

ORISSA

## Destroyed by 'Development'

Subrat Kumar Sahu

SEVENTY-FIVE-YEAR-OLD Raimati has to make quite an effort to walk up the 50-foot slope from her 'workplace' to her tiny hut in Benakhamar village on the banks of the Upper Indravati reservoir in Nabarangpur district, Orissa. Her 'workplace': a manual stone-crushing unit (illegal, according to the administration) run by women like her in the village. They heat the stone by burning fuelwood underneath it for hours; crush the stone into small pieces using big hammers, and then pound the small pieces into stone chips using medium-sized hammers. Even as this tedious process goes on non-stop every day, they might have to wait months for a contractor to come by and buy the chips, at Rs 750 per tractor-load; a meagre sum for a task that involves a month of hard work by a group of four to five women.

Raimati can barely lift the hammer. But she has no choice. "Despite the hardship, I cannot ensure a square meal for myself every day," she says absent-mindedly, looking across the vast spread of the Upper Indravati reservoir. She points somewhere in the distance and says: "That is where we used to live, in our village surrounded by dense forests. They drowned our happiness, our beautiful world... And look at me now!"

Punai, a 55-year-old woman, comes up to Raimati and says: "Life was so beautiful in the forest. No one ever went hungry. The fruits alone sustained us for four months of the year. The forest used to provide us plenty. We also ploughed the land. But they threw us out, and drowned everything."

Nearly 50,000 forest-dependent people were forcibly evicted from their homes in the 1980s and 1990s to make way for the multipurpose Upper Indravati Hydroelectric Project that submerged 11,000 hectares of prime forest, which was also one of the most diverse wildlife habitats in Asia. The displaced forest communities had no option but to retreat to the banks of the reservoir. The road that came with the project, tearing into the heartland, ensured that the remaining forest around the reservoir was wiped out by the timber mafia, in connivance with forest officials, in less than a decade. And so the 50,000 displaced forest-dwellers lost whatever livelihood base they were left with.

The misery of the people of Indravati is a small example of how 'development' has destroyed traditional communities that depend on natural resources not only for their survival but also to keep their rich socio-cultural ethos alive: a way of life that is aligned with the natural evolution of the planet, its resources, and its life forms.

Dr Walter Fernandes, director of the North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati, and former director of the Indian Statistical Institute, Delhi, estimates that between 1947 and 2000 over 60 million people in India were forced to move from their natural homes. Of this, 3 million people were displaced in Orissa alone, most of them forest-dwellers.

The Hirakud dam in Orissa—an impeccable symbol of development for the insensitive middle class—submerged around 75,000 hectares of dense forests, grazing lands, and farmland, rendering homeless around 180,000 people who were dependent on local ecosystems for their survival. The Rourkela steel plant—another pride of the Oriya middle class—decimated 11,200 hectares of primary forest, evicting 15,000 indigenous people. And it does not end here: in order to feed the steel plant electricity and water, the Mandira dam was constructed, submerging 4,500 hectares of virgin forest and displacing an unaccounted number of forest-dwellers. Then the rail network linking the steel plant with Hatia, Barsuan, Bondamunda and other places evicted 20,000 more people.

Apart from big dams, in recent decades it has been the mining and metal sector in Orissa that has caused the most distress to forest-dwellers. Of the 5,813,700 hectares of 'categorised' forest area in the state, mineral reserves have been identified on some 3,500,000 hectares; that's more than 60% of the total forest area. According to a press statement by Orissa's Steel and Mines Minister Raghunath Mohanty in June 2009, "preliminary exploration for mining had already been done on 3,100,000 hectares of forest land". That, coupled with the rate at which the Orissa government has been signing MoUs—more than 80 by now—with metal, mining, and related industries speaks volumes about the dark destiny that awaits forest-dependent people in the state.

Indeed, the situation is so chaotic that nobody even knows what happened to around 32,000 adivasi families (more than 200,000 people) in the Joda and Badbil areas of Keonjhar district, where mining (mostly iron ore) has been taking place for the past 40-odd years. They disappeared without a trace! In Damanjodi, in Koraput district, where NALCO (National Aluminium Company) has been mining bauxite in the Panchpatmali mountains since the 1980s, over 70% of indigenous forest-dwellers who once were completely self-reliant today eke out an existence below the poverty line. While the price paid for such large-scale mining is already etched on the wrinkled foreheads of the adivasis of Koraput, the Damanjodi project is being glorified by the state as an indisputable symbol of progress and development for the local populace; a benchmark for private mining and metal companies to follow.

Michael Ross has already warned of the 'resource curse' that rampant mining unleashes, in his insightful report, "Extractive Sectors and the Poor" (Oxfam 2001). Studies by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) too show that all the poverty indices in Planning Commission statistics are invariably worst in mining-affected districts. The fact that mining breeds poverty rather than diminishes it is glaringly on display at Damanjodi.

The onslaught on forest communities that started with the commercialization of forests during the British Raj has now become a multi-pronged attack, with scores of ambitious development projects - mining, dams, metal factories, rail networks, tourism, sanctuaries - in the pipeline, and many more in the offing. These so-called 'development' projects seek to wipe out large tracts of primary forest forever and destroy forest-dependent communities.

In Orissa, the extent of forest area diverted for non-forestry use since the 1940s would be close on 200,000 hectares, most of this inhabited for generations by forest-dependent tribal populations. Between 1980 and 2007 alone, according to government records, the area of forests diverted for non-forest activity was close on 35,000 hectares. And this does not include vast tracts of forest promised in MoUs but not yet transferred by the state to industry.

□□□

—TWN/NT