



ALCHEMY OF INIQUITY

Resistance & Repression in India's Mines

a photographic enquiry

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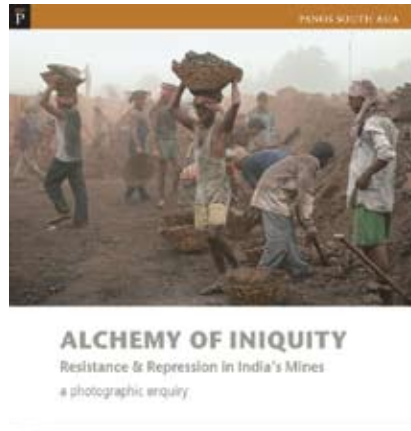
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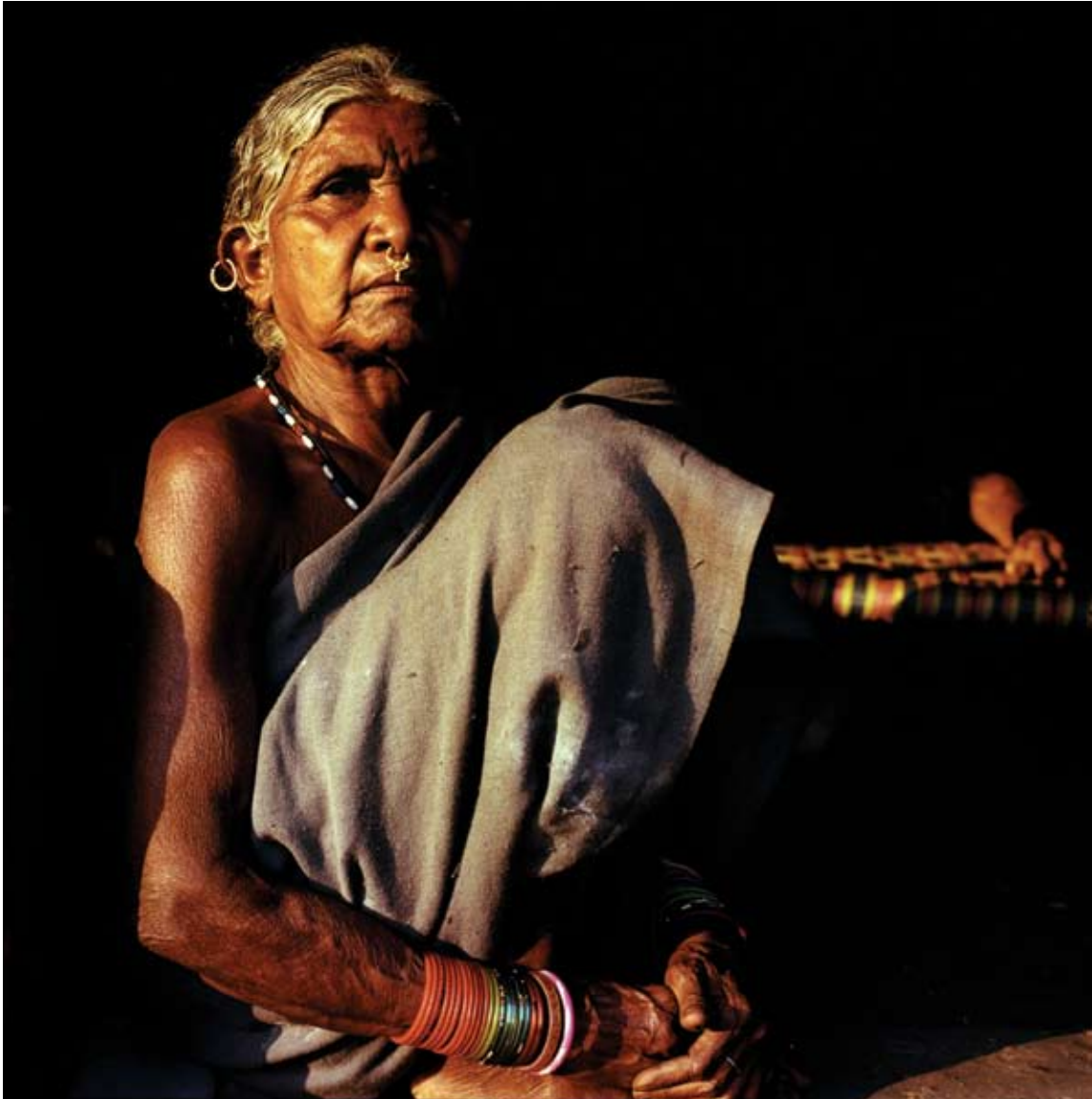


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CONTENTS

6

INTRODUCTION

12

THE ADIVASI WAY OF LIFE

34

DEVASTATION & DISPLACEMENT

80

REPRESSION & RESISTANCE

105

LIST OF PEOPLE'S STRUGGLES AGAINST MINING PROJECTS

106

PHOTOGRAPH CREDITS

INTRODUCTION

The world is once again smitten with a rake called globalisation. The long romance with socialist sweethearts having turned sour, it seems to have fallen hopelessly into the beguiling arms of *laissez faire* capitalism as the only utopia against the evils of want, decay, disease and strife.

But much as we may sing hosannas to the beatitude of the “invisible hand”, unbridled obsession with growth is ripping many vulnerable worlds asunder and spawning dystopias amidst mushrooms of affluence. Few would disagree that our epoch is aquiver with uncertainty and anxiety as never before. The old world, with its mosaic of distinctive civilisations, is crumbling under the steamroller of finance capital to pave the way for a unified global marketplace. In this brave new world presided over by Mammon, almost nothing — ideas, things, peoples, cultures, eco-systems, nation-states — seems immune to the vicissitudes of the free market. Those who refuse to

An Adivasi working on a coal waste-processing site. Having lost their lands, Adivasis in the region can look forward to little more than underpaid work as contract labourers. Bokaro district, Jharkhand, 2006.



fit into the market straitjacket are soon morphed into a parody of their original self, or condemned as pariahs in their own homes, or simply perish.

This at least has been the deplorable fate of a large number of India's indigenous communities, or Adivasis (original inhabitants, literally), as we call them. Over the last several centuries the four horsemen of the "civilising" crusade — colonialism, Christian missionaries, nationalism, Hindu revivalism — have ridden roughshod over these vulnerable cultures, leaving them battered and scattered. Now the free market has joined this horde as the fifth horseman, and together they might yet accomplish the unfinished business of assimilating the "noble savages" into the mainstream of "modern civilisation."

One of the most heartbreaking enactments of this tragedy can be seen in the three Indian states of Jharkhand, Orissa and Chhattisgarh, which together account for 25 per cent of India's Adivasi population. Although entitled to some degree of protection under the Constitution, the Indian state has regularly reneged on its promises and robbed them of their lands and livelihoods in the name of nation-building. The opening up of the economy to private and foreign capital has only ratcheted up the scale of dispossession and disenfranchisement.

More than anything else, it is the insatiable appetite for the cornucopia of minerals buried underneath the Adivasi homelands that has accursed their idyllic lives and poisoned their rivers and forests. History of mining projects in this region, as anywhere else in the world, is littered with contradictions between the rhetoric of progress and enlightenment and the reality of pain, injustice and deprivation. The gangrenous bodies around the uranium mines in Jaduguda (Jharkhand), the blighted fields around Sukinda (Orissa), the recent butchering by the police of 12 Adivasis protesting takeover of their

lands in Kalinga Nagar (Orissa), the internecine war between Maoist guerrillas and the state-sponsored Salwa Judum mercenaries in Chhattisgarh, and the mass exodus of uprooted Adivasis from their blood and poisoned-soaked hearths to venal and degrading urban hovels are just a few reminders of how the Adivasi world is being dismantled.

This book is an attempt to capture in images the starkness and poignancy of this terrible nightmare, of the mutilation of the human soul and defilement of nature, of the unconscionable abuse of state power and the amoral cupidity of finance capital.

But that doesn't describe the whole picture, for it's not all that easy for either the state or capital to completely break, alienate or co-opt the human spirit. The Adivasis have always valiantly fought back to claim what is rightfully theirs. Were it not for their dogged and heroic resistance, the mineral wealth of this region would have been totally plundered by now. The Kalinga Nagar massacre of January 2006 has only made them more resolute in their resistance to the mining juggernaut, most notably the struggle led by Dayamani Barla, a journalist activist from the Munda tribe, against Arcelor Mittal's proposed steel plant in Jharkhand's Khunti district. As the graffiti on the wall of a house declares, "we will lay down our lives but we will not part with our lands."

This visual journey into the beleaguered Adivasi universe is divided into three frames. The first gives us a glimpse of the Adivasi way of life as yet unshaken by mining tremors. It may not be an exaggeration to say that these forest-dwellers were much happier, contented, productive and creative before they were duped by the Trojan gift of development. Soon enough they found themselves bulldozed out of their Edenesque havens and shoved into the morass of modernity. Equally undoubtedly, mining has irreparably ruptured the intricately woven fabric of ecosystems that sustained a diversity of life, including the Adivasis.

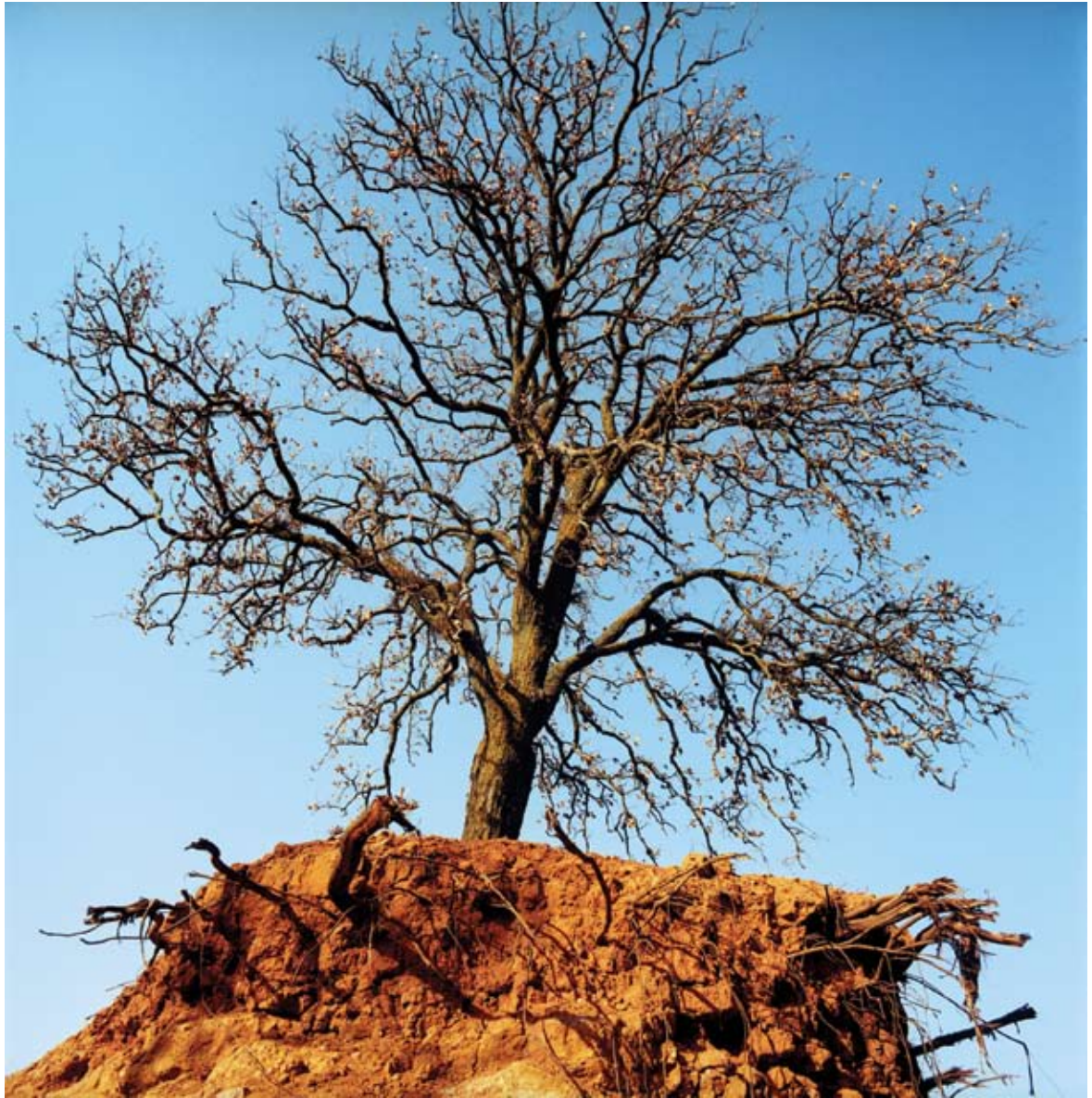
The second frame highlights the pain and ruin brought upon these people and their homes by the mining juggernaut. The aborted Mahua flowers, the poisoned rivers, the bloodied earth and blackened skies, the denuded forests, the withered bodies and tormented souls, the once gentle hearts seething with helplessness, rage and revenge — all crying witnesses to the crimes of mining projects.

The third and last frame captures the fighting spirit of a David valiantly defending his vulnerable world against a ruthless, rapacious and diabolical Goliath.

As the two antithetical worlds collide, will the Mahua tree be able to stand its own against the more powerful bulldozer? Is there no hope for an amicable co-existence in which the Adivasis have the right to determine the course of their future? This may remain a fantasy unless we “moderns” shed our stereotype of the Adivasis as “backward” and “uncivilised”, unless we recognise and respect their subsistence economy as one among many modes of existence, perhaps even more sustainable and equitable, and unless we rid ourselves of the perverse notion that free trade and technology can solve our current social and ecological crises.

It is our hope that the images in the book will in their own little way help reframe our mindsets about what it means to be “modern” without deriding the Adivasi worldview as irrational or backward.

Bauxite mining has devastated villages and forests inhabited by the Oraon and Majhi Adivasis, forcing them to leave their lands in search of livelihood. Mainpat, Surguja district of Chhattisgarh, 2007.



THE ADIVASI WAY OF LIFE



For generations the Adivasis have lived in harmony with their immediate environment. They have evolved their own peculiar sense and sensibility about nature and around which they have woven their own desires of mind, body and soul. This fine-tuned relationship is reflected and celebrated in their arts, languages, fashions, cosmologies, healing systems, languages, appetites, manners, and moral values, things that go into the making of what we might vaguely call culture or civilisation.

Though under constant assault by images and technologies from dominant cultures for centuries, the Adivasi creative spark hasn't dimmed and can still be seen in their weaves, their frescos, their coiffures, their pottery and metal-craft, their brews and potions, their music-making, their hunting expeditions, and their intuitive knowledge of other life forms, among other things. It is ironical therefore that these creative and talented people should be labelled as "unskilled". Indeed those who ridicule the Adivasis as "backward" and "jungli" are stupidly blind to the absurdity of their own hubris even as they decorate their living rooms with Adivasi handicraft.

But the delicately-woven tapestry between nature and the Adivasi way of life has been ripped time and again by outsiders of various creeds—colonialists, missionaries, capitalists, and nationalists—seeking either to "civilise" the "savages" by ordaining them into their faith (first the Christian missionaries and now the Hindutva zealots), or to plunder their rich natural treasures such as rivers, forests and minerals, or, we might add, to convert them into subaltern subjects of a political project or ideology.







Men of the Gond tribe out hunting with bows and arrows in the nearby forest. But they might soon be cast out of their hunting grounds as the advancing Bailadila iron ore mines threaten to swallow their hearth and home.

Dhurli village, Dantewada district, Chhattisgarh, 2007.





Women of the Santhal tribe earn a pittance by selling plates made from the leaves of the sal tree. A family spends more than 12 hours (6 in the morning to 6 in the evening) a day to collect one bag of sal leaves containing 1000-1200 leaves. On the second day, they stitch the leaves and make plates. On the third day, the plates are dried and made ready for binding and sale. Three days of hard labour fetches the entire family a mere sum of 10-12 rupees.

Jarwadih village, Deogarh district, Jharkhand, 2005.

(left) A tribal saucer and spoon used by the Gond tribe living in a forest village not far from the Bailadila iron ore mines. Dantewada district, Chhattisgarh, 2007.



Adivasi women gathering Mahua flowers that are used to make the local brew. The village, Donga Mahua, gets its name from the large number of Mahua trees dotting its landscape. These trees are now being poisoned by toxic fumes released by sponge iron plants mushrooming in the area. India has emerged as the largest producer of sponge iron in the world. In 2001 there were only 23 plants; today they number over 200.

Donga Mahua village, Raigarh district, Chhattisgarh, 2007.



Santhal Adivasi children return from the forest with firewood and fodder for their cattle. Forests and farmland used as commons by the Adivasis are disappearing in Jharkhand as mining activity spreads in the state.

Jarwadih village, Deogarh district, Jharkhand, 2005.



An Adivasi mother and her son lighting a fire with leaves outside a house whose walls are decorated with Adivasi art featuring spiritual animist representations.

Hazaribagh district, Jharkhand, 2005.



A member of the Malhar tribe renowned for their fine metal work, drawing on the mineral resources around them. He is making clay casts for metal (copper/brass) pots.

Kendwatoli village, Hazaribagh district, Jharkhand, 2005.



Rock art is considered to have sacred ritualistic significance and this site, dating from 7,000 to 5,000 years before the present era, is one of the finest examples in Eastern India. The Isco pictograph site is over 100 feet in length under a rock overhang and also has other deep caves. It is called *kobara* by the local Munda and Oraon indigenous people whose mud houses come within a few hundred yards of it. The motifs painted on the rock are still found in the tribal architecture of the region. It is threatened by the noise and disturbance of the Rautpara Opencast Coal Project. The project threatens to evict members of the Munda tribe. Isco village, Hazaribagh district, Jharkhand, 2005.



Traditionally animist, Adivasi communities erect megaliths as part of their belief in ancestor worship. This ancient megalith site is threatened by encroaching coal mines. Research is being carried out to ascertain whether there is a link between people who had erected megaliths across Jharkhand and present-day Adivasis. But this is being downplayed by the Indian government, which does not want to bolster the Adivasi claims of their ancestral rights to land.

Barwadih village, Latehar district, Jharkhand, 2005.



The Hindu deity Jagannath painted over an ancient megalith beside a Hindu temple. According to experts, this is one of the numerous examples of Hindus trying to supplant Adivasi beliefs with their own. Silawar village, Hazaribagh district, Jharkhand, 2005.



Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve at the Hazaribagh Roman Catholic church. Most of the congregation are Oraon Adivasi. Many Adivasis have been converted to Christianity by foreign missionaries. On the rear left wall is a painting depicting coal mining and steel mills – the unstoppable forces transforming Jharkhand.

Hazaribagh, Jharkhand, 2005.

The Adivasis, happily cocooned in the embrace of nature, and hence fragile, have always been under siege from outsiders, be it empires, religions, or nation-states. Different ideologies have tried in their own diabolical ways – from coercion to deceit to co-option – to “civilise” and assimilate them into the mainstream. Forced to occupy the treacherous middle ground between what they are and what they “should be”, their indigenous selves have been fractured and scattered irrevocably.

Of all the evils that have befallen Adivasis, none has been more pernicious than the idea of development and progress. And of the all development projects none has been more devastating for the ecology on which their lives are so precariously hung than mining and hydroelectric projects. Even the formation of new states based on a strong tribal identity, such as Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, has failed to articulate an alternative politics and ethics that respects and protects what is legitimately theirs. Indeed, the ruling political class in these states continues to cut Faustian deals with capital to mine the rich mineral wealth of the region, while the poor Adivasi valiantly resists, often in vain, the pillage of their hearths and homes.

A farmer's field facing a factory making sponge iron, an extremely polluting activity. There are about 30 such factories in a perimeter of 40 miles. Sambalpur district, Orissa, 2007.





Farming will cease if the 24 new mines which are planned, get a go-ahead, displacing 203 tribal villages. Karanpura valley, Hazaribagh district, Jharkhand, 2005.



An Adivasi settlement in the ominous shadow of a thermal power plant.

Hazaribagh district, Jharkhand, 2005.





Adivasi women walk along a railway line past the colossal Bokaro steel plant that processes much of the minerals found in the province. Bokaro district, Jharkhand, 2005.

DEVASTATION & DISPLACEMENT







Mining is inherently inimical to environment. Therefore sustainable mining, a concoction of spin-doctors in the mining business, is nothing but an oxymoron. Mining damages, disfigures, corrodes, corrupts, and eventually lays waste not only to vibrant ecosystems but also to unique cultures inextricably woven into their fabric. Ever since the British started mining coal in the Dhanbad region of present-day Jharkhand district, millions of Adivasis in the states of Orissa, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh have been uprooted from their lands and yoked into industrial slavery of all kinds. In Jharkhand alone, about one million Adivasis have fled their homes in search of a living in other parts of the country, while an equal number of outsiders have entered the region in search of work in the ever-expanding industrial-commercial complex.

A disfigured landscape in the West Bokaro coal mining region. Bokaro district, Jharkhand, 2005.



A board just outside a TISCO (Tata Iron & Steel Co) coal mine in the west Bokaro region preaching the virtues of environmental conservation. But in truth almost all mining companies are guilty of pious fraud as they cannot but put up a false facade to gloss over the devastation caused by mining.

Bokaro district, Jharkhand, 2005.



A woman and her child wash at a pond under banks of coal dust. People are forced to live amid poisoned ruins of their former homes.

Katras coal mine, Dhanbad district, Jharkhand, 2005.





Jindal coal mines that feed the extremely polluting sponge-iron plants in the region.

Donga Mahua, Raigarh district, Chhattisgarh, 2007.



The Talabira coal mines in Orissa's Sambalpur district illustrate how open-cast mining can impair natural and human endowments. Run by Birla's Hindustan Aluminium Company (HINDALCO), the mines have destroyed the beautiful sal forests, polluted the air and poisoned water bodies. The quality of life of over 140 farming families displaced from their moorings has, if anything, worsened as the lands around the mine have been rendered unfit for agriculture –almost all water bodies are covered by a fine layer of black coal-dust throughout the year. As for rehabilitation, the displaced families have been shoved into poorly designed, cramped houses and only a few men have been offered jobs in the mines.





Khageswar Rohidas, 31, a member of the Other Backward Classes, used to own 2.5 acres of land and cashew trees. He has lost everything and has been waiting for compensation for the last three years .

Talabira coal mine, Sambalpur district, Orissa, 2007.







Noamundi, in the West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand, is the iron ore capital of India. Most of the mines here are being run by the Tatas. The area is also one of the most polluted. The dust from the iron ore paints the earth and the sky red as the trucks rumble past non-stop.



Red iron ore dust from mining activity around Noamundi covers every surface affecting crops, animals and humans. Noamundi, West Singhbhum district, Jharkhand, 2007.





Thousands of trucks move incessantly every night from dusk to dawn carrying iron ore to Jharkhand's steel mills and to ports for shipment to China. When the trucks roll, all other traffic must get off the road.





Radha Bai and her alcoholic brother are from the Dhruv tribe. Now jobless, they remember the time when they used to play in the forest which no longer exists. Bailadila iron mine area, Dantewada district, Bastar, Chhattisgarh, 2007.

(left) Gond Adivasis continue to live the best they can despite the loss of their lands to the iron mine.

Bailadila iron mine area, Dantewada district, Bastar, Chhattisgarh, 2007.



Children at a Tata school staffed by volunteer teachers (mostly wives of Tata employees). Inside Tata's compound it is a different world for those who are either employees or who are allowed to attend Tata-sponsored schools and health clinics. Outside the Tata bubble, a much grimmer world confronts the majority of Adivasis displaced by mining. Jamshedpur, Jharkhand, 2005.



Known as 'Pittsburgh of India', Jamshedpur is a city that was designed by Tata to house the employees of its giant steel plant. Unfortunately almost none of the Santhals who were displaced by the steel mill received employment or compensation. Their village of Jujai Saloud at the edge of the mill is now a slum where they scrape a living by selling bits of coal gleaned from the mill's slag-heap.

Jujai Saloud slum, Jamshedpur, Jharkhand, 2005.

A mining project invariably sculpts a moonscape around it, a sort of miasmic desolation that mirrors Dante's vision of hell. Farmlands and forests falling in the mine's shadow are rendered barren, forcing farming families to become wage labourers in the underbelly of mines or cities. Mining not only scars beautiful landscapes but it also poisons bodies and blights souls. Those who live in the mine's belly and those who live off it are both constantly exposed to a deadly cocktail of emissions that engulfs everything around it.

Women and children in particular bear the brunt of this tragic rupture as they are suddenly wrenched from the cosy comfort of their traditional homes and thrown into a ruthlessly exploitative world of which they have little knowledge.





Working at a stone-crushing mill – a typical day of labour for Adivasis displaced from agricultural work.

Ichak village, Chatra district, Jharkhand, 2005.



Adivasi women carry coal while being watched by their managers who are non-Adivasi men.
Urimari village, Hazaribagh district, Jharkhand, 2005.

Families, including children, work in a small coal dump between Hazaribagh and Ranchi collecting coal to be sold in local markets earning them a few rupees a day.

Hazaribagh district, Jharkhand, 2005.









There are thousands of displaced Adivasis and poor immigrants engaged in so-called illegal mining. Often working as slaves for the coal mafia, desperate men, women and children risk their lives by scouring for coal in fiery underground mines. Others “steal” coal from coal-dumps and sell it to the “bicycle thieves”, desperate young men who haul 200-300 kg of coal over as many as 100 km so that they can make a measly Rs 250 by selling it to poor urban folk. As the terrain is undulating, they often trek in bands of 5-10 people. Most of them are in their twenties but look much older.

Men pushing bicycles laden with coal to be sold in Ranchi.

Giddi colliery, Hazaribagh district , Jharkhand, 2006.



Inhabitants of a relatively new village situated next to an abandoned mine near Hazaribagh. The villagers dig for residual coal using primitive methods.

Hazaribagh district , Jharkhand, 2006.

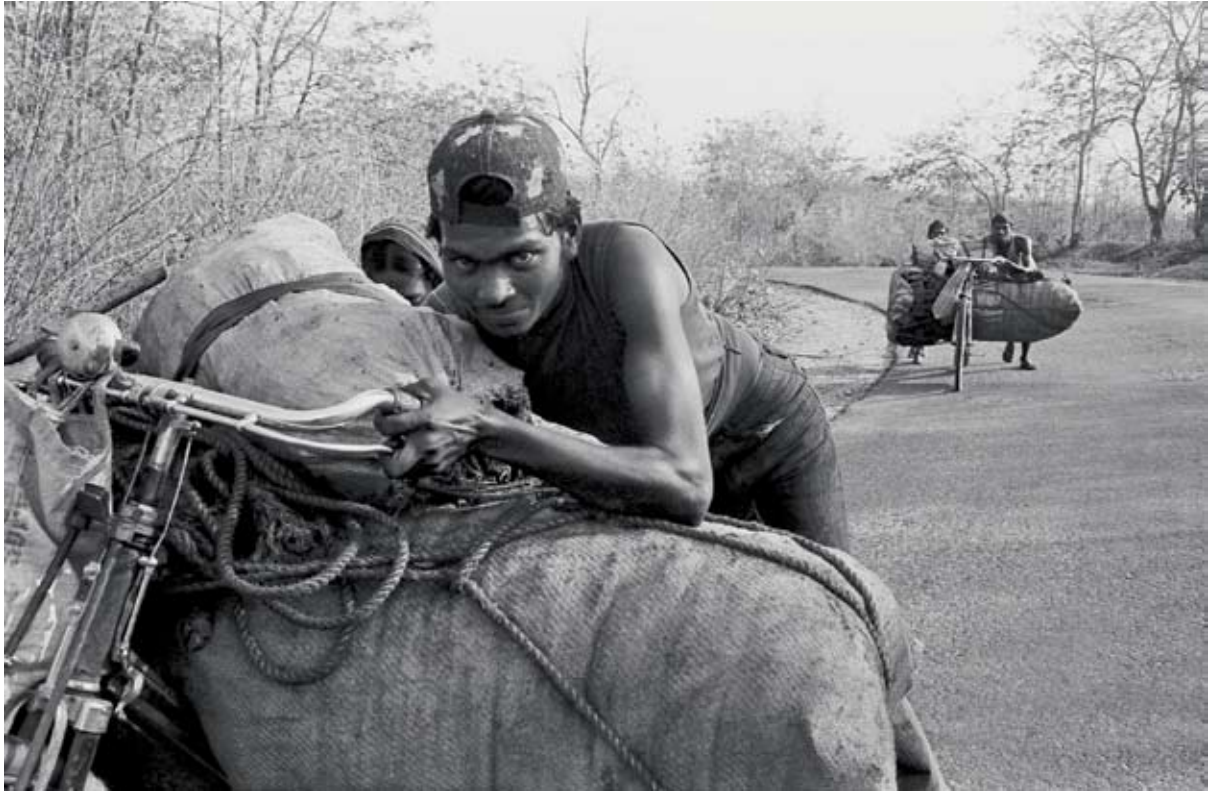






The coal scavenged at the nearby dump or disused mining site is often coked outside the villagers' homes. Bicycles are being loaded to transport the coal to Hazaribagh.

Karati village, Hazaribagh district, Jharkhand, 2006.



Villagers pushing their bicycles overloaded with sacks of coal across hilly terrain. It is an arduous journey which can take an entire day.

Hazaribagh district, Jharkhand, 2006.

Adivasis scavenging the leftovers of processed coal in a disused coal mine in the West Bokaro mining region. Bokaro district, Jharkhand, 2006.







Lodna is a village in the middle of the coal mines of Dhanbad, India's first coal city, in Jharkand. Its inhabitants, mostly migrant workers from Bihar, survive on the remains of abandoned mines and by doing small jobs. Following a major caving in of the underground galleries, the village has been evacuated. But people do not know where to go, nor have they received any help yet.





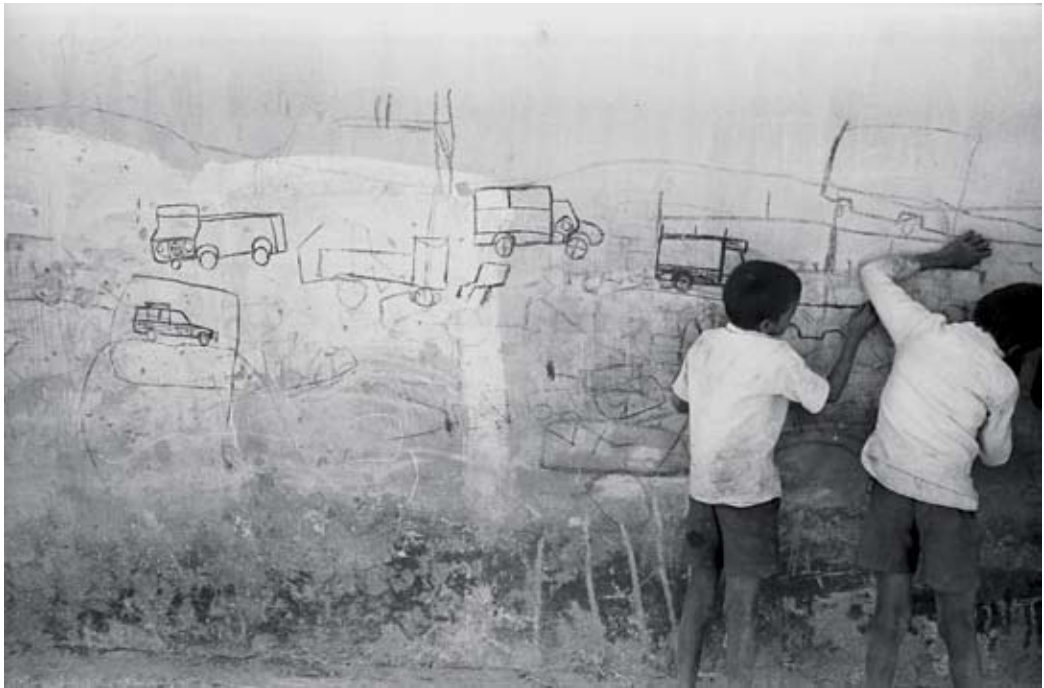
It's appalling to note that until recent times millions of Adivasis displaced from their lands by development projects were never compensated, let alone rehabilitated. And it is nothing short of a scandal that the state has been displacing people with utter disregard of their constitutional rights through the draconian Land Acquisition Act of 1894. Following violent and bloody protests against acquisition of land for industrial projects in places like Nandigram and Kalinga Nagar, the state was finally jolted into tabling a hurriedly redrafted national policy on rehabilitation and resettlement in December 2007. The controversial Bill, widely criticised for its anti-people and pro-corporate bias, is languishing in the Parliament in the face of vehement opposition. Meanwhile, state governments and corporations continue to resettle and rehabilitate displaced Adivasis with horrendous apathy to their sensibilities. It would be a fantastic burlesque were it not so tragic.



The village of Agaria Tola sits on a precipice with two mines on either side – TISCO west Bokaro collieries on the eastern flank and East Parej project of Central Coal Fields India on the west. The 200 households living here have not been listed as project-affected, nor have they received any rehabilitation package. The World Bank is funding this project to the tune of Rs 480 million to provide a rehabilitation package. Most of the 20 villages affected by the mines have been shifted out. Only Agaria Tola remains.

Hazaribagh district, Jharkhand, 2007.





Boys of the formerly nomadic Birhor tribe draw graffiti on the walls of their homes in their resettlement colony close to the town of Sultana, Hazaribagh district, Jharkhand, 2006.



Birhor Adivasis returning to a resettlement camp after hunting with nets. Traditionally nomadic hunters, the Birhor have been forced to settle in government-made camps to make way for mining and other industrial projects in Jharkhand.

Itchak resettlement camp, Chatra district, Jharkhand, 2005.



A Birhor Adivasi youth inside his resettlement house at the Ichak resettlement colony.



Khageswar Rohidas received less than a third of what was due to him after his house was demolished. All he got was this bit of concrete on the firm's re-housing site.

Talabira coal mine area run by HINDALCO, Sambalpur district, Orissa, 2007.



A resettlement site built by bauxite mining company UAIL (Utkal Aluminium International Limited) for the Adivasis displaced by bauxite mining. This mining project on tribal lands led to the famous popular resistance movement of Kashipur which after a 13-year long battle drove out three big multinational companies.

Kashipur, Rayagada district, Orissa, 2007.

REPRESSION & RESISTANCE





Ever since Birsa Munda's revolt against the British in the 1890s, Adivasis have waged a valiant, if sometimes losing, battle against usurpation of their lands. The struggle for land rights increased in number and intensity as independent India set up steel and mining companies in the interest of nation-building. The ever-mounting appetite for coal, iron and other important minerals began to swallow Adivasi lands one by one, resulting in a bloody cycle of repression and resistance that continues to plague the region. The gruesome fracas in January 2006 between the police and armed Adivasis protesting the takeover of their land by Tata's steel project in Kalinga Nagar, Orissa, is a tragic and ominous portent of the apocalypse that awaits this mineral-accursed region.

(left) A Santhal protestor strikes a defiant pose in front of graffiti that says “the water, forest and land are ours.”

Pachwara village, Pakur district, Jharkhand, 2003.

A memorial for two Adivasi brothers who died fighting the British and who have become symbols of resistance against the new wave of neoliberal colonialism.

Ulhara village, Hazaribagh district, Jharkhand, 2005.



A *hul* (revolt) against the Panem Coal Mines Ltd—a joint venture between Punjab State Electricity Board and a private company called Eastern Minerals and Trading Agency, coal company's mining project by the Rajmahal Buru Bachao Andolan. In this rally, Santhals of 32 villages took part, agitating with traditional arms.

Pachwara village, Pakur district, Jharkhand, 2003.







Villagers opposed to the POSCO steel project breaking a six-month-old police siege of their villages.

Balitutha village, Jagatsinghpur district, Orissa, 2008.



Graffiti in Hindi saying "Naveen Jindal Go Back" by the Visthapan Virodhi Samiti opposing the JINDAL Steel Plant.

Asanbani village, Jamshedpur district, Jharkhand, 2005.



In one of the bloodiest battles over land between Adivasis and the state on January 2, 2006, 21 Adivasis were killed in police firing (13 died on the spot and 8 died of injuries in hospital) at Tata's Kalinga Nagar steel complex in Orissa's Jajpur district. The tribal people were protesting the construction of a boundary wall for a proposed mega steel plant by Tata Steel when the violence broke out.

Tata Steel had been allotted 2400 acres in Kalinga Nagar for the construction of a six million tonne plant. The government had purchased this land in 1994 at the rate of

Rs. 37,000 per acre, which it sold to the Tata Co. for Rs. 3,50,000 per acre. It made a net profit of Rs. 72 million, while the Tatas made a neat saving of over Rs. 8.7 million over the market price of Rs. 0.5-0.7 million per acre. This was the bone of contention that forced the Adivasis to prevent the bulldozers from destroying their houses and taking over their lands that fatal day on 2nd January.

A lesser known fact is that the first, and probably the last, land survey was done in 1928 under the British Raj, resulting in 60 per cent of the Adivasi areas not being surveyed. Thus 60 per cent of Adivasis in Orissa do not have land papers, while those of non-Adivasis have been surveyed and are documented. Despite a Supreme Court ruling, the state government had not moved a finger to grant papers to this mass of Adivasis.



The funeral of 13 Adivasis who were killed by the police while protesting Tata's steel plant at Kalinga Nagar.

Veer Bhumi ground, Ambagadia, Jajpur district, Orissa, January 2006.



A protestor at a mass rally organised by the Jharkhand Mines Area Coordination Committee to protest the killing of 13 Adivasis killed in the Kalinga Nagar massacre. Kalinga Nagar, January 2006.



Family members of Ati Jamuda who took part in the Adivasi agitation in Kalinga Nagar and who was brutally killed in police custody.

Chandia village, Jajpur district, Orissa, 2007.



Police in action against protestors at Kalinga Nagar.
February, 2006.



A poster campaign by the Communist Party of India protesting the Kalinga Nagar massacre.

Kalinga Nagar, February 2006.



Adivasis shouting slogans calling for the end of police tyranny at a rally protesting the death of a man in police custody picked up in a raid on their village following a robbery in a jewellery store in Bokaro. The police randomly picked the tribal village and grabbed several boys as suspects. (right) The mother mourns the death of her son who was a worker at the Bokaro steel mill.

Gumla town, Gumla district, Jharkhand, 2005.



The Dongria Kondh, a unique tribe in the state of Orissa, is in danger of losing their lands and hence their cultural identity. They live on the lush-green slopes of the Niyamgiri Hills in the district of Kalahandi. They worship the hill as god as it sustains their life.

Since 2002, the survival of the hills and of the tribe itself has been thrown into doubt by the London-based mining company Vedanta's plans to mine bauxite from these hills. A protected forest area, it is home to endangered animals including tigers, leopards and elephants as well as hundreds of species of rare plants and trees. Besides, the land is a "Schedule V Area", protected under Section 18 of the Indian Constitution, which means it cannot be transferred to private companies without the consent of tribal people.

However, the company has already built what Anil Agarwal, the owner of the company, calls a "Rolls-Royce quality bauxite refinery" at the foot of the hills, destroying several tribal villages in the process, in anticipation of the arrival of the three million tons of bauxite the area is said to contain. Unfortunately for the Kondhs, India's Supreme Court too has ditched them as it finally, after a long litigious battle, gave green signal to the company to mine bauxite from the Niyamgiri Hills. The Kondhs have vowed to continue their fight nevertheless.



Dongria Kondh men and women protesting in Bhubaneswar against Vedanta's mining of bauxite from Niyamgiri Hills. Bhubaneswar, Orissa, 2006.



Kad dei and her family. She is the wife of Sukru Majhi, a popular, well-informed village headman who was campaigning to save the Niyamgiri Hills from Vedanta's bauxite mining project. He was allegedly knocked down dead by a mining company vehicle. Lanjigarh, Kalahandi district, Orissa, 2007.

The Naxalites subscribe to the revolutionary ideology of Mao Zedong. Unlike their ideological cousins in Nepal, they are yet ready to shun the gun in favour for the ballot box. They control a large region popularly referred to as the red corridor, stretching from Andhra Pradesh in the south to the Nepalese border in the north. Reports of trains being hijacked, or of audacious attacks on State apparatuses like police stations, have become more frequent.

The Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has described the rebels as “the single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by our country”. Nowhere is this conflict more acute than in the dense forests of southern Chhattisgarh state, which for the past two years has backed a “people-led” campaign, called Salwa Judum (Peace March in local parlance), against the Naxalites by arming thousands of villagers with guns, spears and bows and arrows. Child soldiers are often ranged against opponents of similar age.

Dewa Ganga Markam, a 19-year-old youth from the Muria tribe, joined the SPO (Special Police Officer) as part of the controversial anti-Naxalite (Maoist rebels) campaign called Salwa Judum. He says it was his choice to join the campaign and he intends to return to his village after there are no Naxalites left.

Dornapal camp, Dantewada district, Chhattisgarh, 2007.





Rajkumari, 21, is another Muria tribal who refused to reveal if the decision to join the Salwa Judum was hers.

Dornapal village, Dantewada district, Chhattisgarh, 2007.



Special Police Officers of the Salwa Judum securing a path to the governmental camps for villagers willing to escape their villages.

Dantewada district, Chhattisgarh 2007.

By all accounts, the Salwa Judum campaign has already turned into a Frankenstein. Entire villages have been emptied as tribal communities flee from the burnings, lootings and killings. The civil conflict has left more than 50,000 people camping under tarpaulin sheets without work or food along the roadsides of southern Chhattisgarh.

Many allege the reason why the government has opened a new front in this battle lies beneath Chhattisgarh's fertile soil, which contains some of the country's richest reserves of iron ore, coal, limestone and bauxite. Above ground live some of India's most impoverished and vulnerable Adivasis.

India's biggest companies have moved stealthily into the forest areas, buying up land and acquiring the rights to extract the buried wealth. Last year the Chhattisgarh government signed deals worth 130 billion Indian rupees (£1.6bn) with industrial companies for steel mills and power stations. The Naxalites have begun a campaign against such industrialisation, which the State sees as necessary to create jobs and provide the raw materials for economic growth.

However, in October of 2008, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), which had been mandated by the Supreme Court to probe the alleged excesses committed by the Salwa Judum, gave a clean chit to it. More importantly, the Commission rubbished allegations that the state government was propping up the campaign.



Some of the thousands of refugees who were forced to leave their villages and go to the Polampalli government camp.

Dantewada district, Chhattisgarh, 2007.





PEOPLE'S STRUGGLES AGAINST MINING PROJECTS IN THE EASTERN STATES OF CHHATTISGARH, JHARKHAND & ORISSA

JHARKHAND

Chatra: Struggle against expansion of coal mines in Tendwa by Coal India Ltd.

Seraikela: Struggle against Tata's steel plant in Tentoposi village. Villages fear takeover of their lands.

Gumla and Khunti: Struggle against Arcelor Mittal's iron-ore mining project.

Dumka: Protests against Jindal's coal-mining project

Latehar: Struggle against Abhijeet Infrastructures Group's coal-mining project at Chitarpur as well as against HINDALCO's bauxite-mining project.

Hazaribagh: Struggles against displacement by NTPC's coal-mining project in Karanpura valley, which is also the site of 5000-year-old megaliths. The project is likely to displace about 14000 people.

East Singhbhum: Struggle against Bhushan Steel's land acquisition for its steel and power plant. Also agitation against Uranium Corporation of India Ltd's plan to mine uranium at Pundihansa.

Dhanbad: Protests against Bharat Coking Coal Ltd's plan to evacuate thousands of people from Jharia, which is sitting on fires in the mines underneath.

CHHATTISGARH

Raigarh: Protests against Jindal's coal-mining project that will affect five villages. Also protests against the profusion of extremely-polluting sponge iron plants.

Bastar: Agitation against displacement by Tata's steel project in Lohandiguda, and by National Mineral Development Corporation's steel plant in Nagarnar.

Dantewada: Agitation against forcible acquisition of land by Essar Steel in Dhurli and Bhansi villages.

ORISSA

Jajpur: Tata's steel plant in Kalinga Nagar and Tata's chromite mines in Sukinda, dubbed as one of the 10 most polluted places on earth.

Angul: Protests against coal-mining projects of several companies including Tata, Jindal, Bhushan Steel, and NALCO.

Jagatsinghpur: Protests against land acquisition by the Korean company POSCO's steel plant.

Jharsuguda: Struggle against Vedanta's alumina smelter plant and sponge iron plants of various companies.

Kashipur: Struggle against mining of bauxite by HINDALCO.

Kalahandi: Struggle against Vedanta's alumina smelter in Lanjigarh as well as against its plans to mine bauxite from the Niyamgiri Hills, the abode of the endangered Dongria Kondh Adivasis.

Sambalpur: Farmers' struggle against indiscriminate use of Hirakud reservoir water by mining corporations such as Bhushan Steel and Vedanta. Protests against dumping of effluents from mining and sponge iron plants into the Mahanadi, Orissa's largest river.

Dhenkanal: Protests against grabbing of land and repressive tactics by Bhushan Steel.

Keonjhar: Protests against new iron-ore mining projects by corporate giants like Arcelor Mittal and POSCO, in this already heavily-mined district. About 100 mines are already in operation.

Koraput: Protests against Vedanta's bauxite mining project.

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This photo-book is a story of one such Euclidean nightmare in India's mineral-rich states of Orissa, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. The voracious appetite for minerals, so vital to fire the cylinders of economic growth, is cruelly and cynically wrecking the lives of India's Adivasis, who happen to inhabit the much-coveted El Dorados.

It's a shame that only a handful of photojournalists have chosen to capture the way sensitive cultures and ecologies have been mutilated by the extractive industries. We hope this modest documentation would inspire shutterbugs to train their lenses on one of the grimmest and most disregarded facets of India's economic success story.

COVER DESIGN: BRINDA DATTA

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(Cover) Adivasi as well as migrant workers loading coal in the Saunda colliery of Central Coalfields Ltd in Hazaribagh district of the state of Jharkhand, India. Workers are often underpaid and suffer from all kinds of respiratory diseases.

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