

***BAUXITE***

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The world's  
unluckiest people

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COMIX BY STANLEY WANY

# ***BAUXITE***



This is the story of Kashipur, India. It is a long story, filled with victories and suffering, repression and uprising. It is a story about power and survival, about oppression and resistance. It is a story that ties continents together. Visitors to Kashipur may leave overcome with sadness or overjoyed with hope. They will not be left untouched. The story began before this journalist came to Kashipur, and continues long after she left. But we must start somewhere, and January 2005 is our beginning, in India, on a side-road between Rayagada and Barigan.



On a typical 36° day in Kashipur, our guide looks out towards the peak of Baphlimali Mountain.







The people here are the unluckiest people in the world.



Unlucky? This looks like paradise!



It's because their lives and livelihoods are threatened. The bauxite reserves on which they live have been a point of contention for many years. These villagers are facing large companies that want to build a mine and smelter.

The government supports the companies, and not the villagers. And the government has police.



The Canadian company says that the villagers consent to the mine, but other reports say that the locals refuse to accept compensation or re-settlement. Which of these stories is true?



The people will tell you themselves. As you will see, we are surrounded by police, by the Indian Reserve Battalion, by the company's hired goons. People have died protesting the project. Others have been injured, have gone to jail, or have seen their villages torn apart and divided. The state uses all its forces to suppress the people.

But still, the people will not be silenced.





In 1993, a conglomerate of corporations created Utkal Alumina International Limited (UAIL) to mine Baphlimali Mountain of its bauxite. As part of the project, alumina - the raw material for aluminium production - is to be extracted from the bauxite at a refinery proposed to be built near the mine site in Kashipur. UAIL was initially a joint venture between India's TATA, Norway's Norsk Hydro, India's Indal. Canada's Alcan joined the partnership in 1998. The mountain was calculated to hold 70% of India's bauxite reserves and 14% of world's total deposits. It is estimated that the project could process one million tonnes of bauxite per year, generating up to one billion dollars. The immense project is supported by both the government of the State of Orissa and the local government.

The mine and the refinery plant would be located on Dalit (caste) and Adivasi (indigenous) land. The Dalit and Adivasi are poor and marginalized in Kashipur.

Yet, as elsewhere in Orissa, opposition from the villagers faced with displacement or land loss has presented a major challenge to UAIL. After 15 years of local resistance, construction for the proposed project has still not begun.

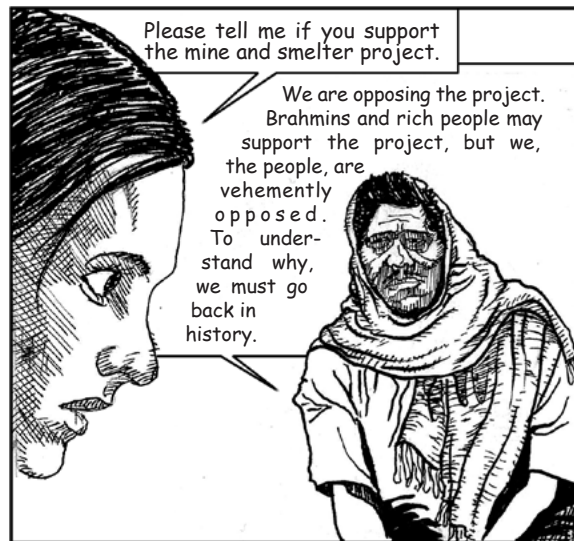
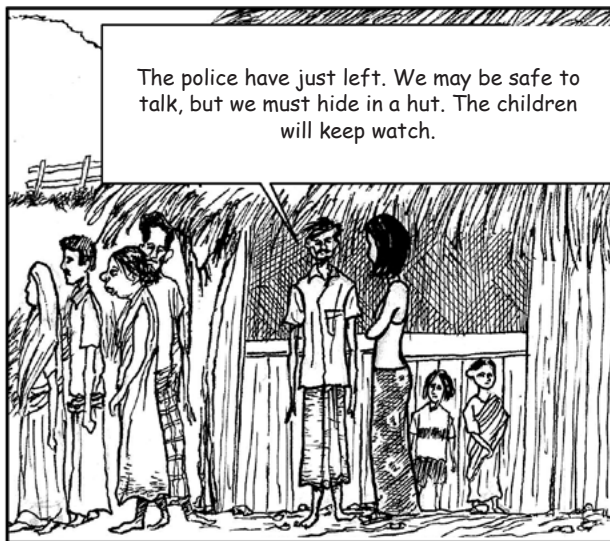


We stop in the village of Barigan. Although UAIL does not consider Barigan to be an affected community, the village is located between Baphlimali and another proposed mine. Villagers are worried about pollution in their fields. They have also been told that Barigan may be flooded by a dam that would provide hydroelectric power to the projects.

It is now time to meet some of the "world's unluckiest people."







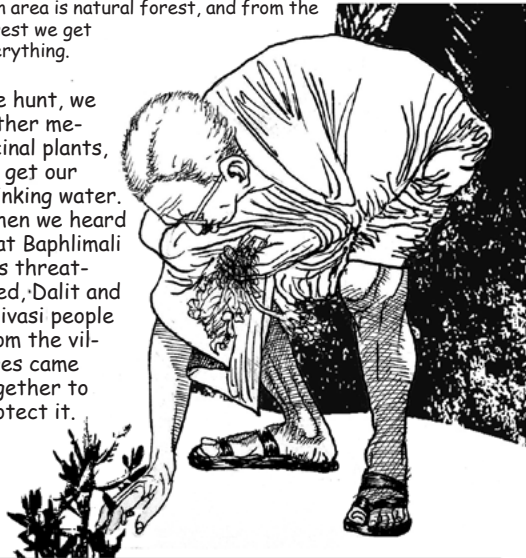
Baphlimali is a sacred hill. Our ancestors won this hill from the clutches of the foreign colonials when they were at work in our area. Our forefathers fought for that hill and it is our responsibility to ensure that our mountain does not go into the hands of others.





Baphlimali is a venerated hill. The mountain area is natural forest, and from the forest we get everything.

We hunt, we gather medicinal plants, we get our drinking water. When we heard that Baphlimali was threatened, Dalit and Adivasi people from the villages came together to protect it.



...In neighbouring regions, resource related conflicts have displaced hundreds of thousands of Adivasis, many of whom have also fled to Kashipur in search of land to farm.

Once we have lost our land, we have lost everything. If company wants the project, they will have to kill us. Then over our corpses the factory will be built.



We are farmers, and without land there is no existence. If the company comes, then our water, our air, all things will be polluted. We will have nothing left. Paper money from compensation is not useful to us.



When we beg for food, for a teacher or a doctor, the government does not come to our village. But when the company is involved, the government arrives with platoons of police. This is not justice to the people.

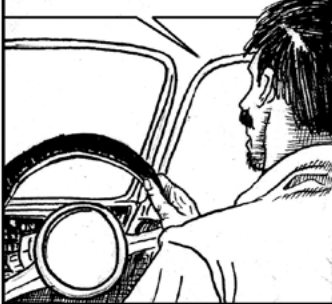


Orissa is known for its resource wealth and extreme poverty. Kashipur is portioned into different extraction "blocks", leaving increasing arable land shortages...

We don't want your Alcan company. We ask all the people of Canada to fight against the company that is coming to India, which is so poor. We hope you will ask your company why it is going to poor states and killing the people in the name of development.



Look out the window. See how arid it is here? There has been starvation, famine in Kashipur. Here, communities rely on subsistence agriculture, hunting and gathering. When people's survival is tied to the land in a fragile ecosystem, the water shortages, water contamination, soil contamination and deforestation that may come from the mine are very dangerous. Studies show that the watershed is linked to Baphimali. Do you see why it is a matter of survival?



Could this be why Alcan didn't want to release the environmental impact assessment?



Professor Rath is a retired lecturer and a solidarity activist in the struggles of Orissa's Adivasi and Dalit communities fighting resource extraction. He now lives in a small house in Rayagada, the largest town closest to Kashipur.



In India, it has been estimated that 50 million people have been forcibly displaced for 'development' projects, and almost 3 million for mines. Many of these people are now residing in crowded city slums and suffering terribly.



In the beginning, people in Kashipur were in favour of mining because they thought it would bring development.



But as days passed, people became more conscious. And when they saw others suffering in other parts of Orissa, they decided that they would fight.



These mines will devastate the lives of people. Their lives would be totally destroyed. And that is why they are fighting.





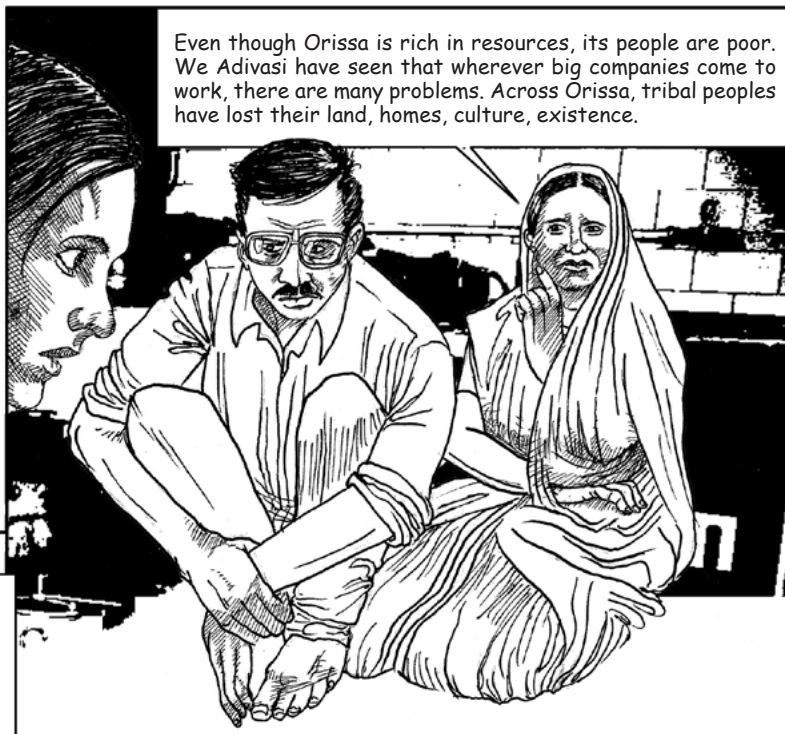
In Rayagada, I am staying with a family that runs a non-governmental organization that works with Adivasi communities working to gain access and control over political and economic resources.



At the forefront of the battle for bauxite is the thorny matter of community consent. Several Indian laws give special protection to Adivasi land. The Fifth Schedule of the Constitution holds that official local consent must be given for resource extraction.



Even though Orissa is rich in resources, its people are poor. We Adivasi have seen that wherever big companies come to work, there are many problems. Across Orissa, tribal peoples have lost their land, homes, culture, existence.



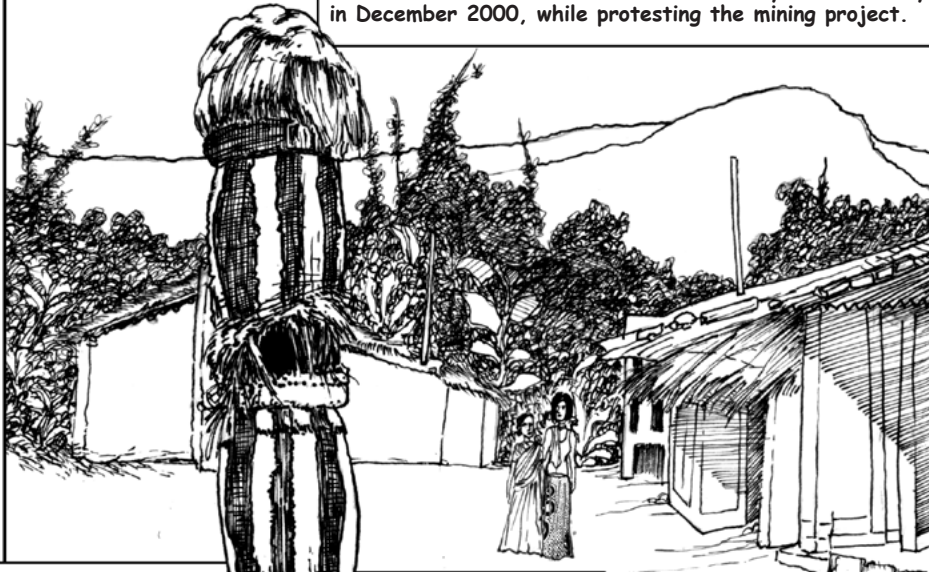
Open meetings in which all villagers participate freely must be held to issue this consent. But consent can be a difficult matter. When it can not be easily found...



... some may tell you that it can be fabricated.



The next day, we set out again to visit affected villages. We pull into Maikanch shortly after police have left. They had occupied the village for almost two months. A Dalit villager speaks to us not far from a monument erected to commemorate the death of three Adivasi men from Maikanch. They were shot by police in December 2000, while protesting the mining project.



In the years before our brothers were killed, tension was building in Kashipur. The Prakruti Sampad Suraksha Parishad, or the PSSP, was among the groups formed to fight the mining project. We had many tactics, from negotiations, to rallies, to roadblocks.



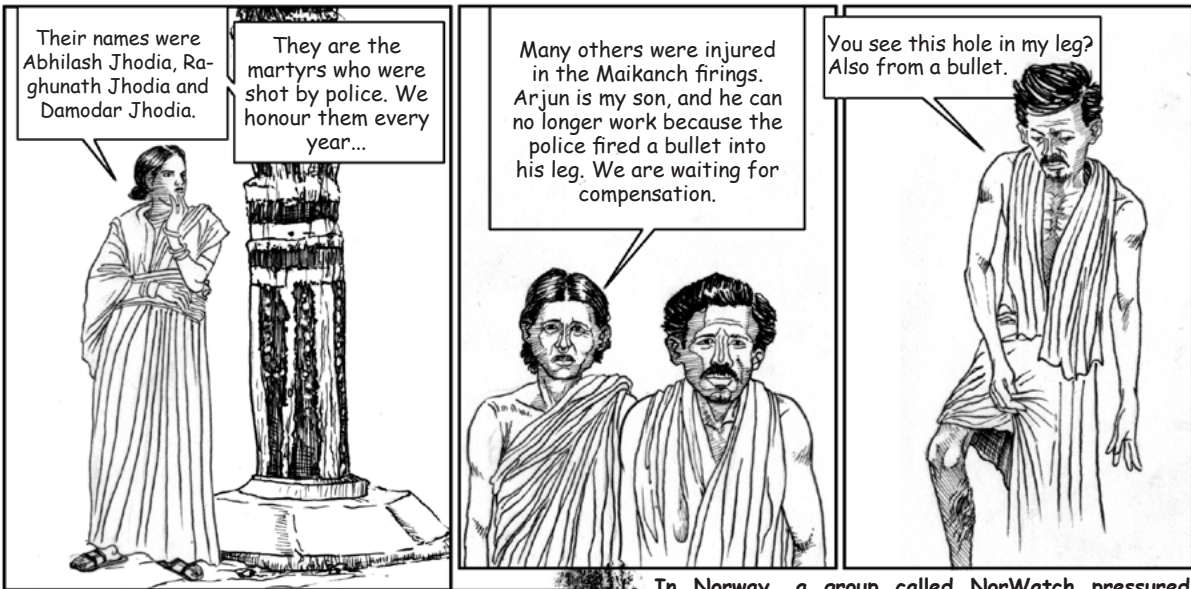
But the company was also at work, and I am convinced that it asked the government to send the police. The police terrorized our villages, arresting people, bribing people, creating factions and divisions. The militarization of the region had begun.

As trouble grew throughout the region, the company tried to stage a pro-mine meeting with important officials near Maikanch. The Dalit and Adivasi made a roadblock, and we stopped the meeting. The company and the government were very angry. It was December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2000.

They sent the police the next day. December 16<sup>th</sup> 2000 was the day of the shooting, the day of terror.







The Maikanch killings drew attention to the crisis in Kashipur, and solidarity campaigns were launched across the globe. A group named "Alcan't in India" was formed in Montreal, where Alcan has its headquarters. The group held protests and pressured the corporation to divest. A shareholder's activist group bought Alcan shares to exert pressure from the inside.

In Norway, a group called NorWatch pressured Norsk Hydro to withdraw from the project. When both Norsk Hydro and India's TATA had indicated their intent to withdraw in 2001, Alcan's stake in UAIL was increased to 45%. The UAIL project was put on hold until the judicial inquiry into the killings was completed.



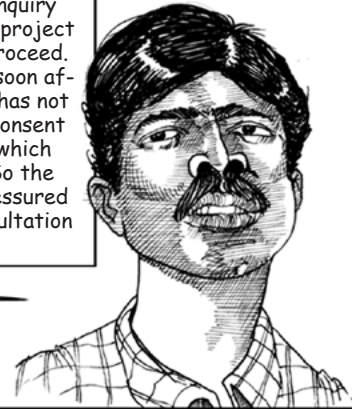
Alcan said that its final approval would depend on the results of the inquiry. In the meantime, it claimed to be committed to economic, environmental and social sustainability. But the uneasy calm that had settled over Kashipur dissipated when the inquiry put its criticisms aside to give UAIL the go-ahead. Indian media reported Orissa Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik saying, "Anybody coming in the way of mining and industrialisation will be severely dealt with."





We return to Rayagada, with some answers and many more questions. We talk with Sibaram, a villager and anti-mine activist from Maikanch.

The Maikanch inquiry was held and the project was allowed to proceed. Trouble started soon afterwards. UAIL has not yet gotten the consent of the people, which is mandatory. So the company felt pressured and held its consultation meeting.



At consultation meetings, known as Gram Sabhas, Adivasi and Dalit must give their free consent for any development on their land. But this particular meeting was a stage for corruption, harassment and coercion. Not all families were invited and the Gram Sabha was filled with police. It was called by politicians, not villagers. Some people said they were forced to sign their names.

And then, weeks later, the company orchestrated a pro-mine rally. It paid people to come and show their support. Witnesses say that the people were from outside the UAIL block.



We don't have proof of whether a person has received 50 Rupees or 100 Rupees to come to the rally. There is seldom easy proof of bribery. But we have proof that dozens of trucks were hired. All of Orissa saw them on television. At 'real' gram sabhas, people walk. Why? Because trucks do not come for free.



Early the next morning, I visit Professor Rath once more.



You ask me if people support the mine? You know of the police and Indian Reserve Battalion Troops on the roads. If the majority supports the project, why are there so many police in Kashipur?

Common sense tells us they are there for coercion purposes.



Otherwise, what need is there? Can the minority prevail upon the majority?

The story is hard to trace. So many voices, so many details, so many questions. I have been trying to talk to supporters of the mine, but the local politicians and police have refused to speak with me. The next day, I plan to visit Kucheipadar, a village at the epicentre of the conflict. But no driver wants to risk their vehicles at the hands of the police, the military, or the villagers hired as company goons.



Maybe we need to bring Kucheipadar here.



We live in the village of Kucheipadar, and we are members of the PSSP.



Why do we need 2 police stations? It is clear that the government wants to suppress our movement.



Let us tell you what we witnessed in the period of time between the pro-mine rally and today. On December 1st, we gathered to protest a new police station that was being built near our village. This would mean 2 police stations in an 8 kilometer distance.



We gathered to block the construction. The police came, they threatened people and ordered them to leave the area. But we refused to move. We yelled, "We want schools and medical clinics, not more police!"



The police then  
lathi-charged us.

Lathi-charge?  
What's that?

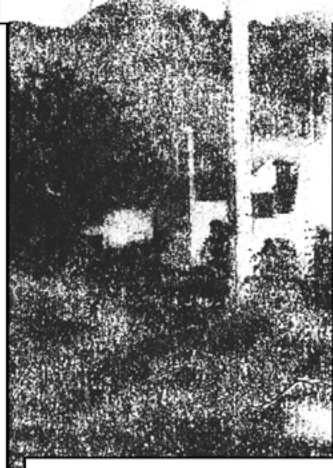


They charged at us with batons.  
And they sprayed tear gas. People  
screamed, "You may kill us, you may  
beat us, but we will not leave our  
land." Sixteen were injured, and six  
were arrested. A few police were  
injured too.

That night, the police came  
back. They began arresting  
anti-mine leaders. Within days,  
the area was closed. The Indian  
Reserve Battalion was called.  
Police began circulating in vil-  
lages, arresting activists, ter-  
rorizing weekly markets.



This is how the  
new wave of  
militarization  
began.



In fact, I was arrested when  
I came from Kucheipadar to  
Rayagada to write my final  
exams. I asked what the  
charges were.

They said I had four charges:  
burning a house, traffick-  
ing girls, taking violent arms  
against the government, and  
decoity. Decoity means robbery  
at the hands of  
armed bandits.

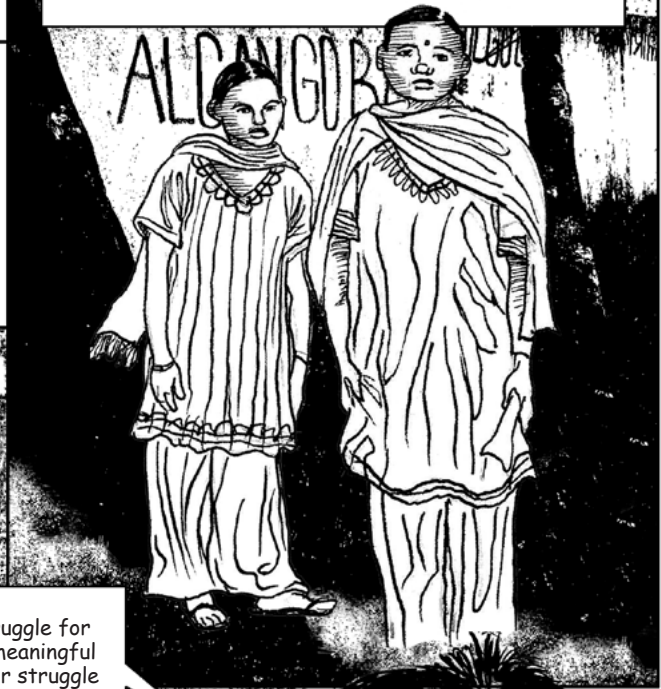




The government cannot buy our people. It can hire people from outside to come to a rally and pretend that people are welcoming the project. The government can do fraud, it can try to tear our communities apart with bribery, repression, and harassment. But it cannot buy our people.



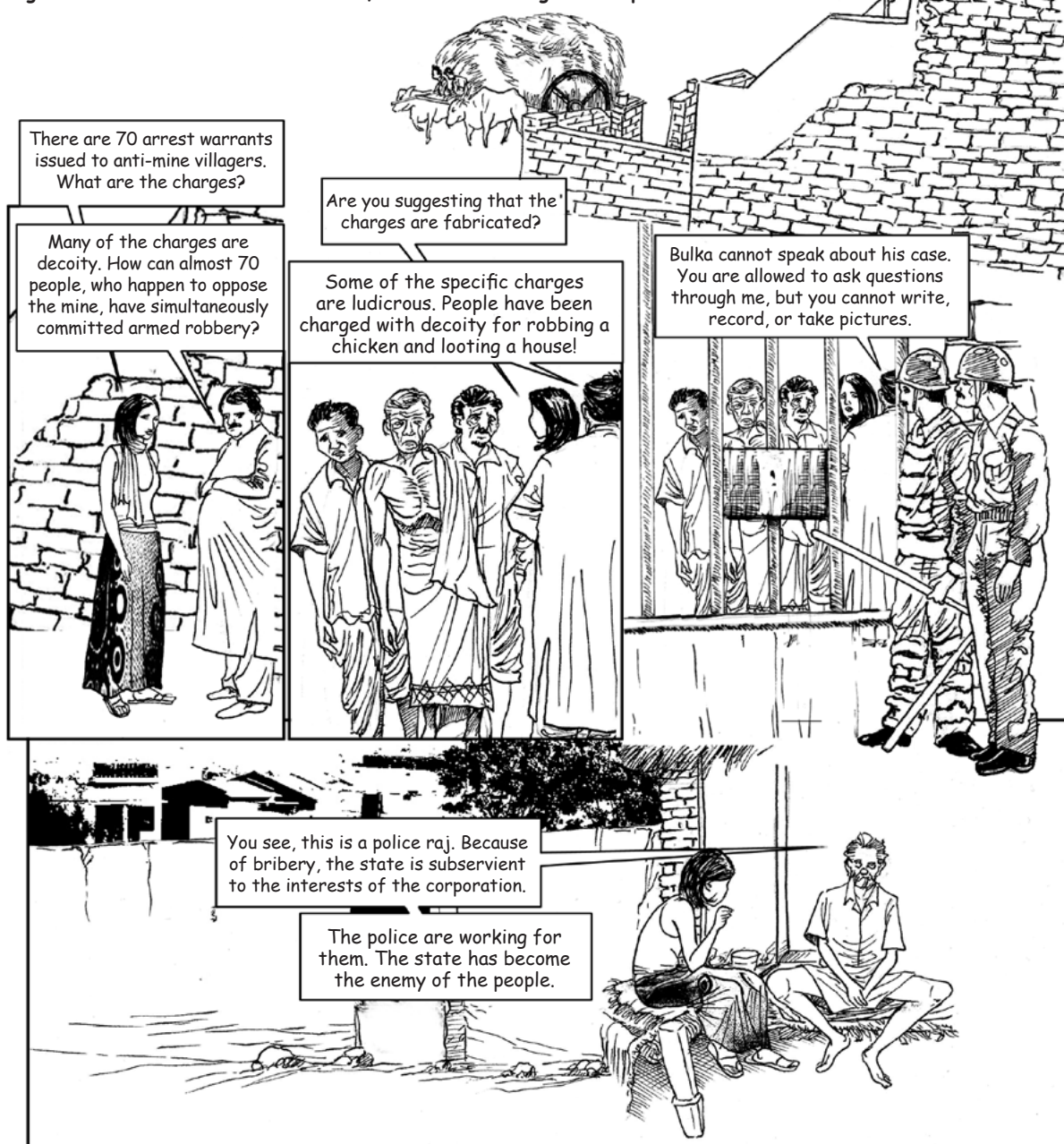
And so we challenge the government to let the people from our area express our consent or dissent freely, without bribery, corruption nor intimidation. The government may attempt to silence us, but our movement continues.



We have had a freedom struggle for over 200 years. It is very meaningful for our existence. Should our struggle end, we would not yet have fully realized our freedom.

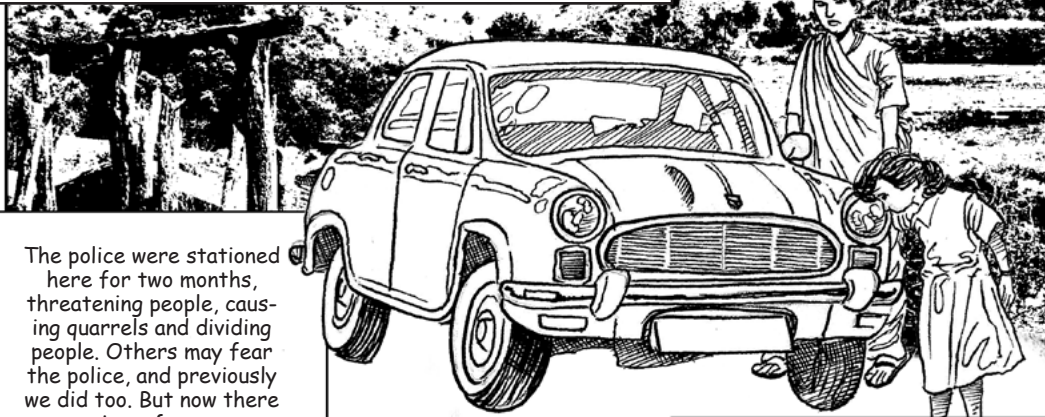


Naveen is a lawyer working with three of the thirteen anti-mine villagers held in jail. He takes me to the jail to visit the prisoners, including 74-year-old Adivasi leader Bulka Miniaka of Barigan. We are not allowed in the cells, but wardens bring several prisoners to us.





I still have more questions for the villagers on the recent repression, and the driver agrees to take one last trip to the countryside.



The police were stationed here for two months, threatening people, causing quarrels and dividing people. Others may fear the police, and previously we did too. But now there is no fear.

Even if the police come back, we will fight, we will organize our agitation, we will not fear.

If the company comes, we will be displaced. Then where can we go?



We don't want the company. Let the police come and kill us.



We are ready to die.





In Rath's garden, before leaving Rayagada, I meet Debaranjan Sarangi, one of several PSSP community organizers who have come to work in Kashipur.

There are questions we would like to ask the government, the police, or pro-mine villagers, but none will speak with me.

Why is it that the government has been putting so much pressure on the communities to push the project forward?



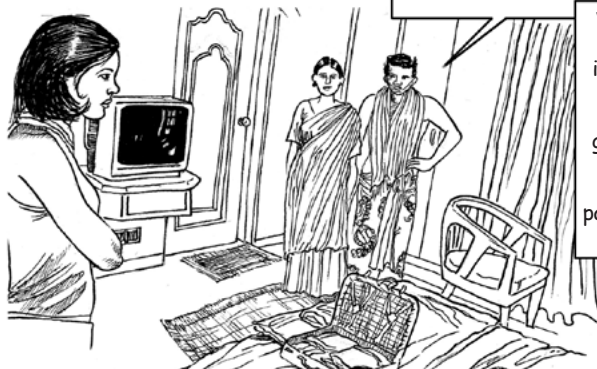
There are two reasons. The first, the surface reason, is for development. Adivasi are targeted for blocking people's progress. Orissa's industrial development depends on the entry of multinationals. The idea is that the Adivasi must sacrifice for development.



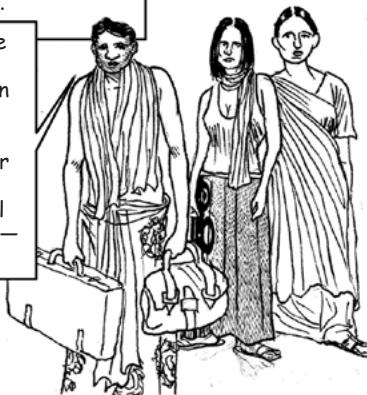
But the ruling class and central government have a different reason. I believe they are speaking about progress and getting lots of money. Where has that UAIL money gone? There is no paperwork to prove these matters.



Of course there is bribery. Bribery and corruption. But some people do want the mine. Within that some people, it is not always the poor, it is not always the disadvantaged. The non-tribals and non-Dalits see there is a kind of temporary benefit they will get. That is a handful of people. But those affected by the bauxite project don't want it.

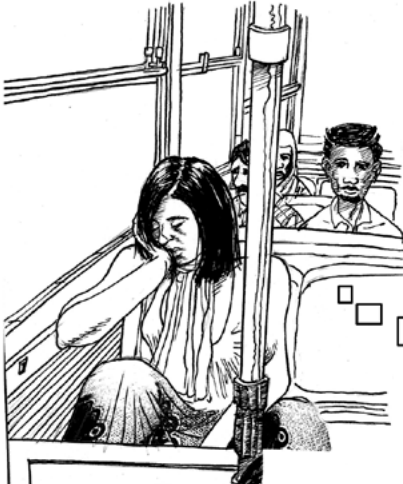


We say we want to live with dignity. If you interfere, we resist. In an environment of militarization and globalization—when our government has come together with political parties and the company—the fight is not easy.



We ask that when you go to your country, tell them that most people here are against this industrial plan. Please bring this message to the people of Canada, because the cries of our people are never heard by our government. Let the world community know that our people are in trouble.

We don't want to welcome a company that does not respect our life and property.  
We only want a peaceful life.

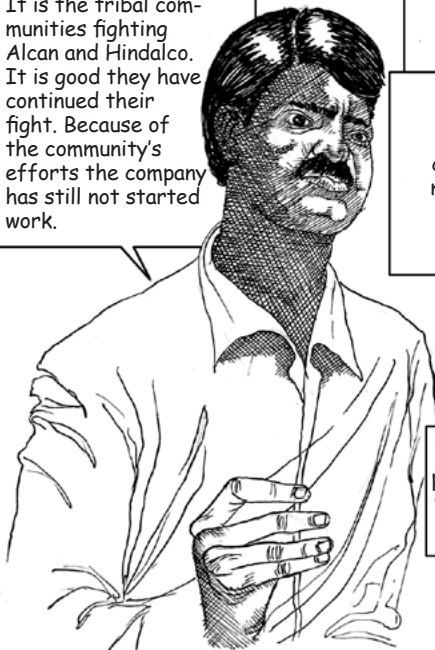


Will the people's movement stand up to this pressure and coercion?



It is difficult to say. The government may shoot at people, it may confine people, it may send more villagers to jail. In this way, they may succeed, or they may not succeed. The state seeks the advancement of capitalism and globalization, and to suppress the Kashi-pur struggle they are using all their forces: judiciary, security, political parties...

It is the tribal communities fighting Alcan and Hindalco. It is good they have continued their fight. Because of the community's efforts the company has still not started work.



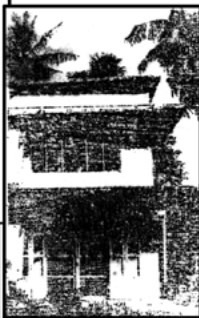
We rely very much on solidarity. If Alcan withdraws, it is an achievement, but another company will come. We must then oppose other multinationals, and not just Alcan. And we must have links to other communities who share our struggles.

If we continue this process, one day we will have very much strength.





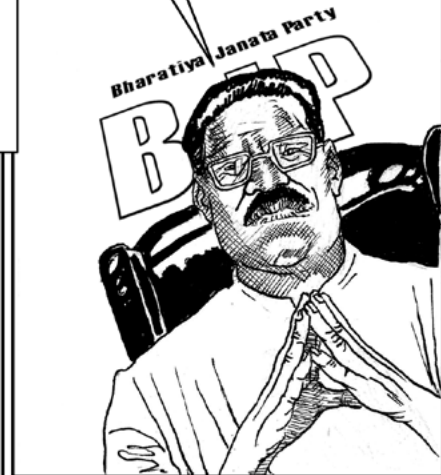
Back in Bhubaneswar, the capital of Orissa. I am getting ready to return to Canada with my findings. But first, I am to meet Shri Biswabhusan Harichandan, the Orissa Minister of Law, Industry and Rural Development.



In Kashipur, we have two projects with the objective of providing employment. Kashipur is an empty tract of land, with no capacities of irrigation, and the standard of living is very low.



This matter of having an aluminum factory was resisted for 10 years.



All matters have been discussed. We have committees at all levels. And after discussing all the aspects from various angles, this decision has been taken.

So ultimately this government has taken the decision that we will have the factory, we will provide employment to those people, they will be rehabilitated suitably, a colony has to be constructed and one from every family will be taken as an employee.



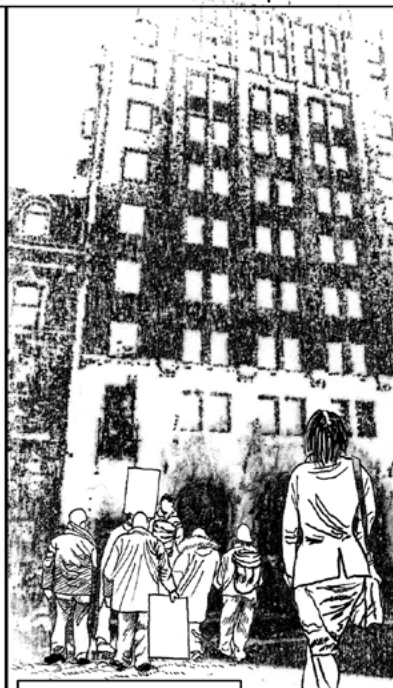
We have heard claims that the government and police are paid by UAIL?

The government has control over the company. We are looking to the public interest and would see that public interest would not be affected in any way. The company is just a small matter so far as the government is concerned. The government looks to the interests of the people of the locality and the greater interest of the state.





The story of Kashipur binds continents together. Alcan (Rio Tinto Alcan since its acquisition in July 2007), will remain based in Montréal. I bring my recordings of voices from Kashipur to Alcan's Annual General Meeting, a few days after I return from India in April 2005.



That is an Indian issue!

This is a Montréal issue. It is Montréal-backed financing that is developing the UAIL project.



for the sake of Montréal-based shareholder profiteers.

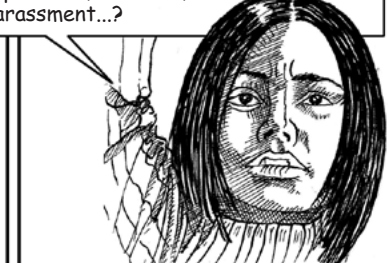
Finally we have also made progress in the development of our joint venture bauxite and alumina project in India, including securing approval and support of government and local communities.



Hmm... In 2003, shareholder activists presented proof that 23 of 24 communities opposed the Utkal project.



Mr. Engen, if the consent of local communities has been secured, why is the region militarized? Why are there so many reports of police brutality, repression, coercion, harassment...?



Alcan is laying off workers! It's cheaper to work elsewhere! It doesn't care about its workers in Québec! Our towns were built around Alcan!



Outside the AGM, Alcan is also under attack.

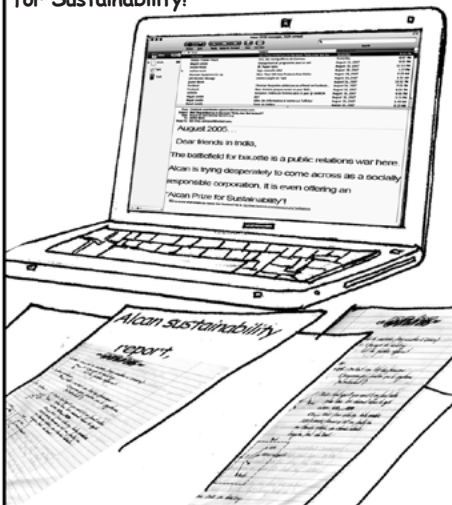
Alcan is trying to sell our water! It is exporting power on our hydro-electric grid and cutting back production and jobs at the smelter. We are taking it to court!



Dear friends in India,

August 2005...

The battlefield for bauxite is a public relations war here. Alcan is trying desperately to come across as a socially responsible corporation. It is even offering an Alcan Prize for Sustainability!



Workers from Alcan plants in Québec and British Columbia have passed resolutions to refuse to smelt any alumina shipped from Kashipur! Resistance against Alcan is moving up the production cycle. Not only is there resistance in India, there is also resistance in Canada at major Alcan smelters! Next we need to target the manufacturers! And keep pressure on consumers, which are all of us...



Dear friends in Canada,

April, 2006

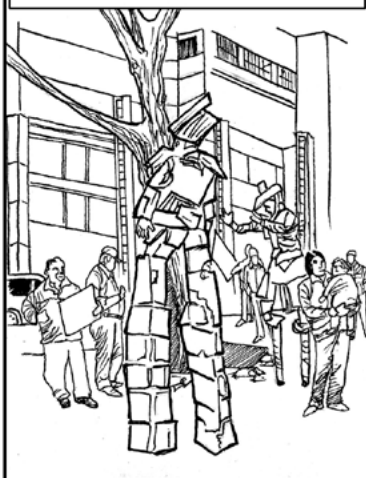
I am delighted to send you this report from the Orissa Legislative Assembly. It criticizes the project on social and environmental grounds, and confirms that UAIL's environmental clearance has expired. This means the infrastructure construction now underway is illegal!



Violence has broken out in nearby regions, and the communities continue to live in terror. But you will be happy to know that no fewer than five fact finding missions conducted by respectable organizations have denounced the use of repression and police brutality to obtain the consent of affected villagers in Kashipur.



April 2006. The campaign in Canada against Alcan continues, inside and outside the corporation's walls.



As you are aware, we presented a shareholder's proposal demanding an independent advisory committee to study the project. Our proposal gained 36% of the votes. This is an exceptional level of support!





Alcan has decided that it will only proceed with the UAIL project if a favourable assessment of the social and environmental dimensions is conducted by an internationally-recognized organization.

I am encouraged by your news, but the struggle is very difficult now. Villages have already been relocated. This is a difficult time. Some villagers are maintaining a sit-in. There is a warrant issued for my arrest. But yes, I will speak to the Canadian journalist when she comes.

January 2007. A Canadian journalist visits Kashipur and speaks to villagers who have recently been displaced from the UAIL site and resettled.

Three villages were bulldozed and we were made to live in these new colonies. I never agreed, but the police were present. I worry about pollution when the project begins. I have received money and I am promised a job, but soon, UAIL will charge me for electricity. They built us a schoolhouse but there is no teacher.

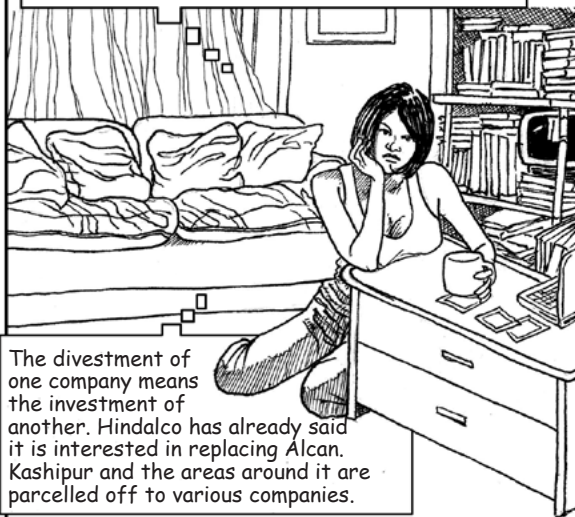
April 12, 2007. Alcan announces its divestment from the UAIL project. It will retain a technology supply agreement with UAIL.

While we celebrated our momentary victory in Canada, the situation in Kashipur remained desolate. After 15 years of repression, harassment, fear, brutality, insecurity and terror, can we expect that Alcan divesting would repair what has already been broken?

...A victory? Maybe a partial victory...



The Government of India has a foreign debt to pay. It wants industry. Orissa is resource-rich. Adivasi and Dalit communities are fighting a multitude of extraction projects. They won't even see the aluminum or the steel that is extracted from their lands.



The divestment of one company means the investment of another. Hindalco has already said it is interested in replacing Alcan. Kashipur and the areas around it are parcelled off to various companies.

In India, Adivasi and Dalits are joined by activists, organizers, lawyers, journalists, academics, researchers, community groups, people's movements, non-governmental organizations and others working to change this balance of power and struggling for the self-determination and dignity of the "unluckiest people."

The poorest people continue to fight the most powerful corporations. Without a change in the balance of power, communities living on resources will continue to be "the unluckiest people in the world".



...The Adivasi and Dalit struggle does not stop because Alcan has withdrawn. They have signed an undisclosed "technology supply agreement" with Hindalco, which will likely include refinery and smelting engineering technology.



Alcan Annual General Meeting, April 2007





You say that the project didn't meet your environmental or social standards, but you're still selling technology?

We chose to withdraw because the contract outlining rights and obligations for partners does not allow us to influence the course of the project... This is a long term project... We want to keep a long term vision and we don't want to hinder our capacity to return to the market in better conditions later.

What measure does Alcan propose as compensation to villagers for events over the past 15 years of its involvement in India? We are thinking of a compensation package.

The company does not hold any legal obligations to pay damages. According to Alcan, the project was in its feasibility stage.

Who are the unluckiest people?



Kashipur has left a legacy of struggle for communities across India fighting extractive projects. For almost fifteen years, a popular movement led by some of the poorest communities in India managed to stall the operations of one of the world's largest bauxite reserves and one of the industry's largest aluminum producers.



If we continue the solidarity process, it can not only be used for Kashipur tribals but for other tribal communities in struggle all over the world.