
The Voice of the Subaltern against the Cacophony of Industrialization in Orissa

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“Where will they put me to rest when I die? Perhaps you can ask the company to bury me under their chimney. It should be able to do this much as it has deceived us and pushed us to part with our Land”.

- An old Dongria woman.

Introduction- The clattering sound of the iron gates of Vedanta Aluminium Limited marked the victory of the roaring voice of the subaltern power in the Lanjagarh district of Orissa. Power and resistance have a very interdependent understanding of its existence. Resistance is what eludes power, and power targets resistance as its adversary (1). Power can produce the very thing which comes to resisting it, but the moment it unleashes its mask it will provoke resistance by what it has produced. The struggle of the Dongria Kondh against the gigantic multimillion Vedanta Aluminum Limited was an act of power relation. As Foucault states- Power consists of actions which modify the actions of others. It treats subjects as free subjects- slavery is not a power relation where men are in chains (2), freedom acts as the condition for the exercise of power. In Vedanta Movement, the resistance of the Dongria Kondh was the idiom of free subjects which was concomitant against the very subjectification process of power.

The Politics of the Conflict- The struggle against the Vedanta Alumina Limited started when in October 2004 The Orissa Government signed an agreement with the Veedanta Alumina, a subsidiary of Sterlite Industries (India) Limited (SIL) to mine bauxite

deposit from the Niyamgiri Hill jointly with the Orissa Mining Corporation (OMC) (3). In accordance with the memorandum signed on 7th June 2003 the SIL would set up an Alumina Complex, which includes a refinery plant with a capacity of 1MTPA (one million tonnes per annum), an open-pi, 3 MTPA bauxite mining plant at the top of the sacred Niyam Dongar Mountain with a captive power a capacity of 75 MW and Rs 4000 crore investment (4). The Niyamgiri is home to more than 8000 Dongria and Kutiya Kondh and other tribes for generations. The notice of the district administration stated that when the project materialized 12 villages with 60 families will be uprooted and 302 will lose their farmland (5). The Dongria Kondh protested against this plan because the mining will not only destroy the flora and fauna of the Niyamgiri Hill but it was also an attack towards their deity- Niyam Raja and their survival which was depended on the very fertility of the Forest. The anti- Vedanta protest began by the Dongria Kondh where in one incident a procession of around 350 people, including children and women from 6 villages were moving toward Lanjigarh police station, against the arrest of their leader. The muscle men of the company attacked the protester and they were beaten up by cricket bats and stumps (6).

On August 16, 2004 Vedanta submitted an application to the Forest Department of the MoEF for the reallocation of forest land. This was in direct contrast to the company's environmental clearance application for the alumina refinery, submitted on June 3, 2003 which stated that its forest land requirement was 'nil'. It also proclaimed that there were no reserve forests within a 10 km radius of the project site, which was contrary to the facts on record. Earlier, on March 24, 2004 the MoEF had informed Vedanta that the mining proposal was crucial to the refinery and therefore it would consider the environmental impacts of the two projects together. Six months later, on September 22, 2004 the ministry surprisingly reversed its decision and granted environment clearance for the construction of the

refinery, independent of the mining project (7). The tribal committee of Dongraï and Jhodia along with environmentalist and social activists filed a petition before Central Empowered Committee(CEC) of the Supreme Court indicating- 1- violation of environmental laws, forest conservation laws, 2- violation of 5th scheduled provision for protection of tribal rights, 3- negative effect of bauxite mining and alumina refinery and 4- imposing a project against the interest of the tribal's (Forest Right Act of 2006-emphasizes the issue of consent of the local and gram sabha as an important criteria for establishment of any project).

The CEC sends its fact finding team and based on their observation recommended the Supreme Court that the project hamper the ecology of Niyamgiri Hill. But it was a temporary reprieve because in August 2008 Sterlite, Vedanta Indian Subsidiary came back with a modified proposal and the project was given a green signal by the Supreme Court (8). October 20, 2008 witnessed hundreds of Dongria Kondh members dancing and singing along the streets of Bhubaneshwar, armed with traditional weapons. The huge procession marked their opposition against Vedanta, which had received the Supreme Court's permission to mine aluminum from Niyam Dongar. Reminiscent of earlier protests, on January 6, 2009 around fifty protestors mounted blockades and prevented the midnight entry of Vedanta workers into their land. The tribesmen stood against the imminent danger of bulldozers and faced off the harrowing threat of eviction. However, the tribe's biggest show of strength was when within 10 days, the Dongria Kondh gathered for two of their largest demonstrations. On January 17, 2009 up to 7000 demonstrators; including people from various tribal groups, women, farmers and day laborers, marched to the gates of the alumina refinery. Many protestors, carrying bows and arrows, destroyed the Vedanta branded sign boards spread across the Niyamgiri area. Subsequently, on January 27, 2009 more than ten thousand men,

women and children formed a 17 km long human chain around the Niyamgiri Mountains, preventing the Vedanta bulldozers from demolishing the mountain. The protesters carried placards bearing the slogans 'Vedanta, go back' and 'Stop mining in Niyamgiri'. October 5, 2009 marked the end of a week long march around the villages of Niyamgiri. The continuous protest puts the Government at stake and in order to resolve the crisis, it sets out a 4 member N. C Saxena Committee was formed by the Union Environment Ministry to assess the impact of the project on the tribes and natural habitat on June 30 2010 . The report of Saxena Committee stated that the project was in violation of the Environment Protection Act, Forest Conservation Act and the Forest Right Act 2006.

The decision of the team sent by Union Government came out on 21st August 2010 denying the permit for Bauxite Mining at Niyamgiri Hill. After denying the company Forest Clearance in 2010, Jairam Ramesh delivered a final blow by revoking Vedanta's Environment Clearance in July, 2011. The Supreme Court on April 18, 2013 rejected the appeal on the mining ban and decreed that the Dongria Kondh would have a decisive say in giving the go-ahead to Vedanta's mining project in relation to the Forest Right Act 2006. 12 Gram Sabhas (village councils) were chosen by the state government to make the crucial decision. In the three months after the Supreme Court ruling, amidst heavy police presence and persistent threats from Vedanta, 11 Gram Sabhas voted against the mining project and on August 19, 2013 the 12th and final Gram Sabha delivered a resounding 'No' (9). The decision of Ministry of Environment and Forest to close down the gigantic Vedanta Alumina Private Limited marked the triumph of the subaltern power and the ground for grass root democratic power.

The Symbiotic relationship with Niyamgiri-The triumph of the subaltern voice of Dongria Kondh in the Vedanta Movement got a boost because their claims reflected not only the violation of their

own right (Forest Act 2006). But also echoed the symbiotic relationship between the Dongrai Kondh and the Niyamgiri Hill which in effect corroborate their rights over the pristine forest. Dongria Kondhs are one of the most traditional adivasi communities residing in the Niyamgiri Mountain Ranges spread across Rayagada and Kalhandi districts of Orissa. Dongria means residents of Hill and they consider themselves as descendants of of Niyam Raja. They worship the Niyamgiri Hill as – Niyam Raja- lord of law as a sole provider of life and sustenance They believe that the hill belongs to Niyam Raja penu, male deity represented by a sword and worshipped during Dussahera and Jura parah. The top of the hill is regarded as his seat and hence sacred to them (10). It is very interesting to note – that before a village is set up, they seek the guidance from earth goddess ‘Dharani Penu’- which is situated at the middle of the village. The popular belief is that if the grains are distributed in the morning, then Dharani Peru will give them permission to settle there (11). The tribes are depended on the Niyamgiri Hill not only for their livelihoods but also 40-50% of their income comes from selling of forest products like Amla, Myrobalans and Siali leaves. The Dongria Kondh knows more than 400 species of wild plant for their foods and medical properties. The taxonomist group which visited Niyamgiri reported in their preliminary report that around 7 plant species appearing to be rare/ endangered/ conservation dependent were found. According to them Niyamgiri flora is of ‘ great phyto- geographical importance’ and the REIA Report prepared by TARMS for SIIL stated that the fauna exhibit a well balanced ecosystem with a prey- predator relationship. In addition to that the Proctological Society of India during a survey found that Niyamgiri was among the four major spots of Orissa where medicinal plants were found in abundance and rich diversity (12).

One of the central issues that provided impetus to the movement and claims of Dongria Kondhs, was the huge disadvantages that Bauxite

Mining on the Niyamgiri Hills. The disadvantages that can be precisely stated are:-

- a. The Bauxite bauxite ore is covered by thick lateritic layer which acts as a source for groundwater (around 30%) and are also the origin of streams and rivers. The bauxite-capped Niyamgiri hills, soak up the monsoon rain, giving rise to more than a hundred perennial streams and rivers, including the Vamshadhara river. These streams provide the water that is vital to the communities who live in the hills, and provide critical drinking and irrigation water for those in the plains, where drought and starvation have made national news (13). It mainly happens because in case of Bauxite Mining the lateritic zone is continuously removed to access the Bauxite ore below, thereby reducing the water retaining capacity of the soil. In fact the Fact finding team mentioned in their report- ‘...Any mining in this area is bound to destroy the biodiversity and affect the availability of water for local people. The question of pollution of Bansadhara river is also there” (14). S. M., the Dongria Kondh woman leader, said, “What will happen when they take away the bauxite from the top of the hill? We know that our water sources are dependent on the hill. Once you make holes in the hill and take away the bauxite, water storage will be affected. All water will run down the mountain instead of being stored. You have walked up to here, you have seen so many streams, you have taken baths in the streams – did you see any rain? So the water comes through all the year, regardless of the rain situation. If they mine, we are worried that this water will not be available.” (15)
- b. According to the Wildlife Institute of India in its 2006 study, as many as 1,21,337 trees will have to be cut if the mining lease is granted. Since the Kutia and Dongaria Kondh are heavily dependent on forest produce for their livelihood, this forest cover loss will cause a significant decline in their economic well-being.

Data collated from the DKDA (Dongria Kondh Development Agency, a government body) and the Forest Department shows that of the total Dongria population of the 7952, at least 1453 Dongria Kondh live in villages in and around the Forest Blocks of the proposed mining lease area.

Besides the Dongria and Kutia Kondh, the mining project is also going to affect the Dalit community of the Dom Scheduled Caste. The Dalits that the Committee met were landless; and earned their living by providing various services including trading in the horticultural produce grown by the Dongria Kondh. Since they are migrant and do not own land, so the disruption of Dongria agriculture will eventually affect their livelihood (16).

- c. The Mountain of Niyamgiri is protected under Section 18 of the Indian Wildlife Act and due to its rich wildlife population, it was proposed as a wildlife sanctuary by the Ministry of Environment and Forests in 1998. In 2004, the Orissa government declared the region an elephant reserve. The relentless mining activities will cause the numerous endangered species in the hills to abandon their homes. (17). The Hindu Business Line on August 2004 said that –“ a rich resource would be lost forever if the mines become operational (18).
- d. The United Nation Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples makes special reference to the unique spiritual relationship that Indigenous peoples, like the Dongria Kondh communities, have with their traditional lands. It has also ratified the Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention, 1957, which recognizes the right of Indigenous peoples to lands they traditionally occupy (19). The EIA report of 2002 and 2005 doesn't analyze the effect of the mining process on the religion, culture of the tribes. A Dongria Kondh man told Amnesty International: “Our language, the way we dress, songs, marriage rituals, worship of Niyam Raja, our livelihoods are all linked to

these Hills and the way we live here. We have seen what happens to other Adivasis when they are forced to leave their traditional lands, they lose everything” (20).

Power, Knowledge, Resistance and Discourse - Every social movement comes with a very definite Truth about the world they presume and the subject they are dealing with. In “Truth and Power” Foucault said- “Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is the type of discourse which accept and makes function as true; the mechanism and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the mean by which each is sanctioned; the technique and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true” (21). According to Foucault Discourse refers to practices, statements which form the object of which we speak. Its structure, regulate what statement is possible to say and the conditions under which they are considered true or false, discourse is a form of power/ knowledge (22). Power is not only about domination, it is also about the shade of creativity which makes it a universal feature. Power creates subject, it creates the ritual of Truth, it induces a form of knowledge and produces Discourse (23). The medical practice of leeching was accepted in the eighteenth century as helpful despite the harmful effects that we recognize today because it was embedded in a network of ancient medical discourses that many accepted as “true.” Likewise, many medical practices commonly accepted today might have seemed like madness or even barbaric because they had no discursive support (24).

The Vedanta Movement was not only a subject of the Resistance but also an exposition towards the study of a new Discourse of a Subaltern Class. Power exercised through the Dominant Discourse uses disciplinary technique to create rational, responsible and productive subjects following the rules and contour of the Dominant Discourse. The disciplining act of the Dominant Discourse seeks to

reassure us a Truth of our identity (molded by the contour of Dominant Discourse) while Resistance seeks to bring out the differences of our claims and identity that exists within the society. Where there is Power there is Resistance (25).

The development of an alternative Discourse against the Dominant Discourse in the Vedanta Movement was seen in the Meaning of Space that holds for both. The term Space in West is a common symbol of freedom. Space lies open; it suggests the future and invites action. The Vedanta Resource interpreted the idea of Space in this fashion. They used a particular choice of words, as they describe hills as a 'vast bank' containing 'reserve' of bauxite that are 'rich' since they have 'accumulated over time'. For them Niyamgiri was an endless sea of possibilities, a bank waiting to be invested. Financial Growth demands expansion on a geographical scale. Tuan claims that the striving to attain more space is closely connected to a sort of power manifestation which is often performed in an aggressive way. This implies for instance, the exploitation and colonization of land.

While on the other hand the idea of Space differed completely for the Dongria and Kutia Kondhs. Forest was seen as a clustered environment, an antithesis to open space. In Amnesty International Report, on Dongria an elderly Women said –“ We are poor, but we get everything we need from the Hills, it gives us everything but salt”. Tuan points out that – “when people work together for a common cause, one man does not deprive the other of space”. However “conflicting activities generate a sense of crowding”. A Dongrai Man said- “...Those wanting to mine here will slowly take over all this”. As Tuan explains that in this case, the whole issues revolves around a struggle of power in the clash of the different meaning of Space. It is a struggle where one meaning of Space is trying to conquer over another, thereby shaping the Landscape for the future. Capitalism in today world is venturing out with the idea of Creative Destruction whereby the a new lifestyle, a set of cultural values are established for

new market and consumers at the stake of old cultural values and social structure. This anomaly is creating the conflict between Capitalism and Indigenous Cultural Identity. As Esteva said today is “robbing peoples of different culture of opportunity to define the forms of their life” (26).

Conclusion- This conflicting Truth about the understanding of Space in reference to Niyamgiri mirrors the two Discourses in the Vedanta Movement. Power is everywhere, it is relational and something that circulates within and through the Discourse. Each subject is produced within the discourse and exists within the knowledge produce by the Discourse. Knowledge is created by the Power of Discourse and this understanding of Space is also a Truth catered by the Discourse of Subaltern Class on one hand and the Industrial Group on the other hand. As Thucydies said- “War one doesn’t only defend oneself against a superior power when one is attacked; one takes measures in advance to prevent the attack from materializing”- Such measures are justified as form of Resistance and nevertheless an example of an exercise of Power, albeit by a nominally Subordinate Group (27).

The roaring voice of the Dongria Kondh calling for their rights, claims and their symbiotic relationship with their Niyam Raja was a Truth , shaped by the Power their Discourse. This Subaltern Discourse not only stood against the Dominant Discourse as an alternative to the understanding of Development. But also Resisted and unmasked the disciplinary act of Power to stamp a truth upon the norms and standard that defines our identities in order to resolve the paradox of Differences in favor of a True Indentity (28).

Power relation are always two way’ that is to say however subordinate an actor may be in a social relationship, the very fact of involvement in that relationship gives him or her a certain amount of Power over the Other

- Anthony Gidden

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