

Survival



For tribes, for nature,
for all humanity

Brutalized for resistance:

The assault on Indigenous women in Modi's India



“The truth about Adivasi women land defenders must come out: we are literally saving the country and the world ... and they are abusing us for it”

Indu Netam Gond Adivasi leader

Warning: contains details of torture and murder

Edited by Dr Jo Woodman
First published 2022

© Survival International
Photo credits:
Cover photo of Hidme Markam: Deependra Sori
Memorial of 'Mukay Oyam': Rinchin
Soni Sori portrait with armed soldiers: Deependra Sori
Adivasi women marching from Hasdeo Forest: Vijay Ramamurthy

Introduction

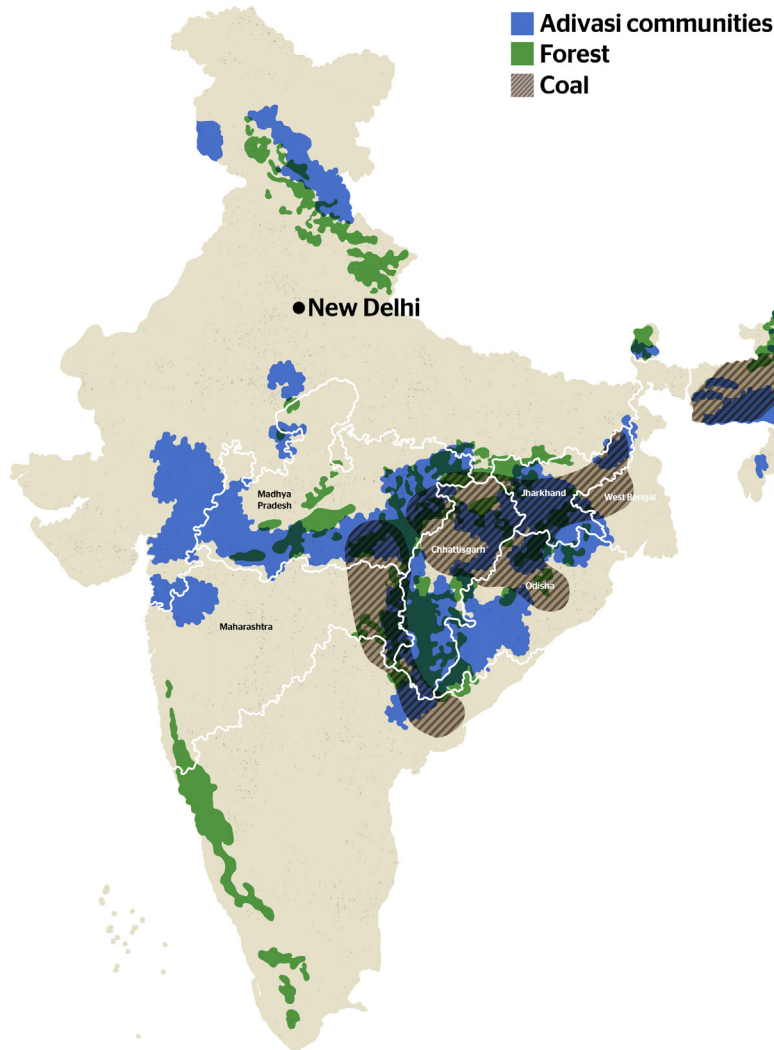
Adivasi (Indigenous) lands are increasingly under attack in central India under the premiership of Narendra Modi. Mining companies – both state and private – are determined to access the resources beneath them, including coal and metal ores. Hundreds of thousands of Adivasi people – across six central Indian states – could be dispossessed if this corporate and governmental mining rush continues unchecked. Currently, the government plans to double coal mining to one billion tonnes a year. Most of the new mines are on Adivasi lands.

The rights that the Adivasi communities have to their lands, their ways of life, their sacred spaces and to give or withhold their consent to mining on their lands are being violated in the rush for mineral riches and profits. Ignored and abused by the state and national governments, Adivasi communities have no option but to resist through direct action. These brave and determined resistance movements demand two things above all else: an end to the violation of their rights, and the protection of their lands from extractive industries.

Rather than stand with their citizens, government agencies are acting in the interests of the mining corporations, attempting to crush the resistance movements, often violently. This report details the extent of that government-sanctioned repression.

At the heart of these movements are Adivasi women, sitting in front of bulldozers, organizing marches and protests, protecting their trees, standing firm against the assault on their lands and rights.

They are paying a terrible price: Adivasi women are being abused at an appalling rate – physically and sexually – and are losing their liberty and even their lives. This is a triple punishment: for being Indigenous, for being women and for standing up for their rights against powerful interests.



“Hidme [Markam]’s arrest and the manner in which it was done reiterates for us Adivasis that governments cannot tolerate anyone among us who speak up against the takeover of our resources”

Jacinta Kerketta Adivasi poet and activist

“Modi’s government is violating our Constitutional rights and is trying to sell every inch of our lands, mountains and rivers. Adivasi people – not only in Jharkhand but right across India – are not safe and neither are their lands and territories. Every inch of our lands is being given to the Corporates.”

Dayamani Barla

Adivasi land defender and leader, Jharkhand

57 million Adivasi people live in the six central states which are being exploited for their coal, bauxite and iron ore.

State	Adivasi population (millions)	% of national coal reserves
Jharkhand	8.6	26%
Odisha	9.6	24%
Chhattisgarh	7.8	17%
W. Bengal	5.3	10%
M. Pradesh	15.3	8%
Maharashtra	10.5	4%
Totals	57 million	89%

Adivasi women defending their lands

“The Earth is our mother. We are the sons and daughters of this Earth so how can we watch anyone destroy our mother?”

Shakuntala Topo, Oraon
Adivasi activist
Chhattisgarh

Over and over again, women have [stood in the front line](#) against the security forces that are acting in the interests of the mining corporations – protecting their communities, lands and futures. In so doing, they have faced police baton charges, teargas, rubber bullets and live rounds. Rather than protect them, the security forces are a major source of the violence the women experience.

In the coal belt across the state of Jharkhand, Adivasi women have been standing in front of mineworkers, using their words and bodies to stop the felling of trees and destruction of their lands.

In Odisha state, there has been an accelerating rush for land and resources in the Adivasi areas since the 1980s, which has been strongly resisted by movements with women at their very centre: In Gandhamadan in the 1980s, women [put their babies on the road](#) in front of the police and bulldozers to show that future generations' lives depend totally on stopping the mines; In the 2000s Dongria Kondh women stood firm against the mining of their sacred Niyamgiri Hills, even when they were [arrested on trumped-up charges](#).

“If we lose our land to mining, the first that will happen is that we will lose our freedom. At present, we women roam freely in our forest, wherever we want, we can go alone. If a mine is opened here, the first that will be snatched is our freedom”

Shakuntala Topo, Oraon
Adivasi activist
Chhattisgarh

In West Bengal, Adivasi women are leading the resistance to the Deocha-Pachami coal mine project, which would displace [21,000 people](#). Women have declared their determination to stop the mine and held a huge protest meeting, which local politicians and police tried to stop. After one woman was [beaten by police so severely that she miscarried](#), the women demanded – and received – a written apology from a local political leader. Their battle continues.

Adivasi women are resisting in these ways because, they say, their land is their life: the center of their cultural, economic, spiritual existence and the central source of their subsistence and livelihoods

Number of Adivasi people at risk of eviction for the Deocha-Pachami coal project - slated to be the 2nd largest coal mine in the world:

21,000

“Hundreds of people [from Kalinga Nagar, Odisha] have false cases against them. When we protest against anything illegal done by them the police come and terrorize us”

Sini Soy, Ho Adivasi land defender
Odisha

Brutal repression of Adivasi women defending their lands

Adivasi women who stand up for their lands and rights and against the injustices that their communities are facing, are [targeted for both their defiance and their gender](#).

There are [high rates of sexual abuse](#) of Adivasi women in the districts with high levels of mining and mining resistance movements. Women defending their lands face additional threats of sexual violence, public stripping, acid attacks and defamation.

By threatening and brutalising Adivasi women, the perpetrators – usually the security forces [working in the interests of mining](#) – hope to intimidate and suppress the whole community’s resistance.

State security forces and private corporations

The cases detailed in this report all concern violations by government forces, whether the police, military or paramilitaries. Often these forces act in the interests - directly or indirectly - of private companies wanting to crush resistance and evict communities from lands for mining.

In southern Chhattisgarh, for example, police camps are positioned every few miles in areas with mining resistance movements, enabling the building of mining roads and the crushing of dissent.

The police have helped ensure that affected communities and resistance leaders are kept away from public hearings for private mines. In November 2021 at a public hearing for mining in Mali Parbat in Odisha, 30 platoons of police, a five mile barbed wire boundary fence and a drone were used to keep the affected community away.

Number of people charged under the UAPA anti terror law since Modi came to power:

10,552

“Like thousands of other Adivasi prisoners, the police want to ensure [Hidme Markam] too languishes in jail for a long time. The process itself is a punishment in this state”

Soni Sori, Koya Adivasi leader and activist
Chhattisgarh

False cases and incarceration

The commonest way that the state punishes, intimidates and threatens land defenders and their allies is through trumped-up charges and unjustified imprisonment. Deep-seated [discrimination](#) and [decades of historical injustice](#) against Adivasis lead to disproportionately high levels of imprisonment and of state-sanctioned violence against them. False charges hang over women who resist, causing them to trek from police station to police station trying to clear their names. Others are imprisoned directly, often under sedition or counterinsurgency laws, and held without trial for years.

Since coming to power in 2014, PM Narendra Modi has massively increased the use of laws against sedition and the notorious Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) anti-insurgency law to control dissent and minorities: [13,000](#) people have been charged with sedition in the last decade and, in 2017-18 alone, [10,000](#) Adivasi people were charged with sedition in Jharkhand for erecting customary stone plaques at the entrances to their villages which proclaimed their rights under the constitution. A significant number of arrests under the UAPA are in the Adivasi heartland state of Jharkhand. Only [2%](#) of UAPA arrests lead to convictions; the aim is not to convict, but to intimidate and silence.

Increase in number of women charged with sedition since Modi came to power:

190%

Hidme Markam

Incarcerated since International Women's Day, 2021



At an International Women's Day event in Chhattisgarh in 2021, Adivasi activist Hidme Markam was bundled into a vehicle and taken into custody on a string of charges, despite her name not matching the information the police had about the cases of which they were accusing her. Hidme's arrest was punishment for her active, public stance on resisting the mining of a site sacred to her Adivasi people and for demanding an end to violations of Adivasi rights. The police claimed she was a counterinsurgent with a price on her head, despite her very public profile – she had even met with the Chief Minister.

“Villagers who protest against the government handing over these lands to corporations are being jailed. We have lost faith in the government but will continue to fight to save our sacred lands and our forests.”

Hidme Markam Adivasi activist, Chhattisgarh

Kuni Sikaka

Imprisoned for defending her people's sacred mountain



The Dongria Kondh people won an historic battle to save their sacred Niyamgiri Hills in Odisha from mining. The resistance was united and determined. The state government, however, was in favour of the mining and punished Dongria leaders with kidnapping, imprisonment and false charges. Kuni Sikaka, as a leader herself and the niece and daughter-in-law of two prominent leaders, was arrested and paraded in front of local media as a 'surrendered' insurgent, causing outrage. State attempts to silence Kuni and make the Dongria accept the mining project failed, but the community remains vigilant.

“Our people are alert to the cause of our land. If the situation demands, we will rise up again”

Kuni Sikaka Dongria Kondh land defender, Odisha

“In February 2019, the police raped five women after shooting them in the legs. After they were done, they killed those women. When they produced the bodies we saw that their breasts had been cut off”

Soni Sori, Adivasi activist and leader

Chhattisgarh

Sexual abuse of Adivasi women by security forces

Rape and sexual violence as a weapon of punishment, intimidation and control is used with horrific frequency by India’s security forces against Adivasi women across the mining belt.

In 2016, the National Human Rights Commission slammed the Chhattisgarh government for the sexual abuse of Adivasi women by security forces in Bastar. They highlighted 16 cases – the tip of a vast iceberg. A report by Women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression (WSS) found sexual abuse by security forces to be “rampant” and “used as a systematic means of torture and repression.”

The study concluded that “perpetrators enjoy the impunity of the uniform, armed might and political and corporate backing” and the entire violent treatment of Adivasis aims to “batter the citizens of Chhattisgarh into submission to corporate-led industrialisation”.

Women are taken from their homes, fields, forests and dragged away. They are sexually abused in police lock-ups and in prison. They are even shot at and then [raped when they are incapacitated](#).

Bastar: Area of Chhattisgarh where Adivasis are squeezed between mining interests, Maoist insurgents and violence from security forces

“Rape and other acts of sexual violence are being used systematically as a strategy to intimidate, humiliate and spread terror among the Adivasis of South Chhattisgarh”

Women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression Chhattisgarh

In 2017, a deputy superintendent of Raipur jail, Chhattisgarh, Varsha Dongre, issued a [whistleblowing statement](#) on the violence against Adivasi women and girls in prisons, for which she was suspended. She stated:

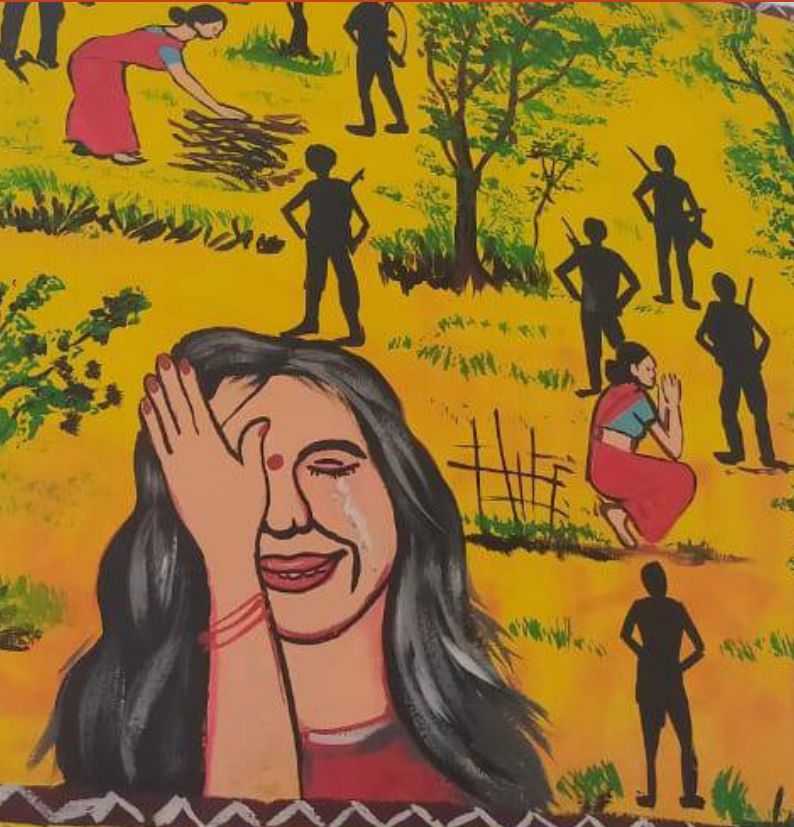
“The fact is that the forests are rich in natural mineral resources and in order to sell them to industrialists and capitalists, the forests need to be vacated. But the tribals will not vacate them because it is their home. They too want Naxalism to end but the way the protectors of the country rape their daughters, burn their houses and send them to prison in false cases, who do they turn to for justice? ... I have seen 14-16-year-old Adivasi girls being stripped naked in police stations and tortured. They were given electric shocks on their wrists and breasts. I have seen the marks. It horrified me.”

Naxalism:

Armed Maoist insurgency, named after Naxalbari, a village in West Bengal

Mukay Oyam

Raped at 16 and abused even in memory



In December 2018, 'Mukay Oyam' (not her real name) was found unconscious by a stream near her village in Bastar, Chhattisgarh.

Mukay, a 16-year-old Adivasi girl, had been gang raped by government forces, but the police refused even to register a case and dismissed her account of what had happened.

When she finally returned to her village from hospital, Mukay hung herself from a tree. The villagers erected a stone memorial to her. Its four sides were painted with scenes from her life and death: life in the village; surrounded by armed men; unconscious by the river; hanging from a tree.

The day before a commemoration event was due to be held, the security forces painted over the memorial, in an attempt to obliterate her memory.

“Gender specific threats such as kidnapping, gang rape or acid attacks and trolling online are some of the common intimidation methods that are being deployed. Women human rights defenders are exposed to multiple dangers that are jeopardizing their lives, freedoms and securities”

Shalu Nigam, lawyer and author
India

Gender-specific violence

Adivasi women who stand up against the might of the state and corporations which are seeking control over their lands and resources are punished viciously. Security forces, for example, justify [squeezing Adivasi women's breasts](#) by saying they need to ascertain if they are producing milk, claiming insurgents are rarely mothers.

Adivasi women face gender-specific violence such as beatings of pregnant women and acid attacks.

A particularly gruesome feature of the violence against them is the sexualized mutilation of victims - before and after death.

“Those who advocate for the rights of marginalized communities such as the Adivasi ... experience caste-based discrimination, death threats, false charges, physical attacks, and the destruction of property. Private companies and armed groups also target human rights defenders for work related to economic development projects and their impact on the local communities or the environment. In addition to the risks faced by men in their defence of human rights, women defenders have been subject to gendered threats, such as acid attacks and gang rape”

Michel Forst, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights Defenders, 2019

In 2019, in southern Chhattisgarh security forces fired on Adivasi women collecting firewood, killing one, and then killed ten young people nearby five days later. One of them, a 15-year old girl named Palo, “had been sexually assaulted. Some of her fingers had been cut and one eye had been taken out. There were marks on her forehead in heavy blows as though with a stone. She had also been stabbed in the chest and had two bullet entry and exit wounds”

Bela Bhatia, activist working with Adivasi communities
Chhattisgarh

The number of deadly ‘encounters’ in just one region of Chhattisgarh in 2020

84

Extrajudicial killings

In areas with active mining resistance movements ‘[encounter killings](#)’ happen alarmingly regularly: The police and paramilitary forces claim they ‘encounter’ armed rebels and fire in self-defence. After huge efforts, activists have managed to get official investigations into some of these killings. They rarely corroborate the government’s version of events. There is state [complicity](#) in these crimes at high levels.

In 2021 an investigation into the [extrajudicial shooting in 2013](#) of eight Adivasis, including four children in Edesmetta [concluded](#) that the ‘encounter’ was a “mistake” and the victims were unarmed Adivasis, not Maoists. In 2020 six women from the village were “[beaten up](#)” for questioning police actions. Fear, distrust and resentment are strong in the area.

Wave upon wave of this brutality and state-sanctioned disregard for Adivasi lives has accumulated to make Adivasi people in mining areas extremely wary, and painfully aware that the government and its agents are acting directly against their interests and rights. Adivasis’ vibrant, peaceful movements have proved amazingly effective in the face of such horrific repression, as shown, for example, by the [Dongria Kondh](#) tribe stopping a billion-dollar mine on their sacred Niyamgiri Hills.

Soni Sori

Imprisoned, tortured and attacked with acid, but still resolute and defiant



Adivasi activist and leader, Soni Sori, has been incarcerated, tortured, sexually abused and has faced barrages of defamation and harassment for galvanising Adivasi women in their resistances to the violation of their lands, rights and bodies.

Soni was a teacher and activist when she was arrested as an ‘insurgent’ and imprisoned, enduring horrific torture and sexual violence in prison. On her eventual release, Soni was attacked by men who rubbed caustic paste on her face, burning and scarring her. Soni continues to fight for an end to the violation of Adivasi rights and lives.

“My acid-burned face is the face of the struggle”

Soni Sori Adivasi activist and leader, Chhattisgarh

Madkam Hidme

Raped and murdered for being an Adivasi woman



Madkam Hidme was dragged into the forest by security forces in front of her distraught mother, Lakshmi (pictured, left). Her body was returned, naked, violated and wrapped in plastic, a few days later.

The police claim she was ‘encountered’ in the forest, and released a photo of her in crisply ironed, spotless black overalls with a gun at her side - killed, they said, after a “fierce gun battle”.

A Supreme Court hearing into a police killing of 16 people from her village was due to occur a few days later. Was her death a way of scaring people into silence?

“The policemen stripped [my daughter] naked, took turns to rape her, mutilated her genitals, breasts and body parts and shot her. They made her wear the Naxal uniform and claimed that they had killed a Maoist. This is an absolute lie. They raped and killed her.”

Madkam Lakshmi Mother of Madkam Hidme, Chhattisgarh

“Without the Adivasis you have no hope of protecting your nature, your resources or your humanity. We Adivasis are your source of courage and bravery that is essential to fight injustice”

**Soni Sori, Adivasi activist and leader
Chhattisgarh**

**jal, jungle,
jameen:**

**water, forest and land -
the three things Adivasi
resistances across India
are fighting to protect**

Conclusion

Adivasi peoples are striving to keep the forests standing and the coal in the ground. They are fighting for their ‘jal, jungle, jameen’, and for all the species they coexist with, the climate and the future. Their sustainable ways of life are being undermined by the theft of their lands and persecution of their leaders and communities.

For their central role in defending their lands, Adivasi women are being brutally repressed and abused. Sexual violence by so-called security forces is commonplace in the highly contested areas where Adivasi people are defending their lands, and the state is working with corporates to open the areas up to mining. Adivasi people say again and again they will lay down their lives before they will give up their lands, because their cultural, spiritual and economic connection is so strong. The state takes them at their word, killing Adivasi men, women and children with impunity. Even when investigations do occur, they rarely lead to justice for the victims or prosecution for the perpetrators, who are a mixture of police, paramilitaries and ‘goons’ – thugs working in the interests of the mining operations.

Campaigning with Adivasi women in their fight to protect their lands and rights should be a global priority.

“By resisting, we are helping the government to actually implement the Constitution. But are criminalized for this”

**Indu Netam, Gond Adivasi
leader and activist
Chhattisgarh**

ILO 169:

**International
Labor Organization
Convention on
Indigenous and Tribal
Peoples**

India’s legal obligations

These violations of Adivasi rights are in direct contravention of national laws and international obligations.

Under the Constitution and laws of India, Adivasi peoples have the right to their own livelihoods and subsistence, to protect their lands, manage their affairs, give or withhold their consent for projects on their lands, practice their own religions and determine their futures. So by privileging the profits of mining corporations over the rights of Adivasi peoples, Modi’s government is undermining the rule of law.

Even more fundamentally, Adivasi people have the right to be treated as innocent until proven guilty by a court of law; the right to life; the right to freedom from oppression and violence; the right not to be discriminated against because of their identity or gender. As Indigenous Peoples, Adivasis have rights which are enshrined in the ILO Convention 169 and under the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The international community must ensure Narendra Modi meets these obligations and India immediately ceases incriminating, incarcerating, torturing and murdering Adivasi people for protecting their lands, lives and rights.



“With Modi things are different. He is more dangerous, and specifically more so for Adivasi people. Modi is selling our country and our Adivasi lands to corporates across India. I want to tell Modi: ‘Stop lying to us that you are helping us. You are killing our future’”

Munni Hasdah, Adivasi coal mining resistance leader
Jharkhand

Adivasi women marching from Hasdeo Forest, Chhattisgarh, to the state capital in protest against coal mining and to demand their rights.

Recommendations

Survival International calls upon the national and state governments in India to:

Implement the Constitution and laws that govern Adivasi issues fully, in letter and spirit.

Ensure no mining occurs on Adivasi lands without their free, prior and informed consent.

Respect the right of Adivasi village councils to protect their lands and determine their futures.

Free all Adivasi political prisoners and those held under false charges for protecting their lands, rights and lives.

Equip the state and national level human rights commissions with the human and financial resources necessary to function effectively.

Commission an independent nationwide investigation into the violation of Adivasi lives and rights in mining areas.

Thoroughly investigate all allegations of sexual violence by security forces and bring the perpetrators to justice.

Train all forest officers, police and paramilitaries in Adivasi and women’s rights and ensure immediate dismissal of any who are found guilty of abuse of those rights.

By resisting we are helping the government to actually implement the Constitution. But we are criminalized for this.

We are not going to surrender whatever violations they inflict upon us. We will not be easily cowed. We will keep fighting until our rights are met and our needs are met. Our courage has not waned. It is a long battle, but we are ready

Indu Netam, Gond Adivasi Chhattisgarh

Survival



Since 1969 | Offices in Berlin, London,
Madrid, Milan, Paris and San Francisco
Supporters in over 100 countries
A 501(c)(3) registered non-profit