Land "grabbing" in Chhattisgarh

Ekta Parishad

History of systemic exploitation

The practice of acquiring and converting forest and agricultural lands for industrial, mining and other development or "public purposes" can be traced back to the extant colonial Land Acquisition Act of 1894. And the current trends, policies and practices of a drastic pattern of industrial development at any cost are not surprising. Some of the most affected areas in India are the states of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Orissa in the central and eastern regions.

In Chhattisgarh this trend began in the early 1900s during British colonial rule when manganese, iron ore and later coal were discovered in the region, which was then called the Central Provinces. The commercial hub of this region was, and in some ways still is, Nagpur in Maharashtra, and its geographical hub, Raipur.

Seeing a great economic opportunity, the British divided the area into two sections, running a railway line (the Bengal-Nagpur Railways or BNR) out of Calcutta through Jamshedpur, Roulkela, Champa, Bilaspur, Raipur, Nagpur and on to Bombay, strategically connecting its two principal ports in the Presidencies of Bombay and Bengal via the shortest route possible.
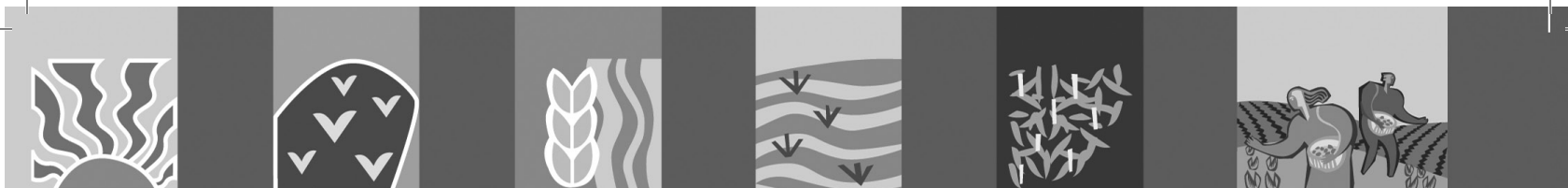
Incidentally, the Sal (*Sohera Robusta*) and Teak (*Tektona Grandis*) forests on both sides of the lines were extensively exploited to the point of nearextinction. The area's mining industry flourished with the British maintaining total control over "clean" ores like manganese and iron, leaving the "dirty" ore – coal – to be mined and delivered to power hubs by unscrupulous Indian contractors who exploited cheap labor. (The coal industry was nationalized in the late 1960s.)

It is notable that Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand States came into being simultaneously, the former on November 1 and the latter on November 15, both in 2000. There are many who trace these statehood movements to the "tribal rebellion" against the British. The British got into minor skirmishes with the tribes and, after having driven them from ore-rich land, wanted nothing more to do with these forest dwellers.

To be left alone in their mining activities, the British granted many territorial concessions, including land tenure and acknowledging their traditional self-governance. The tribal communities, also desiring peace, retreated from their traditional areas into deeper forests. After independence, this "tribal rebellion" was given socio-political status and achieved results through the formation of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand.

At present, a large, comprehensive, fairly homogenous and ecologically diverse zone of indigenous peoples in the heart of the country is being carved up into smaller units. In this era of "super development", profit motives and margins have only escalated. It seems nothing has changed from British times, except the managers. Government has come closer – from Delhi to Bhopal to Raipur – and has made the extraction process more intensive and efficient.

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The exploitative intentions and practices of vested interests notwithstanding, the decentralized governance structure can also be used by civil society for protection, conservation and regeneration efforts. However, civil society organizations (CSOs) have to effect awareness-building and mobilization at the community level, and back them up with strong and relevant documentation for advocacy at State and national levels. Moreover, to have any real change, CSOs have to integrate all localized efforts on various issues into regional and state level fora.

Chhattisgarh is a comparatively sparsely populated state, with nearly 80 % of the population in rural areas. Of the 4.5 million people in its urban areas, nearly a third live in 1300 *bastis* or slum areas. Statistics show that present and projected rates of GDP are on the rise. It is also clear that industry is treated as the State's primary sector (not agriculture). Mining is a major revenue contributor. Yet, nearly half the population of the State is below the poverty line, with half of that number coming from the Scheduled Tribes and Schedules Castes communities. The State has led the country in the number of farmers' suicide for three years in a row.

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Moreover, 40 out of the 85 Blocks in 9 out of 18 Districts in the State are practically out of bounds due to a raging Maoist insurgency. Naxalism (Marxist-Leninist) in the Bastar region was already existent even when Chhattisgarh was still part of Madhya Pradesh, but since the inception of the new state the radical ML groups have transformed into the more violent Maoist insurgents and nearly overrun half the state.

The reason for this is not merely the lack of "development" in rural areas, but the total disregard for the rights, dignity and well-being of the rural population. This is again reflected in the innumerable cases of circumventing laws to grant licenses, irrational tax exemptions and other perks to industry (including mining) on one hand, and coming down ruthlessly on protests or objection of any kind on the other. Even civil society seems to have lost all faith in the administration and political set up to deliver justice and services to the poor.

It is thus important for the State to develop a clear strategy on how to deal with corruption and allay the fears and hurt sentiments of its rural population, rather than simply relying on the insertion of development schemes, programs and components, or dealing with it as an internal security or law and order problem alone. For this, the State has to recognise the role of CSO in creating democratic space and reaching the poorest of the poor in real constructive terms. Any outreach or engagement effort must aim beyond the realm of right to land, livelihood or essential services and encompass issues of right to self-governance.

The State may be segregated into two main situational realities; one where ecology, habitat and local communities have succumbed to a developmental onslaught and are trying to cope with the disaster; and the other where rural communities are desperately engaged in defending or protecting their habitat and preventing an impending disaster. Areas free of such tension are very few.

Mining & Industry

Social & Ecological Consequences

Mining and industry are two faces of the same coin, a heavy coin for which forests and forest people most often pay the price. In this regard, Chhattisgarh is not an exception but the rule. Much of the mining and industrial activity in this region, which has been going on since British times, escaped close scrutiny partly because it was a part of the Central Provinces at that time, and later part of Madhya Pradesh, with its capital at Bhopal quite distant from the hub of such activities. It would seem that Chhattisgarh State was carved out of Madhya Pradesh not to preserve cultural identity, but to expedite the extraction of its natural resources.

According to the State's Directorate of Geology and Mining, 75,000 ha. are under mining patents. The reason is summed up succinctly enough in one of the Chhattisgarh government official websites: "Chhattisgarh, has substantial coal deposits, which led to its 'power hub' strategy… Chhattisgarh Mineral Development Corporation (CMDC), a government agency, undertakes commercial exploitation and trading of minerals in the State. CMDC welcomes partnerships with public and private sector companies, so that the natural wealth of the State is translated more efficiently into prosperity of the populace. Investors, who come into the State with a plan to add value with downstream industries, are given priority for sanctioning of Prospecting License and Mining Lease".
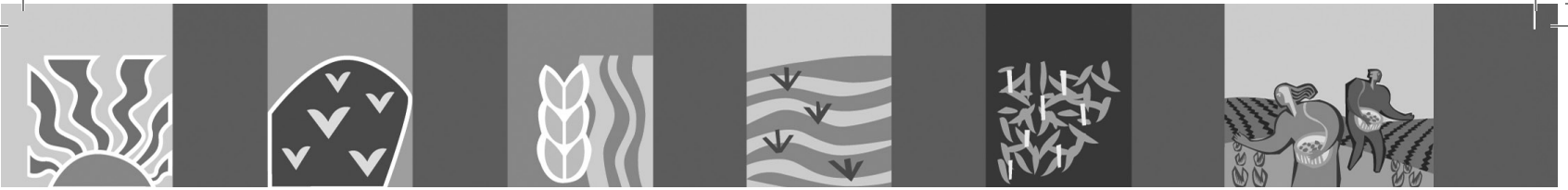
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From carelessness born of its eagerness and haste to grant licenses, the Chhattisgarh government has paid little heed to two crucial prerequisites to measure eligibility for mining licenses prescribed by the Union Ministry of Mines: the soundness of the applying company's financial resources and the company's mining experience.

To a great extent this explains the policy of turning Central India's Rice Bowl (*Dhan ka katora*) into a cauldron of 204 large industries, diverting about 13,000 ha. within 10 years of its inception in 2000.

The Chhattisgarh government has signed additional MOUs with 115 companies for 543 industrial projects. Added to existing industries on site, a whopping total of 747 projects compete in *Dhan ka katora*. According to official estimates, about 13,000 ha of forest land have been diverted to industry since 2000. These include projects granted forest clearance and those granted clearance in principle. Of the total land diverted, 97% has been for mining, yet the State earned only 12% of the value of minerals mined in the State from 2008-2009.

A State website says that "12% of India's forests are in Chhattisgarh, and 44% of the State's land is

forested. Identified as one of the richest bio-diversity habitats, the Green State of Chhattisgarh has the densest forests in India, rich in wildlife, and has over 200 non-timber forest products, with tremendous potential for value addition." According to the Forest Survey of India, Chhattisgarh lost 41.3% or 82,300 ha of its forest area between 1999 and 2007.

Recommendations & Accountability

- Communities, CSOs and peoples' organizations (POs) like Ekta Parishad will have to adopt ways to hold state, industry and investors more accountable, by pressing for policies and best practices of environmental management to rehabilitate and reclaim post-mining areas.
- CSOs and POs, which include conservation lobby groups, will have to work hard at taking a closer and more critical look at national and state mining and industrial policies to ensure compliance not only of CSR projects. They have to ensure that rehabilitation and reclamation of mine areas become mandatory. Failure to do so should be deemed a punishable offense. Policies may need to be redrafted to include a significant increase in re-investment (around 30 % of profits) in environmental regeneration work.
- No further lease or license should be granted especially to old companies unless environmental regeneration and reclamation processes are underway in old and disused mine areas. Local communities could be employed for this purpose providing long-term security with jobs that they can do with dignity instead of the false job promises touted at the beginning of every mining or industry project. In short, the regenerated areas are to be handed back to the communities in nearly the same, or even better, conditions than when they were found.
- The post-mined landscape is safe and stable from physical, geochemical and ecological perspectives.
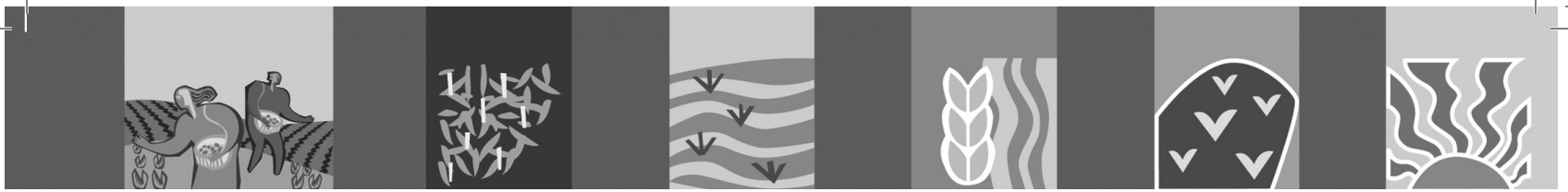
- The quality of the surrounding water resources is protected.
- The agreed sustainable post-mining land use is established and clearly defined to the satisfaction of the community and government.
- Success criteria are agreed with, monitored and reported to relevant stakeholders.

Community mobilization

- Many communities have recently realized that their land and forest are now targeted for mining. At this juncture both the organization workers and community leaders/volunteers need capacity and organization-building inputs to empower them to develop strategies for protecting their land and habitat as well as bargaining on compensation and rehabilitation issues.
- Ekta Parishad and other CSOs working with communities living close to disused or abandoned mines and quarries. These large and medium degraded areas are no longer claimed by anyone and can be reclaimed and rehabilitated by nearby communities.
- Facilitating of regional CSO exchange and sharing exercises like workshops, exposures, consultations, etc. with the aim of initiating teaching-learning processes to understand and use experience in the areas of resisting eviction for mining and/or rejuvenating already exploited mine and quarry sites.

Mobilizing Opinion and Advocacy
- Initiate policy research processes at the State level to examine the effectiveness of laws and regulations related to:
  - Acquisition and leasing of land especially preventing conversion of agriculture land;
  - Rationalizing mining operations and labor regulations;

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- Environmental and pollution control measure (including mine closure procedures);
- Rehabilitation and compensation laws; and
- Debate on the new MMR proposal of 26 percent returns to communities from mining profits.

■ Use emerging issues and demands from these research exercises for lobbying and advocacy for policy change at State and National levels and raising international consensus on these issues.

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Ekta Parishad is a non-violent social movement in India working on land and forest rights at the national level. The structural change that Ekta Parishad is calling for is complete land redistribution to enable the marginalized and downtrodden to escape poverty.