

OCTOBER 31, 2006

SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT FORTNIGHTLY

# Down To Earth

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## HIRED GUNS

State arming people to fight Naxals,  
drive tribals off their land

SC bans GM tests

Kolkata's water hassles

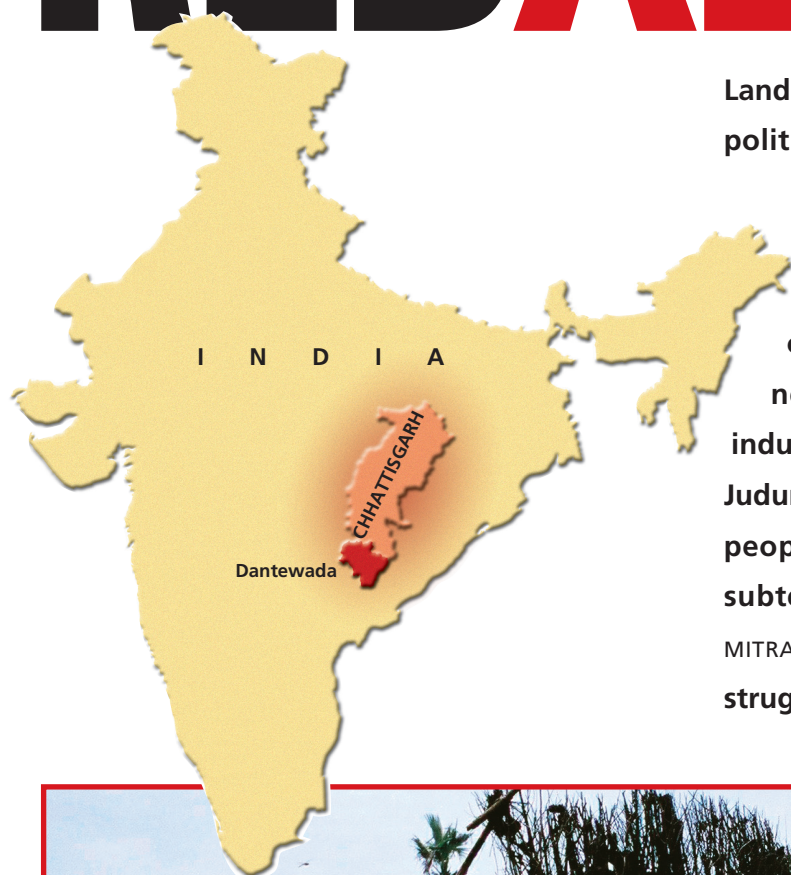
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# REDALERT



Land acquisition is at the centre of intense political and social disputes in the tribal hinterland of Chhattisgarh. On the one hand, Naxal extremists enforce their version of justice by opposing land alienation. But the new state has its compulsion — industrialisation. That is where the Salwa Judum movement kicks in: it moves tribal people out of their land to expose rich subterranean resources. MAUREEN NANDINI MITRA discovers the nuances of the struggle on her travels



*Errabore, Dantewada: The devastation mirrors life of villagers who have been forced into this camp*



# Militia minors

## The state of terror

**E**rrabore relief camp, Dantewada, September 2, 2006: Ramesh carries a .303 rifle. He's not sure of his age. "Maybe 16," he says doubtfully, and adds that he hasn't really shot anyone yet. The teenager has had only a week's combat training at the police barracks within the camp, but is officially a special police officer (SPO) of the Chhattisgarh government to fight the Naxalites for a monthly salary of Rs 1,500. Legally, he can't get married or vote, but the government thinks he can handle a gun. If you thought it only happened in Liberia or Congo, welcome to India's world of child warriors. Sponsored by the state.

Though there's currently a lull in offensives from both sides because of heavy rains and flooding, there have been rumours of an attack by the Maoists tonight. So groups of SPOs are making special reconnaissance trips through the camp. They don't want to be caught unawares as on the night of July 16, when about a thousand Naxalites ambushed the camp's southern flank, burning houses, shooting and hacking to pieces 42 people. "We had heard rumours that day too that there would be an attack but the *thanedar* wouldn't let us keep our guns. Back then we had to turn in our guns at the police station every evening, but after the attack they let us keep them," says Ramesh. "We'll do them in this time," growls another boy who refuses to give his name or be photographed, because, he explains, he doesn't want the Naxals to be able to identify him.

Later, a senior security official said they didn't really trust the boys with the weapons because they tended to be brash and careless. Obviously, he didn't communicate with Raman Singh, the state chief minister.

## Purifying the land

The Errabore camp is a fallout of the Salwa Judum movement. In Gondi, the local language, the term means purification hunt, rather than peace hunt or peace initiative, as it is often translated by the English media. Some say it started in Dantewada's Kerkeli village on May 6, 2005, when villagers stood up against Naxalites who had come to take a young girl into their fold. (The rebels have a policy of recruiting one

cadre from every tribal family, if necessary, by force.) Taken by surprise, the Naxalites backed off. This emboldened the villagers. Others say the movement dates to a series of meetings in which villagers, who had suffered through a drought and had no rural employment schemes or development projects to see them through (since government projects tended to sweep around Naxalite-dominated areas), began questioning the rebels' enforced boycott of trade in *tendu* leaf. The Maoists had called *tendu* leaf boycotts in the past to force prices up, but this time it didn't work. The villagers were upset.

What is clear is that the movement took form only after word of the tribals' expressions of anger reached Mahendra Karma, a Congress MLA, who promptly cashed in. He held a massive rally in the area and urged the tribals to take up arms against the Naxals. Many tribals followed his urging. Armed with bows and arrows they set out in groups to hunt out the rebels in the jungles. Karma had led an earlier peoples' initia-



**Militiaman:** A special police officer with a securityman. These ill-equipped members of Salwa Judum are often recruited by force

tive against the Maoists, called the Jan Jagran Abhiyan. This movement began with the same name but was later re-christened Salwa Judum.

The Congress leader, a tribal himself, began going from village to village in Dantewada, holding rallies and exhorting people to join the movement. His initiative was publicly supported by chief minister Raman Singh and Salwa Judum became part of the state government's counter-insurgency strategy. Paramilitary forces were brought in to protect members. New Delhi chipped in, offering help in the form of extra paramilitary battalions, vehicles, minesweeping equipment and technology to help locate Maoist camps. Several thousand

**Many rights groups have criticised the state for patronising a citizens' militia to fight the Naxals, especially when it comes to arming minors. But the state does not admit responsibility, especially because it smoothens the way for acquiring land**



**Mahendra Karma: The founder of the Salwa Judum movement is a tribal. He says the militia is criticised by a network of pro-revolutionaries**

Salwa Judum activists, many of them barely 16 years of age, were appointed SPOS, given some rudimentary training and arms and promised preference for permanent police jobs.

If the movement was ever a spontaneous peace mission, by the tribals, as the state government and Karma describe it, it very soon stopped being so. Most of the Salwa Judum leaders *Down To Earth* (DTE) met at the Errabore and Dornapal relief camps were either non-tribal or relatively-wealthy tribals. They were schoolteachers, village heads, traders and contractors, people who could be labelled the “local elite”, those who suffered most at the hands of the Maoists. This is similar to the Naxal situation. Though most Maoist cadres in Chhattisgarh are tribal people, the decision-makers, like Commander Koda from Andhra Pradesh, are usually non-tribal.

## Indicted

Several detailed reports by human rights groups and independent observers have amply documented the state-sponsored human rights abuses of the Salwa Judum movement. An all-India fact-finding team, comprising members from Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand chapters of People’s Union for Civil Liberties, People’s Union for Democratic Rights, Delhi, Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights, West Bengal, and Indian Association of People’s Lawyers, which visited Dantewada in November 2005, said it found “a pattern” in the displacements.

“When Salwa Judum meetings are called, people from neighbouring villages are asked to be present. Heavy security forces accompany the meetings. Villages that refuse to participate, face repeated attacks by the combined forces of Salwa Judum, district forces and a paramilitary Naga battalion, which is stationed in the area,” the team’s report states. “Once in camps, people have no choice but to support the Salwa Judum. Some of them are forced to work as informers against mem-

bers of their own and neighbouring villages and participate in attacks against them, leading to permanent divisions within villages. Families are sometimes being split between Judum supporters and those who wish to remain in their villages.”

Another group, which included academic Ramachandra Guha, *Prabhat Khabar* editor Harivansh, former bureaucrat E A S Sarma, and sociologist Nandini Sundar, visited Dantewada this May and reported that the civil administration there was “on the point of collapse” and Salwa Judum had turned into “an unaccountable, indisciplined and amorphous group” led by “criminal elements” over whom the administration had little control. “There is an atmosphere of fear and a great deal of violence in which ordinary villagers, and tribals in particular, are the main sufferers,” says the group’s report titled, *War in the Heart of India*. The report said they “found evidence of killings, the burning of

homes, and attacks on women, including gang-rape” from both sides, though “only the killings by Maoists are recorded”.

Unfortunately, the local media is either too compromised or too intimidated to report the truth. The administration and Salwa Judum activists take exception to any critical reports. Kamlesh Painkra, a young reporter from Bijapur, had to flee to Dantewada town with his family after writing about Judum cadres burning villagers’ homes. Several other local reporters admitted candidly to DTE that they didn’t want to risk their lives by seeming “pro-Naxal”.

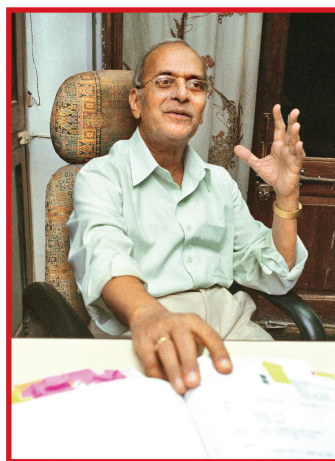
Industrial interests have got into the mix with their own brand of intimidation and blandishment. They want this mineral rich land. But unfortunately, as poor people inhabit this rich land, they need to use guile and guns to get their hands on it. Unimpeachable sources told DTE that local reporters in Dantewada had been offered a Rs 5-lakh package each by top industrial interests.

The rumour was that most of them sold out. But not everyone was cowed down. Advocate Pratap Agarwal of Jagdalpur, one of three people who had filed petitions against Tata Steel and Essar Steel’s proposed steel plants and mining

projects, says he enjoys a scrap with big industry. Despite evidence of intimidation, officials dismiss civil society reports of Salwa Judum atrocities as baseless. “We have gone to see to public protection during Salwa Judum marches and we haven’t seen any violence,” says Dantewada collector K R Pista. Karma says: “Personal vendettas are being attributed to Salwa Judum.” He adds reports are based on false information spread by “a strong network of pro-revolutionary, so-called Naxalites”.

Karma’s disingenuous points fly around. “When Naxals are killed in encounters, they say Judum people have killed them ... You can’t ignore over one lakh people who have joined Salwa Judum. Can you delude so many people to risk death?” he asks.

**Pratap Agarwal: Taking on industrial interests**





# Camp confusion

State just can't cope

**T**he Errabore camp was set up in February to shelter tribals fleeing the Salwa Judum-Naxalite conflict. It had about 4,500 refugees packed into a little over a square kilometre. The numbers vary as people come and go. Many have moved to districts like Konta and Jagdalpur, or crossed over to Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. Most of these *adivasis* have come from Errabore and other villages within a 10-km radius, which now lie abandoned. Some of these empty villages are visible along the Sukma-Konta stretch of National Highway 221 — groups of forlorn huts with locked doors and broken roofs overgrown with weeds. Others are hidden within the dense forests of Dantewada, where few roads run and the administration is practically non-existent.

Since it began in June 2005, the state-backed anti-Naxalite initiative has cost over 350 lives and emptied about 700 tribal villages. Caught between the two forces, terrorised villagers either flee to, or are forced into, relief camps set up along the highways by the state government. Nearly 49,000 tribal people are now living in temporary shelters in 17 roadside camps and 27 new 'villages' that have sprouted across Dantewada, according to the district administration. Another 20,000 have migrated to Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. Unable to farm their lands, those living in camps have since lost two crops and their access to forests, precipitating a livelihood crisis. Homeless, jobless, landless, they survive on government rations and occasional stints as daily wagers, building and widening roads and digging ponds under rural employment schemes. After spending Rs 300 crore on these settlements, the state government is now thinking of turning the camps into new villages or resettling villagers on nearby lands. But there aren't enough livelihood options in terms of land and forest produce, which sustain 97 per cent of Dantewada's people.

## Errabore enigma

The camps show the state of confusion. At Errabore, the tarpaulin tents that initially housed the refugees have since given way to more permanent mud huts with thatched or tin roofs supplied by the state government. Heavy rains have turned the dirt roads into sludge. Camp doctors say though there had been some initial epidemic scares, things are under control. However, there have been a lot of infections, given the cramped conditions. Sanitation continues to be a problem.

The village temple, at the centre of the settlement, serves as a meeting point for the residents. Camp leaders stand on the temple steps, megaphone in hand, and warn residents to not step beyond the check posts after dark. Unable to bear the confinement, villagers often slip off to visit their homes during the day and return to the camp before sundown.

The camp is guarded by a state police unit, paramilitaries and 132 SPOS, whose arsenal comprises 50 rifles, bows and arrows, sticks and 30 bicycles. Paramilitary officials admit that it isn't easy providing security because they can't keep a tab on the people entering and leaving the place. Since they are unfamiliar with the terrain and the people, they have to rely on the villagers for information. But many villagers have fathers, sons, brothers, sisters and husbands on the other side who often slip in to meet them, carrying back vital information.

The villagers had barely begun picking up the pieces after the July 16 attack when floods struck on August 3, sweeping away several homes, cattle and goats. Relief supplies have been



*Errabore camp, Dantewada: The calm is deceptive. This and other camps live in fear of both Naxalites and Salwa Judum members*

slow to reach since the state was struggling to cope with other, worse affected regions in Dantewada and Bastar. In the meantime, the administration has sent instructions that weekly food supplies for children be halved at all camps. None of the SPOS have been paid since February, when the camp came into being. "We are working with our lives on the line here, yet very few senior officials come to see us and offer support or encouragement," says Ramlal Malkam, the local school principal, who's in charge of keeping records of camp facilities. "The district collector assured us that salaries will be paid, but there's no sign of it yet. It's not good for the morale of the people."

The settlement is rife with fear, suspicion and discontent. Forced into cramped quarters, unable to till their lands or go into the forests, the villagers have nothing much to do all day

**The struggle between the Maoists and Salwa Judum has displaced thousands of people. The state-backed militia tries to herd them into camps to reduce the influence of the Naxalites, who in turn visit terrible reprisals on the camps**





**On the move:** Dantewada's tribal people have a peripatetic mode of life

other than sit around and wonder if their neighbour is a Salwa Judum member or Naxalite informer. Truth has long been a casualty here. Few speak openly about what led them to flee their villages. Over and over, the same phrase is repeated: "Everyone was leaving, so I came too." Some tell you in private that they were brought against their will by Salwa Judum activists who threatened them with violence, but change their stance in front of other villagers. In this haze of conflicting stories and mumbled explanations, only one thing is clear: everyone wants to go home.

Mandvi Bhima, a refugee at the Dornapal relief camp, about 30 km north of Errabore, sums up the problem: "We were suffering there, but we are suffering here also. To live on your land and farm is one thing, and it's another to live here almost like a prisoner."

### Flawed effort

Touché. Counter-terrorism experts say no anti-insurgency effort can succeed without the cooperation from local people. "In that sense Salwa Judum is unique," says Brigadier (retd) B K Ponwar, who's been brought in to run a new jungle warfare school in Kanker. But even Ponwar, who's spent most of his career fighting insurgency, admits that "the problem here stems from the neglect of a population that for over a thousand years has lived in the forests" and says such action has to be bolstered with social and economic development.

However, cooperation is one thing, and participation quite another. To deliberately involve civilians in a conflict, especially underage boys and girls, as the Chhattisgarh government has done is, as the Asian Centre for Human Rights has stated, "morally and legally untenable". The movement is increasingly militarising and criminalising an impoverished people and the end result can only be unhappy.

Besides, how long can the government continue to provide food and security to 49,000 refugees?

The chief minister's colleagues are already asking the same question. A senior BJP leader described Salwa Judum as "a bone stuck in the throat" that could neither be spat out nor swallowed. The state Congress leadership, too, is split on the issue. Former chief minister Ajit Jogi's faction recently visited

the prime minister and declared the movement a failure. They accused the state government of "betraying" the tribals of Bastar.

The Congress high command is yet to make its position on Salwa Judum clear, though Union tribal affairs minister P R Kyndiah has called for a review of the movement, saying it was "turning into a fratricidal war". Even Raman Singh's chief security advisor, Punjab's ex-police chief K P S Gill, has publicly said that the state isn't equipped to secure the relief camps from rebel attacks. He said it would have been better if people were provided protection in their villages.

India has witnessed in the past what happens when thousands of villagers are relocated to roadside camps without planning for their livelihood options. In 1966, when Mizo National Front guerrillas overran Aizawl, the

Indian government retaliated with massive counter-insurgency operations, as part of which they regrouped Mizo villages into virtual concentration camps in order to deny rebels hiding in the hills access to food and water. Tens of thousands of villagers were uprooted and dumped into these camps. Instead of quelling the rebellion, the move spurred more young Mizos to join the rebels.

What was worse, the counter-insurgency operations destroyed the structure of Mizo society, its symbiotic relationship with the land and contributed much to the alienation of Mizos from mainstream India. Similar strategies used in the Philippines and East Timor to quell rebellions had terrible effects.

### Exemplary reprisals

The Chhattisgarh example shows the same pattern of counter-insurgency operations doing more harm than good — especially for people in camps. Not only do they have to deal with dislocation and deprivation, they also know that the Naxalite response can be swift and brutal and that they are the soft underbelly.

Ultra-left groups have attacked villages, killed anyone suspected of aligning with the Salwa Judum, burnt houses and destroyed government buildings and schools: on February 28 this year, they killed 29 people in a mine explosion near Konta village while they were returning from a Salwa Judum camp. On April 29, the dismembered bodies of 15 villagers were discovered on the main highway and jungle roads in the district. On July 16, they attacked the Errabore relief camp, killing 42. State officials say thousands of villagers began fleeing their homes to escape the rebels' wrath and the administration had to set up relief camps to shelter them.

What the state refuses to acknowledge though is that Salwa Judum itself is also responsible for terrorising and displacing people, and that too under police and administrative supervision. In an audio recording released by the Maoists in August, and widely circulated, former Dantewada police superintendent D L Manhar is heard promising Rs 2 lakh to every village that joins the Salwa Judum movement. The administration says the tape is doctored.



# Land factor

**Acquisition for industry is the key question**

**D**hurli village, Dantewada district, August 30, 11.30 am: Armed police in riot gear stand in clusters around the walled compound where people of this quiet, picturesque village are to gather for a *gram sabha* hearing. They are to decide today whether they want Essar Steel to set up a 3.2 million-tonne plant on their land for Rs 7,000 crore. The single lane highway connecting this village, lying halfway between Dantewada town and the Bailadila iron ore mines, is lined with cars and jeeps of district administrators, Essar's top brass, Mahendra Karma and BJP public engineering and health minister Kedar Kashyap, and their respective entourages. They are all gathered inside the compound.

This is the second hearing called to discuss the issue. An earlier one, called on June 10, was cancelled because villagers refused to turn up. Police officials say there's a possibility of a Naxalite attack today, since the rebels are anti-development. Essar officials say "outside elements" were provoking the villagers to reject the steel plant, so they needed extra security. Pisda, Dantewada's collector, says villagers were "fighting among themselves", there was "tension in the area" and they wanted people to speak peacefully.

*Gram sabhas*, as per law, shouldn't be attended by outsiders. Hence, gun-toting policemen keep media personnel — "outsiders" — beyond the walls, while within the walls Essar officials — "insiders" in Dantewada administration's lingo — hobnob with state leaders. Essar wants 600 hectares (ha) of land from Dhurli and its adjoining village Bansi for its plant. Bansi has apparently approved the proposal.

Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code, banning the gathering of five or more persons, had been imposed on Dhurli on August 26. Police had picked up eight villagers that day, on charges that they had roughed up the *sarpanch*, Bhagat Kunjam. Four were released the next morning, while the rest were still being held.

Kunjam doesn't live in the village anymore. The villagers

have labelled him "Essar *ka dalal* (Essar's agent)" and are buying for his blood. For a while he was staying in Dantewada town's only hotel, Madhuban, but has since relocated to some unknown address. Villagers say the eight people arrested had been the most vocal about not wanting the plant. Deva Tellam, one of the four people who were released, says the police told them if they agreed to give up their land they would be released.

Villagers begin trickling in around noon. H S Sethi, Essar's Chhattisgarh director, laughs. "Oh, the meeting won't start till about 4 pm," he says. "These people take their time. They will eat, and drink, then have lunch, then drink again, then rest, and *then* they will come... They don't follow our schedule."

The compound fills up by around 1.30 pm, however. But there's no meeting. No discussion. Villagers are taken in turns to a room where officials tell them they have to sign on a piece of paper indicating whether they are for or against the project. Confused, unable to read what is written on the paper, about 30 give thumb impressions. By then the rest of the villagers in the compound get restive. Why aren't we being allowed to discuss the issue, they ask, creating a commotion. Pisda tells them to "either sign or get out". Angry villagers leave. The hearing is re-scheduled for September 9.

"They should have allowed us to talk, this wasn't a *gram sabha*, this was like forced voting," farmer Dashroo Gundru tells *DTE* later. "We won't sell our land at any cost, let them do their development elsewhere," adds Yuvraj Tellam, another farmer. Other villagers crowded around murmur assent.

When *DTE* got in touch with Essar later they said the version of events presented here was "unfounded".

## Instant karma

At Dantewada town the next day, Karma has his own take on the Essar proposal. "Such big decisions aren't taken asking the common people. No *gram sabha* can take a decision against the villagers' own development. For such a big investment, those affected are very small, only 48 families. All of these 48 will be given jobs according to their ability."

At the district office, Pisda said: "The agenda was one point, yes or no. There have been discussions about this from



**Land is acquired for industrial project from tribals by force. Consent is obtained by the state by the deployment police and paramilitary personnel, more often than not at gunpoint. Those who protest are branded Naxals**



before, so there was no need for further discussion at the *gram sabha*.”

September 9: The story is replayed. Again Section 144 is imposed on the whole region. The area is sealed off this time. Roads are blocked by Central Industrial Security Force personnel. All the administrators, Essar officials and MLAs are present again. Few villagers turn up for the *gram sabha*, but since this is the second meeting on the subject, by law no quorum is necessary. The outcome of the meeting isn't made public.

September 13: Two reports. One from Raipur by India Abroad News Service says “after months of protests” villagers of Dhurli and Bansi had agreed to give land to Essar. “Eighty-six protesting families have held a meeting last week and agreed to hand over 600 ha of land to Essar Steel,” the report quotes Sethi as saying. Apparently, only 86 families from Dhurli and Bansi hadn't wanted the plant. Essar was going to pay villagers “Rs 150,000 per acre (just less than half a hectare) plus compensation for trees on the surrendered land”.

The second report, in *Daily Chhattisgarh*, a Hindi paper, says thousands took out a rally in Dantewada against the proposed plant and gave the collector a note saying they would not give Essar land. This is an extract from the report: “The villagers, under the leadership of Dantewada Adivasi Mahasabha and Sangharsh Samiti, Dhurli, said that on September 9, police had forced them to sign no-objection letters. Two constables were posted at each house. No outsider was allowed at the meeting place. People were not allowed to leave their homes or to talk to each other. According to villagers, at 9 am they were forced into vehicles, and taken to the meeting. They were taken to a room in twos, and pistols were placed at their temples to make them sign. They were told not to step out of the village.”

## Goodbye democracy

What Essar can do, the Tatas can too

**W**hat's happening in Dhurli is not a one-off. The same formula — imposition of Section 144, arresting outspoken adversaries and holding them on charges of disrupting peace till the *gram sabha* hearing is over, forced voting instead of discussions and manipulated press reports are reportedly being used by the district administration to secure ‘approval’ for Tata Steel's proposed five million tonne plant in Bastar district's Lohandiguda block in July and August. The Tatas want 2,169 ha of prime, multi-crop agricultural land from 10 villages in the block for its Rs 10,000-crore project.

This correspondent visited Lohandiguda, where villagers said that people in all 12 villages, other than a small group of villagers, were against the plant proposal, at least in its current form. They had given the district collector a 13-point charter of demands, which, among other things, asked for a stake in the plant's profits, job security for future generations and compensation for land acquired with land of the same quality nearby. There will be a meeting to discuss the demand on October 16.

Instead, villagers say, during the *gram sabha* on July 20 the administration trucked in people from other villages, paid them Rs 50 each, fed them lunch and took their thumb impressions. The local villagers, who were rounded up and brought to the meetings by police, were told they had to sign a resolution to adopt the charter of demands. Intimidated and confused, many signed. But in two villages — Baler and Sirisguda — people refused to sign. Another *gram sabha* was

### Ameliorative initiatives

Centre's measures to protect people not enough

With the upsurge of Naxal activity, there has been a rethink on development and land reform programmes. Some efforts are being made, especially by the centre, to push the programmes in tribal belts. The perception that Maoist violence is not just a law and order issue is gaining ground.

In 2001, the centre created a separate department for land resources under the rural development ministry to look into land alienation issues. The department has distributed 2.21 million ha to almost 5.56 million beneficiaries of whom around 2 million are Scheduled Castes and 823,000 Scheduled Tribes. The department lists 375,000 cases of tribal land alienation, over 346,000 ha of land. Of this, 162,000 cases have been disposed in favour of tribal people covering nearly 180,900 ha and 154,000 cases, dealing with almost 147,000 ha, have been rejected by courts. But the department notes that “although good results have been forthcoming in prevention of alienation and restoration of alienated tribal lands ... the task remains to be completed”.

In Chhattisgarh, for instance, the last land regularisation effort took place in 2003 in Kawardha district (now Kabirdham) where the state passed an order to give land deeds ranging from 1.5 to 5 acres, to 6,100 Baidya tribal fam-

ilies. However, only 40 to 45 per cent of these families have been given land deeds and fewer actual possession. In 2004, the government said it would form a land dispute board to resolve matters, but there's no sign of it yet. Again, in March 2005, the chief minister promised to constitute a committee to review rehabilitation. That is yet to happen.

Meanwhile, on July 21, the centre released the revised draft of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill, 2006, which aims to regularise tribal rights on land they occupy, including forestland, and also secure access to forest produce. The draft bill hasn't been tabled in parliament yet, but is seen as a step in the right direction for tribal people. The draft notes that “exclusion and alienation” has led to increasing support for Naxalism. “Such violent manifestations should not be viewed as merely a law and order problem to be tackled through policing or by arming the tribals to fight these events as is being done in certain areas,” the draft says.

There has also been talk in the states of development initiatives to combat Maoism. The centre has provided Rs 2,475 crore for 55 Naxal-affected districts in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. Under this scheme, an amount of Rs 15 crore per year has been given to the districts for three years to fill critical gaps for development.



held in these villages on August 3, following which there were triumphant news reports saying, “The people of Lohandiguda finally vote for progress.”

A local BJP MLA, Lachhuram Kashyap, had been opposing the plant on grounds of its location. “I had wanted the location to be moved to another spot within the block where the land is uncultivable,” he says. But Kashyap’s party made sure he was nowhere near Lohandiguda when the *gram sabhas* were held. Kashyap is a subdued man today, aware that his political career is probably nearing an end. “I won’t contest this decision any more,” he says. “It’s our government, they want it. ... I’m just one person. Who am I to say or do anything?”

But, like the villagers of Dhurli and Banshi, people here haven’t given up yet. “We have no fight with anyone, we just won’t compromise on any single point in our charter of demands,” says Lakhmiram Bagel of Baler village.

There have been some efforts by Chhattisgarh activists to fight the tribals’ cause against the steel giants. Three persons, including Agarwal, had filed separate public interest petitions against the proposed plants in the high court alleging procedural and environmental norm violations. But the court dismissed the litigation saying the Chhattisgarh government had only signed memorandums of agreement (MOUs) with the two companies and no final agreement had been made.

Meanwhile, on September 21, a group of tribals from Lohandiguda, Dhurli and Banshi reached New Delhi and submitted a memorandum to the National Commission of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes requesting an enquiry into procedural violations during the *gram sabhas*. The memorandum said the consent of the *gram sabha* was obtained at gunpoint. It also said that the government routinely brands anyone who opposes big industrial projects as Naxals.

## Response

Tata Steel’s version of Dantewada events

Tata Steel has taken every care to ensure that the villagers were fully informed of all plans and practices followed by us in the rehabilitation and resettlement of displaced people, for those in the proposed site as well as in other sites. We are not in position to comment on the conduct of the *gram sabhas* since they were conducted by the state government, but we did have the whole procedure video filmed and these tapes are there for anyone to see with regard to the fairness of the process. We on our part ensured that there was no coercion and that the process went on peacefully and we are convinced that the villagers gave their consent under their own free will. Tata Steel also believes that in the process of resettlement and rehabilitation, the affected population must end up with a higher standard of life with security for a sustainable future, which is not possible in their current way of life. You may be aware that we shall be soon discussing the rehabilitation plans with the Chhattisgarh government and we are sure that our plans will better those in the government’s policy. We are sure of the acceptability from the villagers, as these have already been shared with them. The communication of the finalised plans will be done in the most transparent manner and the suggestions of the villagers will be taken into account. We would like to present all this to you and any other genuine stakeholders to help you decide on the fairness of the offers.



**Big brother:**  
Villagers going for a  
*gram sabha* under  
watchful eyes



# Interlinked

## What's common to Judum, Essar, Tatas?

**R**ight at the time of India's independence, it was recognised that the greatest threat to indigenous people is alienation of land. Without their land, they have no identity. Successive governments in India have failed to prevent alienation of tribal land, the law and the Constitution notwithstanding. Now, the affairs involving Tata and Essar — as well as the Salwa Judum campaign — highlight how vulnerable tribals are to land alienation despite laws that are sup-



**Nowhere to run: Caught in the crossfire**

posed to protect them. It explains why the Naxals are so powerful in Chhattisgarh and other tribal regions in the country.

Forty-four per cent of Chhattisgarh, or 135,224 sq km, is forest area (forest land and revenue forest). Access to this land requires permission under the Forest Conservation Act. The alternative for industrial development is to source private land, which is limited in the state. Only 36 per cent of the total land area is under cultivation, or under private ownership (see graphic: *Up for grabs*). In the state's rural regions, people, especially Chhattisgarh's 32 per cent tribal population, are dependent on both agriculture and minor forest produce for their livelihoods.

But, most of these villagers are either marginal landowners or landless farmers with no official records to prove their right over the land they have been living on for centuries. When development and industrial projects like dams, factories and mines displace these landless farmers, they get no compensation, no job offers. Either way, both the landed and the officially landless lose not just their connection with the land, with which their culture and tradition is inextricably linked, but also their homes and their only means of livelihood.

As Chhattisgarh rushes headlong towards market-driven development, the state's increasingly marginalised tribal pop-

ulation is trampled underfoot by three forces: the Naxal insurgents, the Salwa Judum militia and forces of industrialisation.

### The left

The Naxalites, who gained strength in Chhattisgarh's tribal districts over the past two decades partly due to a governance vacuum in these areas, seem to have lost connection with their ideology. This is especially true among the lower rung cadres, who block development, plunder, kill, violate and dominate the lives of the very tribals they claim to represent, in the name of providing justice. But their 'cause' gets fodder, as more land is alienated, the poor dispossessed and injustice done. Naxals feed on callousness and there is much of it in Chhattisgarh.

### The right

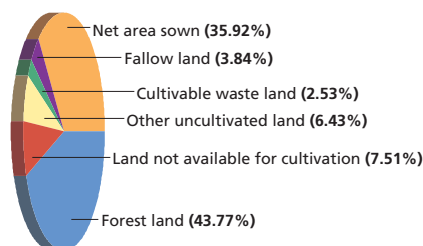
The state's response of arming villagers in the name of Salwa Judum has only led to an increasing spiral of violence and further land alienation of the tribals who have been forced to abandon their villages. It can be said that this war-like tension is creating conducive conditions for further land alienation of the people, this time for industrialisation. After all, the government of the new state is in a big hurry to play catch up in the game of industrialisation. These are rich lands, where poor people live. It is an accident of history that Chhattisgarh would like to forget and bury.

### The middle

In the middle are the people — caught between the guns of the Naxalite on the one hand and the coercion of the state on the other. In this atmosphere of insurgency, every protest is labelled and dismissed. Its protesters can be locked away, its voice suppressed. This is how big industry can get its land quickly and with ease in these rich lands. It is interesting that industry denies that it has any hand in the coercion of the state. The meeting of the *gram sabha*, to get the consent of villagers, is the responsibility of the state. It is another matter that there is a clear case of collusion — where industry and officials come together. But they will say that this is necessary. This is dangerous territory. Security forces are for the people's own good.

### Up for grabs

Classification of land in Chhattisgarh



Source: Chhattisgarh Human Development Report 2004

### The losers

This is certainly not fooling the people. Their anger and helplessness plays into the hands of the Naxals, who are enemies of the state. Then more Salwa Judum soldiers are needed. The cycle of violence, not only continues but it is exacerbated.

It is no wonder then that in Chhattisgarh it is difficult to say who is on whose side. But whoever is winning this particular war against terror, one thing is clear: the people are losing. They lose against the Naxals, they lose against the police, and now they lose against the industry. But for them there is no choice: it is either the devil or the deep blue sea.

In all this what is most pathetic is the Indian state. On the one hand, it arms the very poor to fight their own battles. On the other, it sides with private industry instead of protecting the public good. To call it a government would be a mockery. ■