

## REVIEW ARTICLE

# Aluminium Means Destruction

Sankar Ray

Aluminium ( $Al_2$ ) has in grim reality two radicals - ecocide and genocide. In other words, it's a menace that the white metal's chemical entity hoodwinks. It's utility factor has been diminishing over time. For a comprehensive perception on the war against not only ethnic people but urbanites in the long run—let alone the wanton destruction of flora and fauna wherever bauxite extraction is on, one can't dispense with the pioneering work by Felix Padel and Samarendra Das, the 742 (plus XXIX)—page treatise\* is easily source-material for a dozen of M.Phil and Ph.D. dissertations but that's its minor side. Essentially, it is a weapon of defenders of peace and the biosphere against war-mongers. It's a very rare example of combining scholarship, multi-disciplinary spread, activism and amazing smear of political economy. All this is due to total commitment to both human interest and ecological imperatives, let alone the adherence to scientific temper.

The relevance of the treatise increases everyday with milestones like the refusal of the ministry of environment and forests to the Vedanta Resources plc UK, to go ahead with the mega-project at Niyamgiri in Orissa. The on-going struggle against the big business—including metal MNCs—by ethnic people is a powerful catalyst. In 21 extremely well-researched chapters, Padel, an anthropologist with a Ph.D. from Oxford and Das, a committed activist and an ethno-environmentalist working among subalterns, give the readers—including discriminating academics—an absorbing account on the experience of the battle against the calculated ecocide.

In 1933 Adolf Hitler asked the designers of the world's first aluminium-skinned monoplane within three years after its successful trial for mass-production of aluminium-based war planes. The alloy, Duralmin, came into being then, the alloy for war planes. But it began even earlier, as the authors opine that the First World War was "the turning point for human relationship with aluminium" (pp 46-47). Mining of bauxite began in Hungary at that time. However, by 1937, German aluminium major VAW became the world's top aluminium metal manufacturer, followed by the Swiss counterpart, AIAG- both imported bauxite from Hungary. Among the early signs of transition of US capitalism into imperialism and then into the dreaded US imperialism in the post-Second World War era was the growth of Alcoa as "the world's most perfect monopoly". It began mining the white metal in British Guyana where the ore was prospected in 1876. Little wonder, the company in its biographical notes, bluntly stated, "War was good for Alcoa" (pp 45-47). The US government patronized aluminium-smelters precisely for war preparation, the authors relevantly point out. "Alcoa was paid by the US administration to build and operate extra aluminium factories, using electricity from recent dams, to supply the war effort with material for aircrafts, etc. These 'surplus plants' were sold off cheap after war to Kaiser and Reynolds and Kaiser got Alcoa's help, thanks to a 'special chemistry' between Henry Kaiser and Arthur Vining Davis" ( p 239).

One of several brilliant chapters on the anastomosis between the discovery of mineable spots and growth of colonialism and semi-colonialism—an innovation from the US imperialism before the Second World War is The World-wide Web . This exploitation went along with 'freedom undermined, a signature of the perception that the humanimalisation has been inclusive in nature too, especially as it carries a protracted genocide among the aborigines like the Adivasis in India too. Thus the shameless craze for profits at the cost of flora, fauna and homo sapiens is a global phenomenon in sync with colonial and post-colonial transitions

along the development-path of capitalism towards imperialism with sporadic experimental forays into Fascism, McCarthyism or the like. In other words, such is the general frame of development trajectory for transferring costs are transferred to the environment and local people, without their consent or even knowledge – more synoptically privatization of profits and socialization of the risks and costs. This happens –to digress a little bit- in nuclear power and weapons-manufacture too.

Production of one ton of aluminium requires consumption of 1,37.6 tons of water (estimated Wuppertal Institute of Climate, Environment and Energy, one of the highly credible centres for the study and research on everything environmental in Europe), let alone emission of 13.1 ton of carbon dioxide along with spewing of a considerable volume of carbon monoxide, fluoromethane and hexafluoroethane gases.

The awareness about the ills of Al<sub>2</sub>-menace in India is of recent origin but resentment against bauxite-mining among the Adivasis and other economically weaker sections near the mining projects began in the 1950s. Firebrand socialist parliamentarian Ram Manohar Lohia's expose on the huge subsidy (1.99 paise per unit against the then-going rate of 40 paise guaranteed for 25 years) to the Birlas' Hindalco refinery complex at Renukote, UP, raised a furore during the Nehru-era despite low-key coverage by the media. It was built by the Kaiser group-led US-based consortium and turned about 20,000 people into oustees. For 25 years, the Kaiser Aluminium and Birla group (with G D Birla, Gandhiji's friend at the helm), held 25 per cent of total equity capital (p 218). In the 1990s, Hindalco bought up major holdings of Alcan in the Indian Aluminium Company Limited and in this transfer, a crucial role was played by its CEO who was once a prominent activist of CPI(ML) and once very close to the guiding star of Naxalites in their high-voltage days: Charu Majumdar. But the inroads of international aluminium giants were not confined to the private sector. India's largest aluminium company, Nalco, is in the public sector, which is no different from Hindalco or Vedanta Resources plc, UK, in ecocide and cruel displacement of Adivasis or silent genocide. It was set up as a joint venture with the French MNC Pechiney (world's first aluminium company too) in 1980 basically to exploit Odisha's largest bauxite deposits : Panchpat Mali. The French company was infamous for catastrophe affecting Cree and Inuit Canadian Indians in Quebec where Pechiney had built hydro-electric plants to feed its smelter on the St Lawrence River. Nalco too had caused very high pollution, observed Roger Moody in his book, *The Gulliver File : Mines, Land and People*—a Global background (London,1992). In the late-1970s and the 1980s, the Chemicals and Allied Products Export Promotion Council (Capexil), a body promoted by the Union commerce ministry, took pride in a quantum jump in exports of its member-firms. The credit was due to huge export of alumina by Nalco which got the award for highest exporter from Capexil for several years in a row. Capexil's executive director in those days was the late P K Jana, a card-carrying member of CPI in the late 1940s and thereafter, never cared to know that the process of conversion of bauxite (from the mining stage) into alumina is one of the most polluting ones. The Capexil Employees Association, a pro-CPI(M) body, too never raised this question.

The Former Supreme Court judge Arijit Pasayat who hails from Odisha, in one of his judgments harped on the necessity of a balance between environmental and human/economic interests, recognising the agonising reality that starvation deaths due to severe malnutrition were on the rise in mining areas. The struggle of Khond adivasis at Niyamgiri where Vedanta group is still hell-bent on beginning mining operations is a symptomatic expression of the plight of people who for ages have preserved the ecological balance for crores of people who haven't yet the taste of chill penury. And it has very much a neo-colonial content. Gopinath Mahanty's novel *Paraja* is a tell-tale account of this. A chapter in this book Starvation deaths and Foreign Aid is a cornucopia of the entire issue which deserves to be pamphleteered.

India has the fourth largest deposits of bauxites the world over and most of the mines are in Odisha. The indictment of the nexus between the Biju Janata Dal-led government in Odisha, the chief minister Navin Patnaik and Vedanta by the Saxena Committee was perhaps too hot for the minister of environment and forests to ignore, leading to rejection of a project that combined ecocide and cultural genocide. The Saxena panel recommendations are a sign of hope but the subalterns have to prepare for the worst. They can't rest until their hearth and home are fully secure.

Padel and Das have done their job very well, rather exceptionally well. Genuine democrats have to take up cudgels. It's not a matter of winning assembly and parliamentary seats. They—hopefully a new breed of Left free from the drudgery of Official Marxism too—have to set up a strong camaraderie for a truly we-feeling among the adivasis.□□□

---

\*OUT OF THIS EARTH : EAST INDIA ADIVASIS AND THE ALUMINIUM CARTEL

by Felix Padel and Samarendra Das.

Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi, 2010