
[India: Saving Niyamgiri from mining](#)

In a state such as Orissa in which Dalit and tribal groups comprise nearly 40% of the total population, the issue of 'access' to land and resources (forests, water, etc.) has been central to all conflicts. For traditional communities, 'access' is directly linked to civilizational paradigms and cultural ethos, which rather decide their 'economics', and not the other way round that may be true for modern, techno-centric civilizations. So, in traditional milieus, denial of 'access' to resources directly impacts 'food security'. Most mainstream discourses of history have, however, tried to locate the crisis – the visibly ever-growing marginalization of adivasis and Dalits – in the 'absence of state interventions'. But, a dig into the social history points to deeper roots of the crisis: denial of access and ownership through various social and political processes over the past two centuries, which rather intensified after the entry of the 'welfare' State.

The struggle that has been taking place in the Niyamgiri mountains has now rather been well-known. 'Mining happiness...' is the tagline of Vedanta's billboards clogging the urban landscape in Orissa! Just ten years back, the whole Lanjigarh area on the foothills of Niyamgiri, comprising some 25-odd villages inhabited by the Kutia Kandh tribe and Dalits, was a serene landscape dominated by sal forests, intersected by the Vamsadhara River emerging from the Niyamgiri. Today, Vedanta's alumina refinery has turned their pristine habitat into an industrial wasteland. Nearly 15,000 forest-dependent people have become refugees in their own homeland. Large tracts of forests have disappeared to make way for the factory, ash ponds, red-mud ponds, roads filled with hundreds of trucks, while the native forest dwellers are left rambling for some livelihood option somewhere.

Arjun Chandi of Kadamguda village, close to the refinery, rather puts the situation in perspective, 'How can you call this development? Someone else comes here, destroys your forests and lands, decimates your economic sources, pushes you onto the road, and makes a lot of money. Where is development? If you want development for us, first give our forests and lands back, and then talk about development.'

However, after closely witnessing the devastation at the foothills, the Dongria Kandhs who inhabit the Niyamgiri mountains for centuries have put up strong resistance against the proposed mining of bauxite on Niyamgiri; successfully deferring Vedanta's 'mining happiness' to the past. The mining lease now stands cancelled by government orders. The fight of the Dongrias was supported and strengthened by many civil-rights and land-rights groups. After successfully trampling Vedanta's 'mining happiness', they have now intensified the struggle to have the refinery closed down, as they see 'enormous dangers' to their culture and livelihoods from its very presence in the area. But, the state has not relented from repressing the adivasis there; even after the scrapping of the mining project, police and paramilitary forces have attacked Dongria villages many times and have tortured the adivasis. The state is trying to even declare Niyamgiri as 'Maoist-infested', in attempts to take complete control of the region. The locals say that the state is doing this, only to open ways for Vedanta to start mining there in future.

The success – so far partly though – of the Niyamgiri anti-mining movement has gained strength from the history of land-rights movements around the foothills for the past decades: the CPI

(ML)-Liberation that organized the landless adivasis and Dalits in the 1990s to stake claim over hundreds of acres of land in and around Muniguda and Bissamkatak areas, and the Lok Sangram Manch which has so far reclaimed hundreds of acres of land usurped by landlords and distributed them among the native adivasis and Dalits.

It is this collective strength that later channelized into the fight against Vedanta and the state government to save Niyamgiri from mining.

Excerpted and adapted from "Expropriation of land and cultures: the Odisha story and beyond", by Subrat Kumar Sahu, e-mail: subrat69@gmail.com and Mamata Dash, e-mail: mamata68@gmail.com, published in Social Change, 41(2) 251-270, CSD, 2011, SAGE Publications, sent by the authors.