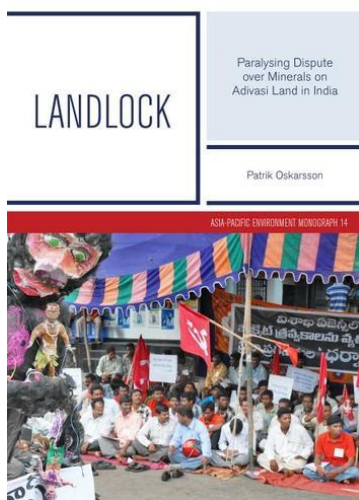


BOOK REVIEW

Growth and Identity: A Deadlock?

Saroj Giri*

Patrik Oskarsson. 2018. *Landlock: Paralyzing Dispute over Minerals on Adivasi Land in India*. Canberra: Australian National University Press, ISBN (print): 9781760462505; pp. 226 + xiv, USD 50 (Print), Open Access (online)



‘Grassroots’ is mostly used in a positive sense, like when we talk about deepening democracy and community participation. But isn’t a top-down apparatus of control and exploitation, such as that by, capital, also a variant of the notion of the ‘grassroots’?

When mining corporations destroy tribal rights and *adivasi* culture, is there not precisely this grassroots capital at work in the form of ‘local elites’ (as mining contractors) who are busy minting money? Here, I take a name: the Karnataka based ‘Bellary brothers’ who, however, were very ‘global’ given that they exported iron ore to China,

Brazil and other countries. Some argue that it is easier to fight ‘global companies’ like Vedanta or global institutions like World Bank than to fight ‘your very own’, home-grown variety — who is now perhaps the ‘new global’ or glocal.

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Published by Indian Society for Ecological Economics (INSEE), c/o Institute of Economic Growth, University Enclave, North Campus, Delhi 110007.

ISSN: 2581-6152 (print); 2581-6101 (web).

The possibility of mapping out the contours of such struggles against ‘grassroots’ capitalist elites is present all along in Patrik Oskarsson’s *Landlock* (2018). The monograph focuses on bauxite mining in Andhra Pradesh and explores the role of private company Jindal Steel Works which is, it is pointed out, in active collusion with public sector companies and politicians. The author’s intention through this detailed effort is to show that a ‘deadlock’ can result between ‘growth’ and ‘identity’. The ‘identity’ here is contiguous with tribal/*adivasi* culture and the notion of livelihood dependent on the land and forests. This deadlock, according to the author, however, does not do anyone any good.

The deadlock takes hold because paraphernalia of ‘pro-people’ legislation has in recent decades emboldened tribal claims to their traditional land and has also enabled them to cross swords with the mining mafia, who are backed by big companies and powerful politicians. The 1997 Samatha judgement of the Supreme Court used by activists to block mining is a case in point. In the deadlock, civil society opposition to ‘growth’ flourishes. This opposition, or even the movement as a whole, is not some idealised tribal or *adivasi* ‘resistance’, but is caught up in the deadlock.

For example, according to Oskarsson, civil society opposition does not have any alternative plan for the good of the tribals. The companies at least appear to have a plan for the community, however flawed it may be. The central problem in such a scenario, he says, is the lack of free flow of information, which he calls as a ‘Habermasian nightmare’.

In effect, *Landlock* attempts to resolve the problem of strong entrenched interests of big capital, state players and glocal contractors as well as civil society opposition in a deadlock scenario, at the level of a formalistic model of ‘free flow’ of information and knowledge. The problem of ‘power’ seems to be displaced to that of ‘knowledge’. I would not agree with this ‘framework’.

However, the book provides us with a lot of detail, close-up view of the ‘deadlock’ and compelling description of the intentions and actions of the different players.

The fact that the project could be stalled or delayed for so long by those opposing it also casts some doubt on the real power of the pro-project entrenched forces. The myriad court cases, litigation and the see-saw around the project implementation does nonetheless urge us towards considering the centrality of information; notably, how specific clauses of court cases shape what increasingly looks like a knowledge-based discursive and legalistic contest. That is why, I think, to give a long rope to the author, one tends to gravitate towards a Habermasian framework.

It is clear that this study suffers from the paucity of critical-political categories related to the new global. And here I suggest that the author reconsider the notion and probable roles of glocal elites, particularly keeping in mind the rise of China, India, Brazil and in contexts where Western capital is increasingly becoming marginal or at least getting majorly reconstituted with the rise of white ethno-nationalism and the decline of libertarian imperialist ideology.¹ In India itself, the glocal elites are in sync with the rise of strongman-led authoritarian regimes. Examples are of course JSW but also the 'Reddy brothers' or for that matter the Saharanpur-based 'Gupta brothers' (also into mining) controlling the South African economy, and so on.

An understanding of this new political economy needs many more concrete case studies on aspects such as mining in order to take political stock of the 'new global' scenario. It is in keeping with this need that Oskarsson's *Landlock* should be recommended as it offers us straightforward and clear documentation of how such realities unfold on the ground.

At one point in the book, we get a sense that the deadlock between growth and identity is mediated through money in which both 'sides' are immersed. In a meeting with officials, the Chief Minister opines that tribals opposing the project just want money (pp. 58-59). The local officer-in-charge, however, points out that all that money being poured in the area does not reach the poor tribals but instead lines the pockets of the local contractors and a range of intermediaries. Here we find that, rather than land or forest, money is the key.

If I may say so, tribals have every 'right' to want to have more things, more money. It appears *adivasi* marginalisation can be addressed if only they acquire more money! It is good to get rich, right? The problem gets displaced: the relationship between humans (the exploitative relationships of the mining companies towards the *adivasi* communities) now appears as the relationship between things ('they have less money', or even, 'they do not have schools'). This *displacement from relationships to things* is what Marx points out in his notion of 'commodity fetishism' in *Capital*, volume 1 (Marx 1887/1954). The fetish powers of money and the fetishism of identity (its affective power) therefore appear to converge.

Glocal elites would, of course, fete about their newly minted money, flashy cars or big fat weddings as part of their legitimate entitlement, and self-respect and 'dignity' for the community and tribal culture. The rise of

¹ For more on this decline, see Giri (2017).

mining contractors from within the local community would appear to converge ‘growth’ and ‘identity’. The fact that that mining project in question did not achieve official completion cannot be harped upon beyond a point. The ‘deadlock’ would have already spawned so much of its own political economy, a good harvest, a good redistribution of the spoils!

The deadlock is not between equality and inequality, but between different forms of inequality, where both identity and growth are enmeshed in the web of asymmetrical relations or, as the author prefers, the ‘Habermasian nightmare’. The book seems to want to provoke activists to rethink the vantage point from which they oppose projects such as the one considered here.

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