



## **GONDWANA AND ADIVASIS**

In the heart of India, there is a land called Gondwana. Geologists borrowed the name to provide an identity to Gondwana or Gondwanaland, a prehistoric supercontinent that gave birth to India before humans evolved. It is also a name derived from some of India's most ancient people, a tribe called the Gonds.

Demands for a state of Gondwana date back to before India's independence in 1947. It was proposed as a home for India's original people, the Adivasis, who include the Gonds. What never came to be was the Adivasi homeland, Gondwana. Today, they are some of the country's most disenfranchised people, consistently occupying the lowest ranks of national development indicators. There are about 90 million Adivasis, and they are India's poorest and most illiterate, more prone to ill-health and death than any other group, and least likely to achieve the Indian dream.

As for the Gonds and other Adivasis who live outside and within parts of the Hasdeo Arand forest, they will be reduced – as others like them have been in other mining areas – to a lost people. They will be removed from their land, they will lose their fields, they will lose their culture – inextricably tied to the land – and, perhaps, join the great, desolate migration to the slums of Indian cities.

Experience shows that resettlement of Adivasis has largely failed. One-time payments are quickly squandered by those unprepared for modernity; jobs in the mines or power plants require skills that Adivasis mostly do not possess; and promises of schools and other infrastructure rarely go beyond the minimum that companies can get away with.

## **HASDEO ARAND - INDIA**

Hasdeo Arand is one of the largest contiguous stretches of very dense forest in central India, spanning about 170,000 hectares. Of this, 841.5 ha of biodiversity-rich forest land, about the size of 800 football fields, is next to be cleared for another coal mine.

The Parsa mine is one of 30 mapped mines in Chhattisgarh's Hasdeo Arand region. It is home to forest-dwelling Adivasi

(indigenous) communities, such as the Gonds, who are deeply dependent on forest produce, and agriculture.

The Hasdeo Arand forest, especially the area of the proposed mine, abounds with wildlife. The region is also highly biodiverse and ecologically fragile with dense sal forests, rare plants, perennial water sources, and wildlife species including elephants, sloth bears and leopards. An important elephant corridor runs through the forest.



Photo: Chitragada Choudhury

In 2009, the Chhattisgarh state environment ministry categorised Hasdeo Arand as a "no-go" area for mining for its rich, unfragmented forest cover. Soon after, in 2011, coal blocks even in no-go areas were opened up because the no-go policy never got off the ground. There are two coal mines presently operating on the fringes of Hasdeo.

This year (2019) the Ministry for Environment gave environmental clearance for open cast coal mining in Parsa completely inside the dense Hasdeo Arand forests. This decision has far-reaching consequences for forest cover conservation in India. A potential ecological disaster being done by allegedly forging the consent of local Adivasis.

## THE PROPOSED COAL MINE

The Parsa coal mine will be operated by Rajasthan Collieries Limited, a unit of Adani Enterprises Limited. Adani has 74% ownership of Rajasthan Collieries. Owned by Rajasthan Rajya Vidyut Utpadan Nigam Limited, which has handed over the mining operations to billionaire Guatam Adani's Adani Enterprises subsidiary Rajasthan Collieries Limited.

In the Hasdeo-Arand two coal mines are operational and the Parsa mine, with a capacity of 5 million metric tonnes per annum (MPTA Million Tonnes per Annum) is slated to be next. All three mines in the Hasdeo forests have been awarded to the Rajasthan Rajya Vidyut Utpadan Nigam Limited, a power corporation of the Rajasthan government. RRVUNL has, in turn, appointed Adani Enterprises Limited as the Mine Developer and Operator for all three.

## IMPACTS ON FORESTS, WILDLIFE AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

### WHEN THE LAND IS LOST DO WE EAT COAL?

"Initiating mining will fragment one of the last remaining contiguous forest patches in central India, violate forest rights and increase human-wildlife conflict," said Kanchi Kohli, a legal researcher at the Centre for Policy Research in Delhi.

"People came to our villages and said there would be a public hearing for the acquisition of 1,252 hectares of our land. We opposed them, and at a public hearing in Janardhanpur, we registered our protest. The villagers who were present said nothing about consent for the mine or land acquisition was discussed. But in August 2018, we were told by activists that in the documents submitted to the Environment Ministry, it was said that the villages agreed to diversion of land on these two days. This is false," Ramlal Kurram of Salhi village has been at the forefront of the protests.

In all the four villages, Gond Adivasis are the majority, and they say that the loss of land would also mean a loss of their tradition. 82-year-old Mayawati: "The forest is everything for us".

"We did not let them survey. Why should we allow a survey when we do not want to give up our land? Every time we have seen the government, they have worked against us. It seems the Congress (party) is doing the same as the BJP (party) before it. We stood in the fields and said first shoot us, and then do your survey. They left," Bhuvneshwar Porte said.

"A 75-kilometre-long railway line has also been laid down through these hilly forests to transport coal. This is causing disruption to wildlife corridors particularly for elephants.



Allowing another mine in the area will only worsen the situation" says Kaushalendra Singh, principal chief conservator of forest (wildlife management and biodiversity conservation).

"Forests are our sanskruti [culture] and our livelihood. Hasdeo gives us so many products and food—mahua, sal, tendu patta, chironji, khunkdi, and lakdi [forest produce such as leaves, seeds, mushrooms and firewood]. Hasdeo is our only home. If we give this forest, where will we go? We can never get it back."

HABSS Hasdeo Arand Bachhao Sangharsh Samiti is a group spanning 40 villages across the Hasdeo region, which have been, or will be, adversely impacted by coal mining.

