

NOTE

Looting Mountains

A Correspondent writes :

Globalisation means exploitation of natural and human resources on a global scale. The old-style mining of British India now looks pea-nut compared to what is happening in the mineral rich hills and jungles. They are literally removing mountains, bull-dozing hill tops, destroying forests and making thousands of poor families destitute overnight. They don't think of ecological destructions. Nor do they bother about climate change that will affect their own future generation. All they can think of is how to make quick profit—super profit.

In their seminal, soon-to-be-published work, *Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminum Cartel*, Samarendra Das and Felix Padel say that the financial value of the bauxite deposits of Orissa alone is \$2.27 trillion (more than twice India's GDP). That was at 2004 prices. At today's prices it would be about \$4 trillion.

Of this, officially the government gets a royalty of less than 7%. Quite often, if the mining company is a known and recognised one, the chances are that, even though the ore is still in the mountain, it will have already been traded on the futures market. So, while for the adivasis the mountain is still a living deity, the fountainhead of life and faith, the keystone of the ecological health of the region, for the corporation, it's just a cheap storage facility. Goods in storage have to be accessible. From the corporation's point of view, the bauxite will have to come out of the mountain. Such are the pressures and the exigencies of the free market.

That's just the story of the bauxite in Orissa. Expand the \$4 trillion to include the value of the millions of tonnes of high-quality iron ore in Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand and the 28 other precious mineral resources, including uranium, limestone, dolomite, coal, tin, granite, marble, copper, diamond, gold, quartzite, corundum, beryl, alexandrite, silica, fluorite and garnet. Add, to that the power plants, the dams, the highways, the steel and cement factories, the aluminium smelters, and all the other infrastructure projects that are part of the hundreds of MoUs (more than 90 in Jharkhand alone) that have been signed. It just gives a rough outline of the scale of the operation and the desperation of the stakeholders.

The forest once known as the Dandakaranya, which stretches from West Bengal through Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, parts of Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, is home to millions of India's tribal people. The media has taken to calling it the *Red corridor* or the *Maoist corridor*. It could just as accurately be called the *MoUist corridor*. It doesn't seem to matter at all that the fifth schedule of the constitution provides protection to adivasi people and disallows the alienation of their land. It looks as though the clause is there only to make the constitution look good - a bit of window-dressing, a slash of make-up. Scores of corporations, from relatively unknown ones to the biggest mining companies and steel manufacturers in the world, are in the fray to appropriate adivasi homelands—the Mittals, Jindals, Tatas, Essar, Posco, Rio Tinto, BHP Billiton and, of course, Vedanta.

There's an MoU on every mountain, river and forest glade. And most of this is secret. It's not in the public domain. 24-hour news channels that are so busy hunting for macabre stories of Maoist violence - and making them up when they run out of the real thing - seem to have no interest at all in this side of the story.
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