

# The Cost of Consent: The Struggle Against Alcan

by Brook Thorndycraft & Tamara Herman  
May/June 2005

“The people here are the unluckiest people in the world,” our guide commented, as we drove through the winding back roads to avoid the many police outposts scattered throughout the mountains. We were all well aware that underneath the vast beauty surrounding us lay the source of a major conflict: the Kashipur region of the eastern Indian state of Orissa sits above one of the world’s largest bauxite reserves. While this may be good news for the major aluminum multinationals, like Canada’s Alcan Inc., it is a curse, not a blessing, for many of the local inhabitants.

The communities we were visiting in Kashipur are waging a ten-year campaign against a proposed bauxite mine and alumina plant. The project, spearheaded by Utkal Alumina International Ltd. (UAIL), a joint venture of Alcan and India’s Hindalco, will lead to the displacement of 24 villages and could affect up to 22,000 people. “The company,” as UAIL is known throughout the region, claims to have the consent of all but one of the affected villages. Local adivasi (indigenous) and dalit (lower-caste) communities, however, maintain that years of corruption, bribery and police repression must lead one to question the meaning of consent. Umashankar Majhi, from the village of Kucheipadar, echoes the sentiment of many villagers when he demands “without bribery, money or corruption, let the government show us who are the real supporters of this company.” To local activist and retired lecturer Professor B. Rath, the answer is clear: “If the majority of people support [the mine], why would police be in the area in such large numbers? Common sense tells us that they are there for coercion purposes.”

Since December, 2004, the conflict in Kashipur has intensified. On December 1, residents of the village of Kucheipadar blocked the construction of a police outpost at the junction leading to the proposed mine site. The villagers asserted that the outpost was being built to clamp down on the anti-mining movement. Community members claim that when the people refused to disperse, police responded with threats of rape, tear gas and a lathi (baton) charge; 16 people were injured and several were arrested. Anik Michaud, director of media relations for Alcan, maintains that the company’s “understanding is that the police, after being taunted by the protesters and asking them to submit their grievances in writing, dispersed the crowd using a minimum of force.”

Since December 1, the village of Kucheipadar and other Kashipur communities claim to have been subjected to increased police harassment, arbitrary arrests and regular surveillance. Fifteen people are still in prison without access to bail on what many consider to be false charges. In one striking example, a person arrested on an unbailable warrant for allegedly stealing a chicken could face seven to ten years in jail.

The police have not denied charges that they were ordered to protect the interests of UAIL. In February, 2005, Officer-in-Charge Kishore Mund told an independent human-rights fact-finding mission that the company is financing the new outpost. Ravi Shankar, an activist with the Prakrutik Sampada Surakshya Parishad (PSSP), a people's organization opposed to the mine, condemned the construction. "When we are begging for food, a teacher, a doctor, [the government] is not coming to our village. But when the company is coming, it arrives with platoons of police."

The company has been widely accused of using local politicians and police to push the project forward. At a press conference called by a coalition of progressive political parties, it was calculated that a mere U.S. \$260 million of the estimated \$65 billion value of the bauxite reserve to be mined by UAIL would go to the state of Orissa. With subsidies and the cost of infrastructure, the state would be investing more than it would gain.

This year's crisis was not the first wave of tension in Kashipur. In 2000, three adivasis were killed and 13 injured by police during an anti-mine protest in the village of Maikanch. These days, the measures used to end resistance have become more covert. "The company employs some of the villagers to push their interests and divide the people," said adivasi activist Bidulata Huika. "They work as secret agents, informing the company and police where people are going and what they are doing." This sentiment was repeated throughout the villages we visited. According to Arjun Jhoria of Maikanch, "company goons are creating divisions among us. We are fighting ourselves, instead of fighting what they are doing."

When asked about community dissent, Alcan referred to its "broad base of support," demonstrated at a pro-mine rally on November 28, which was sponsored by a committee of political parties in favour of the project. The PSSP insists that the attendees were brought in from outside the area and paid for their participation at the rally. Alibha Majhi, a Kucheipadar villager and an activist with the PSSP, maintained that "people were hired from different areas, so a false rumour began. People now think that we welcome the industry, but this is completely false."

Often the people who support the mine are skilled labourers and small-business owners from surrounding towns, who see the project as a chance for jobs and new infrastructure. Many of the people most directly affected know they are not likely to get these jobs. "We don't have any qualifications. We will not be given the good jobs," commented Jhoria from Maikanch. "We are dependent on agriculture. They may give us [compensation] money, but it will be useless for us. We will have neither job security, nor home security, nor land security. Everything will be lost." According to Michaud, the company's plans for the resettlement of the displaced "has been endorsed by the gram sabha" — a democratic community meeting — in three villages. This claim of community endorsement, however, is strongly contested. Maikanch villager and activist Shibaram Naik is one of many who call the gram sabha a "police sabha." Naik was not only referring to the nine police vans present, but also the process through which the meeting was conducted. While a gram sabha is normally called by the community, the meeting in question was called by the district administration. Naik held that adequate advance notice was not given and only a

fraction of families were invited. In addition, participants were not permitted to raise issues or discuss their concerns.

In large-scale development projects, consent is often used as an indicator of transparency and a safeguard against corruption. However, in Kashipur, where power and resources are not equally distributed, consent is easily manipulated. Although none of the district administrators would speak with us officially, we were told that only one or two people oppose the project. We can only assume that the administration has not consulted the thousands of people in the region who have voiced their dissent.

In the end, the struggle in Kashipur is part of a larger movement for the self-determination of marginalized people across India and the world. The villagers we spoke to categorically refused compensation and refused to leave their land, knowing that many of the displaced are forced to live in urban slums. One woman from the village of Barigan stated, "Canadians should ask why their company is going to a poor country and killing people in the name of development." Another added, "Land is scarce. Once we've lost our land, we've lost everything. If the company wants to build a factory, they will have to do it over our corpses."

Brook Thorndycraft and Tamara Herman are activists and independent journalists from Montreal who visited Kashipur in February, 2004.

---

[| WEEKLY DIGEST](#) | [CD ACTION](#) | [RtL/SMAC REPORTS](#) | [CURRENT ISSUE](#) |  
[| CD ARCHIVE](#) | [SUBSCRIBE](#) | [400 CLUB](#) | [ABOUT CD](#) | [WRITE FOR CD](#) |  
[| CONTACT CD](#) | [BACK ISSUES](#) | [CONTENTS](#) | [LINKS](#) |

Canadian Dimension, 2B-91 Albert Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, R3B 1G5

Subscription Hot Line: 1-800-737-7051

(c) Material posted at this website may be reproduced if you obtain permission from Canadian Dimension.