

Central India's indigenous forests are falling victim to bullets and bulldozers

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The state of Chhattisgarh in India's tribal heartland has been the epicenter of a violent conflict for more than 30 years. This struggle has pit a Maoist-inspired group called the [Naxalites](#), who are fighting for the

rights of marginalized tribal communities, against the Indian government, which has deployed security forces to suppress the insurgency. More than 11,600 people [have been killed](#) in the conflict since 2000.

At the same time, Chhattisgarh is also grappling with the pressures of rapid industrialization. [Large-scale mining](#) and [infrastructure projects](#) are threatening both the land and livelihoods of the state's indigenous (or Adivasi in Sanskrit) communities.

Around 44% of the region's land area is [covered by dense forests](#). These forests are home to vital plant and animal species such as Mahua and Sal trees. However, these forests are being damaged. Trees are being ravaged by gunfire, animals are being killed by explosions, and the fragile ecosystem that sustains people and wildlife in Chhattisgarh is gradually crumbling.

[Soni Sori](#), an Adivasi activist, has shared images with me that have been taken by Adivasis in the forests of Chhattisgarh. The photos highlight the damage being caused by gunfire, explosions and shelling.

Bullets tear through bark, while explosions strip it away, leaving trees vulnerable to pests and disease. Shrapnel and [shock waves](#) from blasts also sever branches or trunks, which further weakens the trees and causes long-term damage.

The destruction of Mahua and Sal trees has had a particularly devastating impact on women from Adivasi communities.

The Mahua tree, which is often called the ["tree of life"](#) by locals, provides an essential lifeline for many Adivasi women. Its flowers are fermented [to make alcohol](#), which offers a crucial source of income when it is sold in local markets.

When men are drawn into Naxal movements or caught in the state's counterinsurgency efforts, women often step in and use the income from Mahua flowers and oil to fund their children's education, sustain their families, and repay debts.

In the town of Dantewada in southern Chhattisgarh, locals even hold a special ceremony where they ["marry"](#) the Mahua tree, honoring its life-sustaining role in their community.

Sal trees, which form much of Chhattisgarh's forest cover, play a crucial role in stabilizing the soil. Their loss leads to erosion and increases the [risk of floods](#) and landslides. [Climate change](#), and the increasingly erratic rainfall it brings, has [compounded these risks](#).

The loss of essential resources like Mahua trees will only exacerbate food insecurity and economic hardship, pushing Adivasis further into poverty. The [average annual income](#) of Adivasi households in Chhattisgarh was just ₹53,610 (around £505) in 2022—well below the national agricultural household average of ₹122,616.

The conflict in Chhattisgarh is also harming the region's wildlife. In December, a [female sloth bear](#) was killed by an improvised explosive device planted by Maoist rebels in the forests of Dantewada. The bear's two orphaned cubs starved to death shortly after.

This was the first recorded death of a wild animal from such an explosion in Bastar district, though livestock and pets have been victims of similar blasts in the past.

One month earlier, in central Chhattisgarh's Udanti-Sitanadi Tiger Reserve, a five-year-old elephant calf [sustained critical injuries](#) from a suspected bomb explosion. These incidents reflect a disturbing pattern within the conflict, where wildlife is becoming a victim of the violence.

March of industrialization

Industrialization has exacerbated these challenges. Chhattisgarh is rich in mineral resources. Between 2023 and 2024, [the state produced](#) nearly 50 million tonnes of limestone, 44 million tonnes of iron ore, and over 1 million tonnes of bauxite. However, widespread mining is fueling further deforestation and environmental degradation.

Between 2001 and 2023, the state lost [53,500 hectares of forest](#), with large-scale mining operations contributing significantly to the loss. In the Hasdeo region of northern Chhattisgarh, the Parsa East Kete Basen coal mine has led to the felling of [almost 82,000](#) trees, spread across two phases of mining. Between 2012 and 2018, 50,000 trees were felled, with more than 31,800 more trees cut down since then.

With [continued political support](#) for mineral extraction, [government approvals](#), and the involvement of commercial mining giants, more deforestation is expected over the coming years.

This deforestation is, unsurprisingly, harming the region's wildlife. The [latest census](#) by the National Tiger Conservation Authority, which was carried out in 2022, revealed a sharp and alarming decline in Chhattisgarh's tiger population.

At that time, there were only 17 tigers remaining in the state—a dramatic fall from 46 in 2014. Conservationists fear that the figure could now be even lower, as the situation continues to deteriorate.

This decline is largely due to [habitat destruction](#). But it has probably been made worse by the [Maoist insurgency](#) in regions such as northern Chhattisgarh, which is home to the Achanakmar Tiger Reserve, as well as the Indravati Tiger Reserve in the south-western part of the state.

The insurgency has hindered conservation efforts. The use of explosives in the forests disrupts the behavior of tigers, while also making it more difficult for conservationists to monitor and protect them.

What was once a lush and bio-diverse environment is rapidly becoming a wasteland. But the loss of these trees and wildlife in Chhattisgarh represents more than simply the depletion of natural resources. It symbolizes the erosion of culture, identity, and a way of life for Chhattisgarh's Indigenous people.

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