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India Gate in New Delhi, India. Photo Credit: A.Savin, Wikipedia Commons

From Forests To City Streets: How Tribal Rights Are Converging In India – OpEd

December 5, 2025 0 Comments

By [Samantha Azizi](#)



The India Gate protest of 24 November 2025 has revealed a profound and accelerating convergence between India's tribal land rights struggles and its urban environmental justice movement. What appeared to be a routine protest against Delhi's toxic air rapidly escalated into a politically charged confrontation—not merely because of police intervention, but because the demonstration carried symbolism that unsettled the Indian state.

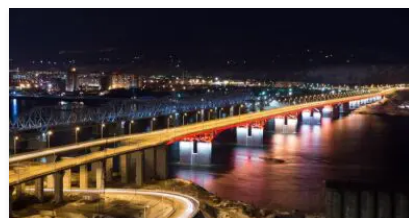
The protest began with familiar demands: curb industrial emissions, enforce vehicular pollution controls, and address Delhi's worsening public health

crisis. Environmental activists, including students from Delhi University's Bhagat Singh Chhatra Ekta Manch and the Himkhand collective, assembled peacefully at the C-Hexagon near India Gate. But the introduction of one name—Madvi Hidma—shifted both the tone and the narrative.

Hidma, a Maoist commander killed on November 18 in what many—including former Bastar MLA Manish Kunjam—allege was a staged encounter, has long been a potent figure in tribal resistance discourse. Though a member of an insurgent group, he symbolized for many Adivasi communities the fight for "jal, jangal, jameen"—water, forest, and land. He was associated with anti-mining resistance, opposition to forced displacement, and protection of tribal ecology across the forests of Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana.

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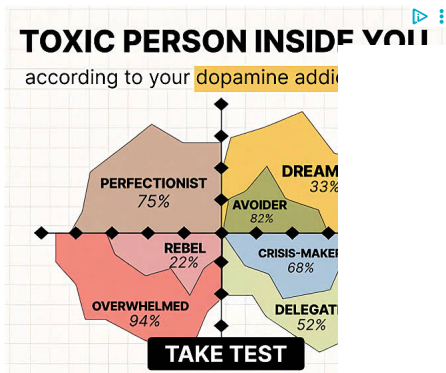
Disabling One Bridge Could Shatter Russia's War Machine (And It's Not The Kerch) – Analysis

December 23, 2025 0

By [Luke Coffey](#) and [Can Kasapoğlu](#)
 Analysts have devoted significant attention to the Kerch Bridge, which was

When protesters displayed posters showing Hidma alongside icons such as Birsa Munda, they signaled a political message: environmental degradation in cities and ecological exploitation in tribal regions share a common root in state and corporate impunity. This symbolic fusion of struggles unsettled authorities, prompting a response that was disproportionately harsh.

The Delhi Police responded with force, alleging that protesters broke barricades, used pepper spray, and injured officers. Between 15 and 22 protesters were arrested on charges ranging from assault to conspiracy. The presence of Hidma's name was used to frame the demonstration as extremist-influenced. Media aligned with the government amplified this framing, turning the spotlight away from air pollution and toward accusations of Maoist sympathies.



The reaction illustrates how India's environmental protests are increasingly portrayed through the lens of security. When environmental advocacy intersects with tribal rights, authorities often treat the expression of solidarity as a threat. This phenomenon is not new. For decades, tribal land conflicts in regions such as Bastar have been framed as insurgency rather than legitimate resistance to displacement, mining, and deforestation. By conflating environmental defenders with insurgents, the state widens its authority to deploy force and narrows the space for dissent.

The symbolic rise of Hidma within urban environmental protests underscores a deeper shift. India's ecological crises—whether air quality in Delhi, water scarcity in metropolitan areas, or deforestation in tribal belts—are increasingly understood as part of a broader struggle over resource control. Tribal communities have long been at the frontline of environmental conflict, resisting mining, land acquisition, and ecological destruction. Their movements are rooted in an understanding of land as livelihood, culture, and identity.

Urban activists, especially students, are beginning to recognize that their fight for clean air is connected to these larger patterns of extraction and exploitation. The India Gate protest became a moment where these connections were openly articulated—much to the discomfort of a state that has historically sought to keep these narratives separate.

The death of an environmental activist during the police crackdown further complicated the political landscape. It highlighted not only the excessive force used against peaceful demonstrators, but the broader national pattern of violence against environmental defenders. From Meghalaya to Tamil Nadu, activists who challenge mining mafias, illegal land acquisition, or ecological corruption have been targeted, threatened, and in many cases killed. These killings often involve powerful political-corporate networks, with investigations stalled or ignored entirely.

The answer lies in the unifying potential of these struggles. Adivasi resistance movements have long remained geographically isolated, while urban environmental movements have been politically fragmented. When these movements converge, they create a shared narrative about inequality, resource exploitation, and state accountability—one that challenges both political power and corporate interests.

In the long term, however, this strategy may prove counterproductive. As India faces worsening climate impacts, forest loss, and toxic air, more citizens will recognize the interconnected nature of these crises. Tribal-environmental alliances are likely to grow, not diminish. The symbolic presence of figures like Hidma—whether embraced or contested—reflects an emerging recognition that environmental justice cannot be separated from land rights, ecological stewardship, and the fight against dispossession.

The India Gate protest was not merely about pollution. It was a moment of political clarity, revealing how India's environmental conflict is increasingly braided with its tribal struggle. Understanding this convergence is essential for any serious effort to address the ecological and democratic challenges now confronting the country.

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A brilliant achievement for India. Hats off to the great people who are behind this project. Jai hind.



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Samantha Azizi is pursuing her MPhil in South Asian Studies at the American University of Beirut (AUB) in Lebanon. With a keen interest in the rich and diverse cultures, histories, and politics of South Asia, Samantha is committed to exploring the intricate dynamics that shape this region.

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