COMMENT

Revisiting the legend of Niyamgiri

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JANUARY 02, 2015 01:42 IST
UPDATED: JUNE 04, 2016 16:10 IST

TABOO: "Major incursions like mining and factories are unacceptable to the Dongria Kondhs." Picture shows them rejoicing in Kalahandi district of Odisha after a gram sabha voted against mining by Vedanta in Niyamgiri hills. Photo: K. R. Deepak

It will need a caring partnership between the Dongria Kondh, civil society organisations and the government to figure out how to navigate the very difficult terrain the tribals face

Till last week, I'd never visited Niyamgiri, scene of the iconic fight between the

Dongria Kondh tribal group and Vedanta, a powerful multinational corporation bent on mining in the area. So why have I titled this 'revisiting Niyamgiri'? Partly because I've read so much about it, heard so much from colleagues, that I feel like I've been there before. In a struggle that the global media likened to David versus Goliath, the corporation was sent packing — this is the stuff of legends. But legends can be simplistic, so the second reason for the title is that when I did actually go to Niyamgiri last week, it was with the purpose of going beyond the narrative of the anti-mining struggle; of revisiting the legend itself.

The Dongria Kondh in southwestern Odisha is one of India's so-called "particularly vulnerable tribal groups." They retain world views and practices that go back millennia, and embody forms of knowledge and relationships with nature that have been lost to many of the so-called "civilised" peoples. They typify everything that the Indian state and urban educated folks would call "backward": absence of literacy, simple levels of technology, shifting cultivation, animism, lack of schools and hospitals, *kaccha* paths to their villages, no electricity, and so on. And yet, defying all the stereotypes that go with this characterisation, they — at least for the time being — have triumphed over a private corporation with all the "civilised" powers at its command. (We heard that Vedanta continues to hope for a reversal of the decision to disallow it from mining in the area, especially now that an even more corporate-friendly government than the Congress is in Delhi.) The Dongria Kondh are, however, alert, and absolutely sure they will not allow any incursion by the company.

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I went to Niyamgiri with some colleagues to understand the views of the Dongria Kondh on development and well-being. They had rejected mining, but were they rejecting the notion of development itself? Were they saying they were happy as they were? Did they reject everything coming from "outside," or did they want some of it — government schemes for instance? Were there differing views within the community?

Walking to a number of Dongria Kondh villages and talking to some of the movement leaders, we got a sense of the powerful spiritual and rational basis

for the rejection of mining. The rules laid down by Niyam Raja, the spiritual source of the territory, included the protection of forests and rivers, common custodianship of resources rather than individual property, and sharing of labour and its fruits. In such a situation, major incursions like mining and big roads and factories were simply taboo. Leaders like Laddo Sikaka and Dadhi Pusika were also clear that they did not want Niyamgiri to go the way towns like Muniguda and Bhubaneshwar did, where the water cannot be drunk and the air cannot be breathed without falling sick, where houses have to be locked when people go out, and where women face harassment on a daily basis. Building roads through the territory, they knew, would only bring exploitative forces in. And having realised that getting individual plots under the Forest Rights Act could encourage individualisation and more deforestation, the community has demanded that the entire territory be recognised as a habitat right under the Act, with a single title in the name of Niyam Raja.

Kinds of incursions

Unfortunately, however, such incursions have already been made, some rather insidious. Under its well-intentioned but blatantly inappropriate "welfare" schemes, the state had sought to bring the benefits of "civilisation" to the tribe. Schools hardly functioned in the few villages that had them, so Adivasi children were brought to ashramshalas or boarding schools where the education is in Odia (the Dongria Kondh speak Kui language). Adivasi culture is sought to be replaced by the dominant mainstream one. A well-known educational institution in Bhubaneshwar, which counts many political and scientific celebrities amongst its backers, has brought thousands of Adivasi children from across Odisha to give them education; that it has significant funding from corporations that want to establish mines and industries in Adivasi areas has led activists to wonder whether it is education or brainwashing that is taking place.

Closely following on the heels of the state has been the market. Till recently, the Dongria Kondh economy was almost completely non-monetised. There is now an increasing "need" for money as whatever little the Adivasis have to buy has become more expensive. Items that they bring to sell are often sold at well-

below market rates. Typical of Adivasis in India, the encounter with the market is almost always to their disadvantage.

Finally, there are the incursions of the police and other security forces. The area is supposed to have Naxalite activity, which has given the state a reason to periodically send in patrols. Both Adivasi leaders and their supporters have been interrogated, framed with charges, including terrorism, searched, and made to feel unwelcome in their own home.

The Dongria Kondh are aware of these issues, but there is some ambiguity on how to deal with them. The increasing use of rather incongruous looking metal roofs on their houses (the walls were still mud), is symptomatic of a level of confusion. They complained that such roofs make their houses very hot in summer. Why, then, did they change from the traditional thatch roofs? "Because the government was giving us the metal roofs." This was the same response given for why white rice was being eaten when they had their own nutritious local millets and other grains. Our question on whether the increasing entry of money as a medium of exchange could be problematic was left unanswered. Several Dongria Kondh families continue to send their children to mainstream schools in the desperate hope that their children will have a brighter future. Many of them do say, however, that they would prefer schools in their own villages, with Dongria Kondh teachers using Kui language, and with incorporation of forest-field-based learning.

The complete narrative A positive development from the anti-mining stir is the creation of the Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti, which unites all the Dongria Kondh settlements. The Samiti is taking up other issues too, such as a movement against illegal liquor brewing. This is a ready platform to take up other thorny issues the tribe face.

There is no way that with a limited set of interactions, we could do justice to the complex questions we had set out to ask. But we got sufficient glimpses to convince us that Niyamgiri, both as a place and as a narrative, needs to be revisited. Enabling the Dongria Kondh to decide their own future, based on their understanding of their past and present, requires deep empathy and

understanding from anyone outside of them who genuinely cares. The David versus Goliath narrative is powerful, and will sustain and inspire, but it is not complete. The market and the state have inextricably entered their lives. It will need a caring partnership between the Dongria Kondh, civil society organisations and the government to figure out how to navigate the very difficult terrain they face ahead of them, and for them to continue inspiring and teaching the rest of the world how to live lives finely tuned to nature.

(Ashish Kothari is with Kalpavriksh, Pune.)

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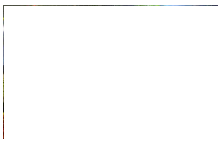

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