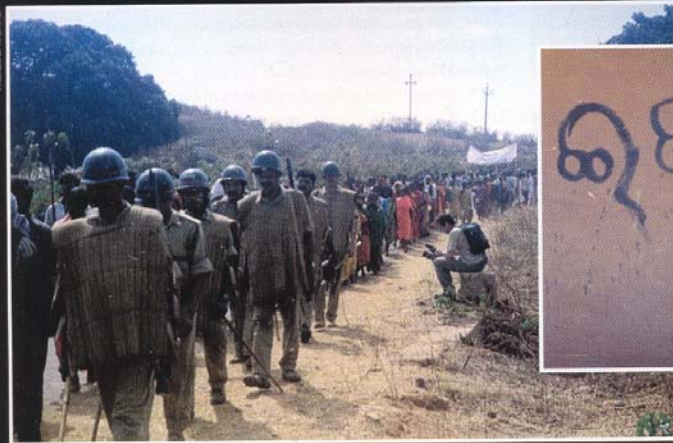


Chronicle of a Struggle

the Kashipur anti-mining movement

by Vidhya Das and Achyut Das



In 1993, 21 tribal women met the Chief Minister in Orissa to demand action on a 10-point charter of demands. Pointing out the havoc caused by displacement due to large-scale projects the women appealed to the Chief Minister to put a check on the mining activities coming up in Rayagada and Kalahandi. They cited the example of the Upper Indravati project where thousands of displaced families were suffering untold hardships. "They got compensation money did they not?" the Chief Minister shot back. The discussion ended there.

Extensive bauxite mining was being planned in the region, which forms part of the East Coast deposits. These are high-grade deposits, with low silica content, which place India in the enviable (or unenviable, depending from which angle you look at it) position of becoming the lowest cost producer of high quality, internationally competitive alumina.¹ The Baphlimali deposits, part of these reserves and the site of the ongoing struggle in Kashipur, occur on the northwest border of the Kashipur Block in Rayagada District. These deposits have been identified as the bauxite source for the Utkal Alumina project, with a deposit life of more than 60 years for a 1 Million Tonnes Per Annum (MTPA) plant. Additional reserves of a similar grade have also been identified in nearby areas, including Kodingamali and Sasbahumali, that could be tapped to provide for a 60-year plant life at two MTPA. According to the promoters, "Utkal is the lowest cost greenfield opportunity in our knowledge."

In 1992, INDAL entered into an agreement with Orissa Mining Corporation for the transfer of its prospecting lease for the Baphlimali Plateau, and subsequently, approached the Government for permission to set up a 100 % Export Oriented Unit (EOU) Alumina Refinery plant in Kashipur. Other International players in the aluminium sector, including Norsk Hydro of Norway and Alcan of Canada joined in equity participation, and the Utkal Alumina International Limited (UAIL) was formed. In 1993, TISCO joined the group, but subsequently withdrew. In December 2001, Norsk Hydro also withdrew from the Joint venture and the UAIL partners are presently Indal (55% share) and Alcan (45% share).

Almost at the same time as UAIL, Larsen & Toubro entered into a partnership with Alcoa for a prospecting lease over the Kutrumali Plateau, on the northeast border of Kashipur. Both the Baphlimali as well as the Kutrumali deposits are bordered by Kalahandi on the other side.

The Chief Minister's negative response at the 1993 meeting did not discourage the tribals of Kashipur. Resolved not to submit to a fate thrust upon them by cold blooded market arithmetic, the people

are the deposits in Baphli Mali that the Engineers India Limited Feasibility Report, projects that the UAIL can become one of the, if not *the* lowest cost alumina plant in the world!¹

The Birla group, which has a major equity stake in Indal, (97%), has announced major investments in the aluminium sector in Orissa. Apart from the Utkal Alumina, they also have plans to start the Aditya Birla with the Kodingamali deposits. A Rs. 16,000 crore investment is being planned by Hindalco, the flagship company of the Birlas, in the aluminium sector. This plan is targeted to place the Birlas amongst the top 10 producers in the global aluminium market, and give it a comfortable edge over its Indian competitors in business in general and the aluminium sector in particular. The Rs. 16,000 crore investment plan for aluminium will flow into two projects - the Utkal Alumina Project and the Aditya Aluminium Project - both based in Orissa. The bauxite deposits of Orissa have been identified as the biggest reserve of quality bauxite, comparable to the best in the world, attracting global mining giants like the \$15 billion BHP Billiton.⁴

Attracting the Hawks

Orissa has huge reserves of iron ore as well. According to a report in *Steelworld*, Orissa is endowed with huge natural resources, especially iron ore. The foremost advantage for mining projects in the state is the easy logistical support. The long coastline has proved beneficial for existing companies and will enable the cheap export of finished goods to all possible locations. As a result, Orissa has become an attractive destination for steel makers.⁵ An offshoot of this is the clamour from groups such as the Tatas to build ports such as Dhamra for the import of coal and extraction of steel. This itself will have its own consequences on the livelihoods of thousands of families as well as on the environment.

Underlining Orissa's advantages in the mineral sector, at a session titled "Towards a seamless internal market" at the National conference and Annual Session of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) in New Delhi last month, the Chief Minister made an upbeat presentation,

pointing out that Orissa was giving emphasis to industrialisation while protecting the environment and that it had signed agreements with the leading industrial houses of India. According to him, Orissa's GDP was targeted to grow at over 7% in the next 10 to 12 years.⁶

However, things are not so easy. Orissa has a predominantly agrarian population. The several MOUs that have been signed have already caused much dissent and dissatisfaction in different parts of the state. In Jajpur, local demonstration against a steel plant which would displace more than 6,000 people from more than 13 villages led to violent police repression and several deaths; in Koraput, 3,000 tribals marched in silent protest against bauxite exploitation in Mali Parvat in Semiliguda Block. The state Government in an effort to throw some sops, has promised to settle household land for more than two lakh landless people in the next three years, and tree planting schemes are to be taken up extensively in the tribal areas.

Would such sops be enough? The processes of governance and administration in this country and especially in Orissa over the last several decades, have reduced tribal communities to the margins of survival. The Chief Minister might talk of settling land and protecting the environment, but almost all change in the tribal areas, over the last two decades has been for the worse, with indicators such as distress migration, malnutrition, drought and crop failure only increasing. In such a scenario, when the long-suffering tribal communities turn round and assert their rights, it is with their backs against a precipice, clinging on to their only remaining means of survival, their land and forests. History knows that it does not take much to push such a tribal community over the edge.

In Kashipur, the tribal villages have been protesting against the appropriation of their land and homes for mining projects for more than 10 years now. It takes immense courage, perseverance and determination for a tribal community to carry on such resistance for such a long period and against such odds. But now they are up against an armed police force, who have been given a virtual *carte blanche* to



repress freedom, without any checks. The war of attrition is almost complete. A people struggling just to survive, fight against injustice with extremely limited means. Governments on the other hand, hand-in-glove as they are with market forces, can mobilise immense forces to put down such movements. Corporations and governments know that sooner or later the local community will give in... and the government which is supposed to be a democracy of, by and for the people, will claim a great 'victory', having defeated its most marginalised peoples in their fight for human rights and justice. In the bargain it will have 'taught a lesson' to other deprived and marginalised sections who might have similar aspirations! What a victory!

In neighbouring Kalahandi district, Sterlite made its entry much later, but the project has progressed much faster. People have already been thrown out of four villages and 'resettled' in colonies to make way for the mining of the beautiful Niyamgiri hills in Lanjigarh for bauxite. Here too, there was local resistance, and mock *Gram Sabhas*, surrounded by armed police, silencing the people's voices. It was this that probably provided the modus operandi for the Rayagada administration in its efforts to help the cause of UAIL.

However, Sterlite's operations have been questioned by the Centrally Empowered Committee (CEC), on the grounds of legal violation of environmental laws. The company's plea not to consider the order by the Central Empowered Committee was rejected by the Supreme Court on May 13, 2005. But reports indicate that on the ground, things are going from bad to worse. The earlier Forest Secretary, who had a pro-people profile has been changed, and the state appears to have turned a blind eye to the Supreme Court's Decision! A letter in the *Independent Media Network* carried on May 27, 2005 reports "The work is proceeding at a ferocious pace despite the CEC/Supreme Court rulings, and... with blatant disregard for human life. There seem to have been well over 100 deaths... I've heard accounts of at least a dozen work deaths, (during my visit to Belambar in Lanjigarh yesterday)."⁶

Of late, the Kashipur movement has slowed down, with the state joining hands with the MNCs to bribe, divide, lure and above all terrorise the people through a massive police presence, which has the mandate to repress through midnight village raids, uncontrolled use of the *lathi*, threats and even sexual abuse. Innocent villagers now have serious legal charges against them. Many have been served non-bailable warrants. New police barracks are under construction in many places and old ones are being expanded. For the 'development' of the tribal people, a large-capacity jail has been promised near Kashipur town! The administration proudly claims, that it has 'taken care' of the anti-mining people and groups. The media is almost entirely bought over and is falling over itself to promote the cause of the MNCs. Reliable sources have even told us that the elections to the Orissa Journalists' Union is being financed by the mining corporations! Larsen & Toubro and Aditya Aluminium, which were lying low after the Maikanch police firing have also resurfaced and are about to start their operations. But it is wrong to say that the Kashipur movement has melted away. On May 25, 2005 there was a fairly large demonstration despite the presence of 10 police platoons and the sealing of all roads to Kashipur.

Kashipur is simmering and it is anybody's guess what the future portends. Pushed to the brink, whether the people will choose the path of violence or civil disobedience is to be seen in the coming

months. The movement has little political support, with the Congress, Biju Janata Dal and Bharatiya Janata Party openly backing the corporations. Civil society organisations in Orissa has have also sought to distance themselves from the Kashipur movement, fearing a state backlash. The government of Orissa claims that the Samatha judgment is not applicable to Orissa meaning that any amount of land in scheduled areas can be acquired for mining and industries. Perhaps the intention is that the tribals can be dispensed with in this so-called process of 'development'.

In the tribal regions, where humans live in close proximity to nature, the forests and wildlife can perhaps help human communities much more than an elected government, as our wildlife and environmental laws are much stronger than human rights laws. With the intervention of the CEC, the struggle of the tribal communities in Lanjigarh has gained strength from the environmental activists. In Kashipur, too, the environmental question needs to be properly raised. Bauxite mining is one of the most environmentally-destructive processes known. The slag to ore ratio is 3:1, which means that for every tonne of alumina produced, there will be three tonnes of highly caustic slag! This will be dumped as red mud in downstream areas, destroying agricultural land, surface and sub-soil water, and causing unnamed diseases and ailments. UAIL does not even appear to have obtained environmental clearance for the project. According to a Canadian based Kashipur solidarity group, 'Alcan't in India', despite, earlier verbal agreements, Alcan, UAIL's Canadian partner, has refused to disclose any part of the 1995 Environmental Impact Assessment prepared by Engineers India Ltd., during their meeting with Michael Hanley, CEO of Alcan's Bauxite and Aluminium Division, on June 16, 2004. According to Hanley, the project's governmental approval had expired three years ago and was thus no longer relevant to the proposed project. (probeinternational website, Saanet.org, July 7, 2004)

Humans and animals share a common environment, a common planet. If there is sensitivity about the environment, there will be sensitivity about human beings too and vice versa. Governments cannot just run ahead with plans for industrial development and ignore the voices of indigenous human communities. They might do so using legal and supra-legal loopholes, but, in the long run, this is a recipe for environmental disaster. And the long-run is fast becoming the short run, as the planet heats up, the ice caps in the Arctic and Antarctic melt and sea water levels rise across the blue planet. The struggle of the people of Kashipur is not just a struggle of a tribal David against an MNC Goliath, it is a voice of sanity, that seeks to re-establish the bonds that human beings have with other inhabitants on this lonely planet.

Notes:

¹ Summary Feasibility report Utkal Alumina Project, 1994; Utkal Alumina (Private) Limited, Pg.1

² Extract from the PUDR Report; DNR Network, May 3, 2005

³ Summary Feasibility report Utkal Alumina Project, 1994; Utkal Alumina (Private) Limited, Pg.3

⁴ *Kumar's big Bets* Business world, 27.9.2004

⁵ *Orissa Flooded With Iron and Steel Plant Proposal*, August 2004, Research Paper, SteelWorld.com

⁶ India Infoline News, August 5, 2005.

⁷ Felix Padel, *Independent Media*, May 27, 2005.