

Indian forest activist Alok Shukla awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize

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REUTERS

This photograph taken on April 14, 2024 shows Alok Shukla, an activist, taking photos of the Parsa East Kente Basan (PEKB) coal mine site in Surguja district, in India's state of Chhattisgarh. Shukla has led a decade-long grassroots campaign against some of India's conglomerates -- including one operated by

Adani Group, helmed by Asia's second-richest man -- seeking to tap one of the country's richest subterranean stores of fossil fuels. | Photo Credit: AFP

Deep in an Indian forest, activist Alok Shukla greets friendly faces among a small band of protesters sitting in the way of plans to turn the surrounding wilderness into coal mines.

Shukla has led a decade-long grassroots campaign against some of India's conglomerates -- including one operated by Adani Group, helmed by Asia's second-richest man -- seeking to tap one of the country's richest subterranean stores of fossil fuels.

The movement had a major triumph in 2021 when, bowing to its demands, the government established an elephant reserve in a 445,000-acre (around 180,000-hectare) swath of the threatened Hasdeo Aranya forest, an area bigger than the size of London.

"It was a great achievement for our struggle," Shukla told AFP this month from his base in the woodlands of central Chhattisgarh state.

"Our final fight is that no more mines should be opened and not even a single tree should be cut down here now."

Shukla, 45, was announced on Monday as one of the recipients of this year's Goldman Prize, awarded to campaigners for "sustained and significant" efforts to protect the environment.

Through a combination of protest marches, pressure on lawmakers and court cases, Shukla rallied support from thousands living in the forest's isolated tribal communities to battle the mining giants.

Seventeen proposed mining sites were closed off from development as a result of the elephant reserve's establishment but large stretches of the forest remain earmarked for coal projects.

Another six proposed mining sites were left out of the reserve, Shukla said, five of which remain dormant while another -- belonging to the Rajasthan state government but run by Adani Group -- is already operational and planning an expansion.

This photograph taken on April 13, 2024 shows Alok Shukla (C), an activist, speaking with the tribals during a meeting at the Morga village of Korba district in India's state of Chhattisgarh. Shukla has led a decade-long grassroots campaign against some of India's conglomerates -- including one operated by

Adani Group, helmed by Asia's second-richest man -- seeking to tap one of the country's richest subterranean stores of fossil fuels. | Photo Credit: AFP

Shukla and the Hasdeo forest's inhabitants have maintained a sit-in protest for the past two years at the village of Hariharpur, set to be swallowed up if the expansion proceeds.

The campaign "isn't just a struggle to save the forests or environment but an effort to question the prevalent view around economic development," Shukla said.

'Direct struggle'

India is the world's third-biggest emitter of greenhouse gases but has committed to achieve a net zero emissions economy by 2070 -- two decades after most of the industrialised West.

For now, it is overwhelmingly reliant on coal for power generation.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government says the fossil fuel remains central to meeting India's rising energy needs and lifting millions out of poverty.

Modi, currently seeking a third term in India's six-week-long national election, has championed pro-business policies which activists say have weakened mining and environmental regulations.

The Hasdeo woodlands are estimated to sit atop an estimated five billion tons of underground coal eagerly sought by conglomerates such as that owned by tycoon Gautam Adani, who has branched into ambitious green energy projects but built his fortune on meeting India's voracious appetite for the dirty fuel.

Modi's opponents have accused the billionaire of unduly benefitting from his close association with the prime minister -- charges he has denied.

Adani Group said in a statement to AFP that its charitable arm was “committed to improving quality of life of the communities” around the mine.

“Certain self-proclaimed activists... are working with a clear agenda to malign the reputation of Adani Group,” it said.

‘A cautionary tale’

When Shukla first arrived in the Hasdeo forest in 2012, its inhabitants had come to accept the mining projects as inevitable.

“No one wanted to give up their land but they were all resigned to the idea that they couldn’t do anything,” he said.

Shukla went from village to village explaining the legal recourses and constitutional protections for tribal communities that could be used to stop the mines.

He and his allies said they had resisted bribes, violent threats and warnings of legal action in the course of their fight.

“It took a long time, it was tough, but people gradually organised and joined the effort,” 47-year-old Shakuntala Ekka, one of the first few to join his cause, told AFP.

Most of those living in the Hasdeo forest survive on subsistence farming and foraging in the surrounding woodlands, a way of life undisturbed for generations until the arrival of mining companies.

The Chhattisgarh state government approved the expansion of the Adani-run mine in 2022 but tree-felling work was halted after a blockade by the forest’s inhabitants.

Since then Shukla and a rotating band of villagers have maintained their sit-in protest at the heart of the proposed expansion site in an effort to stop clearance work from resuming.

Among them is father-of-six Shiv Prasad Khusro, 35, who had surrendered his family's home and farmland in exchange for compensation when mining operations began more than a decade ago.

He told AFP that he was there as “a cautionary tale” to others living in the forest, saying that the money he took for leaving had soon run out and many of his neighbours were now struggling to make ends meet as day labourers.

“I am here to warn those who haven't lost their lands, to urge them to fight, because we feel cheated,” he said.

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