

# A timely treatise

## Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel

By Felix Padel and Samarendra Das

Foreword by Arundhati Roy

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This is the book that Home Secretary G.K.Pillai is said to be reading nowadays to better understand tribal alienation in mining areas. It is said that if things are not what they often seem to be, then it is the job of the anthropologist to unravel what lies beneath. Felix Padel and Samarendra Das do a thorough job of it in this book.

Ambitious in its scope, *Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel* charts the global linkages of the metal and mining industry while simultaneously detailing the specific consequences of bauxite mining in the tribal habitations of East India that is wreaking social and environmental chaos in the name of development. The discourse as to what constitutes development and how it must be pursued has acquired renewed relevance now that socio-economic development is being suggested as a solution for combating Left-wing Extremism in India's tribal areas. This book is, therefore, a timely exposition as to how skewed development priorities have upset the lives of indigenous communities in mineral-rich districts of the country.

Drawing from the case of Odisha, Padel and Das reveal how an elaborate financial structure linking mining corporations, international banks, NGOs, aid agencies and the media collude to rip bauxite out of its mountains. And in this splendid analysis apparently disparate world events seem to come together. By tracing the complex history of aluminium, from its presence in soil (thus making it fertile) and its extraction from bauxite rock for use in various industries, especially arms manufacturing, the authors join the dots for the reader to show how the journey of the metal from the soil to the arms factory is in a way the story of mankind itself.

What to mining companies are mere rich deposits of minerals to be dug out, processed and sold for profits is to the tribal the very gods they worship as is in the case of the Niyamgiri hills and the Dongria Kondh who worship it.

Throughout the book, Padel and Das juxtapose these alternative ways of viewing that distinguish the tribal people from 'modern man'. While the indigenous tribal communities have continued to worship the mineral-rich mountains, 'modern man' has exploited this natural wealth for industry and technology by employing scientific research. For the tribal person this act of extracting mineral wealth by blasting the surface of the earth is repulsive, but for modern man this activity has become central to the feeding of his factories of greed.

In the chapter titled "Aluminium's Secret History", Padel and Das explore the uncomfortable linkages between scientific research, the arms industry and the war machinery. The book shows how the demand for large quantities of aluminium metal arose during World War I. Facts such as "By 1916, 90 per cent of the output of corporations like Aluminium Company of America (Alcoa) was for the war industry" speak of the linkages that the industry has traditionally enjoyed with the military-industrial complex that promotes an arms race between nations resulting in the outbreak of conflict world over. Though the metal has found wide application in industries manufacturing

automobiles, aircrafts and even fertilisers and pesticides, it has retained its chief position as a 'strategic metal' essential for war. For instance, most warplanes used during World War I and II were made of aluminium. And scientific research has since, unwittingly or otherwise, aided and strengthened these processes. The chapter ends with a reference to the American 'War on Terror' which will ensure that the demand for the metal does not die for years to come.

The book forges very important links between dams and metal factories and how the two sustain each other. Citing Hirakud as an example, Padel and Das show how Odisha's first and

the book also draws attention to the financial crises suffered by countries like Iceland that plunged into a similar cycle of exploitation and irredeemable debt slavery. Country after country has been led by the mirage of economic prosperity to promote dams and smelters for the metal industry. The book raises this crucial question as to what guarantee there is that Odisha will not become another Iceland. Considering that the scope of the book is limited to the aluminium industry, Padel and Das also suggest that similar trends in industries such as coal and iron ore be examined.

Felix Padel draws from Stuart Kirsch's *Reverse Anthropology* to

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clearest dam-smelter complex was primarily meant to supply electricity for industry, and irrigation and other stated objectives of the project were only secondary in the line of importance. It shows how natural water resources have been systematically exploited to meet the energy needs of aluminium smelters. The authors sound an alarm bell for developing countries like India, which have become the choicest dumping grounds for smelters being dismantled in Europe and the US as part of the process of shifting out the mining and metal manufacturing work to Third World countries and the Middle East. They have carefully documented the environmental impact of these processes, including the occurrence of skeletal fluorosis in the proximity of smelter complexes in Odisha.

Besides the environmental damages,

inform the mode of analysis in this book. He allows himself to view the social structure of the aluminium industry using indigenous modes of analysis, which means the reader gets to see the world of aluminium through the indigenous perspective. Padel's first major anthropological work on the Konds of Odisha under British rule in *The Sacrifice of Human Being* informs his understanding of the impact of mining on Odisha's tribal communities. In that work, Padel had sought to reverse the anthropological gaze to study the structures of power and authority imposed by the British on the Kond tribal community with a view to gaining control over them. Padel continues in the same vein here to correlate the current politician-bureaucrat-industry nexus in mining with the legacy of the colonial administrative apparatus.

Padel and Das compare the invasion of tribal territory in Odisha and the ongoing cultural genocide there to the genocide of the Yahi tribes in California during the 1949 gold rush. They draw parallels to the conflict over tribal land and forest in Odisha with the Indian wars in America. This establishes the historical continuity of how metal mining has interfered with indigenous communities and their ways of life world over.

This book makes an important contribution by highlighting the mostly non-violent nature of India's tribal social movements.

This is crucial given the current context in which many innocent civilians in tribal areas are confused to be Maoists by counter-insurgency groups. The perception has also seeped into popular imagination and the book does its best to undo the damage. Padel and Das have painstakingly documented instances where peaceful protests of tribal people towards injustices such as land alienation and forceful displacement has been suppressed by the State machinery. They have exposed the sham that often happens in the name of public hearings and consultations with local communities before a controversial mining project is approved. They also examine the controversial role sometimes played by non-governmental organisations in dividing tribal communities. It also depicts the manner in which powerful corporations use sustained propaganda to coerce tribal people into giving up their land.

Padel, who happens to be the great grandson of the naturalist Charles Darwin, attempts to redeem the father of the theory of evolution from uncomfortable linkages with the concept of 'social evolutionism' that has sought to justify colonialism and industrialisation as part of the 'primitive to civilised' paradigm of human progress. He argues instead that tribal society, perceived to be primitive by modern societies, are complex and highly evolved in themselves and that the Western model of industrial development need not necessarily be viewed as an indicator of progress and forcibly imposed on them. He draws attention to ecological awareness and their sense of community to show that tribal people are highly developed in their own way. However, the discourse over indigeneity in the context of social evolutionism is worthy of more elaborate treatment than what is presented in this book.

*Out of This Earth* is recommended reading for anyone interested in the indigenous communities of India and the impact of industrialisation on them. Surprisingly free of academic jargon and written in simple, straight prose, it is easy reading as far as the language goes, but the complexity of the subject matter demands that the reader sustain her effort till the end. For academicians the book comes as a boon as it is thickly-footnoted and can thus be used as a ready reference for any work relating to the tribal question in India. But most importantly, this well-documented evidence of the destruction caused by bauxite mining is a useful weapon in the hands of activists working in tribal areas. It is hoped that all those who are working for the rights of the indigenous communities make the most of this precious document.