many have been properly rehabilitated? You have not provided them with jobs; you have not rehabilitated them at all. How can you again displace more people? Where will you relocate them and what jobs will you give them? You tell us first. The Government has failed to answer our questions. Our fundamental question is: how can we survive if our lands are taken away from us? We are tribal farmers. We are earthworms [matiro poko]. Like fishes that die when taken out of water, a cultivator dies when his land is taken away from him. So we won't leave our land. We want permanent development.<sup>5</sup>

For Adivasis in particular, displacement means cultural genocide, because when they lose their land, every aspect of their social structure is in effect destroyed: their economy and identity, because of loss of status as self-sufficient farmers; their political structure, because from being mainly self-employed they become dependent on corporate and government hierarchies, forming a bottom rung of labourers or unemployed; their social relationships, because they cease to be a largely self-sufficient, cohesive community; their religion, because 'even our gods are destroyed' when their villages are bulldozed (in the words of a tribal woman we met in Lanjigarh just after displacement); and their material culture and spatial arrangement of villages, because these give way to 'colonies' of alien design – separate houses of concrete, not earth and wood, joined together in lines, as in a traditional village (see Padel 1998, Padel and Das 2010; Roy 2009).

The term 'genocide' was first used in 1944/45, to describe Nazi treatment of Jews (Lemkin 1944, 79–95). What is classed as genocide now is often a sensitive political issue. The classic model of genocide, however, as applied to countless tribes that were exterminated all over the continents of America and Australia, is not in dispute. 'Genocide' means killing (Latin: *caedo*) a people, race or tribe (*genus*). Examining what was involved in an American tribe's genocide, it is evident that there are two levels to what was killed: physical extermination, and the killing of a culture. US policy from the late-nineteenth century was to take over tribal territories and resettle surviving members in reservations, where they could no longer support themselves. A conscious policy of 'detribalising' them was pursued by forcibly taking children away from their families and putting them in schools where any attempt to maintain traditional customs or speak tribal languages was punished (Fenelon 1998, who prefers the term 'culturicide').

In popular usage now, 'culture' often means just 'the pretty bits', exemplified by tribal or classical dances. But its original meaning, from Latin *cultus*, refers to 'cultivation' of the soil as well as the traditions of a society ('culture'), and religion ('cult'). In other words, tribal people's economic and political systems are fundamental to their culture, and when dispossessed of their land these systems are effectively destroyed. The sacredness of nature, respect for elders' knowledge, ritual contact with the ancestors, growing their own food on family land and making their own houses and tools, exchanging food with neighbours with an egalitarian spirit: these things are swept away by corporate values, which emphasise money and financial power.

Police killings at Maikanch (December 2000, when three Adivasis protesting against the Utkal alumina project were killed) and Kalinganagar may have killed relatively few. But they symbolise a much wider, psychic death. Underlying the

cultural genocide is the invaders' total lack of respect for tribal people's traditions and connection with the land. If one takes a region such as Lanjigarh, what was until 2003 a network of mostly tribal (Kond) villages, with a slow pace of life, has been transformed into a factory several square kilometres in size, with metalled roads, a colony of displaced villages, and tribal villages around it still in place, but in a radically changed environment. Vedanta claims this as 'sustainable development', based on the large sums they have poured into Corporate Social Responsibility schemes. The reality is very different, and includes pollution on an appalling scale, intimidation of protestors, new roads with a high accident rate (numerous deaths reported in local papers) – including the unwitnessed death of a prominent tribal activist, Sukhru Majhi, run over on the road to Lanjigarh on 27 March 2005, soon after it was completed – and the timber mafia's entry into Niyamgiri.<sup>6</sup>

Stereotypes about tribal people and their areas as 'backward' and 'under-developed' are promoted as much from the Left as the Right. For example, Archana Prasad (2003) attacks positive interpretations of tribal societies and traditional practices, such as shifting cultivation. Yet the reality is that in India, as worldwide, the stereotype of the Ignoble Savage predominates (Meek 1976). Without idealising it, it is clear that traditional tribal society is characterised by a highly egalitarian spirit, which generally extends to women, as well as a claim to sustainability in the 'true' sense of sustaining over centuries without essentially damaging the natural environment. Dongria Konds' taboo on cutting trees on top of Niyam Dongar, protecting primary *sal* forest at 4000 feet, is a classic example of real sustainability.

#### Social structure and rhetoric of the mining industry

The East India Company, as one of the world's first and biggest corporations, forced a synthesis of European/British hierarchies with the caste system that compounded hierarchical tendencies in India (Padel 2010, Robins 2006).

Mining companies have a pyramid structure, from Directors down an elaborate hierarchy to the lowest rung of labourers and those displaced. Pay packages exemplify this hierarchy: from Anil Agarwal's multi-million pound Mayfair home that belonged to the Shah of Iran, to bauxite miners we have interviewed in Chhattisgarh, who have no schools or electricity, and often no compensation for accidents or land lost. Even people displaced by public-sector companies such as Nalco received inadequate compensation, and promises of employment have not been kept. <sup>7</sup> Balco offered relatively good terms when it was public sector, but after it was bought up by Sterlite in March 2001 workers staged an unprecedented 60-day strike (Bidwai 2001). We recorded interviews with Balco employees who spoke of how security of tenure collapsed when Sterlite took over.

The social structure of a mining company includes a network of deals with financial institutions (such as the London-based consortium of banks investing in Vedanta), accountancy and public relations firms, construction, transport and other companies, metal traders, and companies purchasing aluminium, which include car manufacturers, and aerospace/arms companies – among the world's most influential entities. The network of contacts includes senior bureaucrats, politicians, lawyers and police (as at Kalinganagar).

History comes full circle here, back to East India Company times. Police firings on Adivasi protestors recall Colonel Dyer's massacre in Amritsar, and in Orissa several instances during the Quit India Movement in 1942 (Pati 1993, 167–187).

In many ways, the pattern of tycoons and conglomerates in India now was set by the 'robber barons' who masterminded America's industrialisation from the midnineteenth century, simultaneously symbols of national pride and notoriety for their corruption and ruthlessness.

'Compensation' for tribal land tends to focus on lavish sums for 'tribal development', despite evidence that this is a nexus for corruption (Sainath 1996, passim). An integral part of the strong tensions existing in the project areas is the presence of goondas associated with the mining companies. Links between 'mafia' and senior bureaucrats emerged after the recent murder of a gangster in Bhubaneswar. Orchestration of violence to intimidate protestors forms a key strategy in attempts to force through industrial projects, in evidence also in dozens of 'false cases' brought against protestors in project areas (Mahapatra 1999; PUDR 2005).

Rhetoric enters through the links between mining companies and public relations companies, as well as media, often in effect 'manufacturing consent' (Chomsky and Herman 1988). Vedanta, Tata and Posco adverts are prominent in Orissa newspapers, television adverts and city bill-boards, becoming the biggest patrons in the state of dance, music, film and religious festivals, making large donations to the political parties in power, and even sponsoring a major lawyers' conference. Images of smiling tribal people are prominent in mining company adverts situated on huge billboards in Orissa's capital, Bhubaneswar, with slogans such as 'Vedanta – Mining Happiness'.

If current changes imposed on tribal people are enormous, this is not to claim there was 'no change' in previous eras. Exploitation of tribal areas and the existence of migrant labour are established features of economic life in Orissa, but most tribal people returned to a base in their villages, and did all they could to keep their land.

Dislocation by a mining company brings an uprooting and discontinuity. Moreover, traditional tribal (as well as non-tribal) values emphasise continuity, in contrast to dominant contemporary values that tend to emphasise change. The neoliberal ideology that promotes the uprooting process is advocated from the Left as well as the Right, and has become part of the new rhetoric of 'sustainable development'. Along with 'sustainable mining', this rhetoric promotes an impression of safeguarding the environment for future generations, and masks an intensification of the process of exploiting indigenous communities and taking away their land.

'Sustainable mining' rhetoric is the central theme in the Mining, Minerals and Sustainable Development process, formed by the world's leading mining companies in a collaborative process that composed an influential report in 2002 entitled 'Breaking New Ground'. This collaboration started after the Extractive Industries Review, commissioned by the World Bank, made a surprisingly strong stand on behalf of indigenous communities. The issue at stake was Free Prior Informed Consent – the idea that people threatened with displacement should be properly consulted, and have the right to refuse consent. Warning that the World Bank would not accept this, a letter from the Policy Director of DfID to the head of the Extractive Industries Review ridiculed the idea that failure to get Prior Informed Consent from an individual could be allowed to veto 'a national development package' – although what was at issue was a veto by communities (Padel and Das 2010, 448).

Overall, the past 30 years have seen a massive shift of mining industry projects from 'developed' to 'developing' countries. Thus Britain is closing coal mines, as well as its last alumina refinery in 2003, just as new refineries and smelters are promoted in Orissa. UK's DfID and the Department for Trade and Industry have vested, if well hidden, interests in Orissa's industrialisation. <sup>10</sup> An extensive recent study of the closing of aluminium plants in Europe shows the causes: high costs of labour and electricity and unacceptably high levels of pollution. <sup>11</sup> In effect, an outsourcing of metal production is taking place, since environmental and social costs cannot be as effectively hidden and externalised as in India. Nevertheless, in Norway, Canada, Brazil, Iceland, and other countries, the price of electricity used for aluminium production is hugely subsidised, and public relations campaigns have glossed over colossal environmental costs (Gitlitz 1993; Barham, Bunker, and O'Hearn 1995; Martinez-Alier 2002).

Similarly with steel. When Tata bought up Corus and Landrover/Jaguar (2007/08), there was celebration in India, seeing this as revenge for colonialism. What few realised is that these mergers – funded by large loans, just before the recession – put massive pressure on Tata's projects in India, which materialises in the violence at Singur, Kalinganagar and Lohandiguda. In terms of class analysis, Tata, Mittal and Agarwal are today's Robber Barons, merged in their interests with the ruling class in 'developed' countries even as they play on Indian nationalism.

What do mining magnates actually believe in? How do they operate? Anthropologists are in a unique position to deconstruct their belief system and rhetorical strategies, and this must form the focus of work on areas at risk such as tribal Orissa.

#### **Notes**

- This question forms part of the title of a Centre for Science and Environment (2008) study.
- 2. Hindustan Times, 13 August 2009 (Bhubaneswar).
- See Shiva and Jaffri (1998), and *Times of India*, 7 December 2007. The renewed violence
  was reported in *The Hindu*, 1 April 2010 (http://www.hindu.com/2010/04/01/stories/
  2010040156590300.htm). The Chief Minister's public thanks to steel companies for
  paying for the new police station was reported in *Times of India*, 17 December 2009.
- 4. The company's Environmental Impact Assessments have wrongly claimed there was no forest, or only 'stunted trees'. The case against Vedanta is summarised in Roger Moody (2007), and the Council on Ethics (2007) of the Norwegian Government.
- Recorded in the film Matiro Poko, Company Loko (Earth Worm, Company Man) by Amarendra and Samarendra Das (2005).
- 6. Vedanta employs two London-based mining companies: Finsbury & CO3. On Vedanta's public relations war with Survival International and other non-governmental organisations, see http://www.survival-international.org/news/3804, 'Lanjigarh to London' at actionaidindia.org, actionaidusa.org, Action Aid (AA) (2007), War on Want (2008). On Sukhra Majhi's death, see http://www.minesandcommunities.org/article.php?a=33, and PUDR (2005). Dongria prevented timber mafia removing trailer-loads of logs in July 2008
- 7. Interviews in *Matiro Poko*, see note 6.
- For example, *The Hindu*, 27 July 2009 (Bhubaneswar edition), with an account of goondas on motorbikes preventing activists from attending a Kond rally against mining Niyamgiri on 25 July 2009.
- 9. The murder of Biranchi Das on 13 April 2008 focused attention on senior Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer Priyabrata Patnaik, who had been Orissa Secretary for Industry, and had links with Biranchi, as well as his alleged killer Raja Acharya, whose arrest in Goa and links with Priyabrata are mentioned in *Kalinga Times*, 5 May 2008.

- 10. For example, the Department for Trade and Industry website advertised investment opportunities at Lanjigarh until an activist questioned this in 2005, and several UK engineering firms are involved in plans for Tata's Kalinganagar steel plant.
- 11. Aluminium Verlag study, 'Primary Aluminium Smelters of the World', July 2008.

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