An Indigenous Struggle with Development

Abstract:
In a western district of West Bengal in India, stone quarries have encroached on the agricultural land of the indigenous Santals. Boulders blasted out of the ground have fallen on huts and fields, wounding and killing the unlucky; dust billowing from crushers has caused lung disease and smothered crops; and cracks induced underground have caused the water table to fall, drying up ponds and wells. With agriculture increasingly unviable, many Santals labor instead in the quarries and crushers, in unsafe conditions. Social ills abound. The cash economy has facilitated alcoholism, while the exposure of female Santal laborers to overseers at the quarries and crushers has led to an epidemic of sexual exploitation. Since 1994, however, a Calcutta-based activist has helped organize Santals against these ills, with mixed success. In 2010, for instance, thousands of Santals marched in procession and closed down hundreds of quarries and crushers. In retaliation goons associated with the quarry owners burned down three villages, and when that did not suffice to crush the agitation, almost the entire leadership was bought off. Now Santals are reviving their traditional form of governance by a hierarchy of elected, accountable chiefs to pose the most potent challenge yet to the industry. The convoluted course of the struggle illustrates both the tactics used by opponents to derail movements, some of which are universal (intimidation, incitement to violence, cooption) and the processes that may eventually lead to measurable, if not complete, success.