

## **Save our sacred forests!**

### **Indigenous movement in Jharkhand challenges plans for industrial development that threaten Adivasi forests, farmlands and way of life**

by

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Like State governments in many other parts of India, the government of Jharkhand State is planning large-scale industrial expansion across the entire region in the name of “development” and “poverty reduction”. To the dismay and disillusionment of mass movements in Jharkhand, newly elected government officials plan to uphold agreements struck by the previous State government with leading steel and mining companies. In return for 169,198 Crore Rupees (c. US\$3.8 billion) of investment, these agreements promise companies massive land acquisition for their mines and steel plants, which will deforest no less than 57,000 hectares of forest and displace 9,615 families, many of them located in legally protected Scheduled Areas set aside for indigenous Adivasi peoples in the State.



*[Photo: T Griffiths]*

**Official government plans for rapid growth of mega-steel and factories and associated mining development threaten forests and the traditional lands of indigenous peoples across Jharkhand.**

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

Indigenous and mass social movements in Jharkhand have mobilised to challenge these official plans for massive industrial development across the State. Peoples' movements are categorically saying 'no' to industry-related displacement and they reject interference in their local affairs and decision-making by company "community liaison officers" or political party activists and politicians.

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

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

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

He is backed up by other leaders of the community:

The forest is of great importance to us. We gather fruits like *karanj* from the forest and medicines. We collect minor forest produce for sale. We have our orchards where we grow mangoes and tamarind. We use the forest to get construction materials for our houses and to make tools, including our agricultural implements. How can a factory replace all this? It is our culture and our livelihood. We cannot and will not give this up this land [Devar Pahan, Udikel Village]



[Photo: T Griffiths]

**The head of Udikel Panchayat and his adviser stand next to a *sarna* "prayer place" located in sacred forest groves which are threatened with destruction by steel plant development by Arcelor Mittal Steel Company.**

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When we found out that Mittal was planning to establish a steel plant here we organised ourselves. All the villages decided that we would not allow the development on our lands because the plant would displace all of us. [Arnan Hemrom, Secretary, Udikel Gram Panchayat]



[Photo: T Griffiths]

**The head of Udikel Panchayat and his colleagues holding the banner which reads:**

*Jai sarna jai Jharkhand. Jameen bachav sangathan janm jug se hamara jameen, hai Jameen bachav sangathan, gram Udikel*

**Save Our Land Committee says: Long live our sacred groves! Long live Jharkhand! This has been our land since time immemorial. Udikel Village does not give up its land and forest!**

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

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





[Photo: T Griffiths]

**Natural *sal* forests on the collective ancestral Khuntkatti lands of the Mundari people in Seraikella District, Jharkhand. This valley is threatened by gold-mining development, which local Adivasi communities, their traditional authorities and their Panchayats strongly oppose**

The people organised a large gherao (siege protest) at the offices of the Deputy Commissioner and a memorandum was been passed to him affirming that companies must be stopped from entering Khuntkatti (legally recognised collective land and forest) areas and mining must be stopped because it will have harmful impacts on people's livelihoods and will damage the forest, pollute water sources, weaken the Khuntkatti system and cause displacement and migration. Indigenous leaders in the District stress that their hero Birsa Munda sacrificed his life to get the Khuntkatti lands recognised and these lands must not be broken up and sold off. They affirm:

“We will not break up our Khuntkatti lands. We will never take action that will mean Birsa Munda died in vain!

The grassroots movement against destructive and top-down development also maintain that they are fed up with company officials trying to persuade them to sell off or lease their lands for mining and other development:

“This Khuntkatti is where we have lived for generations. Before, we were unaware that the companies were coming or that they wanted our traditional lands. But now they keep coming and offering the people money and more money, and promising us facilities. This is what we face today. About a year ago a company agent attended a meeting of the Gram Sabah and told the people that the Chief Minister had invited L N Mittal to invest in Jharkhand. The agent regularly attended our meetings and told the people that they would receive help with road building and schools and people would get jobs. This man kept interrupting our meetings so we passed a resolution prohibiting company agents from being present in our meetings without invitation. But the man continued to disturb our meetings. So the people organised a big rally to protest against this outside interference in our local government. Since then the company has stopped harassing us, but it is now informally pressing some villagers to accept development on our lands. They are using these middlemen in the villages to try to change the minds of their neighbours. But the people are very much united. Rolahatu Panchayat has now passed a resolution with all 14 villages affirming that they will not allow industrial and mining development on their Khuntkatti lands. [Patra Hassa, Attra Village, Rolahatu Panchayat]

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[Photo: T Griffiths]

**Members of Dalbhanga Village, Bhhuihari Khuntkatti with activists of Jharkhand Save the Forest Movement who collectively oppose mining development on traditional forest lands in Seraikella Karshwan District (the statue of hero Birsa Munda is in the background, decorated after the annual celebration of his birthday (15<sup>th</sup> November) all over Jharkhand State).**

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

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