

Fact-Finding Report on India's Anti-Displacement Movement

In the summer of 2008, an American teacher spent three weeks gathering information about the anti-displacement movement in India. As a guest of Visthapan Virodhi Jan Vikas Andolan (the People's Movement Against Displacement and for Development), I traveled across five states in central and eastern India visiting the targeted sites of industrial and mining projects, Special Economic Zones and real estate developments. I spoke with hundreds of villagers who are threatened with displacement, and with many dedicated activists who are helping to organize the people's resistance.

The farmers and villagers I spoke to—including many adivasis (tribal people) and dalits (“Untouchables according to Hindu chauvinists”)—told me that the existence of their villages and the lives of their families are at stake. Rapacious industrial and mining enterprises, supported by the state and central governments, are trying to grab tens of millions of hectares of agricultural land. When bribery doesn't work, police, paramilitaries and hired goons attempt to drive the villagers off their land.

In return for their land, farmers are being offered paltry monetary compensation that will be gone in a year or two (villagers without land will get nothing); illusory promises of industrial jobs; and for a few, “relocation colonies” in which they will not have enough land to farm to support their families. The result of these threatened displacements—like the wave of displacements since independence in 1947—would be the creation of tens of millions of new landless farmers who will become urban slum dwellers, who appeared briefly in *Slum Dog Millionaire*.

The overwhelming response of the villagers I spoke to was that they will not give up their land under any conditions. As many put it, “We will sacrifice our lives, but we will not give up our land.”

Maharashtra

My first destination was a hunger strike in downtown Mumbai, which was aimed at the Reliance Company and the Maharashtra state government. Reliance had set up a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) composed of 35,000 acres, where it had plans to build an upper and middle class “New Mumbai” on top of multi-crop rice fields. This SEZ would displace 45 villages and 250,000 people, and was an important focus of the anti-displacement movement in Maharashtra in 2008.

Based on a law passed by the central government in 2005, SEZs are usually large industrial projects involving foreign investment. However, Reliance hadn't given any indication that it was interested in industrial development. It was instead trying to take advantage of the many profit-making opportunities of SEZs. They offer exemptions from taxes for 10 years, no tariffs and duties, and exemptions from most labor legislation. Since SEZs were treated as “public service utilities,” strikes are illegal. Most SEZs are foreign enclaves on Indian soil. As of 2008, over 500 SEZs had been approved by central and state authorities. Most of them were under construction or at the stage of “land acquisition.”

Chhattisgarh

My next stop was Chhattisgarh, where large numbers of multinational companies and mining firms are moving in to exploit the state's rich natural resources and cheap labor. With the assistance of a leader of the Women's Liberation Front in Chhattisgarh, I met with two groups of women in the capital city of Raipur. They recounted their stories of protecting their villages and families from industrial encroachment.

One group of women lived in a slum of 3,000 people that was located in the middle of one of Raipur's industrial areas. These so-called slum dwellers were villagers who had been displaced by the surrounding factories. Their area, Mazdoornagar (Workers' Town), was located near the Woodsworth wood products factory which was taking over their land. The villagers responded by demanding official recognition of Mazdoornagar--with the right to have municipal services such as schools, water and food ration shops. In the meantime, they have tapped into Woodsworth's water pipes for drinking water, and into its transformers for electricity. These women are active in the Women's Liberation Front, whose slogan is "We are not flowers. We are the sparks."

Another group of women I interviewed had built an independent women's group that has a committee that operates a school, one for demonstrations, and another to collect funds for village needs such as digging wells. They have also mounted a campaign against liquor shops and their husbands' habit of wasting scarce funds on alcohol. When I asked them what they wanted for the future, one of the women told me, "We want a good world for our children. We will forge a new identity. The workers and peasants will rule."

I also interviewed two Christian activists who were working with women in remote tribal areas in northern Chhattisgarh to keep mining companies from setting up operations. Sister Bulu explained that "Social activists are trying to organize the people under the repressive watch of the government." She stated that one prominent victim of state repression was Dr. Binayak Sen, a civil libertarian and doctor in Chhattisgarh who had been imprisoned for more than a year.

When I asked Sister Bulu what message she wanted me to carry to concerned people in the U.S., she said, "People everywhere in the world should get united. All the intellectuals and thinkers and those who are concerned about the people should join hands with the oppressed, marginalized people to save humanity."

Before I left for the Bastar region in southern Chhattisgarh, my guide filled me in on the background of the Salwa Judum-- the self-professed Purification Hunt. For decades, there had been a question concerning who controls the rich mineral reserves in central and eastern India: Profit-seeking multinationals, big Indian companies, and the central and state governments--or 100 million adivasis, who make up one-tenth of India's population? To give me an idea of the stakes involved in answering this question, a Jesuit priest who was the chief convenor of the 2007 Ranchi Conference in the nearby state of Jharkhand showed me an official estimate of the value of bauxite reserves in states with large adivasi populations. This figure is \$4 trillion.

While the Salwa Judum was most immediately aimed at the Maoist forces and their adivasi base of support in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal and other nearby

states, its ultimate objective was to clear away all resistance to exploitation of the bauxite, iron ore and other valuable minerals in these areas where the adivasis have lived for centuries.

My guide explained that after neo-colonial independence in 1947, the conditions of the adivasis in the region remained unchanged. They have faced extreme exploitation at the hands of the forest officials and police. In the early 1980s, Maoist cadre from the nearby state of Andhra Pradesh crossed into the area to live and organize among the Gondi-speaking tribal people. Over 25 years, the Maoists developed a popular base of support among more than 50,000 adivasis. In 2004, the Communist Party of India (Maoist) was formed by a merger of the two largest Maoist groups in India.

According to public documents of the CPI (Maoist), it has set up people's governments (Janatana Sarkars) in southern Chhattisgarh. These parallel governments have driven out corrupt forest officials and police and set up self-reliant development projects. At the same time they have allowed in teachers, health workers and government food ration shops. 30% of the Maoists are women; many are members of two adivasi women's organizations with memberships of 50,000 and 100,000.

In June 2005, a section of the adivasi elite, with support from the Congress Party leadership in New Delhi, started organizing to eliminate Maoist influence from several villages. The Chhattisgarh state government seized the opportunity to bring in large numbers of state police, central paramilitary forces, and gave arms to politically backward adivasi youth as Special Police Officers (SPOs). These combined military forces conducted raids on villages that had been identified as "Maoist-affected." Hundreds of thousands of adivasis were ordered to leave their villages, most of which were burned down. They were forced to make forced marches to "resettlement camps," which were modeled after the strategic hamlets that the U.S. army set up in South Vietnam in the 1960s.

Those who refused to leave were treated harshly. 538 murders and 99 rapes in three districts in Chhattisgarh were cited in a petition to India's Supreme Court. This scorched earth campaign eventually extended to 644 "Maoist-affected" villages in the south Bastar region, emptying them of 300,000 adivasis.

Dr. Binayek Sen and other civil libertarians played an important role in opposing the Salwa Judum, demanding that the adivasis be permitted to return to their villages, that the "resettlement camps" be shut down; and that all repressive military forces be withdrawn from the region. With broad popular support, Maoist squads reoccupied these villages. The Maoists also attacked an Essar Steel plant in Dantewada district in order to underline their opposition to capitalist-driven displacement in the region.

I took a long bus ride to Dantewada district in southern Chhattisgarh to meet with Himanshu Kumar, a Gandhian human rights activist and leader of the Varvasi Chetna Ashram. Under Kumar's leadership, the VCA was exposing conditions in the 23 Salwa Judum camps. Kumar told me about jail-like conditions in the camps, where 50,000 people were living in crowded quarters with no work, little water and unchecked diseases. Three adivasis had recently been killed by guards. Kumar told me that some adivasis had escaped and run away to nearby forests, where they had started to work with the Maoist forces in the area.

According to Kumar, after villagers had returned from the forests to rebuild their homes, the paramilitaries and SPOs continued to raid the villages, burning them down two, three and more times. Doctors Without Borders had been repeatedly denied permission by state authorities to go into these villages and treat the adivasis for malaria and other endemic diseases. In this situation, Kumar's group launched an initiative to resettle the village of Nendra in southern Dantewada. For three weeks, 20 volunteers lived in Nendra, pledging to serve as "human shields" if the police returned to force the villagers to leave once again. Along with some of the adivasis who had been living in nearby forests, the ashram volunteers started to plant Nendra's first rice crop in three years.

I had hoped that Kumar would be able to take me to a "resettlement camp," but he advised against it. He said the District Superintendent of Police was not in his office. Kumar thought it would be necessary to get the DSP's permission to safely visit any of the camps. In May 2009, the state police demolished the Varvasi Chetna Ashram after it exposed a staged "encounter" killing of 19 adivasis in the village of Singavaram by state security forces; the military claimed that the dead were "Maoist organizers."

After the campaign to shut down the Salwa Judum was successful, in 2009 the central government launched a much larger military campaign known as Operation Green Hunt. Nearly 200,000 paramilitary soldiers under New Delhi's control have been concentrated in the mineral-rich and adivasi-majority states of eastern India. The final verdict on Green Hunt is not in.

Jharkhand

In the eastern and very poor state of Jharkhand, I visited five villages along with a team from the People's Movement against Displacement and for Development. In the Karna Pura Valley, the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC), a branch of the Ministry of Energy, planned to develop huge open pit coal mines that would eventually eliminate 186 villages and displace 250,000 out of the 300,000 people who live in the valley.

We stopped in the village of Kerigahra, where 100 households grow rice, wheat, vegetables, sugar cane and maize. The land is fertile, supporting up to four crops a year. I met with a group of 30 villagers, many of whom were dalits ("untouchables" according to Hindu chauvinists). They had formed a Save Motherland Committee, which organized road blockades and people-to-people, village-to-village actions in order to bring neighboring villages into the struggle against NTPC. In November 2006, they organized a rally of over 10,000 land-owning and tenant farmers.

The members of the Save Motherland Committee were particularly proud of an action they took in October 2006. After NTPC established an office in Kerigahra to start the process of "land acquisition," 3,000 villagers gathered and demolished the office brick-by-brick with their hands and feet alone. After this action, the state police filed cases against 550 villagers. They told me that "the police are working as the right hand of NTPC." After we talked about their struggle, these farmers and villagers asked me, "Do American companies displace people?", "What kind of mining do you have?", "What effects are companies like Walmart having on small shop-keepers?" and "Is there unemployment in the U.S.?"

I came away very impressed with the work of these Jharkhandi grassroots organizers. Due to their resistance and the strength of their anti-displacement movement, no new industrial projects had been built in Jharkhand in the previous five years.

In March 2007, an important national anti-displacement conference was held in Ranchi, the capital of Jharkhand, bringing together more than one hundred anti-displacement groups. The **Ranchi Declaration** called for an alternative model of development: “A people-centered model based on a self-reliant economy, free from the imperialist yoke. The policies of development must, first and foremost, enhance the well-being of the masses and must be in their interest—not at their cost.”

The Declaration called for: (1) Extracting the natural wealth of the country only to the extent that it serves the needs of the Indian people; (2) Developing indigenous industry that generates employment and protects labor rights; (3) Introducing land reform with the ultimate goal of “community ownership and individual right to use,” and (4) Extensive reforestation, water management and topsoil regeneration.

At the core of this new model of development, the Declaration stated: “All decisions must be made by the people themselves at the grass-roots level, and built upwards in a genuine form of people’s government. It is the people themselves who know best what type of development is in their interest and what is harmful. They have the inalienable right, and are in the best position to decide their own future.”

West Bengal

In West Bengal, a self-described “Marxist” government (led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist)) had recently announced plans to “acquire” 200,000 acres of land in West Bengal for SEZs, which threatened to uproot 2.5 million farmers and villagers. The first big test of this policy came at Singur in 2006, where the government attempted to take control of 997 acres of fertile land for an auto plant for the Tata Group, the largest capitalist conglomerate in India. This project threatened to displace over 50,000 people.

Local farmers and villagers opposed to this takeover of their land organized themselves into the Singur Krishi Jami Rakhsha Samiti (Committee for Protection of Agricultural Land). In June 2006, over 2,000 villagers took an initial action outside a government office, bringing their agricultural implements and bullocks (oxen) with them. On the night of September 25, 2006, as farmers gheraoed (surrounded) the government office in charge of this land grab, they were attacked by the police and cadre of the ruling Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPM). Dozens were injured, including many women, and one youth was beaten to death. This show of force made it possible for Tata Motors to start construction of the showcase plant for the “Nano Car.” This was slated to be the world’s cheapest auto at 100,000 rupees—around \$2,500.

On August 9, 2008, I traveled north from Kolkata to Singur to join a “procession” (a long, winding march) of 1,500 people through four villages adjoining the Tata plant. Since my visit to Singur, the anti-displacement movement took a major leap forward. In early September 2008, tens of thousands of farmers and villagers surrounded the plant, blocking roads and preventing Tata management and their initial group of workers from reaching the plant. These actions stopped the final stages of construction of the plant. Several months after my visit to Singur, Tata Motors closed down the plant altogether, and moved

production to the northwestern state of Gujarat, where Narendra Modi's government offered a management-friendly and Hindu-chauvinist climate for Tata.

The extent of Tata's defeat at Singur was underlined by two statements from the Tata Group. According to Ratan Tata, the chairman of Tata Motors: "The existing environment of obstruction, intimidation, and confrontation has begun to impact the ability of the company to convince several of its experienced managers to relocate and work in the plant." In the September 3, 2008 New York Times, a longtime adviser to the Tata Group complained: "Which foreign company will want to come in when India's most respected group cannot set up industry in a state?"

During my stay in West Bengal, I had hoped to visit Nandigram, where tens of thousands of farmers and villagers rose up to defend their land in 2007. Because I wasn't able to visit Nandigram in person, my Bengali guide recounted how the villagers in that area stopped the plans of the CPM-led government to build a giant chemical complex on their land.

The proposed operator of this plant was Dow Chemical, a multi-national U.S. corporation. Dow had acquired Union Carbide, which had been responsible for the unsafe conditions that led to a cyanide gas leak in 1984 in its Bhopal plant in central India. In the villages surrounding the Union Carbide plant, 4,500 people were killed immediately, and hundreds of thousands of people in the surrounding villages developed long-term lung and other medical conditions. With the protection of the Indian government, none of these victims of cyanide gas poison received compensation from Dow or Union Carbide. (Dow Chemical is also notorious for the production of the defoliant Agent Orange for the U.S. military, which caused millions of birth defects among women in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.)

I learned that the 440,000 villagers living in Nandigram's 38 villages are lower-caste Hindus and Muslims. In December 2006, the CPM representative for the area announced that the government would "acquire" 14,000 acres of land for a "mega chemical hub." This project threatened to displace 95,000 people, 130 schools, 112 temples and 42 mosques. Thousands of people organized under the banner of Bhumi Uchhed Protirodh Committee (Committee against Eviction from the Land). On January 3, 2007, as over 3,000 villagers met to discuss how to build opposition to the chemical complex, the police opened fire, wounding four villagers. The people's resistance stiffened, and from early January until March 13, 2007, Nandigram was in the hands of the people.

A massacre ensued on March 14, 2007 in Nandigram. Fourteen villagers were killed by CPM cadre dressed in police uniforms. They targeted BUPC women for rape in order to terrorize them and other villagers. In the 48 hours following the events of March 14, 20,000 villagers, armed with sticks and iron rods, chased the CPM cadre and police out of the area. From March 16 to November 2007, Nandigram was back in the hands of the people. In order to defend the people against organized CPM violence, the BUPC announced that "To carry out the movement of Nandigram we must have the right to carry arms for resistance."

A new phase in the struggle began in July when women and girls, including many who had been molested and raped, organized the Matangini Mahhila Samiti (MMS). In addition to organizing large processions of women who stopped the CPM from entering Nandigram, the MMS set up "people's courts" to combat the beatings of wives by their husbands, and to struggle with husbands who were attempting to stop their wives from moving around freely and developing as political activists.

In November 2007 an armed force of 2,500 CPM cadre, backed up by mercenaries from Jharkhand and Bihar, launched a new attack on Nandigram. They drove 10,000-15,000 villagers, especially BUPC members, out of Nandigram. Continued fighting in Nandigram made it impossible for me to visit the area. I had hoped to learn more about the struggle there, which many of the activists I spoke with viewed as the epicenter of the anti-displacement movement in India.

Orissa

My final destination was Orissa, another mineral-rich state which has a large adivasi population. I visited villages where the South Korean-U.S. steel company POSCO and Tata Steel were trying to take over farmers' land to build integrated steel plants. In June 2005, the Orissa government and POSCO signed a "Memorandum of Understanding" that would enable POSCO to build a large steel plant at Jagatsinghpur. This project would include a nearby "captive port," and the provision of 600 million tons of iron ore from Orissa mines to the plant every year. Seven villages and 22,000 farmers would be displaced from 4,000 acres of land. In addition, thousands of fisherman and villagers in the nearby port area would lose their livelihoods.

For three years, POSCO had tried to take over this land. Farmers and villagers organized in the POSCO Resistance Struggle Committee kept the company from establishing offices in the villages. They set up "check gates" at their village entrances to check on the identification of outsiders, and to prevent POSCO from surveying and demarcating their land. Blocked in its "land acquisition" efforts, POSCO hired outside goons to destabilize the area, and to provide a pretext for bringing state police into their villages.

On January 2, 2006, in the area of Kalinganagar, the Orissa police killed 15 adivasis who were protesting the beginning of construction of an integrated Tata Steel plant. After January 2, an Anti-Displacement Movement (ADC) was organized in Kalinganagar. Next to the fields in which he was working with a pair of bullocks, ADC secretary Rabindra Jarika told me that for the following 14 months, the ADC stopped traffic on nearby Highway 215. "People came from different areas of Orissa and other states, including POSCO, Nandigram and Kashipur, to support us. Only 5-10% of the local farmers have sold their land to Tata."

Because of the strength of this anti-displacement movement, construction of this Tata Steel plant has been stopped. This dealt a body blow to the plans of the Orissa government to turn the area of Kalinganagar into "the second most important steel city of the world."

Final Impressions

I ended this trip with several thoughts:

(1) I had no idea how vast the SEZs and other mining and industrial projects were in India. It is no exaggeration to state that capitalist "development" will displace tens of millions of people in India in the coming years--unless it is blocked by India's farmers, villagers, adivasis, dalits and their supporters. This issue was taking center stage in Indian politics in 2008. It also made international news, as the coverage of the path-breaking victory of the farmers and villagers in Singur over Tata Motors demonstrated.

(2) I did not know how widespread the Indian people's resistance to displacement was, and how far it had spread throughout India in recent years. Everywhere I went, I encountered the determination of the people to defend their land, even if it costs them their lives. I saw that Indian women, rooted in their land and villages, were at the forefront of numerous anti-displacement struggles. I was struck by the high level of political consciousness of the members of grassroots organizations and political activists that I met, and their understanding of the strategic importance of lending assistance to each other's struggles.

(3) I learned how seriously the Indian central and state governments take these rapidly growing struggles, and how the authorities are moving to derail the anti-displacement movement with lies that it is opposed to all forms of development. The government's disinformation campaign goes hand-in-hand with the employment of armed force against the anti-displacement movement and other people's struggles against the Indian state and multi-national corporations.

(4) I returned convinced that international solidarity with India's anti-displacement movement is essential. There is a strong material basis for the development of solidarity between India's anti-displacement movement and anti-displacement struggles in South America, Africa and in the Philippines. In North America, the First Nations in Canada have mounted powerful struggles against the mines and pipelines of predatory corporations. In the U.S., Native American nations are fighting against strip coal mining, pipeline river pollution and other desecrations of their ancestral lands.

As forced displacement and profit-driven "development" spread around the world like a disease, this is creating the conditions for grassroots resistance with a global reach, within which the anti-displacement movement in India will play an important role.