



HungerFREE

Action for food rights

InFocus: India: Hunger in the Mines

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East Indian tribal people ask: **What will we eat if mining goes ahead?**

Dabu Majhi, a formidable woman in her fifties sits with others in the painted porch of her mud home in India, watching the comings and goings of an international mining company on her doorstep.

“This is our place,” she says of her village Kankasarpa in Orissa in the north east. “We’ve been here for ten generations. If we leave, where will we go? Who will take us? We will become beggars.”

The mining company she refers to is Vedanta Resources, currently in the middle of a Supreme Court hearing in Delhi. In 2004 Biswajit Mohanty of Wildlife Society of Orissa, tribal rights activist Prafulla Samantara and non-profit organisation Academy of Mountain Environics appealed to the Central Empowered Committee, a body constituted by the Supreme Court itself, against the establishment of Vedanta in Lanjigarh.

The upcoming court hearing will decide if Vedanta can be allowed to mine bauxite from Niyamgiri.

Dabu Maihi’s tribal group venerate the local Holy Mountain of Niyamgiri as a living God. Two rivers and 32 streams flow from the mountain and the surrounding hills and forests are home to wild and endangered species of plants. It also has bauxite.

Mukul Rohtagi, who represented Vedanta Alumina Limited (VAL) in a Supreme Court hearing earlier this year, says the reserves in the Niyamgiri Hills in Orissa are the largest in the world, which explains why the company has already built an aluminium refinery in Lanjigarh village.

“An unfavourable ruling by the court could deal a serious blow to ‘primitive tribal groups’ who have been campaigning for their right to land and livelihood,” says Bratindi Jena, who leads ActionAid’s work with indigenous communities.

“A positive decision could spell the end to deforestation and evictions around Niyamgiri and set an example for law violators across the country.”

She believes that a go-ahead for Vedanta’s plans would make a mockery of the special protection these people are afforded under the Indian constitution.

Vedanta Resources, a UK-registered company, has so far spent over £400 million (\$805 million) on the project. The company claims to have invested heavily in the local community through training schemes and schools and even a resettlement village which

rehoused those who lost their land to the development.

The Vedanta “village” is a compound of mostly empty two-room concrete houses surrounded by a barbed wire fence where displaced families were resettled after their land was acquired for the initial building work at the plant. Many of the occupants have left, unable to cope with their loss of land and traditional way of life.

Environmental experts have warned that bauxite strip mining at the top of Niyamgiri would devastate the flora, fauna, river systems and food capacity of the mountain environment.

It is believed Bauxite mining will endanger the indigenous tribes and seriously affect thousands of villages in the plains dependent on mountain water.

Chemical waste from the refinery will collect in the Red Mud Pond and Ash Pond. By law both these ponds should be located 5 kms away from any village. But at present they are situated very close to the villages and the River Bansadhara.

Effluents are likely to be a mix of highly toxic alkaline chemicals and heavy metals including radioactive elements. A flash flood could cause a breach in the ponds, resulting in a spill of poisonous chemicals into the river. During the rainy season the ponds could discharge into the ground water and soil, becoming hazardous for human and animal health.

A study of the proposed project by the government-run Wildlife Institute of India concluded that mining could trigger “irreversible changes in the ecological characteristics of the area”.

Remote tribes are unaccustomed to migration and relocation. In mainstream society they cannot find work that matches their skills, such as collecting non-timber forest produce, digging out tubers and upland cultivation.

The government has not yet confirmed that, if relocated, the indigenous people will have access to subsidised food.

“Right now, the people have sovereignty over seeds”, says Bratindi Jena. “They’ve passed on non-hybrid seeds for generations. These seeds grow without pesticides, added irrigation or fertiliser. This is what makes the people food secure.”

Mining will destroy Niyamgiri forest’s biodiversity, currently their main source of food and hunger will begin to loom over a previously self-reliant people.

“We live because of Niyamgiri. If it goes, we will be finished”, says Alisi Majhi of Sindhbahal village.

“Our lives are with Niyamgiri. Our lifestyle is because of Niyamgiri. We eat tubers, leafy vegetables and millet. We know how to prepare forest products, selling them for income,” she adds.

In the shade of another porch is Damba Majdi, a widow. She sits on her haunches with a neighbour’s child, milling flour with a grinding stone.

“I grow makka (maize), beeri (black gram), mandia (finger millet) and paddy (rice). I plough the land nearby – I used to have more but the company took some of the land away; that land was much more fertile. We had really good paddy there.

“If mining starts, we cannot stay here any more. Our streams and forests and crops will be destroyed. We are dependent on Niyamgiri for water.

“Company people came here with papers they wanted us to sign: they promised us houses, roads, money and water; they promised us showers and toilets inside the houses! But this is how we live. We are happy with this life. Look at all this”, she says, pulling back a tarpaulin cover from her grain store with a flourish: “I harvested this from my land. Can the company guarantee this?”

“What will happen to our children? Will they get jobs? They know how to plough, grow food and collect from the forest. And what jobs will the women get? And if they give us money, how long will it last?”

Sukli Majhi, a 45-year-old widow from Narengdani village, says that women are already feeling the brunt of the company’s presence: “We normally bathe outside in rivers and streams. But now with the company, many strange men are coming. We feel very uncomfortable. The way they stare at us and the way they behave make us fearful to walk around on our own. Now the women move around in groups.”

These concerns have resulted in vibrant local groups, regularly exchanging information. They recently held a meeting in Delhi with indigenous communities resisting displacement in other states.

In August, ActionAid supported a trip to London by two of the groups’ representatives to attend Vedanta’s annual general meeting and raise concerns directly with the company’s chief executive and shareholders. According to Babu Mathew, a law professor and director of ActionAid in India, the Vedanta case is part of a wider trend of evictions and displacement.

“India has one of the world’s best constitutions when it comes to protecting the rights of vulnerable groups, but this seems to have been forgotten in the pursuit of industrial growth.

“If mining starts, we cannot stay here any more. Our streams and forests and crops will be destroyed.”

“While the national economy is booming and India has more billionaires than any other country in Asia, rural and urban poor are being displaced from their homes, land and livelihoods. Families who were once managing to eke out a living now don’t know where their next meal will come from”, he says.

“Communities resisting Vedanta have already enlisted the support of local and international lawyers and activists. Let’s hope that we can soon celebrate similar success here.”

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Note: The next Supreme Court hearing on Vedanta is scheduled for 5 October in Delhi.

The story in context: Hunger in a booming economy

One in four Indians go to bed hungry and India is home to the largest number of malnourished people in the world – 212 million, of whom 100 million are children.

An Indian government report released in August this year says 77 per cent of Indians, about 836 million people, survive on less than half a dollar a day in one of the world’s most booming economies.

According to the government-run National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector, most of those who earn less than 20 rupees (50 US cents) a day are from the informal sector with no job or social security, living in utter poverty.

ActionAid’s Hunger FREE campaign in India calls for:

Land rights for women

A guarantee of an equal minimum wage for men and women

Implementation of social security schemes

Implementation of the Land Reform Act

Eradication of practices involving corporate abuse

Full citizenship rights (constitutional rights)

Photo: Damba Majdi grinds grain with a neighbour’s child at her house in Belamba village, Orissa, India photograph by: Stuart Freedman/ActionAid.

For more information and high-resolution copies of photographs, please contact Alexandre Polack alexandre.polack@actionaid.org.