“Lat Does Not Exist”: The Last Testament of a Dead Village

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LOIS KAPILA, DEC 6 2014

Imagine the government one day ordered you to tear down your home and abandon your farmland to make way for “progress”.

Underneath where your family has lived for generations is coal needed to fuel your country’s growing economy. It has the potential to lift millions out of poverty, to keep the factories running in booming cities and the bulbs shining in countless homes.

Across India, this has already happened to tens of thousands. And as the country plans to ramp up coal production to plug energy shortages, it is likely to happen to many more.

Last year, I went with a small team to the coalfields of eastern India to talk to people about what it feels like to have their village torn down and way of life transformed. It feels, said Ram Kumar Rathia, “like something untoward has happened to us. It feels like there’s been an earthquake.”

Once surrounded by rice and lentil fields, the village of Lat, where Rathia had lived and farmed, teetered on the edge of a black crater. The leaves of the trees were layered with dust and the air was punctuated with the booms of blasting from the mines.

Our aim was to record and share the voices of residents and former residents of this Chhattisgarhi village, as they lived the trauma when a coal company rolls into town and digs up the earth.

Each family had had a different experience, depending on its economic and social position before the mine came. A few better-off landowning residents and village officials moved fast and profited from the change.

The majority, farmers with smaller plots or workers with good salaries, did their best to adjust and get on with life, using what little leverage they had to get compensation from the coal company.

Like Munda Singh Thakur, a teacher with a steady salary. He left Lat in 2006, as soon as the coal trucks started to roll through, kicking up so much dust that he and his children were often ill.

In the resettlement colony of Punarvas, a plot of land in the middle of the jungle, he complained that the coal company hadn’t helped build new homes and had done a shoddy job of installing water and other services. Nonetheless, as a salaried worker, he seemed in control of his future.

“Of course, I have a job and so I’ll make my arrangements. But if somebody is unemployed and has no land, and has been living in the same village right from the time of his ancestors for the past hundred years, his life depended on that village,” he mused.

The ones who really suffered were the poorest, those with little or no land, who were therefore due little or no

compensation. They were left in the crumbling remains of the village, with their social network decimated, bitter and desperate.

Many felt cheated and said the only leverage they had with the coal company was to refuse to move. So, like Yadav Prasad Rathia, they hung on and waited.

As the village barber chopped his hair, Rathia talked of the farming life he had enjoyed before the mine came. His family had owned 15 acres, sown with rice and lentils. They got some – inadequate, they judged – compensation and jobs for two of Rathia’s brothers in the mine, but he was left behind.

Rathia’s family was not the only one split by compensation rules based on quantity of land, rather than family size. “There have been divisions and fights in almost all the houses here,” said Lilawati Singh. “In a place where there was so much love, now, for a few rupees, bad blood has been created among family members.”

Not far from Singh’s house is the village square. From there, shopkeeper Prem Thakur watched over the community from his hole-in-the-wall ‘kirana’ store.

If there was news of a fight or if somebody was searching for a friend, he’d know. He would open up his store by 5am, ready to sell sugar and biscuits and single cigarettes to customers. So if anywhere a baby was crying he would know about that too.

Now, as the village emptied, homes torn down, and the mine crept closer towards his shop, Thakur’s role had diminished. Customers were rare, and there was less gossip to share. “The sales will be for maybe one or two hours in the morning and in the evening. I just sit here, though, since there’s nowhere else to go,” he said.

In India and other growing nations, debates rage over how to handle the dilemma of development-induced displacement. Worldwide, at least 15 million people each year find themselves inconveniently placed in the way of desired dams, roads, factories, mines, etc. Is the destruction of some of the world’s poorest communities justified to lift millions out of poverty? Who really benefits?

If there had been forceful resistance to the mine in Lat – as in many other parts of India like forested Mahan in Madhya Pradesh or the Niyamgiri Hills in Odisha – it had dampened by the time we visited.

There was little discussion on whether this upheaval could have been halted. Many feared what landlessness would mean for future generations, but the mine was now there. Change seemed inevitable. To varying degrees, “progress” was good for some, bad for others.

Instead, the residents questioned: can’t we just be treated fairly? All who lingered in the village wanted the resources to survive in the future, a secure job, and adequate compensation.

When Mithu Ram was asked if the government was right to force him to move from an “idyllic” farming life to the drudgery of a mine in the name of progress, his pragmatic answer summed up the feelings of many. “If they give the right compensation then it’s right,” he said. “If they don’t, then it’s wrong.”

About the author:

Lois Kapila is a freelance journalist based in Dublin, Ireland. From 2011 to 2013, she was a reporter for *The Statesman* newspaper in Kolkata in eastern India. More recently, she has written for *The Irish Times, The Sunday Times* and *We Are Dublin* magazine. She is the co-editor of *Lat Does Not Exist: Oral Histories of Development-Induced Displacement in India,* published by Earthcare Books in 2014.