

Case Study No. 6, written by Xavier Dias¹, 2007

The Right to Say No - Model for Community Activism, the BIRSA Mines Monitoring Centre, Jharkhand, India

Overview

This case study investigates one model of community-led activism, where a group of Adivasis, India's indigenous peoples, have banded together to fight a bitter struggle with India's power elites. Inspired by a grassroots media campaign raising public awareness about the rights of Adivasis in the state of Jharkhand, in India's north-east, the local community has taken on government and industry in attempt to redress the balance, and regain their land, cultural heritage and identity.

Background

This case study is located in the Indian state of Jharkhand, a homeland of the Adivasi Peoples². Its birth as a separate state within the Indian union in 2000 was a major victory after a five-decade-long, militant struggle. It was hoped that a separate state would protect the Adivasi Peoples' rights to their own land and natural resources, conserve their distinct culture, and allow them to regain their dignity. But this milestone achievement came after generations of power struggle between the indigenous population and several different outside forces that have colonised the land.



As men, women and children line up at a makeshift shrine, Kone Majhi, a *Behejuni* - woman priest from the Dongria Kondh indigenous tribe of Orissa - repeats prayers and thanks to a sacred mountain. Courtesy of www.actionaidindia.org.

Many historians consider the arrival of Columbus in the Americas as the birth of colonisation. They have, however, missed the important, but obscure, fact that more than two millennia before Columbus set sail, peninsula India was colonised by what has been called the 'Aryan invasion'. Like the subsequent Span-

Summary of Issues

- Adivasis and Dalits, together representing India's Scheduled tribes and castes, have been discriminated against and marginalised by Indian society since time immemorial.
- Inspired by an emotive media campaign that captures the community's imagination, local resistance groups have grown increasingly proactive, and are demanding that government and the mining industry recognise their inherent rights to their land and the mineral deposits on the land.
- Government and industry have, however, played an underhanded game, and have used deadly tactics to crush the rapidly multiplying resistance groups springing up across the state. One tragic episode resulted in many deaths that have been directly linked to the Orissa state government and the diversified giant, Tata.

¹ The author is the founding member of BIRSA (Bindrai Institute for Research Study & Action: www.birsa.in) and its Mines Monitoring Centre. He is also the spokesperson for JMACC (Jharkhand Mines Area Coordination Committee: www.firstpeoplesfirst.in), an alliance of Jharkhan's mining affected communities. He edits a community news bulletin for the mining communities Khan Kaneej Aur ADHIKAR (Mines Minerals & RIGHTS: www.adhikar.in and reachxdias@gmail.com).

² Adivasi means 'first peoples' and is how the indigenous peoples of India prefer to be identified. Over 8.5% of India's 1.2 billion population are recognised as indigenous peoples. If those groups that aren't officially classified as indigenous are included, this figure would possibly double.

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ish, another race of 'conquistadors' came over land from present day central Europe, crossed the Indus River that borders Pakistan and India, and settled in India.

According to D.D. Koshambi, a renowned Indian scientist who championed a new interpretation of Indian history, the Aryan invasion was not only motivated by the conqueror's desire for better pastoral lands, but also for the technology of metal extraction. Colonisation did not end with the Aryan invasion. In the early 1500s Mogul invaders swept across India, establishing the Islamic Mughal Dynasty which lasted for 200 years. By 1757, the British East India Company's influence had begun to spread across the subcontinent, and before long the company had

direct control over all trade in the East Indies.

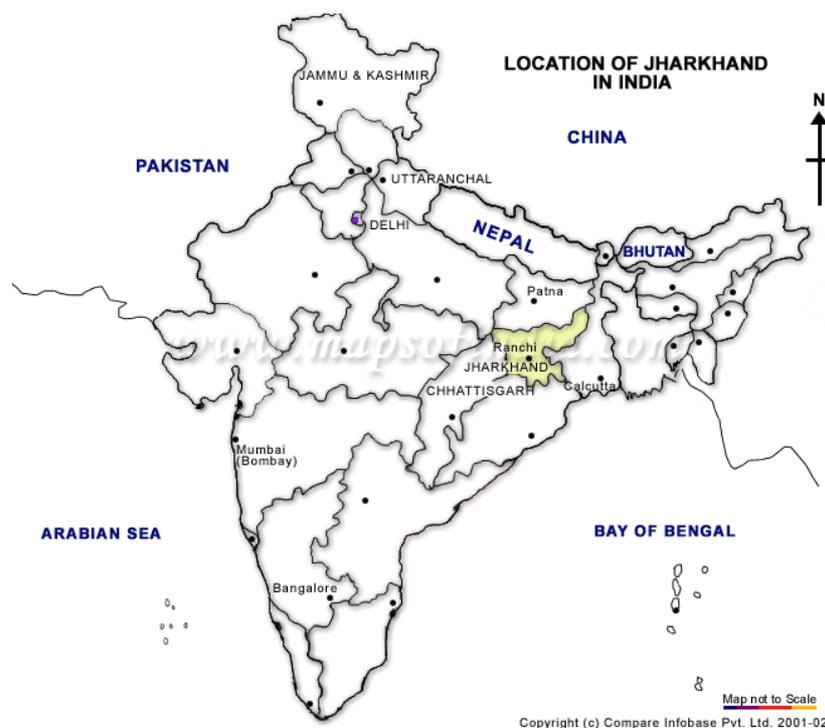
The Company transformed from a commercial trading venture to one that virtually ruled India and other Asian colonies, as it seized control of auxiliary governmental and military functions, until the British Crown assumed direct rule in 1858, following the events of the Indian Rebellion of 1857³.

As Gupta explains, even though India won independence in 1947 after a long and bitter struggle with British Raj, little changed for the millions of dispossessed and marginalised Indians. He explains, "Independence continued the process of colonisation, simply creating a fourth world within the third world"⁴.

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³ John Keay, The Honourable Company - A History of the English East India Company, [HarperCollins](http://www.harpercollins.com), London, 1991

⁴ Fourth World Dynamics - Nirmal Sen Gupta et al



Jharkhand State of India

Map not to Scale
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The Issue

In Jharkhand, as in most indigenous peoples' homelands around the world, mining and logging have together formed the backbone of the economy. But these activities have impacted tribal populations acutely, pushing them off the land and away from their traditional subsistence farming livelihoods, leaving them in abject poverty, landless and jobless.

The growing domestic and global demand for cheap primary products, fuelled by free market economics and Asia's rapid industrialisation, has driven India's government and commercial enterprises to develop the natural resource sector, plundering the land at an unprecedented rate.

One Adivasi victim of the government's policy of unregulated resource extraction explains, "The government justifies its action by telling us we have to make this sacrifice in the name, and for the greater glory, of National Development."⁵

Dias explains, "Ironically, this spectacular progress - given the sugar-coated label of National Development - has seen 50 million⁶ people uprooted from self-sustaining livelihoods and thrown into the gutters of industrial townships. Sixty percent of them are Adivasi and Dalits (outcasts), and most have not received any compensation in spite of losing their jobs and their land."

He continues, "The government has made the empty gesture of providing a small number of dispossessed Adivasis with token employment on development projects, but generally the work is tedious, poorly paid and offers little security. Also, the government can cynically exploit this vast pool of new 'wage earners', paying them meagre wages to do backbreaking work, and casting them aside when they're unneeded."

"Not surprisingly, women and children are usually the ones who suffer the most", he

explains. "For generations Adivasi women have shared the same status as men in these traditional, subsistence communities. Now things are completely different. They're confined to dirty male-dominated mining towns and shanty settlements, where they're treated as second-class citizens, and face toxic and hazardous pollutants in their water, air and food."⁷

Figures Reflect Adivasi's Grim Future

The best way of assessing a community's standard of living is to look at the locals' life expectancy, infant mortality, and male/female birth ratios. From this perspective, Jharkhand's Adivasis face a grim future. Where words can barely do justice to their wretched existence, figures are more illuminating:

- Although India's average life expectancy has risen significantly since India's independence, from 50 years of age in 1947 to 60 years in 2004, the life expectancy of Adivasis living in and around Jharkhand's mining townships has plunged to a shockingly low 35 years of age.
- In Jharkhand's mining townships the infant mortality rate is over 125 per 1000 births. (The BPD Progress Report 9 Oct 2000⁸ of Koraput mentions 95 per 1000). This is one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world.
- BIRSA studies show that while male/female ratios at birth are about equal, there is a discrepancy between adult male/female ratios in the region. While there are more females in villages not directly affected by mining, around the mining projects there are more men⁹. This suggests a trend of female infanticide, a common practice among India's poorest, who feel that girls are a burden on the family.

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⁵ Voice of an evicted victim of Asia's first open pit coal mine Rajmahal, in the video documentary 'Rajmahal R.I.P.'

⁶ These are Central Government's own figures. The actual numbers are probably double this.

⁷ Dias X. 'Wealth Creation & Adivasi Homelands' September 06

⁸ This short report summarises the principal conclusions of a one-day workshop held in Calcutta on 6th September for the Business Partners Development (BPD) Natural Resources Cluster, an initiative of the Overseas Development Institute. The workshop was convened to review and learn lessons from the most recent partnership activities relating to social management in the mine impact area (MIA) of the Sarshatali coal mining project.

⁹ Based on observations and surveys undertaken by BIRSA representatives.

Adivasi Activists Take Action

One weak link that has impeded the progress of the Jharkhand Movement¹⁰, since it started up more than 200 years old, has been the lack of a dedicated space to base their operations and a focused action plan to achieve their goals. In an effort to redress this problem, a group of Adivasi activists came together in 1988 to establish a public institution called Bindrai Institute for Research Study & Action.

The organisation is partly named after the martyred Adivasi leader Bindrai Manki¹¹, who was hanged in 1833 for resisting British attempts to extend their territories into his homeland. The acronym BIRSA is the name of another martyred Adivasi leader, Birsa Munda¹² (1875 -1900), who fought British attempts to privatise land holdings which had been traditionally defined as common lands.

BIRSA focuses on five key areas, which include human rights, forest people's rights, women and health, language and culture, and responsible resource management. The Mines Monitoring Centre (MMC) promotes responsible resource management to both the community and mining ventures.

From the earliest days BIRSA made mining and Adivasi Rights a top priority. With only one full-time staff member and under-resourced, BIRSA was poorly equipped to take on this enormous challenge. BIRSA leadership was very conscious of this and anticipating the impact of the free market economy on this mineral-rich region, they

made a timely move to set up a better resourced centre dedicated to helping the victims of the mineral industry and addressing the ecological impacts caused by environmentally irresponsible mining practices.

It took one year before BIRSA raised enough funds to launch the MMC, which was officially established in June 2003, on the 103rd martyrdom day of Birsa Munda. The Centre was opened by the village high priests of the different Adivasi tribes in accordance with Adivasi rites. The wives of two of our martyred colleagues inaugurated it with a pledge that all the activities of this Centre would follow in the footsteps of, and be dedicated to, our ancestors who fought bravely against colonisation.

From the very beginning, BIRSA members agreed that the MMC had to set an agenda that facilitated the NGO's mission statement - empowerment for Adivasis. They also knew that compared to the government and powerful mining enterprises, they were literally small fry. If they were to have any chance of standing up to these behemoths, they would have to devise an inventive and effective plan of attack.

With little or no experience in community activism, they had to quickly develop the skills that would enable us to take on our rivals more effectively. Following this logic, BIRSA members sat down and made a concerted effort to design a focused strategy that brought together all the stakeholders and mobilised the community.

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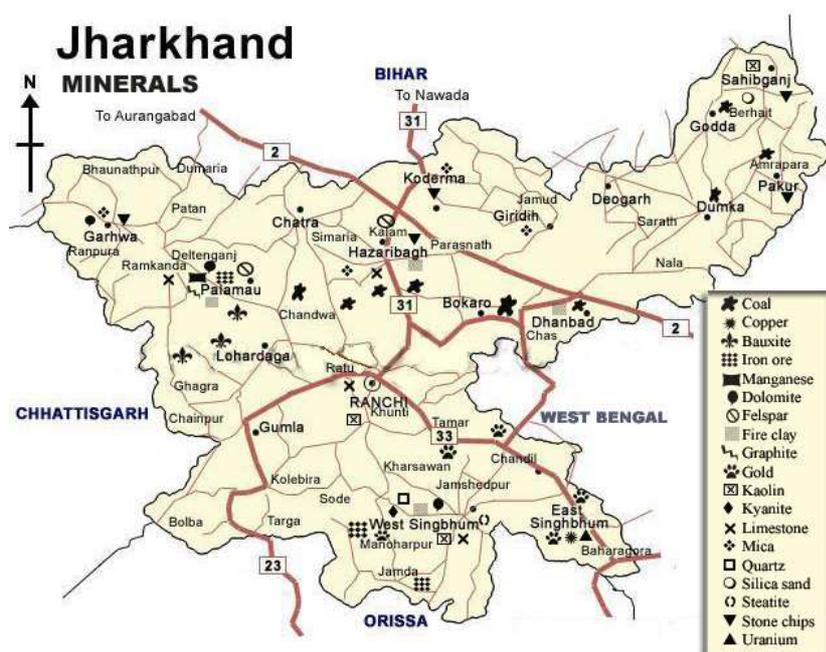
¹⁰ The Jharkhand Movement is defined by the numerous wars, revolts and rebellions that have occurred over the years against hostile colonisers. Since India's independence, the movement has struggled for indigenous rights including those of self-determination, land rights and labour rights, and fought against big development projects and military expansion.

¹¹ Manki is a chieftain or headman of a group of villages.

¹² Although Birsa Munda was sentenced to death by hanging the British feared a rebellion, so they commuted his sentence. Instead they transferred him to a cholera ward inside the jail where he contracted the disease, dying shortly after.

Examples of Initiatives Launched to Facilitate BIRSA Objectives

- Mines Monitoring Centre (MMC) - A resource centre that engages in research and community training, and launches media campaigns that advocate the Adivasis struggle.
- Jharkhand Mines Area Coordination Committee (JMACC) - An alliance of organisations that represent mining affected communities.
- Khan Kaneej & ADHIKAR (People's Natural Resources Rights) - A monthly education broadsheet in the language and idiom of the communities.



Map of deposits of minerals across Jharkhand

What Do We Mean by Empowerment?

According to BIRSA, the first step to 'empowering the community' is to hand-pick a group of effective and popular leaders from the victims' communities. These community leaders are responsible for raising public awareness among locals, and challenging long-held assumptions that they are powerless and destined to a marginalised and impoverished existence. Another crucial step in 'empowering the community' is to encourage the Adivasis to question their deep-seated beliefs by re-interpreting their own history.

Breaking Myths

Although the mineral industry has been operating in Jharkhand for the past 150 years, the various contemporary social movements have failed to identify this industry as the primary source of their problems. They viewed mining as an issue of 'displacement' only, downplaying the effects and failing to identify the more insidious consequences. For this reason, they only called for fair 'compensation', 'rehabilitation' or 'relocation'.

Since India has a high population density, virgin lands are not available for the development of mining and industry. The government therefore draws on an archaic relic of British rule called the Land Requisition Act of 1894 to 'sequester' the lands of farmers and forest dwellers, known as **green field lands**¹³, even though doing so violates two important principles. These principles are

defined in the constitutional provision for the protection of Adivasi rights, known as **Schedule V**¹⁴, and a piece of legislation calling for the protection of Adivasi owned lands, known as the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act, which falls under the Constitution's (Sixty-sixth Amendment) Act 1990.

Once the land is appropriated, the government then sells the land off to industry and commercial interests, another illegally dubious step, at give-away prices. To legally justify their actions, industry and government officials coined the term 'displaced people' to give these dispossessed people legitimacy, soft-pedaling a policy that destroys so many people's lives.

By driving the Adivasis off their own land, and not offering viable alternatives, not only do they end up penniless and destitute, but they

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¹³ Green field lands are former agricultural or forest lands that have been appropriated for mining uses.

¹⁴ The Schedule V (or Fifth Schedule) of the Indian Constitution provides for the administration and control of tribal lands (termed 'scheduled areas') within nine states of India. The Fifth Schedule guarantees that the Adivasis' rights to their land and natural resources be protected from hostile take over by outside non-tribal forces.

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become trapped in a socioeconomic and cultural limbo where they lose their sense of dignity and self-identity. Based on this logic, it might be more appropriate to use stronger language, like 'ethnocide', 'genocide' and 'extermination', to describe the social, psychological and ecological impacts of the mineral industry on the Adivasi people.

The choice of language is a political one. By limiting the demands to fair compensation, one accepts the false claim that the mining companies are legally sanctioned and morally vindicated in their actions as long as the mandatory statutory compensation is paid.

Such interpretations benefit industry, but cost the Adivasis dearly, for they deny them their cultural, political and economic rights. Besides it denies them their constitutional rights that ensure the protection of their land and the natural resources that fall on those lands.

By taking a stand on our ownership rights to the land and its natural resources - in particular minerals - we were attempting to shatter the myth that government and industry implement responsible policies regarding Adivasi rights, exposing the ugly truth that the 'powers that be' play an exploitative and underhanded game.

MMC Inspired Slogan Changes Lives

One critical tactic employed to effectively convey our message to the stakeholders was to raise a mass awareness that Adivasis had inherent ownership rights to their own minerals. To help get this message across, MMC designed a pedagogy that would facilitate the transfer of these ideas to our people. The MMC team captured the zeitgeist with the catchy slogan "Minerals are ours, not just stakeholders... but owners". Simple, relevant and striking, the slogan helped trigger a change in the way the victims perceived their reality. For the first time, Jharkhand's Adivasis started to see themselves as the proud owners of their own mineral resources, rather than vassals, instilling them with a sense of dignity.

Different forms of media were used to spread this slogan. A striking calendar poster was designed by our Media and Publications Unit, which we sold at all our meetings and public awareness campaigns. With the above slogan splashed boldly across the bottom, the poster was emblazoned with colourful pictures of the martyred Adivasi leader, Birsa Munda, and the pop-icon and Latin American revolutionary leader, Che Guevara. It called on the people to join in the footsteps of these martyrs in their struggle against colonialism. An impressive ten thousand copies were sold within the campaign's targeted area (see campaign poster).



Campaign Poster and 2005 Calendar

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Documentary Galvanises Community

In June 2003 BIRSA MMC also released its first documentary video 'Pachuwara + 32'. The production was a major achievement, as we were able to make it in-house without professional help and on a very low budget.

Pachuwara + 32 told the story of a coalition of thirty-two Santhal villages¹⁵ who courageously took on the state-backed mining giant Eastern Minerals & Trading Agency (EMTA).

Drawing wide publicity, the documentary helped to electrify the Pachuwara Block Division's flagging and uninspired people's movement. The main voices in the documentary were those of the women from those villages.

Other women from distant villages described how empowering it was to see these women speak out about the injustices they encountered every day.

¹⁵ Santhal Adivasis are the largest Indigenous nation in the world. They are found mainly in the states of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Assam, Orissa and Bihar

Ten More Documentaries

Over the next three years, the MMC team produced ten more documentaries about the Adivasis struggle, over two series, focusing on two critical themes. The first series, called Poison Pits, exposed the social and ecological devastation resulting from local mining operations. The second series, entitled Rhythms of Resistance, narrated stories of the resistance movements from their earliest days, tracing their evolution and their struggles. People flocked to view them.

The films are shown at night on a big screen through an LCD projector, and each screening draws at least one thousand people.

The campaign, supported by the posters and the films, continues to travel around all the areas where mining leases are granted. Through its public awareness initiative, MVF allowed the community, for the first time, to see themselves and their history in a positive and dignified light.

This new perspective resonated deeply with the community, especially the women and children. It also gave the local villagers a fresh confidence that has boosted the leadership potential within our own staff team, not to mention being a source of inspiration for emerging village activists.



An Indian man from the Erikala tribe cuts slices of bamboo trunks in the Mahabubnagar district of India's southern state of Andhra Pradesh. The Erikala tribe is one of the Adivasi or Scheduled Tribes entitled to special government attention under the Indian Constitution. Together with the Scheduled Castes, they compose over 24% of India's population. Courtesy of AFP/Getty Images.

MMC Offers Adivasis an Alternative

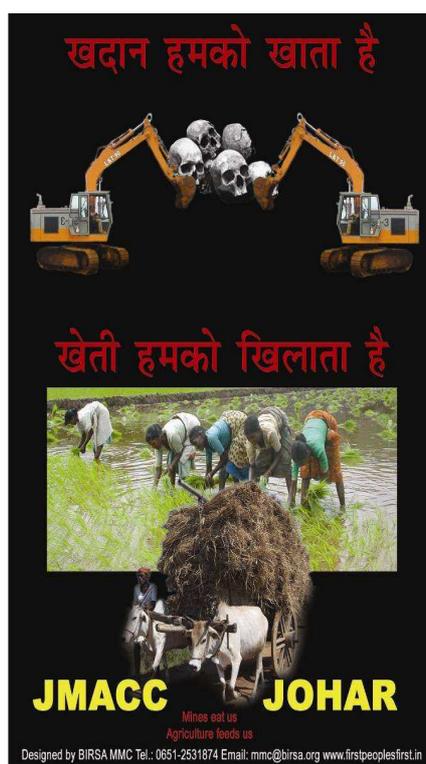
In 2005 the government launched an aggressive sell off of mining leases in dense forest and multi-cropped farm lands. Since our opposition to green field mining is deeply rooted in the Adivasi cultural tradition of holding lands as sacred, we refused stand by idly and watch the destruction of our life-sustaining farm land and biodiversity-rich

forests. To date, the Adivasis and Dalits have been India's largest involuntary contributors of land, water and forest for mega-development projects, but have gained little or nothing in return for making this enormous sacrifice. Finally, the people are taking a stand, and are refusing to bow down to the power elite any longer.

Continued from page 7 - MMC Offers Adivasis an Alternative

To protect the Adivasi and Dalit's land it was vital to design an integrated strategy to minimise the impacts of mining on the marginalised Adivasi communities. With this goal in mind, we sketched out an action plan incorporating these features, to: realistically value the mineral resources existing on Adivasi and Dalit land; introduce more environmentally and socially responsible extractive and processing methods; challenge the defence sector's over-consumption of the nation's minerals, at nearly 20-30% of total production; and, develop viable alternative vocations to mining, such as agriculture and small business.

In an effort to push this action plan, MMC came up with a second powerful slogan focusing on the negative impacts of mining, and farming as a viable alternative - "Mines Eat Us, Agriculture Feeds Us". Boldly inscribed across our 2005 calendar and posters, this emotive metaphor helped to galvanise the community, stirring up the people's emotions. Like the first slogan, this message captured the spirit of the Adivasi people striking a deep chord by closely reflecting their grievances and world view.



Provocative slogan 'Mines Eat Us, Agriculture Feeds Us' on Campaign Poster and 2006 Calendar

MMC Media Campaign

MMC's media campaign spread like wildfire, quickly raising awareness of the Adivasis' plight, not only locally, but across the entire country. Inspired by MMC's success, several other social movements, including those working in non-mining related areas, took on the slogan 'ownership rights'. Even as far away as Rajasthan, a desert state 2000 km to the east, grassroots organisations adopted the slogan in an effort to advance their various struggles - one example being the fight for indigenous ownership rights to water sources.

This impacted the regional political process profoundly, and political leaders began to find themselves challenged as their game of 'running with the hares and hunting with the hounds' was exposed. Over three years, as the public became more aware of their rights and began to question the government's actions, political leaders were forced to watch their step as communities demanded greater accountability.

With increased public scrutiny and a growing demand for more transparency, political lead-

ers found it increasingly difficult to engage in dubious backdoor dealings with company bosses that left Adivasis landless and destitute. This reflected a seismic shift in the status quo. In the past the mining industry bribed local politicians, and their contracted henchmen, to keep locals in line, silencing any group's that complained too loudly. But the locals' rights could be denied no more, and things were starting to change.



An Adivasi family relax outside their home in the Western Ghats, in the state of Karnataka, Western India

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Adivasi Reject Government and Industry's Overtures

The story doesn't end here. In response to the Adivasis' growing demands and their new-found confidence, the Jharkhand government announced that it would introduce a 'displacement' policy (was still in draft form as of February 2007) which offers 'displaced' peoples a better compensation package and guarantees that their land can only be requisitioned if the village committees give their approval. This is a milestone achievement considering, to date, the mining industry and the present government have consistently refused to even meet the people's organisations for discussions. By applying pressure at the grassroots level, the community has given the state government no choice but to start talks.

In a surprise move, commercial interests followed the government's lead introducing an 'engagement' package where land owners were offered a certain number of their stock shares as part of the compensation package. Despite these overtures from the

government and industry, the Adivasis flatly rejected their offers. This, however, didn't stop mining industry reps who continued to badger land owners, offering more and more after every negative response.

Over the years, the state and industry's unilateral approach to decision-making, which totally ignored the community's opinions and grievances, and their exploitative policies and actions, have only alienated the local population. Now the tables have been turned, and although industry reps and government officials have opened up a dialogue with the Adivasis, they do so reluctantly as they know the communities are more organised, better informed and gaining in confidence. One of the most significant changes in the local community's attitude, is they now appreciate that their land and natural resources can't simply be exchanged for token compensation. They realise that no value can be placed on their land, livelihoods, cultural heritage and identity.

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Indian woman from the Erikala tribe Koneti Venkatamma, an Adivasi tribe, makes bamboo baskets, at their hamlet at Lingala Mandal, in the Mahbubnagar district of India's southern state of Andhra Pradesh. Courtesy of AFP/Getty Images.

The Community Demands Rights Are Recognised

When the incumbent government was re-elected in 2005, it went on an aggressive selling spree auctioning off mining blocks to private industry in green field areas. In just three months twenty-two coal and iron ore mining leases and three allied industries' leases were sold to big corporate interests. MMC sprang to action, and we quickly occupied the Adivasi land that was to be sold off before the mining companies arrived. We set about educating the people on their constitutional rights, and explained that they shouldn't surrender their land without a fight.

We knew we couldn't count on the state legal systems for support, as both the High Court and the Supreme Court had already shown that they were strongly aligned with the mining corporations when they threw the Pachuvara case out of court. They had failed in their constitutional duty to protect the Adivasis, so with no other form of recourse, the victims set up their own local resistant organisations to take matters into their own hands. Travelling to each of the twenty-two communities slated for green field development, we campaigned with our posters and videos to inform the locals about their rights

One of the unique features of the MMC campaign was to actively target women, as the female population exhibited a much more intimate connection to the land. As such, they were more tenacious and passionate about achieving the campaign's goals. Our media campaign, which included punchy and simple information pamphlets, posters, and open air video presentations, inspired local activist movements to consolidate their aims and objectives.

All twenty-two communities that had been marked for green field development came together and agreed on a common plan of attack which addressed all their concerns, merging them into one unified action plan. Some of the issues that the action plan

addressed included:

- Refusing to give up any more land;
- Forcing the government to scrap the archaic and exploitative Land Requisition Act;
- Expanding the 'compensation packages' offered by government and industry so it provided financial recompense to the thousands of Adivasis who have become landless due to previous land grabs;
- Maintaining the embargo that prevents officials of the government or mining industry reps from entering the areas slated for green field development. To date this embargo has been a success (See Text Box 2).
- Ensuring that government officials do not disrupt the activists during their protests, unless they are meeting their demands.
- Ensuring that politicians and government officials do not speak on behalf of the Adivasis during negotiations with industry and government bodies. The Adivasis must always represent themselves, so they can clearly and unambiguously articulate their real demands. Only in this way can they avoid political spin and hidden agendas.
- Ensuring that when political parties become involved, they can only do so in a legally binding and constitutionally acceptable manner, incorporating the Adivasi's demands into their political agendas, and raising the issues in a legally impartial environment, such as the State Assembly or Parliament.
- Ensuring the immediate annulment of all the amendments enacted that undermine the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act, and make a concerted effort to bring it back to its original status and legal force.

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Adivasi Action Reflects Anger

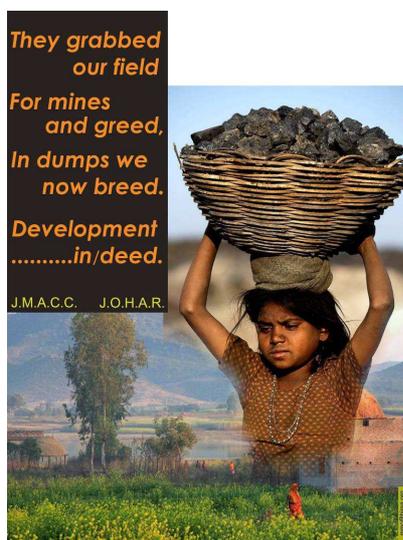
On November 6th 2006 the Adivasi people showed how serious they were about maintaining the embargo they had imposed on industry and the government to stop them from entering the 'contested areas' in response to the 22 slated green field developments and government and industry's murderous policies (See later in article). The highly respected General Secretary of the Council of Adivasi Chiefs, Sri Ontu Hembrom, had gone against community opinion, and approved a green field development project to be undertaken by the ESSAR steel company near the town of Chaibasa in Singhbhum.

When villagers heard about the general-secretary's fait accompli, they were enraged, tracking him down, catching him and hauling him off to Chaibasa. Garlanding him with footwear, they paraded him through the streets, an action considered by Indian mainstream society as a desecration of the person's respect.

It takes strong resolve for villagers to disgrace such an important member of the Adivasi nation, but Sri Hembrom had failed the community by breaking the embargo, and the locals' wouldn't sit by idly. This reflects the community's new-found zeal for protecting their own land.

On 7th February 2007 the State Chief Minister an Adivasi himself had to cancel the foundation stone laying ceremony for a massive thermal plant in the Karanpura valley fearing mass protest.

MMC Campaign Opens Up Hostile Communities



MMC campaign poster showing the stark contrast between Adivasi peoples' previous lives on the fields and the new life where even young children toil away at backbreaking labour.

Another positive outcome of our campaign to 'empower the community' was that previously hostile, indifferent and sceptical communities were now much more approachable. Inspired by MMC's intervention initiative, these Dalit communities were taking a proactive stance on the issues and were demanding change for the first time. This was an amazing achievement, seeing as they had been an oppressed and voiceless caste since time immemorial, and few expected them to have the audacity to stand up against the intimidating power elite.

Even more remarkable is that sociological studies reveal that this assertiveness is totally out of character for these marginalised communities, as the converted (Christian) Adivasis are too pietistic and the non-converted are too docile, to be political. But this time they've proved the pundits wrong.

"Inspired by MMC's intervention initiative, these Dalit communities were taking a proactive stance on the issues and were demanding change for the first time."

Forty Resistance Groups

With over forty new resistance groups forming over a period of only four years, and each one producing as many as twelve new male and female community leaders, activism is experiencing an upsurge in the region. There are now more than fifty new 'first level' leaders and an additional fifty 'second level' leaders who have taken the campaign to at least 200,000 people, radically altering their realities and opening up the consciousnesses.

One of the most impressive figures to come out of this intervention initiative is that all the community leaders are either Adivasis or Dalits, and at least 25% of them are women.

MMC's intervention campaign has changed Jharkhand's political climate dramatically, leading to an extraordinary result -not one single green field mine or industry development has been launched in the state of Jharkhand during the intervention's lifespan.

“MMC's intervention campaign has changed Jharkhand's political climate dramatically...”

Adivasis Mobilise in Face of Tragedy ¹⁶

On 2nd January 2006 in the heavily Adivasi populated neighbouring state of Orissa, the state government joined forces with the industry giant, Tata Steel¹⁷ in an effort to stop locals from protesting against a proposed green field development. Afraid that their expropriation of Adivasi land to build a steel plant would trigger riots impeding their development, Tata, in collusion with state authorities, laid landmines on the contested lands, home to the Ho Adivasi people. This deadly tactic was used to stop people from protesting on the land, making it easier for them to move in and snap up the land.

The next morning a large group of people assembled to protest, and stop the progress of the earth movers used to bulldoze their fields. Tripping on the triggers, the protesting Adivasis set off the mined explosives, and tragedy ensued with 13 killed and 40 injured. The site was like a war zone, with bodies being torn apart from the impact of the explosive's blasts. Although some bodies were returned to their grieving families, some weren't and some body parts went missing.

Within a few hours of receiving this news the MMC sprang to action organising a Fact Finding Team (FFT) consisting of members from the human rights organisation Jharkhandi's

Organisation for Human Rights JOHAR, JMACC and a journalist from an Italian newspaper. As the first outsiders to arrive at the massacre site, the FFT saw first hand the survivors' indescribable pain and anger, and empathised with the immediate community-initiated embargo they launched, stopping outsiders from entering the crime scene.

After being on the scene for two weeks the FFT released a report¹⁸ in English and in Hindi which proved, irrefutably, that landmines and other weapons had been used against the landowners in an attempt to crush any resistance. Unearthing hard evidence, such as used shells, to use against the government and Tata Steel, MMC were ready to start the assault on the guilty parties.

By the end of the month we had produced a video documentary called 'Tata Landmines Adivasis', uploading it to our website for free downloads. Even though MMC has accused Tata of direct involvement in the bloodbath, the company is yet to deny or admit to MMC's charge.

On 30th January we released this documentary at a mass meeting attended by activists and sympathisers on the site of the massacre, despite and in defiance of a massive police and paramilitary presence. We also prepared

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¹⁶ Sadly, this incident is not unique, being repeated across India where industry and the state clash with marginalised communities trying to defend their rights.

¹⁷ TATA is India's largest private sector group. Its steel making division recently took over Corus, an Anglo Dutch company, to become the world's third largest producer of steel. Its automobile division is set to take over FIAT to produce a 'people's car' in the neighbouring West Bengal State. Singur, the planned site for this plant, is a multi-cropped agriculture region where the farmers are protesting over an incident where six farmers were killed in clashes with the corporate giant.

¹⁸ Since the report was released we've received positive feedback and support from the following groups: British based website, Mines and Communities; Cambridge University; Amnesty International; the international human rights group, FIAN, and; a University group from Germany (through SARINI Heidelberg).

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large size posters for an exhibition carrying graphic photographs of the incident.

The FFT Report and the video documentary were later requested and referred to by the UN Human Rights Commission, a parliamentary commission and the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), the Indian equivalent of the FBI.

Even though the massacre aroused untold anger and grief among the community, MMC's rapid response bolstered the local Adivasi resistance movements, uniting and energising them to take on the state and Tata. In response to the massacre, villagers forced the closure of Highway 200, a major transport route built to truck minerals from Chattisgarh to the ports of Orissa, for export across India and off-shore.

Still blocked off at the time this paper was written, the resistance action hurt the mining operators badly, as they had to find alternative and less accessible roads to transport their loads, slashing into their profits. The resistance movements have stated that they will no longer give up their lands, nor will they stop the road blockade, until the state government recovers all the missing body parts that were torn off those that were killed, and return them to the victim's families.

Unquestionably, this is by far the biggest tragedy that the MMC has ever encountered, but it has proven that in spite of being a fledgling organisation, the inexperienced staff can mobilise quickly and effectively, inspiring the local Adivasi to take action. But the local activists and MMC have had to fight a bitter struggle with an increasingly hostile Tata, who have recruited the support of India's equivalent to the CIA and its most powerful intelligence agency- the Research & Analysis Wing (RAW). In an attempt to crush the local protest movements, RAW has launched an all out campaign of intimidation in the area.

MMC and the resistance movement have responded quickly by turning to the international media in an effort to expose state-backed Tata's flagrant violation of human rights and their use of lethal tactics. When Australia's Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), a public television network, aired a piece on the massacre, it drew global attention to the plight of India's Adivasis and Dalits, and their struggle for land rights, legal representation and recognition.

SBS's coverage of the tragedy was especially poignant, as Tata are currently in the process of establishing a large coal mining project in Australia. Bad publicity has a tendency of firing up the public, and this might prove awkward for Tata's plans for expand its mining operations in Australia.

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Conclusion

This case study shows that effective community led interventions can radically alter deeply entrenched cultural assumptions and inspire marginalised and deprived communities to take action against otherwise intimidating power elites. For generations, the Adivasis of Jharkhand have been exploited by both the government and industry, but an emotional media campaign launched by the local grassroots organisation, MMC, and its umbrella organisation, BIRSA, has galvanised the local indigenous community to make a stand.

Using sophisticated forms of media, like video, posters and pamphlets, to raise awareness in an engaging and emotive way, MMC was able to capture the zeitgeist. Their message struck a deep chord with the local Adivasis, energising the community to form forty resistance groups that started to demand that the government and industry recognise their inherent rights to their land and the natural resources that fall on that land.

Adivasi's new found confidence forced industry and government to open up dialogues with locals, discussing possible compensation packages for 'displaced' peoples. The Adi-

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vasis rejected their overtures flatly, stating that appropriating their land was immoral and illegal, and they would no longer stand by idly. But the government and industry's gestures proved to be empty after they slated 22 communities for green field developments.

Along with this, the indescribable tragedy that occurred when Tata and the Orissa government's deadly tactics killed and injured protesting Adivasis, led the Adivasis to mobilise rapidly. With the backing of MMC and international media, the local community launched an aggressive attack against their adversaries.

Despite the enormous tragedy faced by the Adivasis..., this case study shows that an engaging and inventive intervention program that incorporates a media campaign that rings true can mobilise the local population beyond anyone's expectations."

Despite the enormous tragedy faced by the Adivasis, and the ongoing bitter struggle with regional power elites, this case study shows that an engaging and inventive intervention program that incorporates a media campaign that rings true can mobilise the local population beyond anyone's expectations. There is little doubt that this case study can be used as a model for effective interventions that stimulate community activism, that can be used anywhere in the world where indigenous peoples are being persecuted by the regional powers.

Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM) in Asia-Pacific Portal – <http://www.asmasiapacific.org>

ASM Asia-Pacific Case Study Series

This series of case studies documents concrete examples of equitable, effective, and sustainable local-level partnerships including small-scale miners or their communities as a guide to develop better policy and practice in the Asia-Pacific region.

The project has been led by Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt. The case studies have been edited by Joel Katz and designed by Rachel P Lorenzen.

Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM) in Asia-Pacific Portal

The ASM Asia Pacific Portal is the public interface of a loose network of individuals and institutions working on poverty eradication, development and livelihoods in Artisanal and Small-scale Mining (ASM) in the Asia-Pacific region.

The portal's mandate is to disseminate knowledge about ASM in the Asia-Pacific, to document best practice in community development and environmental management, and to promote fellowship and cooperation among stakeholders interested in poverty eradication and sustainable development.