

7. Habermas's Nightmare?

The previous chapters identified a number of information problems that have had an impact on the capacity of different actors to understand and take appropriate action related to the Jindal South West (JSW) bauxite project. The problems have ranged from the project's original conception, when an agreement was signed with no prior public debate and doubtful public benefit (Chapter 3), to the lack of information provided to affected people about what was being planned and how they would be affected (Chapter 4), to the government procedures that worked to exclude people from being seen as affected and from taking part in deliberations over the project (Chapter 5), and to the populist rhetoric and mass litigation produced by the project's opponents, which largely drowned out a discussion of genuine grievances (Chapter 6). This discussion has shown that people were simply talking past one another, leading them to occupy entrenched positions in oppositional discourses.

This chapter continues this discussion by detailing the information access and availability issues that I encountered during my fieldwork. The strategies used to uncover information further illustrate the depth and nature of the problems that prevented the creation of any common ground between the opposing discourses. Information is here seen not only as a vital resource to which access is determined by sheer power, but also as being uncertain, complex, full of contradictions and coded in languages that determine who can and who cannot access and make use of it. By situating the researcher as an active participant in the story, the importance of power dynamics and the partial nature of the informational resources available to any individual actor are also illuminated.

Accessing Information from the Government

It was not possible for me to contact the politicians and industrialists who signed the original agreement to obtain their comments on the project. Bureaucrats were easier to approach, as they are required to be in their offices, at least for some part of the working week, but bureaucrats do not like to provide information since that poses a risk to their work and their careers. One strategy to navigate this problem was to depoliticise the request by asking for official statistics and publications of a general nature rather than information more directly related to the project. In that process, I discovered an apparent ground rule that states even ostensibly simple statistical information was always available somewhere other than in the office where I happened to be searching for it. The Land Information Office in Hyderabad advised me to approach the joint collector of the project district, followed by the local head of the Revenue Department (the *tehsildar*), in order to obtain the relevant land records. At the tehsildar's office in the Visakhapatnam Agency, I was told that population statistics were available for all the mandals in the Visakhapatnam city office, but this advice was never tested, since another option was suggested by the head of one local revenue office: approach a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) and they will be able to provide you with the information you are looking for.

I spent quite a lot of time travelling between government entities in Hyderabad, talking to the planners in the Mines and Geology Department, the miners in the Andhra Pradesh Mineral Development Corporation (APMDC) and the MoU signatories in the Industry and Commerce Department, all seemingly part of the scheme, and ended up with only a few brief notes and a suggestion that I look for a copy of the documentary that APMDC had made to promote the bauxite project. I could find no library that even collected the gazettes where government orders are published. The availability of information seemed to depend on the status of the person seeking it, or of the organisation to which that person belonged, as well as the willingness of bureaucrats to part with it, and thus resembled a type of patron–client relationship.

There are indications of very limited information flows even between different branches of the same government.¹ It was not necessarily a simple matter for the state government's Industry Department to access information about land from the Revenue Department. On a number of occasions, JSW had to step in to ensure that information kept flowing from one department to the next, as shown by some of the fax messages that JSW sent to the environmental consultant producing the project's environmental impact assessment (EIA) report for APMDC (BS Envi Tech 2008). Otherwise, it seemed that the flow of information around industrial projects of special importance, like this bauxite project, was not even controlled by high-level bureaucrats in the relevant agencies, but by the chief minister and a small set of locally powerful ministers who were not necessarily connected to these agencies.

When I told a retired officer of the Indian Administrative Service how I had been struggling to get information from the government, and how I felt that everyone should have a right to access basic information about what was being planned, the otherwise forthcoming former bureaucrat suddenly became angry, exclaiming, 'Who are you to get information? Who are you?' His argument against access to information was apparently based on the risk that people could misuse it to create all sorts of trouble. Instead, he seemed to feel that a 'good' administrator should only be magnanimous enough to deliver information to people who were found to have 'genuine intentions'. Although he was aware that this attitude could lead to other problems, including an increased risk of corruption, this former official thought that such problems should be addressed by reforming the education of elite bureaucrats rather than opening up the flow of information. Another former official took a very different line by advising me to 'say in your report that nothing of the information you have was given by the government voluntarily'.

Despite the intense secrecy, the quality of the government's information production must still be questioned. How could government employees be expected to produce accurate information when they are working in early twentieth-century facilities with no proper equipment, and seemingly little relevant training in the use of modern technologies? And what kind of quality can be assured when government departments are making drastic staff reductions, as was the case with the Agriculture Department,

1 This is a crucial element in Chibber's (2003) explanation of the federal Planning Commission's inability to design appropriate plans ever since its inception.

which at times during my fieldwork seemed to work mainly as a land acquisition compensation assessment department, rather than providing support to help farmers produce better harvests?

Accessing Expert Knowledge

When interactions with politicians and bureaucrats proved largely futile, I sought to engage with outside experts to see if there were specific studies that could provide a better understanding of the aluminium industry and the local conditions in the area where the bauxite project was being proposed. General information of this sort was almost as difficult to find as the more contentious material directly related to the project, even though the experts were not under direct government control and worked in an environment where there was supposedly freedom of speech.

A professor at one local university denied the existence of any studies relating to the locations where mining was proposed, even though his colleagues at this same university had discovered the bauxite ore body in the 1970s. According to this professor, no one studied the area these days, and the university had no maps or any older material that was in any way relevant to my study, whether it related to biodiversity, forests, agriculture or any other topic. I was advised to use Google Earth to find satellite images if I wanted to know about forest cover, and to ask the NGO Samatha for additional information. Only later did I discover that this same professor had spent a lot of time working on forestry and wildlife issues in Visakhapatnam District, and had taken a number of relevant books and reports into his office at the university and, for some unknown reason, was unwilling to grant access to myself or to his own colleagues in the same department.

Another professor at the same university, who had a much smaller office, responded to my enquiries by saying: 'If you require information for research purposes I will give information but otherwise I will not.' I had assumed that my own credentials were already clear, since I had been introduced as a researcher by another employee of the same university. Once further papers and a business card from the University of East Anglia had been displayed, the professor handed over copies of a number of his own seminar papers, on which he wrote 'with best compliments'. One might have thought that any academic would want to distribute such material in the hope of getting it a wider audience.

Other academics would respond with a gasp when I informed them of my topic of study and exclaim that it was very contentious. But then, quite unexpectedly, other contacts led me to a few free-thinking members of the university's staff. It was those in the Geology Department who proved most open to discussion of the impacts and implications of bauxite mining, including the risks of pollution. This department had actually been marginalised by the politicisation of the bauxite issue, since their science no longer seemed to have any value. Not only were researchers in the department powerless in the face of an argument that 'national treasures' should be used for the public good; they could not even travel to the hills since people might mistake them for surveyors or otherwise associate them with the mine's promoters. There were a few academics in other departments who felt that the secrecy surrounding the project was ridiculous and were happy to let me copy maps of the area that are not available for sale to the public. They could not provide me with full-sized originals in colour since they would struggle to get new ones from the Geography Department, which had control of this particular asset. But I later found that this was no obstacle, since the maps had already been scanned and could be printed in colour from a regular 'Xerox' shop.

Another interesting aspect of information control in the university world was the library, which was only accessible by means of a letter of invitation. Once inside, the only things immediately accessible on the dusty bookshelves were ancient books of little relevance for my purpose (or possibly any other). Statistics from the national census could be accessed from cupboards that were normally locked. Once permission had been sought from the head librarian in her air-conditioned office, photocopies could be made if the Xerox machine operator was present in his own office, which was not the case on the occasion of my visit. Possession of a digital camera, and the authority to walk past the information guardians with it still in one's possession, was a partial solution to that problem, but only yielded a few pages of what in the end turned out to be not very useful 'public information'.

Even these tactics were insufficient as a means to access copies of the most useful information on the bauxite deposits, which was contained in doctoral theses on bauxite ore geology written in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These are kept in a separate section of the library, in a corner of the top floor with a librarian dedicated to guarding it. Here again, an invitation letter had to be produced, this time with the signature of the head librarian added to it. But in this case there was no point in looking for the absent photocopy

operator, since the theses could only be read in the adjacent reading room. The explanation for this was that some theses are yet to be published and free access could ruin the prospect. When I asked the guardian for guidance to finding a thesis of particular interest to me, the result was a vague nod towards a disintegrating card index system.

The geological reports prepared by the Geological Survey of India in the 1970s, as advertised on its website, look to be more accessible, but still command a premium price. Reports on the bigger deposits cost hundreds of thousands of rupees (India 2008b). So that constitutes another kind of limitation on the flow of information.

The main characteristics of the aluminium industry, in terms of geological and operational characteristics, but also its negative consequences for local employment and the environment, were already known in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They had been evaluated in numerous committees and subjected to comparison with international experiences. And yet the same debates were continuing 30 years later, and with very little in the way of openly available information. The older reports that already existed had largely been forgotten or hidden away, so nothing was being learned from them.

The experts are impressively effective at keeping information under control, and that is partly due to the direct influence exerted by the government. A company that leaks information will find it difficult to win new contracts from the government, as indicated in a letter written to one environmental consultancy firm:

[T]here are reports that the [company] officials at certain levels are providing information to outsiders, without maintaining the confidentiality expected of a professional organization and this has resulted in unseemly controversies at the public hearings organized in respect of Irrigation Projects (Andhra Pradesh 2005f: 1).

The government official who wrote this letter went on to advise the company to ‘induct competent officials with professional expertise related to irrigation projects and possessing integrity and high standards of efficiency’.

Other forms of information control are exemplified by the case in which experts in environmental management altered their own findings to suit dominant interests. I was told about surveys undertaken to determine whether sand mining along the Andhra Pradesh coastline should be

allowed or whether pollution levels for industries in the region were within prescribed limits. In both cases, information was collected and analysed according to prescribed procedures. But the expert author of the sand mining report then changed the crucial data in the final draft to reduce the number of turtle nests that had been found and hence to make sand mining seem a less harmful activity. Likewise, the pollution control laboratory applied a general procedure to ensure that measured test results would fall within the prescribed limits so that this finding could be used as the basis for a negotiation to have pollution control equipment installed, instead of leading to the denial of an environmental compliance certificate.

Individuals expressing opposition to the JSW bauxite project could expect visits from both government employees and representatives of the Jindal Group. However, since there was not much more that could be done to prevent those free from direct government or company patronage from speaking their minds, these visits could lead to an offer of benefits for those whose minds were changed. One NGO was reportedly approached by a representative of the JSW Foundation, the company's corporate social responsibility division, promising that 'anything you want us to do to avoid another Nandigram we will do' (interview, activist, Visakhapatnam, 4 January 2008).² Academics were also approached with offers of funding to host a conference on bauxite mining.³ While support for the government could be rewarded with perks like these, the maintenance of an independent stance brought few personal benefits and could stall an academic career.

New Technology for Information Dissemination

New legislation and information technology (IT) offered some hope for improved access to information. The Andhra Pradesh Government has not only been keen to attract investment from IT companies but has also tried to use technology to modernise its governance. The government's IT projects have included the eSeva project set up at local offices across the state for the payment of utility bills (amongst other things), a new web portal with information on its various agencies (www.aponline.gov.in/)

2 Nandigram in West Bengal had recently been the site of violent clashes over land acquisition for a proposed petro-chemical plant.

3 The national seminar on bauxite mining in Andhra Pradesh and Odisha was held at Andhra University on 17–18 July 2009.

and an e-procurement website for public tenders (www.eprocurement.gov.in/). The central government has been even more proactive in its efforts to spread information through websites, and the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) has been at the forefront of this move. Right to Information (RTI) requests from the MoEF have, however, been denied on the grounds that the information is already available on its website. This is in spite of official websites being frequently inaccessible, and only a small minority of the population having access to a computer and the English-language skills required to navigate the site.

The Ministry of Corporate Affairs is another example of a ministry that has enabled the web to distribute information about registered companies all across India (www.mca.gov.in). However, this supposedly public information can only be accessed by users who are willing to pay Rs 10 per copied page and have a credit card to pay for it, and once the information has been ordered, the information seeker must visit the physical office of the Registrar of Companies in the state where the company is registered in order to obtain the copies. In the case of JSW Aluminium, this would be the office in Mumbai, even though the Jindal Group is based in Delhi and its project was in Andhra Pradesh. The service does not appear to be aimed at the public but at companies seeking information about other companies.

My experience of the limitations of IT as a vehicle for the spread of public information in Andhra Pradesh has been confirmed by Thomas and Parayil (2008), who found that access and use was much greater in the state of Kerala, not because of the size or quality of investment in IT, but because of people's ability to make use of information, and to some extent their interest in doing so. Nevertheless, there was still evidence of change during the course of my research on the JSW bauxite project. The many RTI requests received by APMDC may have explained why that organisation started to post all mining agreements on its newly created website.⁴

⁴ apmdc.ap.gov.in/Home/RTI (accessed 3 September 2018).

The Poor Quality of Official Information

In the controversies over access to information, it became apparent that government information was at the centre of the argument. In media debates and court cases alike, the government has been seen as the provider of the kind of information that comes from surveys carried out by authorised personnel and performed according to specific procedures that are deemed to give it legitimacy. But is this dependence on the government warranted by the quality and independence of the information it produces?

Government surveys of proposed industrial sites gave the appearance of being thoroughly politicised, as top Hyderabad bureaucrats and (at times) even politicians would bypass local (and usually unavailable) bosses and order local government workers to undertake them. This caused a great deal of confusion, since the workers had been trained to follow orders made in writing and passed through established bureaucratic channels, but there was no time for this when sudden phone calls were received. In what appeared to be uncoordinated pressure to get all the required surveys done at the same time, one Agriculture Department survey team was unable to complete its work because the Revenue Department had yet to produce the basic details of the land to be acquired. On the other hand, some government employees took great pride in the efficiency of their work on behalf of the corporate proponents. One such case was that of the Revenue Department official who bragged about finishing land acquisition for an earlier project in just a few weeks and thus getting handpicked to do the same for the more important AnRak Aluminium project.

The sheer complexity of local land tenure, and the poor information management skills of government employees who were largely stuck in a pre-computer era, with facilities dating from the 1950s, posed serious challenges to the quality of information production. Even though Revenue Department officials sometimes used satellite imagery to make plans for land acquisition, poor land records remained an obstacle to more detailed work at ground level. I witnessed a local surveyor involved in planning the JSW project take worn 1950s village maps from a steel cupboard in his otherwise bare office and repair them with a razor blade and tape. The result was an official land acquisition map labelled 'JSW Aluminium', rather than 'Government of Andhra Pradesh', even though the government was legally responsible for land acquisition.

The digitisation of such documents cannot compensate for the poor quality of the original data. The information contained on local maps had not been updated for decades, and thus failed to take account of numerous illegal land transactions. In the end, the government was not interested in providing compensation to anyone not present in its own ancient registers of title, as shown in Chapter 4. Even so, Revenue Department officials had to travel daily to the JSW project site daily by bus from their head office in Vizianagaram over a period of several months, even working on weekends, to sort out issues with the land records in order for the acquisition to proceed.

When combined with the deficiencies of the EIA reports discussed in Chapters 2 and 6, this indicates a basic lack of local knowledge about who might be affected by the project. There was simply not enough in the way of existing information about the local environment, nor any capacity to make up for this deficiency, to make plans for adequate compensation or mitigation. Even where relevant and reasonably accurate information did exist in the numerous and voluminous reports produced by the government and its various consultants, there was still uncertainty about the legal and regulatory standards that should be applied to it. This inevitably meant that the project would fail to demonstrate compliance with the best social and environmental practices.

Even though new to the aluminium industry, a company like JSW Aluminium would have known that the technical knowledge required to build a large alumina refinery is available in national and international markets, so it did not have to rely on its own resources or those of the government for that purpose. The international technology supplier could provide the equipment, an engineering group could prepare the site, and consultants could compile various planning documents. However, it seems that the company and its many consultants still did little to gather the social and environmental information that would have made it clear why so many people were protesting against it. Under these conditions, opposition actors and organisations will continue to find genuine reasons to object to bauxite mining and refining projects across central India.

Information from the Bauxite Project Opposition

The wide range of groups and individuals who had come out against the bauxite project included activists, journalists and political parties. Information about the bauxite project was actively pursued by each of these groups, albeit with widely varying degrees of success, and put to use for specific purposes.

Moneyed NGOs and Struggling Activists

The way that information collection and dissemination took place amongst NGOs and activists was typical of many other actors during the period of my fieldwork. There were only a few organisations working on the issue with sufficient people and funds to collect information on a larger scale, and it was on these organisations that many other organisations and individuals, including journalists, had to rely. Journalists would reward access to information in the form of publications mentioning the name of the organisation or party that provided it, or simply by writing stories on topics favoured by the NGOs. The greater resources of the moneyed NGOs that were the main repositories of information naturally created a fair bit of envy and resentment on the part of activists with smaller means, who did not have much to offer in return for it or who did not want to get involved in making such deals.

One of the most important documents about any industrial project is the EIA report. This is a document that people affected by a project are supposed to be able to read in their own language. It is supposed to be made available at a number of local government offices some weeks ahead of an environmental public hearing. It is also the only document that has to be made public, so the public hearing becomes the only venue where many aspects of a proposed project can be debated. According to one EIA consultant, the wide variety of concerns normally debated at such hearings have generally not focused on environmental issues because economic issues tend to dominate the agenda.

In coastal Andhra Pradesh, it has mainly been the larger NGOs that have the capacity to receive advance information about the timing and location of a public hearing and hence the availability of the EIA report. These organisations know their rights and are able to demand access to

these public documents, which they can then pass on to experts across the country who can provide critiques of them. Other people with an interest in the report are then obliged to approach the larger NGOs in ways that are very similar to those by which people approach the local government for favours. While the NGOs need to show that they are doing good work in order to continue receiving support from their donors, their comparative wealth and perceived secrecy are sources of constant contention with other activists, who rightfully feel that a wider dissemination of information will help the common cause.

There is a perception that activists used to get information from bureaucrats, at least occasionally, on an informal and friendly basis, but that this space has since been closed. In recent years, with an apparent reduction in the contacts between activists and individuals working in the government, some have resorted to the Right to Information Act. Despite the many benefits offered by this legislation, the use of legal means to extract information is unlikely to close the gap in understanding between activists and the government.

The use of public interest litigation to obtain information requires even more resources, since information is already required before plans can be challenged, and the legal basis of the challenge also has to be established. For these reasons, NGOs need to combine their own knowledge of the law with an ability to persuade lawyers to take on their cases at little or no cost. This activity may yield more information than RTI requests because the litigant will receive all the information that the court asks the other parties to provide.

The Media: Active and Free, yet Ultimately Ineffective

Some very competent journalists operated out of the small towns in the vicinity of the proposed JSW refinery and mine. The limited interest of the English-language press in covering rural stories made it necessary for opponents to talk to the Telugu media, and especially newspapers like *Eenadu* and *Andhra Jyoti* that were (unofficially) aligned with the oppositional Telugu Desam Party (TDP). Journalists at these papers were hard at work to press the government on its accountability for programs

and projects all over the state. The Telugu media had a readership keen on stories about corruption and poor people losing out as a result of economic development.

The state government responded to such reports by pursuing a few cases against the editor of *Eenadu*, but was otherwise largely obliged to allow the papers to publish what they wanted. Some saw the launch of the Telugu paper and TV station Sakshi, owned by the son of the chief minister, as a strategy to counter this critical press coverage.⁵ Critical stories about the proposed refinery included one about the withholding of information about land acquisition from people who would be affected (Anon. 2007i), another about the secret (and illegal) alterations made to the boundaries of the area to be acquired (Anon. 2008h), and a third about the extraction of commissions from compensation payments made to local farmers (Anon. 2008i). English-language newspapers like *The Hindu*, *Deccan Chronicle* or *New Indian Express* only carried stories about the problem of water availability in the cities or reports of political party meetings, but *The Hindu* took a particular interest in tribal issues in the state.

Some exaggerations were evident in the press coverage, and the capacity to obtain and interpret government documents varied enormously from one journalist to the next. Some got their hands on maps and other government documents on which to base their stories, but would not say how they had done so. One journalist claimed that he had made RTI applications and travelled to Hyderabad to obtain some of his information, but journalists generally seem to have obtained government information informally from local sources. On several of my own visits to government offices, I came across journalists casually chatting with government workers.

The many stories covering various aspects of the JSW bauxite project seem to have had very little actual impact. One S. Kota journalist expressed his frustration by exclaiming that the stories were just 'cries in the wind'. This was not the fault of the journalists themselves but of the larger system. News stories spread information about the proposed bauxite project to an impressively wide audience in rural and coastal Andhra Pradesh, but they would not carry much weight in a court case, nor could they be used to initiate investigations since they were seen—perhaps somewhat unfairly—

5 Despite the recent spread and popularity of intensely competitive local TV news stations, the TV crews were rarely present in the locations where my fieldwork was conducted.

as being ‘unscientific’ and biased in favour of the political opposition. Even if the media did a good job at shaping local public opinion, that too had very little relevance for actual outcomes.

Political Parties

As discussed in the previous chapter, all the opposition parties quickly decided to ‘be with the people’ and against any bauxite projects in coastal Andhra Pradesh. They included the TDP, which had formerly favoured mining when it was in power, as well as a number of left-wing parties.⁶ Opposition politicians were generally very keen on meeting a foreign researcher like myself. The left-wing parties had cells that operated only in certain locations, and this seemed to restrict the amount of information they could provide. Limited resources and a lack of experience of ever being part of the government meant they were not able to discover much about its plans or shed much light on the ways in which it operates. And even if the left-wing parties did have access to information, they would have had few ways of putting it to use aside from fuelling more news stories in a media space that was already full.

Many left-wing parties, active for decades in coastal Andhra Pradesh, preferred struggle on the ground to information collection and dissemination. There was even disdain for information, among the more radical groups, as something inherently bourgeois. Since, in their opinion, the government was invariably going to be wrong and had to be opposed, they doubted the point in spending time and effort to rediscover this fact. Unfortunately, their ignorance of relevant laws and procedures meant that those working to mobilise farmers to reject land acquisition at the refinery site, despite the impressive levels of self-sacrifice, were rather like the blind leading the blind. Party workers who were not even aware that the proposed refinery site was located just outside of the Scheduled Areas, which allowed for the non-tribal ownership of land, insisted that all the land was scheduled and the whole acquisition was therefore illegal.

The TDP, which had been in power since the 1980s before losing office four years previously, and which has significant financial resources, also had a clear informational advantage. With the former member of legislative assembly (MLA) Ashok Gajapathi Raju and a number of panchayat and

6 The policy turnaround has come full circle since the TDP returned to power in 2014 and once again came out in favour of bauxite mining (Anon. 2015a).

mandal parishad seats in the S. Kota and Araku constituencies, it also had a significant local presence. However, as we saw in Chapter 6, the party chose not to capitalise on its available resources other than to host a few padyatras and meetings in the Visakhapatnam area and to make noise in the assembly. It could most likely have gathered any information it did not already possess about the politics and economics of the JSW project, so it was no wonder that even a left-wing party worker would put me in touch with TDP members to assist in my own search for information. A visit to the TDP headquarters in Hyderabad revealed an impressive library and a number of staff working full-time on information collection, but the purpose of their doing so remained unclear. Like other parties, the TDP does not usually engage in the sort of litigation for which such information would be crucial. It could have used its own information when making its frequent objections to the state government's plans in the assembly, but this would have meant sharing the information with the left-wing parties that also have a few MLAs. It was perhaps more likely that the party was using its information in direct negotiations with the government rather than in public forums.

The Politics of Opposition and Information Control

As already indicated, my own interactions with activists and opposition party members were quite straightforward. There was not even much of a need for informal introductions, even when I was seen as being aligned with particular activists. Yet this does not mean that much information was being shared between the project's opponents. My interview with one NGO leader initially prompted a 15-minute rant against Samatha, since I happened to mention that I had previously volunteered to work for them. The antagonism was based on the credit the organisation had received for the Supreme Court judgment, despite its many imperfections. The head of another, smaller NGO went so far as to argue that Samatha was really working for the government, apparently because the government had mentioned the existence of the judgment in the development agreements it signed with private companies. Once activists had calmed down, it was possible to discuss the issues in greater depth, and frequently to access the information that they had taken pains to collect.

NGOs often do not get along due to ideological differences, and are in competition with each other to promote their own organisations and attract additional support. The political parties functioned in much the same

way. The result was a lack of coordination in the gathering of information, as well as in actions that would have been more effective at achieving their common goal. A wide range of activists and political parties were invited to speak at meetings on the bauxite issue, but padyatras in rural areas were organised separately by each party, and if others were invited to join them, the timing would be such as to keep the organisers in the limelight. In one of the rare cases where NGOs combined forces, one NGO threatened to withdraw its funding from a joint activity when another NGO was thought to have taken too much credit for the campaign on its website.

The level of trust between parties and activists was also quite low. In one case, a local party worker blamed the head of a local NGO for being a 'cunning fellow' who was only interested in money, while the latter returned the favour the next day by accusing the party of sending out 'double messages'. Both seemed equally single-minded in their opposition to bauxite mining, but had somehow failed to understand one another, despite living in the same small town. Other activists saw politics as a necessary evil with which one had to engage in order to make an impact. It was only the parties who had the capacity to mobilise opposition on the ground, even though their support could be withdrawn as quickly as it had been created.

The result was that each NGO, activist, party worker or journalist involved in opposition to the bauxite project was working in a single local cell, and had only a small piece of the puzzle, usually confined to that particular location or the specific issue that they were following. Only a few individuals had some capacity to circulate information between these different actors. Several of the findings presented in this book thus constitute my own attempt to combine the results of fragmented and time-consuming information-gathering activities by different members of the opposition.

Greater Access to Information at Local Sites

Having searched libraries across the state and enquired at what felt like countless other locations, it almost came as a shock when I discovered that detailed statistics about people and agriculture could be swiftly printed out from a computer at a local revenue office, and then copied to a thumb drive when the printer stopped working. Otherwise, despite the right introductions, access to information was just as challenging at the proposed

project locations as it was in government offices in Hyderabad. On any given day, it would be almost impossible to first find the tehsildar, the most senior officer in any given office, and then persuade him or her to authorise the right person to provide me with information. This would invariably require several visits, since the statistician or the surveyor would be absent on each occasion. In the case of the Agency, the problem was compounded by the fact that one statistician had information on the revenue villages and another on the forest villages. Only the person in charge of any particular document or map could bring this out of the locker for me or anyone else to see. On one occasion, a surveyor agreed to meet me on the day after a joint meeting with the tehsildar, but then immediately took leave, apparently without informing his boss.

The fact that I was able to gain any access to local government offices was nothing short of amazing to many activists. To put this into perspective, about six weeks before I sought information from one of the offices in December 2007, a group of 42 project-affected villagers, led by a group of politicians from all the major opposition parties, had spent four days blockading the same office, demanding to know the plans for land acquisition. The officials stayed away from the office until the blockade ended, when the police moved in and arrested about 30 people. The process of land acquisition actually started during the fortnight in which this core group of activists were being held in the Visakhapatnam jail. In the months that followed, the tehsildar refused to respond to letters objecting to the land acquisition notices, despite one such letter being handed over in person by the same set of opposition politicians in the presence of a large media gathering.⁷

While I was spending time at the proposed project sites, lower-level local government officials would actually call me to ask when we could meet and then show up at the appointed time. When doing so, they did make sure that they had political cover from a sarpanch and had consulted with local employees of the company before they would talk. The only thing that can really explain why it was easier to conduct my research at these sites, other than a general curiosity to meet foreigners, would have to be the altered power differential between the two sides. It was apparently harder to ignore a foreign researcher at this level than it was in Hyderabad.

7 A legal case was later launched against the tehsildar, but the land acquisition process continued.

Every single person I sought out at the various project sites, especially the villagers, turned out to be forthcoming. If not necessarily eager to respond, they were seemingly only unable to provide information when it was really not available to them. I showed the villagers maps with the refinery area outlined on them in an attempt to work out where their own plots were located. I was surprised that this did not create too much interest despite the fact that some of the respondents had been arrested only a few months previously when they were demanding more information. It seems that they did not regard maps as substantial and reliable sources of information because they could be drawn today and changed tomorrow, just like any government plans. Several local farmers indicated that they had not received land acquisition notices, but had joined the local opposition group in the belief that they would be affected by a second phase of land acquisition. They did not know that there would be a second phase, but could not see why their land would not be acquired if this was happening to other people's land. The documentation was of much greater interest to the teenage children of the largely illiterate farmers whose land had already been earmarked, yet their few years of poor schooling did not enable them to make much sense of the Revenue Department's technical jargon in English.

I did find one villager studying land acquisition maps and documents on the occasion of a visit to his home. This was a non-tribal man who had illegally bought land many years earlier, and was naturally tight-lipped about where he had been able to get hold of this information. Unfortunately, he also seemed to have little interest in sharing it with other villagers, even though he was nominally a member of the bauxite opposition.

The main problem with information collection in the villages was generally not people's willingness to discuss and share what they knew, but the fact that they simply did not know what was going on. Nor did local government officials in the proposed mining area know much more of what was being planned than what they had read in the newspapers. They had not even been called on to conduct surveys as part of the planning process, unlike those at the proposed refinery site, since this work had been contracted to a consultancy firm.

The surprising amount of information in circulation at the refinery site found little productive use other than in a few local news stories and for individual bargaining on the part of those being displaced. It was not

being collected by the project's opponents in 'civil society', who preferred to stay in the cities and spend a lot of their time filing RTI requests. This acceptance of the government's authority as a producer of information does not seem to make much sense, given the poor quality of much of the information they were producing. Perhaps it was a strategy influenced by the demands of the courts, or simply based on their reluctance to travel to rural areas. Local villagers would have been better off if activists with the ability to access and interpret technical planning documents had come to explain what was about to happen, thus enabling the villagers to make more informed decisions on how to proceed.

Conclusion

The picture that emerges here is not one of an all-powerful alliance that has perfect information itself and the ability to prevent others from accessing it. Rather, the poor information flows seem to be the result of a widespread recognition of information as a valuable resource that needs to be protected and only released if something can be gained by doing so. This behaviour was found to reach far beyond the key state planning departments that the bauxite alliance could hope to control, not only to the rest of the government, but also to most of the other organisations and individuals that I encountered during my fieldwork, including researchers, journalists, opposition parties and NGOs.

The informational struggles were almost exclusively concerned with data produced by the government. This information was seen to be authoritative because of its supposedly high quality and the strict procedures that were meant to guarantee independence from political influence. However, my own observation cast doubt on these perceptions. Survey workers were found to be heavily influenced by senior administrators and politicians, and to be using poor facilities and methods to produce the information. Combined with the many site-specific information gaps found in the public documents and special reports examined throughout this book, the government's limited ability to produce truly authoritative information made it seem impossible to properly compensate land losers or mitigate negative environmental impacts according to principles of best practices. When mediation over land use change is impossible, future mineral projects are certain to generate continued protests.

I am not suggesting there is such a thing as perfect information or a perfectly transparent mode of organising society. Even with better access to information, struggles would still have to take place to ensure that there is justice. The very promising Right to Information Act was found to have many procedural issues that limited its usefulness, but recent improvements in access to information provide some reason for cautious hope for improved communication in the future.

For now, I can only conclude that the sum of many informational problems currently prevents any meaningful communication from taking place. This breakdown in communication, with very limited options for meaningful deliberations, could be seen as a Habermasian nightmare, since it seems to imply that contestations over mineral projects in tribal India are destined to end in paralysing stand-offs where little that is productive can be accomplished.

This text is taken from *Landlock: Paralyzing Dispute over Minerals on Adivasi Land in India*, by Patrik Oskarsson, published 2018 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.