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David Vs Goliath: The Dongria Kondh Movement

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ABSTRACT

The Dongria Kondh tribe is one of the many vulnerable tribes in India Residing in the Niyamgiri hills in the Rayagada district of Odisha. The tribe has a vibrant and unique culture, history and art of its own. They are the people who worship nature. Their belief is that Mother nature is their sustainer, as they get everything from her. Hence they owe everything to the Niyamgiri hills and worship it. They call their beloved god, Niyam Raja(the king of law). Their simple lifestyle on the hills, proves them to be the true children of nature. In the year, 2003, a UK based mining company Vedanta Aluminium limited (VAL) , decided to set up an alumina refinery in the Rayagada district. For the production of Aluminium, Bauxite is an essential raw material. Odisha is a state which is extremely rich in mineral sources, so much so that two thirds of the bauxite available in India is present in Odisha. The Niyamgiri hills is a great source of Bauxite and thus the company decided to set up a bauxite plant in the Niyamgiri hills which posed a great threat to the Dongria kondhs who considered even felling of one tree from the hills as an insult to their beloved god. More than that it was going to pose a great danger to their lives as setting up a bauxite plant meant drying up of all the perennial rivers on the hills as the plant was going to soak up all the water. The dongria kondhs were aware of this danger that they were going to face. The government of Odisha turned a deaf ear to their woes and gave the permission to the company for setting up a bauxite plant in the Niyamgiri hills.

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What followed was a great movement against the Aluminium company and the government by the Dongria Kondhs, which continued for a decade and at last they won. My paper will highlight the precariousness that the Dongria Kondhs faced as a result of this project and the Dongria Kondh movement which followed as a result, which also garnered a lot of international attention. This paper will also provide an insight on the precariousness that forest dwellers face in general because of the lack of land rights.

The Dongria Kondh is one of the many vulnerable tribes of the country residing in the Niyamgiri hills which is a mountain range present in the Rayagada district, the tribal belt of Odisha. Their name 'Dongria' rightfully means hill, as they belong to the hills. Odisha being a very mineral rich state has an abundance of various minerals like bauxite, iron ore, chromite, nickel and many other minerals. When it comes to bauxite, nearly two thirds of the total amount of bauxite present in the country is present in Odisha. This made the Odisha government to sign 79 MOUs(Memorandum of understanding) with various multinational mining companies and this is how Vedanta Aluminium limited(VAL) got entry into the Niyamgiri hills. The VAL is a UK mining giant, based in London. They proposed to set an alumina refinery in the Niyamgiri hills of Odisha, and for production of Aluminium, bauxite is an important raw material and the Niyamgiri mountain range was an excellent source of bauxite.

The Dongria Kondhs who reside in the Niyamgiri hill range, worship the hill as their god. They call their god as Niyam Raja(the king of law). They believe that it is because of the hill, their god that they are able to lead such good peaceful lives. They live in complete harmony with nature and have their own rituals, traditions and customs which are extremely unique and distinct in their own way. Their attire is also something that is very different and they wear various kinds of ornaments on their bodies. Their reverence for the mountain is so deep and profound that even felling of one tree is considered to be a sin for them. According to them, it was because of the hills that they were able to lead wholesome, simple lives with lack of nothing. The Kondh tribe has a population of 8000 and this mining project meant the destruction of an entire culture from the planet. The Dongria Kondhs have a deep reverence and respect for their Niyam raja and it is shown in their various traditions and rituals. They believe themselves to be the descendants of this same god. They hold the natural environ of the hills- the streams, the forests and the mountains with a lot of respect and admiration. It is because of this strong association that they have with their culture and tradition that they were able to fight a huge multinational giant like Vedanta, even when the government was not on their side. The traditional art forms, murals and paintings on the walls of their houses depict their god and all the rituals associated with him. While the popular notion of the tribal people being poor and not having enough to sustain themselves is very prevalent, the truth is that the Dongria Kondh as a community is extremely self sufficient. They cultivate different types of fruits like oranges, bananas, ginger, sweet papaya, and many others fruits and then sell them at their local market. Throughout the year they

cultivate 200 different foods from the forests of the Niyamgiri hills, which is enough to sustain them for an entire year. Besides this, they also keep animals like cows, buffalos, sheep, goats and chicken which helps in their sustenance. This kind of livelihood and culture makes them extremely happy and at peace with their environment. This also shows how they can be called as the true children of mother earth as they are the ones living in harmony with nature, as humans should have actually lived.

In the year 2003, the VAL proposed to set up an alumina refinery in the town of Lanjigarh which was at the foothills of the mountain, a bauxite plant at the top of the mountain and a conveyer belt for getting the bauxite from the top of the mountain to the Aluminium refinery at Lanjigarh. When the Dongria Kondhs got to know about the setting up of a bauxite plant at the head of the Niyamgiri mountains, they fervently opposed this move which was hemmed by the Orissa Mining corporation(OMC) wing of the government. The Dongria kondhs very well knew of the purpose that the reserves of bauxite, at the head of the mountain served – they knew how the reserves of bauxite acted as a sponge that soaked up all the rainwater during the monsoon season. As a result of this, there was a continuous supply of water in the perennial rivers all round the year. It was the presence of bauxite that prevented the streams of the Niyamgiri hills from drying up. The river Vamasadhara is a great source of fresh water not just to the hills but also to the state of Odisha and neighbouring state like Andhra Pradesh. The setting up of the bauxite plant meant drying up of the river which was such a huge source of fresh water. It also meant a huge threat to the ecology of the Niyamgiri hills. According to the statistics, the bauxite present in the hills amounted to Four trillion dollars in the year 2009. With this amount of money being involved, it naturally attracted the VAL and the Odisha mining corporation to set up the mining plant.

After getting to know about this project, the Kondhs started protesting. They conducted peaceful protests in the Niyamgiri hills and the state capital Bhubaneswar as mining of the bauxite in the Niyamgiri, could lead to extremely disastrous condition for the tribes – it meant their displacement and eradication. The Kondhs created long human chains around the entire Niyamgiri hill range and prevented the officials of the Vedanta company from entering the hills. They held roadblocks and vigils, but every time they did all this, they were met with a lot of opposition by the police force but the Dongria Kondhs continued to protest against the setting up of the plant. For them, their life did not matter but protecting Niyamgiri did. Many of the leaders of the community were kidnapped by the Vedanta goons and a lot was also being done to spread rumors about the leaders in the many villages of the Niyamgiri hills. There was absolutely no support from the government, in fact when the Kondhs were fighting to protect their hills they were termed as ‘maoists’ by the government. There was a Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti(NSS) that was set up, but the police said that the people of the organization had links with Maoists, a charge that the NSS members vehemently denied. In spite of not getting the clearance for the proposed alumina refinery by the court, Vedanta set up an alumina refinery in the foothills of the Niyamgiri hills in a town known as Lanjigarh. The setting up of the

Lanjigarh refinery led to the destruction of 60 hectares of the forest land and the displacement of a hundred families belonging to the kutia kondh. They have been shifted to what is known as the 'rehab colony', which is a "a walled compound of concrete houses, circled with barbed wires" as has been described by an international website survival international. Survival international was one of the international organisations working for tribals that supported the Dongria Kondhs legally in their battle against Vedanta. It is as much as being forced into an artificial way of living and no less than imprisonment, it was a violation of the basic human rights. This was the precariousness of living conditions that the kutia Kondhs, which is a part of the Kondh tribe, faced in Lanjigarh. The entire area surrounding the Lanjigarh unit of the alumina refinery was completely destroyed. It has led to air pollution, water pollution and loss of animal and plant habitat in that area. The red mud which is also produced as a result of the plant has made the streams very toxic.

The Dongria Kondhs, seeing the condition of the Lanjigarh town were bent on protecting their land at any cost. They questioned as to how they would survive, if the forest was lost- "how will we survive? No, we would not give up our mountain" they continued this fight for an entire decade. In the year 2010, the forest clearance for the project of setting up of the bauxite plant at Niyamgiri was rejected by the union ministry of environment and forest(MOEF). This decision of the union ministry was challenged in supreme court by the Orissa mining corporation(OMC) which is under the state government. Finally, in the year 2013, the supreme court ruled that the proposed mining project can only be carried out if all the twelve gram Sabhas vote for it. After the voting was conducted, the result was a unanimous "no" by all the twelve gram sabhas and thus Vedanta did not get the rights to carry on with the proposed bauxite plant. This was a huge battle won and it gained a lot of international attention and support. The Dongria Kondh, fought single handedly with the government and even though they are a minority, this proved how major a voice they have. This fight of the Kondhs has actually given a lot of hope and inspiration to many tribal groups, all across the country and the world. Many people have also compared this tussle between the Kondhs and the UK mining giant to the 2009 film avatar where a ruthless mining company was all bent on extracting a precious metal from the moon. This fight, according to me can also be compared to the very popular battle between David, the shepherd and goliath, the giant in the book of psalms in the bible. David, who was just a small shepherd boy was able to take over a huge giant like goliath, who was considered to be indomitable till the time David killed him single handedly. All the warriors and soldiers were not able to take over the giant but David, with the help of just few stones was able to kill the giant and behead him. The same holds true for the Kondhs as well. The Kondhs, being extremely close to nature and being very less in number and power compared to the UK mining giant Vedanta and the state machinery, were able to take over and win the battle.

Though the Dongria Kondh set an example by protecting their niyamgiri and saving not just their culture and heritage but also nature, there is still a lot of precariousness that they face on an everyday

basis because of them being the Adivasis. Somehow there is no respect that the people of the city or industrialised areas who are the so called “modern” people show. They are seen as backward because they live and bond with nature, when the purpose of man like every other species is to bond with nature and create a harmonious connection. The government tried to introduce schools but in the schools they said that their culture was being lost. The children were not taught the qui language which is the language of the Dongria Kondh but the main stream Odia language. This makes the condition of their language extremely precarious in nature. With the loss of the language there, no doubt will be a sense of alienation from the culture and this will just lead to the degradation and loss of the same. Some activists of the movement, wondered if it was education that was being imparted to the children, or it was just brain washing in the name of education that was happening. The roads that the government built were roads through which, the Kondhs say the mining officials come and welfare programmes are just an excuse by the government to bring in various other mining companies to inspect the mountains. The Dongria Kondhs, because of this are extremely wary of all the schemes that the government proposes to introduce as they fear, it will be used against them. They are not against development, but this development should not be at the cost of their culture and livelihood. Prafulla Samantara, an environmental activist who won the prestigious American goldman prize award for environment, due to his role in saving the Niyamgiri hills by helping the Dongria Kondhs in their battle, said “We can’t say development is bringing them out of the forest. It should be based on their culture and livelihood systems. The government should help them process and market forest produce and set up food processing units”, the precarious condition of the dongria kondh is exemplified by the fact that they face harassment on a daily basis by the government officials – some leaders are kidnapped, some are taken hostages and tortured. According to an article by survival international - Drika Kadraka, a tribal leader, was intimidated by the police and picked up without any charges being filed. Soon after, he managed to get back to his village and committed suicide in November 2015. Dasru Kadraka, another active youth leader who was at the forefront of people’s movement to protect Niyamgiri was arrested in april 2016.” The Odisha mining corporation in the year 2016, again applied for reversing the decision of the supreme court in the year 2013, but this request was quashed. When sikaka, a kondh is asked what will happen if some other company will again try to acquire the forests and the hills, he says “ let our blood flow like river, we won’t allow mining”. This shows the lack lusture attitude of the state government which is bent on cashing in on such projects. What is more scary is also the attitude of the people of the state and the country. Hardly anyone knows in detail about this movement and the magnanimity of the same. The media also kept silent on the entire issue, only now is there some talk about the same happening. And because of all this, the dongria kondhs had to fight a battle completely on their own and that is what is the scariest part and shows the precarious condition in which they are in. It is high time, the media, the government instead of working for their selfish motives start paying attention to the problems of the Adivasis who can be rightly said as the inheritors of this beautiful planet as they are looking after it.

There is a lot of biodiversity which is still unexplored on the hills. This biodiversity should be explored and a detailed study should be done on them, so that the hills are protected and the environment is safe. We should actually learn from these adivasis as they are the ones living in harmony with nature. What we have done till now is destroy it and we are continuing this destruction, which we ironically see as 'development' .