

Mali Parbat Protection Movement – A Prolonged Adivasi Movement Continues to Batter Oppression and Brutalities

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Keywords: Movement, Adivasis, Livelihood, Governance, Protection

Abstract

Adivasi lifestyles have always been characterized by simplicity, a strong sense of autonomy, symbiosis with nature, and cooperativeness with their neighbours. This study analyzes conflicts concerning livelihoods and environmental destruction claimed by Adivasis due to bauxite mining at Mali Parbat by Hindalco Company. These villagers are wholly or significantly dependent on the Mali Parbat. Adivasis cannot be separated from the land; their knowledge, experiences, stories, and memories in relation to the land are essential. In particular, this paper will observe the social relations, political strategies, and claims of local governance developed in the process. This study weighs the degree of success achieved by Adivasis in protecting the hills when governments display highly ambivalent attitudes about strengthening ethnic diversity. The paper sheds light on the realities of asymmetrical power relations. It also highlights that Adivasis employ democratic movement to advance goals that involve distinctive visions of their future. Conclusions suggest potential demands and support required for the Adivasis to protect their livelihoods and environment.

Introduction

A resourceful hill cursed for its bauxite mines

In 2003, the Government of Odisha granted a lease on 268.11 acres of Mali Parbat, a hill in the Eastern Ghat mountain range in Koraput, Odisha. The lease was granted to Aditya Birla-owned Hindalco, an aluminum major. That leased area is near Dolitoamba, a village about 20 km from Semiliguda block headquarters in Koraput. The company obtained the lease for 20 years to mine 17 million tonnes of bauxite ore from Mali Parbat, with a mining capacity of 6 lakh tonnes per annumⁱ. The mining activity started through a contractor engaged by the company in May 2008. But actual mining operations have hardly taken off due to stiff resistance from local communities who have continued to, despite numerous hardships, resist the mining of the resourceful hill. The hill contains the valley's many water streams and fertile land. According to sources, between 2008 and 2011, the company mined and transported approximately 18,000 tonnes of bauxite to its alumina refinery plantsⁱⁱ. The mineral mined from Mali Parbat is used in the company's aluminium plant at a far-off place called Renukoot in Uttar Pradesh.

Local people have a heavy stake, and they have risen to protect that stake

The Koraput district is located in the Eastern Ghats and is known for its hilly terrain, rich and diverse mineral deposits, and tribal culture and traditions. The district has one of the highest tribal populations in Odisha and is a Scheduledⁱⁱⁱ District under the Constitution of India. The tribals mostly maintain a simple, nature-supplementing lifestyle dependent on farming and other natural resources. They maintained a serene life till the state government leased out Mali Parbat for bauxite mining. The community feared a direct adverse impact in 44 villages under the Sorishapodar, Hundi, Dalaiguda, and Pakhajhola panchayats in the Similiguda block. After learning about the lease, the community began to organize themselves. After a few years, they formed an organized association, *Mali Parbata Surakhya Samiti* (MPSS). Since then, they have grown in strength and are strongly objecting to mining. They're also demanding the cancellation of the lease to mine the hill. However, they have received mixed results. While they have been successful in stalling mining activity, their demand for cancellation of the mining lease still remains unattended. The company is waiting to break the villager's union to restart mining. These villagers are peaceful in their long protests. They have tried to use the constitutional and administrative options available to them. For example, these villages have categorically decided against any mining of the hill in Gram Sabha meetings, including the Gram Sabha meetings held related to the mining plan. But none of these decisions have had any bearing on the government. Gram Sabha is the meeting of adults in the village who have the authority to hold the panchayat. It is a permanent body. The Gram Sabha's overall mandate, oversight, and monitoring are used to enforce development programs by the panchayat. Villagers even protested against not recording their decisions and views in the minutes of the meeting and preparing different conclusions. When the villagers protested, the police used brute force to quell them. Many have faced the wrath of the police, administration, and company goons and have been implicated in false cases. In spite of all this, MPSS has continued their protest and maintains that the damage due to the mining of Mali Parbat will be more than what the official project report states. They say that even going by the project report, the entire Bauxite deposit of Mali Parbat will be exhausted within 15 years. These green and water stream-rich hills will become dry, dissolute, and barren.

Within 15 years, there will remain nothing to sustain them.

Mining Mali Parbat; a massive environmental and religious threat

About 44 villages around Mali Parbat shall be affected directly, and over 200 villages will be affected indirectly. There are 32 perennial streams and four canals that emerge from this hill. Nearly 2,500 families in 44 villages rely on this water for irrigation of their fields for vegetables and other cultivation. Mining will significantly affect the streams and soil moisture, thereby devastating thriving livelihoods. Other hazards associated with mining include water pollution, soil pollution, waste of oil and lubricants, and waste dumping. These will have a huge adverse bearing on the region's water, land, and forest resources. Local people allege that they have not been told by either the company or government officials about the impact of adverse effects of mining. There is a serious complaint about the manner in which the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) has been conducted. They contend that the EIA report for the mining project,

prepared by VIMTA Laboratory Pvt Ltd of Hyderabad, has neglected and disregarded the impact of mining on the water sources and subsequent consequences on agriculture and horticulture. While adverse impacts on water resources are likely to be catastrophic and permanent in nature, serious land degradation is likely to be huge too. That aspect has also not been assessed and captured in the EIA. Soil erosion due to mining and deforestation is already among the highest in Odisha. Koraput has other bauxite mines, including Deomali. That region is displaying very serious soil erosion and land degradation. Mining of Mali Parbat will surely increase the rate of soil and land degradation. This area is coming under the catchment area of Upper Kolab Reservoir. Thus, erosion will lead to huge silt deposition in the Kolab reservoir, which has already lost a lot of storage capacity due to massive siltation. Such siltation will greatly undermine the efficiency of the reservoir in producing electricity and providing irrigation. Even the life span of the dam will be immensely threatened.

Many rare species and plants like Pitakonda, Taraka konda, Kakudi plant, and Charu koli plants are available on this hill. They are part of local people's food, nutrition, and medicinal ecosystem. Mining will have an effect on these rare plants.

Mali Parbat is home to many rare medicinal plants and species like *Hada sakada*, *Patala garuda*, *Bhuin Penga*, *Haladi kanda*, *Kalad Kanda*, *Anala*, *Bahada*, *Harida*, *Pita kanda* (all local names), etc. Mining will affect these rare medicinal plants.

Similarly, the hills are a natural habitat for Bears, Sambar, Kutura, Peacocks, etc. Mining activities, along with increased human ingress, vehicular movement, etc., will affect animal habitation.

Not just environmental stakes, people have direct religious and cultural connections with the hills. The local people have religious roots in the hills.

A religious place of tribals in the Mali Parbat is known as *Pakali Pahar Gumpah*. The deity is worshiped by the villagers of the surrounding villages Aligon, Kumbhiguda, Daleiguda, Rajaniguda, Pakijhola, Mania. Mining will destroy this.

What makes the issue more threatening is the mining company's eagerness to obtain more land than what is required. The acquisition of this land has not been properly assessed. The Hindalco Industries Ltd, for its mining operation in the Mali Parbat, had originally applied for 90.30 hectare for the following uses:

Sl.no	Pattern of utilisation	Planned 5 years (in hectare)	Beyond 5 years (in hectare)	Total (in hectare)
1.	Mining	24.90	52.40	77.30
2.	Dumping of over burdel	6.50	-	6.50
3.	Storage of top soil	1.50	-	1.50
4.	Construction of building, power station & work shop etc.	1.00	-	1.00
5.	Infrastructures (Rest shed, office, first aid centre etc.)	0.50	0.50	1.00
6.	Road	1.00	2.00	3.00
7.	Total	35.00	54.90	90.30

While the company initially stated their total requirement was 90.30 hectares, it leased 268.11 hectares; about three times the land required. This will have the following Environmental impact.

- There is every possibility of utilizing the extra area for mining purposes, thereby causing further environmental impact. That may also lead to the loot of minerals.
- There is the possibility of a change in the pattern of land utilization (as given above), which will cause an increase in soil pollution, air pollution, water pollution, etc.

While demand for land has obvious reasons to raise doubt, impact assessments too must be conducted. In this case, that aspect has been ignored.

Livelihoods under serious threat

Local villagers grow the area's rice, wheat, pulses, and vegetables. They have a diverse cropping pattern and cultivate almost throughout the year. They mostly grow dhanu (rice), *mandiya* (millet), and many varieties of vegetables. They sell their vegetable produce in the district headquarters town of Koraput and adjoining districts of Andhra Pradesh. These households, on average, possess around 5-7 acres of farmland. Some have up to or more than 10 acres of land. Farming is the most significant, if not sole, occupation.

The forest is the other major source of livelihood. Villagers collect or harvest forest-based products like *Amla*, *triphala*, *harrida*, *bhada*, *bel*, *mahu*, *sada patta*, *sardi coli*, *sar-coli*, *jambo*, *jam-coli*, *guava*, *khandu*, *beet-khandu*, *targen-khanda*, *peeta-khanda*, *tarka-khando*, *sorenda-khando*, *kakdo*, *kata-koli*, *Pit-kanda*, *Siali lata* and various other medicinal plants for their livelihoods. The leaves – mainly gathered by female workers – are sold for one rupee per bundle. The men collect firewood and carry it on their shoulders to Semiliguda by foot, where they get Rs. 80-100 for 40 kg.

These communities also depend on wage labour, mostly in agriculture and granite cutting.

Losses to income and livelihoods have not been documented

The company's EIA report mentions that about 120 people will be employed when mining starts. The company assured to employ local people but for unskilled and low-wage positions. But the fact remains, that to employ, since it will be technology-driven mining, there will be very few opportunities for locals. Even if employment is offered to some, it will be for a maximum of 15 years. After 15 years, there will be no company, no bauxite, nor any other resources to provide employment.

Huge costs, limited benefits

The Hindalco will get bauxite by paying a paltry royalty of Rs. 42 per ton. That company will sell that based on the current average price, at Rs.1,200. Average expenditure on mining and transportation will be Rs. 100 per tonne, meaning an average profit of Rs. 1,100 per tonne. Thus in 15 years, the company, by mining 78.4 lakh tonne of bauxite, will get a net profit of 862 crores from this operation.

While the company will harvest riches, the government will get peanuts. It will get Rs. 33 crores as royalty for 15 years.

Since the government's income will be very low, local people have nothing to benefit from the mining project. Rather, they will suffer huge losses as their farming will have enormous casualties. Even a simple calculation gives enough indication of how mining this hill is a costly mistake and ruinous for the local people. Local people produce about 3000-5000 tonnes of vegetables every week. That means, because of mining, farmers will lose about five crore rupees every week and about 260 crores in a year. In contrast, the annual profit, if the total expected profit is divided equally by 15 years, the company will earn will be about Rs. 50.75 Crores, and the royalty the state will get will be only about 2.12 crore per year. The company's profit, together with royalty earned by the state, will be much less than what the farming community will suffer by losing its prized vegetable cultivation.

This makes it clear that mining the hill is a very bad idea, even from a macroeconomic point of view.

Governance brutalised and social tranquility broken

The mining site falls in an area listed under the Fifth Schedule to the Constitution. Such areas enjoy special privileges and require the consent of the Gram Sabha for the diversion of land as per the Panchayat Raj Extension to Schedule Areas (PESA) act 1996; and Forest Rights Act, 2006. Various historic judgments, including the landmark Niyamgiri judgment, have given priority to the rights of the tribal people and the special needs of the scheduled areas.

While the laws and Court orders are very clear, Dinsha Patel, minister of state for mines, in response to a question in parliament during the winter session in 2011, said something starkly opposite.

“Prior approval is granted by the central government on basis of the provisions of the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957 and rules framed there under, which does not provide any separate consideration for classification of areas listed in the Fifth Schedule to the Constitution of India.”

Constitutional and legal safeguards were enacted to protect the land and resource rights of Adivasis. However, the exploitation of tribal people by private industries, non-tribals, and the state itself persists. The approach and stand in this case only enhanced the presence of such threats.

Social tranquility threatened

The company made a strategy to induce a few villagers on its side by giving money and bribing local touts and political leaders. The company did manage to take over a few to its side. These few taken-over villagers made counter-argument that their livelihoods are threatened. It is not because of mining activities but because of forced obstruction to the mining activities and halt to transportation of minerals. They took the plea that some villagers were engaged in loading activities, and they were losing their employment opportunities.

But their support to the mining company is even conditional. They demand controlled mining that does not harm the water sources and irrigation potentials. They also want Hindalco to set up a plant to process the mineral instead of transporting the raw mineral to distant places. As a result, more jobs can be created, and value addition is ensured. But since the bauxite reserve in Mali Parbat is not large enough, the company has evinced no interest in setting up any plant. This shows that support for the company is muted. But even that muted support has somewhat created a division among these peace-loving tribal communities.

People's movement continued even after assaults and abuses

Mining activities in Mali Parbat have taken a heavy toll on the peace and tranquility of the region. In 2007, residents of Konkram Maliguda, a village of about 35 households, were beaten up for protesting against mining. The mining site was less than a kilometer away from the village, and blasting at the site caused pollution and disruptions. Following protests, mining was stopped at one of the sites in 2011. In 2012, reports of violence emerged after the villagers stopped a vehicle near the mining site.

The company managed to lure over MPSS's first President, Mr. Anand Kirsani, and the Secretary who had initiated the movement. Mr. Anand, who had filed a public interest litigation against the mining, withdrew it a few years later. Initially, villagers were shocked, but their conviction and motivation doubled to fight against the company.

On August 29, 2010, lawyer and Congress party leader Anand Kirsani was murdered in his village Dususra, allegedly by the CPI Maoist.

Mine operation was stopped in 2010 due to stiff and continued opposition from the locals. Though bauxite excavation resumed for a brief period in 2012, it had to be halted as protesters opposed the transportation of the mineral.

On January 8, 2014, around 500 villagers stopped 50-60 cars carrying bauxite and made a peaceful rally in front of the Tahasildar office at Similiguda against illegal mining activities. On January 9, 2014, the Tehsildar asked the people to release the cars, which they refused to do. Villagers continued the peaceful demonstration. In the night, five young tribal people of MPSS were physically assaulted by the Company goons. Thereafter, the company sent vehicles loaded with goons and touts to attack and disperse members of MPSS. Villagers fought off them, and the attackers had to flee.

On January 10, 2014, around 7,000 people from 44 villages came to the protest site and strongly protested against the mining activities and the assaults on the villagers. Around 400 villagers went to protest outside the mining site. The contractor's goons assaulted them, but the villagers countered them. The administration reacted by imposing Section 144 of CRPC in the area, which disallows the assembly of more than three people at a notified place. The administration also provided police protection to the company's employees. Security personnel were deployed at the site. Administrative partiality led to an ugly turn of events. The villagers of the MPSS spearheading the agitation against continuous attacks on them and the administration's support to the mining company damaged over 15 vehicles. Hindalco's manager and workers fled the area. Since then, mining operations have stopped.

The MPSS has now extended the scope of the struggle. On August 3, 2016, a *bandh* was called in Koraput to protest against the fake encounter of five Adivasis in Gumudumha at Kandhamal. Alongside the issue of mining and fake cases, the MPSS is also trying to develop struggles around issues of health, education, rural employment, etc.

The problem: Mining stopped temporarily, but suffering continues

While the mining has temporarily stopped because of continued protests from local people, the lease stands, and the company has not yet withdrawn. On the other hand, repressive measures of the state continue to hound the helpless villagers.

Innocent people are in constant threat of arrest

Hundreds of people involved in the January 10, 2014 demonstrations have been slapped with false cases. Multiple cases, ranging from 8-25, have been slapped against the peaceful protestors. Fearing police action, villagers cannot go to marketplaces. They are being branded as extremists. Even 14-year-old youths have been branded as Maoists, and the police have registered cases against them.

When villagers protest, the government stops all the development work in their villages: whether roads, electricity, check dams, Anganwadi, providing BPL cards, and more.

Villagers say that the greatest threat to them can come from their own – those who file cases against them, those who have been kicked out of their movement but still go for all the company's public hearings posing themselves as representative of the community.

On January 18, 2017, a large meeting was organized under the banner of the *MPSS*. Over 4,000 Adivasis participated in the rally. Activists from across the country attended. The meeting was chaired by the veteran Gandhian activist Dr. G. G. Parikh. According to him, "The struggle in Koraput was not just a struggle over the Mali Parbat but was emblematic of conflicts going on all over the country. The struggle is for a new idea and vision that will guide the fight against injustice and oppression throughout the country. It is, therefore, the duty of the *Mali Parbat Suraksha Samiti* to extend solidarity to other struggles".

Updates on the situation

On the 10th of January 2014, due to the vehement protest of local tribals, Hindalco was forced to stop the mining work. Since then, Hindalco's activities in the area have ceased completely, and strong resistance has developed on the ground. *Adivasis* are adamant that they will not allow mining in the mountain under any circumstances. *MPSS* members are keeping a close watch on the company's movement.

The local *Adivasis* have been arranging an annual gathering for environmental protection every year. In these gatherings, local struggles, big and small, come together to unitedly reaffirm their commitment to the environment and the protection of Mali Parbat.

On April 2021, the Hindalco industry got a fresh lease for 50 years from the Odisha government, for which a public hearing was necessitated. On 22 September 2021, the State Pollution Control Board (SPCB) of Odisha held a public hearing at Kankaramba village in Koraput district on the issue of granting of environmental clearances to the company for mining. But there are allegations that the police and paramilitary forces deployed there prevented the public from reaching the venue in the village of Kankadamba. The hearing could not be held due to stiff protests by hundreds of villagers.

The police arrested at least 28 tribal youth, including a class eight Adivasi student based on a first information report filed by the assistant sub-inspector of Semiliguda police station. The charges slapped on them were serious: rioting, armed with deadly weapons, causing hurt to public servants, causing grievous hurt by dangerous weapons, attempt to murder, criminal intimidation, and other crimes. The criminal case against the villagers has been lodged at the behest of the company. Villagers said this was done to break the community's will and to subdue them.

The company then organised another public hearing on November 22, 2021. Activists say that, once again, it was anything but free or fair as a large number of police and paramilitary forces were assembled there, putting pressure on the locals to go along with Hindalco's plans. Seeing that the administration was completely aligned with the company instead of protecting the tribals' interests, the activists under MPSS moved to the Odisha High Court in January 2022, seeking a free and fair hearing and to nullify the hearing held in November 2021.

On February 8, 2022, the high court issued an interim order imposing restrictions on grants on EC after four residents of Maliguda, Kankadaambo, and Kakriguda villages in Koraput district, along with environmental activist Prafulla Samantra filed a PIL.

In December 2022, the High Court granted the plea and ruled that the November public hearing was null and void and directed Odisha State Pollution Control Board (OSPCB) to conduct a fresh public hearing in connection with the grant of environment clearance (EC) for Maliparvat bauxite mining lease in the presence of Koraput district judge. Finally, the state pollution control board and the district administration hold another public hearing on January 7, 2023. Even though again this time there was a heavy police presence, the people could not be stopped from going to the hearing because the court was directly monitoring it. Also, people were better prepared and hence not intimidated by the police or company officials.

MPSS's demands:

- Withdrawal of all false charges against the local tribals.
- Prosecution of state government officials and corporations responsible for the illegal mining activities of Hindalco.
- Total acceptance of Gram Sabha resolutions in matters relating to diversion of land - as per the Panchayat Raj Extension to Schedule Areas (PESA) Act 1996 and Forest Rights Act 2006.
- Fresh and total implementation of the FRA 2006 process in the project area in a transparent and democratic way and ensure settling of individual and community rights as per the provisions of the Forest Right Act and Rules made therein.
- Cancellation of the mining lease in the greater interest of people, the environment, and also the state.
- Government to develop planned and sustainable initiatives for social and environmental development in the area, such as promoting paddy and vegetable cultivation-related activities.

Community movement needs support

The MPSS has almost launched a lone battle. They have had success but problems continue to hound them. They are suffering oppression not by the company authorities but also by the blatantly partial functioning of most state machinery. There is a strong need for the politicization and consequent political formation of the critical mass of people. It can only sustain when people raise the banner of resistance around the issues related to the assault on livelihood resources (land, water, forest, and mining) by the corporate capital through various government policies.

Mindless industrialization, besides looting and polluting our precious natural resources, causes massive displacement. Community property resources are commoditized and destroyed in a quick time, causing permanent damage. The resistance struggles have to be united in alliance with the other progressive democratic forces in terms of challenging and raising questions against the system.

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Annexure - 1

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF AFFECTED VILLAGES DUE TO MINING IN MALI PARBAT

Panchayat	NAME	Total Population	SC Population	ST Population	Total of SC and ST Population	% of SC and ST Population	Literate Population	Illiterate	Total workers	Main Agriculture Labourers	Main Cultivators Population
Paikijhola	Lunguri	1928	385	844	1229	63.74	727	1201	986	116	170
	Paikijhola	143	19	100	119	83.2	9	99	2	NA	NA
	Mania	1318	348	295	643	48.79	405	913	555	79	232
	Aligan	2073	66	1247	1313	63.34	353	1720	1272	141	834
Dalaiguda	Ranikona	712	95	493	588	82.58	113	599	423	235	0
	Kakiriguda	1447	78	857	935	64.62	265	1182	899	99	465
	Kutugam	1182	129	704	833	70.47	127	1055	737	52	324
	Kakaramba	767	108	492	600	78.23	266	501	483	90	171
	Tentuliguda	399	105	279	384	96.24	68	331	45	NA	NA
Khudi	Kudi	1516	6	1160	1166	76.91	350	1166	914	73	345
	Kakiriguda	1447	78	857	935	64.62	265	1182	899	99	465
	Maliguda	157	11	0	11	7	5	152	23	NA	NA
	Mugunaguda	108	0	100	100	92.6	9	99	31	NA	NA
Dudhari	Dudhari	1889	280	681	961	50.87	356	1533	932	452	180
	Sundhiput	875	25	156	181	20.69	232	643	515	11	418
Sorispadar	Marla	1612	168	1039	1207	74.88	237	1375	951	252	513
	Jamukota	408	0	393	393	96.32	41	367	262	0	247
	Sorisapodar	1642	169	726	895	54.51	128	1514	1142	147	549
	Bhitarkota	486	8	477	485	99.79	98	388	396	348	3
	Kasuguda	160	0	153	153	95.6	5	155	122	114	0
Gunthaput	Porapadar	119	0	38	38	31.9	40	79	62	10	49
	Gutaput	1025	58	290	348	33.95	340	685	538	61	100
	Boriguda (Bariguda)	192	0	126	126	65.6	20	172	116	0	101
Kunduli	Sirimoda	671	0	646	646	96.27	75	596	460	91	74
	Kunduli	1675	183	739	922	55.04	686	989	845	12	120
	Pungar	1111	60	613	673	60.58	334	777	587	109	301
	Total	25062	2379	13505	15884	63.38	5554	19473	14197	2591	5661

ⁱ Pattnaik. S. *Bauxite mining at Mali Parbat in Koraput seeks to displace and disrupt local livelihoods*, Land Conflict Watch, January 26, 2017

ⁱⁱ Mohanty H. *Tribals step up stir at Hindalco bauxite mining site*, Dec 19, 2013

ⁱⁱⁱ **Scheduled Areas** are areas in India with a preponderance of tribal population subject to a special governance mechanism wherein the central government plays a direct role in safeguarding cultural and economic interests of scheduled tribes in the area. The authority to create and administer Scheduled Areas stems from the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Constitution of India.