

# Niyamgiri: The Native's Last Stand



Natives of the Niyamgiri hills, Dongarias feel Vedanta rules the country, not the government. ‘Yet it cannot take our mountains, forests, rivers, the wild’

## **Purusottam Singh Thakur Bhubaneswar**

**It was impossible** to miss the glow on Kanu Sikoka’s face, when, on August 24, 2011, the then Union environment minister, Jairam Ramesh, decided to sack the plan of the Vedanta Alumina Ltd to mine the Niyamgiri hills, sacred to thousands of Dongarias like Kanu.

“We are very happy, the message has saved our lives,” Kanu had said. Identifying himself with the struggle to keep Niyamgiri out of Vedanta’s ‘mining happiness’, his happiness was quite palpable. However, a niggling doubt had remained in his mind: although a small battle had been won, the war to ‘free’ Niyamgiri seemed far from over.

A year and half after, Vedanta is leaving no stone unturned to go ahead with its plans to mine bauxite from these sacred Dongaria hills. “The state government is working like an agent of the company, playing dirty tricks to kill our hill,” said Kanu. “Together they are conspiring to kill us. We are in a fight of do or die. Either we will stay here, or the company will. We won’t leave our motherland.”

Locally known as the *rakhas* (demon), the company was earlier caught resorting to fraudulent means for getting environmental clearance to mine Niyamgiri. “There has been a very serious violation of the Environment Protection Act, the Forest Conservation Act and the Forest Rights Act,” Jairam Ramesh had said, blaming Vedanta, the Orissa Mining Corporation, and state government officials for the violations.

In its deposition before the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) of the Supreme Court, Vedanta had tried to delink the refinery project from mining, whereas during a hearing at the Court, it tried to justify its existence by citing how it had invested in the development of the region. Interestingly, the company’s environment clearance application for the alumina refinery did not mention mining Niyamgiri.

Later, the apex court allowed the operation of the refinery in the foothills of Niyamgiri, obviously without taking note of the company’s hidden agenda. In September 2005, CEC had recommended revocation of the environment clearance for the refinery, but the apex court took too long – till April 2007 – to hear the matter. Vedanta took this opportunity to build the refinery with active connivance of the state government. The company has long been trying to justify its existence in the name of its

investments in local education and healthcare.

When the Union environment ministry decided to choke the refinery's planned expansion from 1 MPTA to 6 MPTA, and said no to mining in Niyamgiri, it came as a big blow to the company and the state government.

"The government and the company are hiding under the cover of investment. But why should we bother about a company's investment?" asked Lodo Sikoka, a leader of Niyamgiri Surakhya Parishad. "With all the power – money, muscle and State support – on their side, they will keep trying to snatch Niyamgiri from us. But we will not abandon our motherland to be handed over to the demon." The people of Niyamgiri are now demanding complete removal of Vedanta from Lanjigarh.

Lodo pointed out the core of all debates on environment: "It's funny when these outsiders come and teach us development. Is development possible by destroying the environment that provides us food, water and dignity? Our government sheds crocodile tears about environment protection. Here, we live with the hills and forests, having preserved them since our forefathers' time. But they want to give this away to a company for its own profit. Is it not hypocrisy?"

"If the factory stays here, our environment will be polluted. Its smoke will affect Niyamgiri's climate; our cultivation will fail; *kossala*, *mandia* will not grow. Our land will be destroyed. We cannot live without our hills, forests and farms."

Lodo shared his unhappy experience of the world outside Niyamgiri, where "you have to pay to take bath, for food, and even to drink water". With its perennial springs, Niyamgiri has given the Dongarias water aplenty. "In our land, we don't have to buy water like you, and we can eat anywhere for free. We are dependent on the market only for clothes, salt and chillies," he said with a hint of pride.

Niyamgiri is the lifeline for the humans, plants and wildlife that depend on it. The Dongarias say it gives them "water, air, *kosla*, *mandia*, *jada*, banana, roots, garlic, *haldi*, *kating*, *jhurunga*, *kandul* and many more kinds of food and fruits to eat and live happily."

Lodo believes that no one but the Niyamgiri would be so generous to adivasis: "What has the government provided us? We have no schools, no hospitals. And they ask us to part with our only saviour!"

### **'We have no schools, no hospitals. And they ask us to part with our only saviour: the Niyamgiri'**

**The Dongarias inhabiting** the plateaus of the Niyamgiri hill ranges make up one of the 13 'primitive tribes' in Odisha. The word Dongaria means hill-dwellers: those who live on the dongars (hills). As part of the Niyamgiri ecology, they have managed to preserve into the 21st century a livelihood system based on sustainable use of local resources, combining forms of shifting, subsistence agriculture with foraging, hunting and gathering.

However, the Dongarias' lives have been changing for the worse ever since the company started eyeing their mountain, threatening to destroy their ecologically sustainable livelihood system. The police and administration seem to openly side with the company. "If it was a good company, would it have harassed us using the police?" asked Lodo.

"They just come and beat us up, abuse our girls, take away our chickens, our axes. Once they took four axes from our village. The police say, 'This is government's property, not yours. Stay away from Niyamgiri or else we will rape your women and kill you all.' Each time they do this to us, our determination to fight against the demon gets stronger. The celebration of victory that began last year August will only be complete if the company is completely uprooted from our area."

On September 27, locals took out a rally demanding the ouster of Vedanta from Lanjigarh and Niyamgiri. Leading social activists like Prafulla Samantra and Lingaraj joined in solidarity. “They are using the police to abuse and kill us. But it is better to die than to live in hell. Living with a demon is like living with death. The company has to leave,” said a protestor.

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