

COMMENT

SALWA JUDUM AND TATAS

BASTAR HAS BEEN IN THE NEWS for quite some time because of Salwa Judum (SJ)-the anti-naxalite terror squad sponsored by the BJP-rum state government of Chattisgarh. What is less publicized is how the Tatas are utilizing the services of SJ to forcibly acquire land for their steel plant. Of late the Tatas have earned the dubious distinction of being called the most aggressive land-grabber in various states-Bengal, Orissa, Kerala, Chattisgarh. The flagship company of the Tata House-Tata Steel has been indiscriminately exploiting huge tracts of land in former Bihar (now Jharkhand) and Orissa for mining purposes by systematically displacing tribals from their ancestral lands and forests. Now it is the turn of Bastar tribals to face the greed of Tatas. And the ruling and opposition parties, irrespectively of their political colour and ideological differences can go to any length to make room for the Tatas. Relocating Bastar villages in the name of curbing naxalism is in the main aimed at easing the task of acquiring lands for the Tatas. The situation in Bastar is at a critical stage. The “manufactured civil war” pursued by Salwa Judum continues with at least 80,000 tribal refugees languishing in what are virtually concentration camps.

The proposed Tata steel plant is planned on 2,000+ hectares of tribal land belonging to 10 villages in Lohandiguda block, near the amazing Chitrakot waterfall on the Indravati river. The agreement for the plant was signed between the Chhattisgarh Govt & Tatas in June 2005—precisely the month when Salwa Judum was formed—labelled a “people’s movement against the Naxalites” but actually a police sponsored terror militia forcing the evacuation of one tribal village after another, with refugees pressurized to join SJ.

The Bastar region is outstanding for the tribal culture as well as outstanding for nature—this part of Bastar is one of the few places in India where wild buffaloes & cattle survive. They will vanish, thanks to the Tatas. The tribal culture of the Maria Gond & other tribes is one of the world’s most beautiful and wise of all surviving tribal cultures, written about beautifully by Grigson & Elwin in the 1930s-40s. Their culture survived intact at least till 2005 when the Salwa Judum war started, which has split virtually all the tribal villages into SJ versus Maoists. There have been thousands of deaths & rapes since 2005.

The Naxalites may be misguided to use random violence, but they are opposing an extreme level of exploitation & corruption, and stand up for the rights of tribal people, and appear a lot more principled than the SJ and State forces opposing them. Since Bastar tribals have been opposing Tata steel plant plans for many years, it does actually seem that SJ was largely set up to implement Tata and other mining/metal plans. □□□