

COALITION FOR ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT
Sustainable Cultures – Cultures of Sustainability

BACKGROUND PAPER 13

by

By Mamata Dash¹

**Conspiracy by the State:
Destruction of Culture and Livelihoods in Orissa**

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Context

The Indian state seems to be in a hurry to protect India Inc from the recent economic crisis in the US as reassurances about a strong economy pour in from every possible channel. This sentiment was reinforced after the finance capital Mumbai was rocked by terrorists on 26 November 2008 and the state again got busy with the ritualistic blame games. This provides a situation of paradox in the country as we witness the same state perpetrating violence and exploitation on the *adivasis*, the dalits and farmers to make way for corporate expansions in the name of development – let alone providing protection to communities in crisis. The mad rush for 9% growth seems to be engulfing the state as it blindly signs agreements with other countries and multi-national corporations – the nuclear deal being the most hyped one. Who benefits from these agreements? This remains a much-contested issue as the impacts of such pacts have been the most severe on various communities as they are robbed off their life-sustaining resources and identities.

There is no doubt that the onslaught on natural resources and people dependent on them, in the name of development across the country, has led to more exclusion and marginalisation of people from their otherwise self-sufficient socio-cultural and economic lives. The communities have reacted to the forced grabbing of their resources braving severe

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repression by the state and untold violence by companies. It is important to understand why people are protesting; what is it that they want to cling on to and protect; and why is it so very primary to their existence. It is within this context, this paper dwells upon the lives of three communities of Orissa who, among many others, are facing the threat of destruction as the corporate take-over of their land, life and environment is pushed vehemently by the state. Two things played a role in choosing the state and the communities for discussion in this paper: 1) despite the fact that the state of Orissa has signed the maximum number of MoUs with corporations in recent years to facilitate extractive economy, voices from the ground have reflected much broader socio-political spectrum and resolve in keeping most of the projects at bay; 2) my engagements with many campaigns in the state have helped me to see some of these communities very closely more often wondering how can the state be so blind-eyed to symbiotic existence of communities with nature. That is why the urge and need to share what makes these communities stand firm on their feet despite all the attempts to silence their voices of dissent by the state and the conniving corporations.

Orissa is a land of immense natural resources and rich mineral reserves. This has often been cited by the state to invite corporations to invest for greater returns. And the corporations – both domestic and foreign – have found this as a golden opportunity to get the raw materials at throw-away prices, as though on a platter. This phenomenon is not new; Hitler had once said that ‘...those who own the minerals of Keonjhar, carry the capacity to rule the world...’ With the mineral preserve of Orissa all mapped out way back in the 1920s by Cyril Fox, a geologist with the British, it seems that the plans made then are executed now with much more vigour and urgency. In recent times, the state of Orissa has been in crisis of all kinds: floods affecting more than 200,000 people primarily because of the ‘presence’ and mismanagement of dams; 50,000 people forced into relief camps following communal violence by Hindu fundamentalist groups; and hundreds and thousands of people facing the threat of displacement due to several mega projects in the name of prosperity to the state. The big hoardings in the state capital shows how corporatisation of the state is taking place as Vedanta, Jindal, Mittal and the like are shown to have brought smiles to the people of Orissa. What’s the state doing if the corporations are asked and expected to fulfil the fundamental responsibilities of the state? Despite all this devastating measures cooked up in the corridors of power and the chief minister Naveen Patnaik speaks on TV, “No one – I repeat no one – will be allowed to stand in the way of Orissa’s progress”, millions of small-scale farmers and *adivasis* have shown greater resolve to stand up against this brutal tactics.

Sustainable Culture and Livelihoods – the Impending Threat

Most of the ‘development’ projects in Orissa are situated in resource-rich areas, be it forest, fertile agricultural land, river systems and so on causing destruction to sustainable livelihoods and distinctive cultures. Post-Independence has been a phase of devastation as the foundation of a modern India was laid in Orissa by Jawaharlal Nehru with the Hirakud Dam. The statement made by the first prime minister of independent India is as harsh today as it was then – ‘if you have to suffer, you must suffer in the interest of the nation... (1948)’. Today, hundreds and thousands of people are suffering as projects such as dam and mining of bauxite, iron, chromites, coal and so on are sanctioned in the name of development in the state. So far, more than 49 MoUs have been signed for large-scale extraction of minerals and

mega dam projects and the number is increasing regularly. Each of this carries a concrete formula to destroy various sustainable cultures and livelihoods.

In this section, we will discuss about three distinct communities of Orissa, two most traditional tribal communities and one small-scale farming community that are confronted with huge projects by the multinational companies.

1- Dongria Kondhs of Niyamgiri Mountains

The *Dongria Kondhs*², one of the most traditional *adivasi* communities, reside in the Niyamgiri Mountain ranges spread across Rayagada and Kalahandi districts of Orissa. Dongria literally means resident of hill. The Dongrias lead a secluded but sustainable life drawing all sustenance from the Niyamgiri. For them, Niyamgiri is *Niyam Raja* – lord of the laws – and they worship nature as the sole provider of life and sustenance. They consider themselves as the descendents of Niyam Raja and thus live like kings of the jungle. The *Dongrias* consider the mountain sacred and thus believe it to be a sin to cut trees in Niyamgiri. And, that is the reason Niyamgiri is still a virgin forest at a time most other forests have shown massive depletion under the raj of the forest department.



The Niyamgiri Mountain in Orissa.

² A tribe listed on government records as 'primitive' – a terminology many human and democratic rights discourses have abandoned, which in many ways means they are on par with any world heritage and need to be protected and preserved.

Accounting for more than 100 villages spread across the expansive Niyamgiri range in Orissa with more than 15,000 population³, the *Dongrias*, who speak a unique language *Kui*, have very little relation with the outside world. They essentially depend on the thick, primary forests for food and engage in cultivation for subsistence living although the elders in the community do not completely deny the practices of hunting and gathering. Numerous streams originating from the mountains provide them the required water for cultivation and other usages.

Each and every single act of the *Dongrias* starts and ends with the nature in the centre stage, making it an inalienable component of their existence. For example, before a village is set up, they seek the guidance from earth goddess *Dharni Penu*⁴ by locating a place conducive to cultivating and animal rearing and placing few grains overnight. The popular belief is that if the grains are disturbed in the morning, then the Dharni Penu has supposedly given the permission for them to settle there. A typical Dongria Kondh settlement, usually a linear and clustered pattern of houses with very low thatched roof, is surrounded with thick forest and a stream nearby. The rites for a permanent settlement are not complete until a Meria⁵ puja/festival is organised.

The Dongria Kondh believes in the existence of supreme deities sharing the same environment with them. “We have stayed on these mountains for thousands of years and nurtured them preserving their pristine characteristics, which, in turn, would feed us for another thousand years”, is a standard response of every Dongria. Dharni Penu is considered powerful and occupies very high position among all deities. A typical Dongria village always has its Dharni Penu in the middle of the village with the belief that she protects the village from all evils. Few wooden planks and stones are placed together often giving a structure to demarcate the site of Dharni Penu. People show respect to Dharni Penu by observing the Meria festival. Various sources suggest that earlier there used to be human sacrifice during Meria festival. Now, they practice buffalo sacrifice which is then shared among the villagers equally. Sacrifice of living being, small or big is integral in Dongria culture during festivals and rituals as a mark of respect to the nature which gives them everything. Both women and men perform the rituals as the *bejuni* (priest) is always a woman and *disari* (healer) a man. Each of them has a specific role to play in festivals and each festival is observed to pay respect to the nature god.

The entire village engages in the production process in their demarcated area for cultivation. The demarcation of land is usually done in a collective process and is primarily based on the needs of each family. Mostly, the production is for subsistence economy and any surplus is sold in the market. The *Dongrias* depend on the outside market primarily for three things: salt, oil and cloth and this is where they are most exploited on the hands of the traders. Their integration to the market economy has led to indebtedness of *adivasis* in some villages – a concept alien to their culture. This is usually propagated by the *Doms*, a non-*adivasi* community which co-exist with the *Dongrias*. History suggests that the *Doms* entered

³ The government records show a figure of 8000 *Dongrias* in Niyamgiri Mountains, which the *Dongrias* themselves have refuted.

⁴ For the *Dongrias* Dharni penu is the mother and Niyamgiri is the father and thus give supreme authority to them before any important decision is taken in the community.

⁵ Meria is the most important cultural practice of the Dongria Kondh which is held in every village to pay respect to the mother earth and Niyam Raja.

the Dongria territory in search for trading and introduced the external markets to the Dongrias – its impacts are proving most severe in recent times as the *Doms* are the connecting factors for the market forces to come into the lives of the *Dongrias* facilitating robbing of resources.

The *Dongrias* are considered an aggressive community by outsiders, something which can be used against them in this market-driven age, as they are equipped with bows, arrows and axe, primarily for the reasons that their existence of late has been that of a struggle. No Dongria ventures out without an axe on the shoulder and a miniature of it is always tucked in the hair of every woman as she sets out in the wilds. These apparatus are used for various purposes in their daily work in the wilds. Situated in the wilds, this *adivasi* community has had to brave the wild animals and nature very often risking their lives. In the present day, the notion of their aggressive nature is conveniently used for all wrong reasons as they oppose the mining project by Vedanta/Sterlite⁶. An interaction with people in Lakhpadar recently, a total Dongria village situated on a 4000-ft mountain in Niyamgiri, showed how a secluded community was forced to be aggressive to reclaim their lost resources from the hands of *Doms*. An excerpt from the diary is presented in the box below.

After a good 8 hours of uphill and downhill trek through more than 4 mountains, wading through the wilds often wondering how the state could be so cruel to give it away for mining, we reached Lakhpadar at around half past five in the evening. The village was getting down from their fields after a long and arduous day taking care of their crops. As the women took charge of their kitchen and animals, the menfolk came in a little later – after a session at the SalpaTree taking a shot of the traditional drink – a ritual they follow daily.

Some of them came and greeted us as we were still catching our breath. Suddenly there was havoc; all of them were speaking in very high pitch and I wondered if they were fighting over something. No, they were not. They were discussing their strategies to not let the mining take place in Niyamgiri – the mountain was right there for all of us to see. Lakhpadar is one of the villages which will be displaced if mining takes place. The conversation sounded very aggressive. All this while, I was wondering where the aggression was coming from! That's when Jitu, one of the Dongria Kondh and a member of Lok Sangram Manch, gave a history of the village and the reason behind the aggressive nature of the community.

It goes like this – around 30 years back this village had a dominating presence of Dom families who exploited the Dongria Kondhs in many ways. They had grabbed the land that belonged to the *adivasis* and looted their crops when the *Dongrias* were away in their fields to keep a watch on the crops.

The turning point came when the present leader Nada came back after serving 7/8 years in the jail for killing his elder brother over a family dispute. His exposure to outside

⁶ The Supreme Court of India has granted permission to the Sterlite Industries India Limited, a sister concern of Vedanta Alumina Limited, to mine the Niyamgiri mountain despite severe protests and a prolonged legal battle.

world had somehow worked for better for this village as he played an instrumental role in organising the *adivasis* to reclaim their resources. Lands were reclaimed and the *Doms* were driven away – now this is an all Dongria village.

The suppression, exploitation, brutality that they have faced earlier and finally taking over the mantle have made this community stand for what is theirs.

Mamata Dash, Lakhpadar, Niyamgiri, Orissa. 8 December 2008

As in any *adivasi* community, the women in *Dongria Kondh* community have an equal status although the society follows patriarchal system. Women carry out much more tasks comparing to men as they participate in the household work and in cultivation in equal intensity. Taking the surplus to the market to sell is primarily done by women as they trek down with head-loads of material to trade off for salt, oil and cloth. The *Dongria* men have little engagements in this work though it is not nil as well. There are certain practices of this *adivasi* community which reflects that they give ultimate respect to nature and its products. For example, the traditional drink ‘*Salpa*’ is usually shared by the *Dongrias* equally in a collective. This drink is never sold by the *Dongrias* although the *Doms* are seen to be selling the drink for a price. Very often, as one treks through the mountain, *Dom* women are found to be selling the drink and we have stopped by to quench our thirsts perhaps not realising that we are treading a path the *adivasi* community does not really believe in – something the *Dongrias* can never imagine to do. Likewise, despite animal rearing is a common practice among the *Dongrias*, they never milk the animals as they strongly believe that taking out milk means preventing the calves from adequate milk from the mother. This is the ultimate tribute to the nature and the natural process in an age of consumerism where every bit of human existence is calculated in terms of capital.

The role of the state has been most devastating on this secluded community as they are exposed to unfamiliar territories. For example, the Dongria Kondh Development Agency (DKDA) under the aegis of ITDA was set up almost three decades back to provide the *Dongrias* all assistance in ‘improving’ their lives. ‘Improvement’ by all means was aimed at integrating them with the mainstream society – a concept which is very alien to the culture of *Dongrias*. In the DKDA school, a child’s name is changed to a so-called mainstream one as they are given either Hindu or Christian names – something which the children have no other option but to adopt. The curriculum that’s followed in these schools is much disconnected with their existence. During one of the informal interactions with few girls in Sakata school, it was learnt that the girls have been told that they would study in the school for five years after which they will be sent to Bhubaneswar – what could be more damaging than taking them away from nature in the name of development. The DKDA schools are anything but helping the *Dongrias* to retain their unique culture.



Getting ready to sell the leaves.

The role of DKDA in providing the *Dongrias* with much better negotiating capacity when they come in contact with the outsiders has been negligible as we see the *Dongrias* being exploited in trading off their surplus production. For example, a Dongria woman sells a bundle of 30 tendu leaves for one rupee in the market. And the trader makes a leaf plate and sells it for Three rupees each. In that 30 leaves, he usually earns 30 rupees, making a profit almost three times. Now, this could be easily promoted by DKDA where the *Dongrias* could have a better economy and the women do not have to trek down to the market and face exploitation at the hands of the traders. There are innumerable instances which suggest the damaging impact of DKDA's interventions and non-interventions on the sustainable culture and livelihoods of the Dongrias.

Now, this community is faced with the threat of mining as the state paved way for

Vedanta Aluminium Resources Limited (VAL) to mine the mountain way back in 2004 and finally the Supreme Court of India giving permission to the company to mine. VAL is a British company and was listed in the London Stock Exchange on 5 December 2003 with the help of J P Morgan (US) as sponsor and financial adviser along with other banks and numerous other financial institutions. With a project worth Rs.4500-crore investment, the company sought permission to mine the mountain and process bauxite in Lanjigarh for 25 years. The company has always followed unethical measures to get its way whether it is setting up of the refinery in Lanjigarh before getting the environmental clearances or releasing factory effluent to the Bamsadhara river, already polluting the river. It is noteworthy here that Bamsadhara originates from Niyamgiri and is the lifeline for hundreds of villages not only in Orissa but also in Andhra Pradesh. Mining Niyamgiri will result in drying up of streams and will also dry the Bamsadhara river affecting peoples' lives and livelihoods. The setting up of refinery has already displaced 3 villages (where only the factory is built) completely and as many as 22 villages in the surrounding area have and continue to face displacement as it has become impossible for them to live in the area due to pollution of air and water severely affecting their livelihoods. The company claims that mining in Niyamgiri will displace people from only three villages. Nothing can be more untrue than this as the entire mountain range will be devastated with the mining leaving no forest and water source which will force the *Dongrias* to move to new places. With no knowledge of any other lives, one can imagine what will happen to the Dongria Kondhs if Niyamgiri is mined. An entire civilization will be lost to a development project which has very little to offer to the people of Orissa itself.



The refinery in Lanjigarh side is already displacing three villages completely and affecting more than 26 villages.

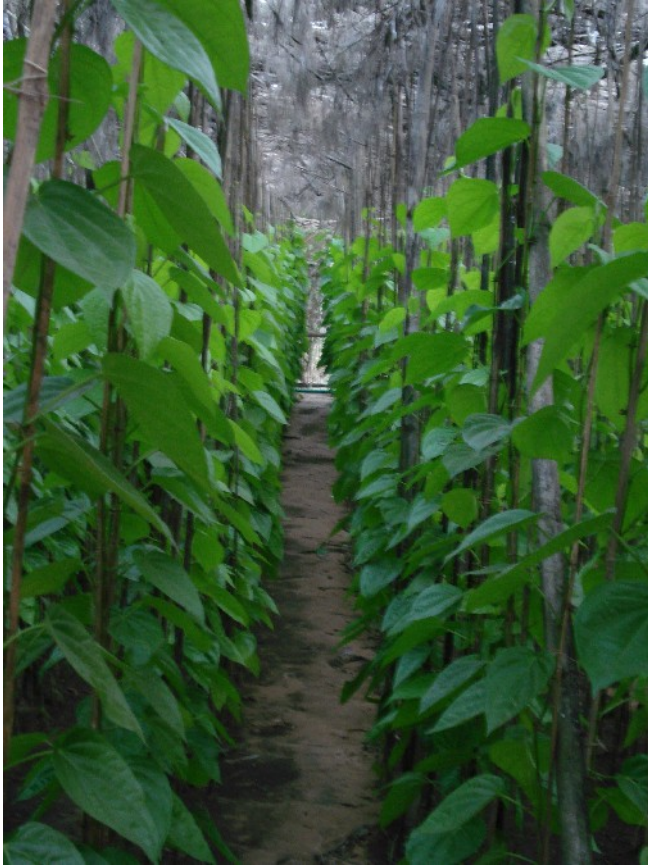
The Dongrias are forging a valiant fight to protect their unique identity, culture and livelihoods. In an age when discourse on climate change is initiated by the west, this low energy-consuming community must not bow down to the high energy consuming aluminium industry.

2- Farmers of Jagatsinghpur

For the past three years, the farmers of three panchayats in Erasama block in Kujanga tehsil are resisting against forceful land and resource grabbing by POSCO – a Korean multinational steel company. The state has been all for it as it is said to have the highest foreign direct investments in the country. The total land sanctioned for the project is 4,004 acres of which 3,566 acres is claimed to be government land and the rest is private land. The figures quoted by the officials suggest that only 471 families would be affected by the project – an estimate which is outright rejected by the people as a completely skewed number. According to 2001 census, there are 3,350 households with a population of 22,000 – this is close to the estimates presented by the locals. The population is comprised of small and marginal farmers and one third of the population belongs to the Scheduled Castes. The proposed project of a steel plant and a captive port will destroy the traditional livelihood system of people thereby damaging the sustainable existence of the community.

Why is it that people are opposed to the project with highest foreign direct investment? They are not ready to let go a vibrant economy which has sustained many generations in the past and will continue to do so in future – and this cannot be equalled with any amount of money in the form of compensation as the company and the state are offering. “This economy has survived the super cyclone of 1999 and has always provided us our sustenance. We are not poor that we need projects like POSCO to sustain us. Money can never substitute for land”, says Suranana of Patana village. This is a sentiment echoed by each and every person in these villages barring a few who have fallen to the greed the company has shown.

The area is conducive for three kinds of agriculture – paddy, fish and betel-vine (*paana, dhana, meena*). “This trinity is the essence of their life” – says Dr B D Sharma of Bharat Jan Aandolan. Despite being on the coastline, the area is laden with sweet sand that facilitates good crops and adequate drinking water. This is nurtured by people in this area akin to lifeline as they engage in agricultural practices. There is sweet water available within two-three feet from the ground. Among the three cultivations, betel-vine is the most viable livelihood option for various reasons. The quality of betel leaf of this area still remains unparalleled in the world. This cultivation is unique in itself as it engages people of all ages in the work and this is why the whole family works in this. There is work for a young child as well as for as old as a 70 year person. Usage of bamboo in this cultivation for the purpose of shade also creates another economy going. This is the most widespread livelihood option in the area.



Betel Vine in Patana village – a traditional crop & a vibrant economy which engages people of all ages.

It is usual for a family to have multiple betel-vines having thousands of plants in it. An estimate shows that there are around 5000 vines in the three panchayats looked after by about 10,000 cultivators. A standard betel-vine gives around 10,000 leaves every week round the year and average annual income is Rs.1 lakh per acre with another one lakh from ancillary employment that it raises. The landless work in the betel-vines to earn a wage as they make the baskets for transporting the betel leaves.

If this is the round the year cultivation, there are seasonal agricultural practices. The climatic conditions of the area provide an environment conducive for extremely rich cashew cultivation in summer months. With an average cashew bush giving a quintal of nuts worth 4000 rupees, a family engaged in this can earn about 20,000 rupees every season.

Sprawling paddy fields in the area can hold anyone's attention as people draw their subsistence crops from these fields. People in the area vouch for very high quality paddy due to availability of sweet water in the area.



Fish and and Prawn cultivation – a thriving economy.

Fish and prawn cultivation is practiced by more than 50% of the families in the area and there are demarcated colonies such as *Nalia Sahi* where the entire population is engaged in this economy. The Jatadhari estuary offers the best condition for catching fish and rare varieties are found in this deltaic region. The catch is huge as the average income of Nalia Sahi only ranges from Rs.100 to Rs. 5,000 per family per day. Apart from personal consumption and local selling, the fish is transported to other parts of the state and at times to other states as well.

One of the main component of dispute as far as the government claims concern is the land entitlement. The government considers the people of the area as encroachers whereas the fact is that people in the area have been living there for many generations. Claiming of land as forest land by the government across the country has remained a subject of concern and that's now used as an instrument by the state to drive people away from their land they consider as ancestral. The politics of paper work can never be so stark that the generational cultivation of betel leaf, paddy, cashew are not shown in government records and the government has shown a blind eye to several applications for title claims by the people. The only settlement record of 1984 only recognizes agricultural land under regular occupation discriminating other uses such as forest produce, cashew cultivation, fishing from the record. Ironically, these are the subsistence economy of the entire area that is facing the threat of land grabbing by the corporation.

For people, land is their life and that's the reason they have been putting up a peaceful resistance. They also know that no amount of rehabilitation package can equate with what land, sand dunes, the estuary and other things have given them for ages. There is a thriving inter-dependence between those who have landholdings and those without land as they work in tandem with each other and have kept the thriving economy growing stronger.

The project affected area has a wide strip of land along the shore that is classified as 'forest land' and is under the jurisdiction of the forest department. This strip of land has an interesting history. It was transferred to the forest department after a struggle led by a local communist leader, Loknath Chowdhary. He demanded transfer of the land to the forest department so that afforestation could be carried out to provide a natural barrier to protect the villages against cyclonic storms and to provide the basic needs of firewood and stalk for betel vine cultivation. The land was categorized as 'gramya jungle' [village forest] and trees were planted on it. Over time, some families took up betel vine cultivation in part of this land.

Source – Striking when the Iron is Hot by Manshi Asher, 2007

Apart from a steel plant on the agricultural land, the project has also proposed a captive port at Jatadhari. This would essentially mean disturbing the nesting habitat of the endangered Olive Ridley turtles besides destroying the local fish economy. Illegal mechanised fishing is already affecting the nesting beaches and the captive port on this place would completely destroy the eco-system that provides the appropriate condition for nesting. Thus, there will be double deaths in Jatadhari itself as the threats monger around the loss of livelihoods of the fishing community and the nesting ground for the Olive Ridelys. Only thing that the people needed at Jatadhari is a dredging which was never taken up by the government. Finally, in August 2008, the villagers worked together and dredged the mouth of the river against the wishes of the company and the state. In fact, one of the active members of the local organisation fighting against the project fell victim to the attack by the goons as they opened fire at the people as they were returning to their villages after the work.

The project, being touted as the largest ever FDI in the history of India, with an investment of 51,000-crore rupees, will have large-scale, irreversible socio-economic and environmental impacts not only on the areas under the threat of immediate acquisition but over vast tracts of the state's forests and other lands. POSCO's assertion that its project will lead to the creation of 45,000 jobs, directly or indirectly, is meaningless in the face of the fact that the proposed steel plant, port, and mines will directly dispossess hundreds of thousands, apart from having very deleterious effects on the lives of many millions more. Further, an examination of the MoU signed by the Naveen Pattnaik government with POSCO establishes the fact that the government has agreed to transfer thousands of billions worth resources for almost no returns to the state exchequer.

Given below are some glaring facts about the possible impact of the project on people in this particular area although mining in Khandadhar (in another district) from where iron ore will be procured will have a separate set of hazards on the people. The community that will be affected by mining operation in Khandadhar is discussed in this paper later.

The steel plant alone will displace more than 4000 families, meaning more than 200,000 people; the port will displace more than 20,000 people.

The company will earn a minimum profit of Rs 96,000-crores but pay at a paltry 'fixed' rate of only Rs 24 per tonne as royalty to the government, whereas the market price of iron ore keep on increasing every year. POSCO will get more than 6000 acres of land and 15,000-crore litres of water per year practically for free, sucking from peoples' drinking

water sources: guaranteed water supply to Naraj and Jobra will affect drinking water of neighbouring cities like Cuttack, Bhubaneswar, Chaudwar, and others.

The project is *illegal and in direct violation of the Forest Rights Act of 2006*, under which no forest land can be handed over to any party without recognizing the rights of forest dwellers in the area and, in the case of their community forests, without their consent. More than 3000 of the 4000 acres of land that POSCO is seeking for its steel plant is forestland.

The project will have a devastating environmental impact. The planned captive port at Jatadhari river mouth will destroy the deltaic ecology of the Mahanadi, increase the problems of water-logging, clog the connecting rivers, adversely impact farming and fishing in the area, and result in the loss of large tracts of coastal vegetation due to felling, which will increase risks during cyclones.

The sustained livelihoods of the local people, whose resistance is centred on the call “paana, meena, dhaana bachao” / Save the betel vine, fish and paddy crops, will be destroyed. The area is characterized with highly fertile lands, a vibrant fish economy, and resourceful forests.

POSCO has been granted SEZ status, meaning it will pay practically no taxes for the titanic profit it will make after decimating a prosperous economy and rich socio-cultural ethos. An illegal project generating virtually no tax revenue, ensuring hardly any employment, seizing 15% of India’s ore reserves, promising no benefits for the government or to the people, causing environmental devastation, and displacing tens of thousands...

Is this development or plunder of peoples’ common properties?

- An excerpt from a leaflet circulated during a rally against the project in Delhi on
15 November 2008

The peaceful resistance under the banner of POSCO Pratirodh Sangram Samiti (PPSS) on the ground has been gaining strength day by day. All dirty tricks by the state and the company have not deterred the people from their resolve to protect their source of life as they organise themselves even better. “The government and company people think they will weaken our struggle by arresting Abhay Sahu⁷, the leader of PPSS. They do not know there are many more Abhay Sahus among us and nothing can deter us from fighting against POSCO. We want POSCO not only to leave Orissa but it should be driven away from this country...”, this was the steely resolve of a woman from Dinkia shared on 30 November 2008 after a rally against the POSCO project, condemning the arrest of Abhay Sahu and other activists.

3- Paudi Bhuyan of Khandadhar

⁷ Abhya Sahu, the leader of PPSS, was arrested by the police in Orissa on 12 October 2008 when he was returning from a health check up and was unwell at the time of the arrest. As many as 32 illegal cases have been filed against him. Apart from him, the police had arrested 4 PPSS activists earlier and one more activist in November 2008.

*Paudi Bhuyan*⁸, like the *Dongria Kondhs* of Niyamgiri, is one of the most traditional *adivasi* communities with distinct characteristics. Essentially a hill tribe, Paudi Bhuyans draw their sustenance from nature and agriculture. Unlike the *Dongria Kondhs*, Paudi Bhuyans do not have a language that is distinct from the mainstream one – they speak Oriya. It is also claimed that Paudi Bhuyans are the originator of Oriya language.

Known as *Bhuyan Pirh*, the homeland of Paudi Bhuyans is spread across Keonjhar and Sundergarh districts in Orissa. They live on the plateau land on the hill tops or else on the hill slopes in the wilds. Agriculture is their main occupation as they practise the ancient shifting cultivation along with collection of forest produce for consumption. Like the *Dongrias*, Paudi Bhuyans also distribute their land on the basis of the need of a family and exhibit a collective responsibility towards one and all in their community. They follow a specific pattern in cultivation as they leave the land barren for five to seven years after tilling it for three years. Specific crops⁹ are yielded each year keeping in mind the fertility and usage of the land. As in any other shifting cultivation practising community, they also leave big trees intact, which take a long time to grow. These trees provide the required shades to the crops grown in the field.



The Khandadhar water fall, highest in Orissa, housing one of the most traditional adivasi ‘Paudi Bhuyan’

This community has a set of distinct traditional practices which is linked to nature. They believe that their deity, *Maa Kanteshwari Devi*, resides in Khandadhar and visits them for a month in a year. It is believed that she comes out of her abode once a year during

⁸ Paudi Bhuyans are also listed as one of the primitive tribes in India.

⁹ First year they grow Kultha, biri, Rasi and vegetables followed by Paddy, Jowar, kada, Mandia and Kangu the next year. The third year they grow only Niger.

dushera for a month and cherishes the produce. It is noteworthy here that this is the same time when the harvesting of crops is usually done and people get ready for the new crop. This time signifies wealth and healthy existence with nature. Paudi Bhuyans believe that any destruction to her temple, i.e., the Khandadhar range, would create catastrophe in the region. This is still believed as some of them told us recently that every attempt by POSCO to survey has ended in disaster. We were told that apparently two teams had gone to the area for survey work and some of the survey teams got drowned in the falls. People strongly believe that every attempt by anyone to rip the mountain will meet with similar consequences. The Khandadhar hill range holds significance not only for providing economic sustenance to the community but also carries inalienable importance on the cultural ethos of Paudi Bhuyans. Many mythological instances are shared by people with Khandadhar signifying its pristine nature and symbiotic existence of nature with people.



Robbed off their resources, Paudis will be soon seen working as wage laborers...something they do not know.

Largely agriculturists, they also collect food materials, fuel wood, honey, resin lac, medicinal plants and herbs from the forest. Monogamy is the norm and marriage by negotiation is preferred but not always adhered to. There is the prevalence of a bride price, which is paid to the bride's father in cash and/or kind. The tribe functions according to lineage and clans, like the *Dongrias*. The village head is called the *Naik/Padhan*, who presides over the village assembly or *Darbar*; and the inter-village traditional political organisation is known as the *Bar* in the Sundargarh district and *Pirh* in the Keonjhar district. The *Dharam Devta* and *Basukimata*, who represent Sun and Earth, respectively, are at the apex of their pantheon. The *Dihuri* is the sacerdotal chief, who performs all rituals connected

with worship of deities. When sickness arises, the tribe applies magico-religious methods through *Raulia*, the witch doctor, and utilises medicinal plants and herbs.¹⁰

The existence of local deity on Khandadhar had refrained people from cutting trees and Paudi Bhuyans have protected the forest from time immemorial. Even the British did not dare to touch the mountain as it feared that might unruffle the local sentiment and popular belief system of the *Paudis*. That's the reason why Khandadhar retained its thick forest cover till the Government of India opened it to Orissa Mining Corporation for iron ore mining at Kankaragarh in 1966. This was the beginning of denudation of forest which posed a threat to the lives of Paudi Bhuyans. The neo-liberal economy has brought in many more domestic companies to mine in that region. The last blow came when the state government gave a green signal to the Korean steel giant POSCO to mine there. The Supreme Court has given the permission to the company to mine there and at present POSCO is awaiting environmental clearance.

Apart from the rich natural forest, Khandadhar region is the elephant corridor, an abode for Tiger, Leopard, Sloth Bear, Gaur and so on, thereby making it a rich biodiversity. The Paudi Bhuyans also account for existence of Royal Bengal Tiger in Khandadhar forest. The present mining operations in the area have already disturbed the habitat and there are instances of attacks by the elephants in the region. The limbless lizards is said to be found only in this forest as the Golden Gecko can be found only in Niyamgiri. Any attack on their habitat will destroy these unique species leading to their extinction from the earth, creating imbalance of the whole ecosystem.

The area is already witnessing the impact on the environment due to mining operations by OMC(Orissa Mining Corporation) and other small-scale mining operations. Mining and transportation of minerals at Barsuan and Koida in upper Khandadhar has already had its devastating impact on people there and the villages situated downstream. Last year, Uskula was affected as the red oxide flowed into the stream which affected their livelihoods in many ways. The usual practice of fishing could not be done as the red water killed all the fish in the area and the water became so thick that it was difficult to catch the dead fish also. The agriculture has been affected for last few years and more so in last one year. This is the impact of small-scale mining in the area and any large-scale mining, such as the proposed POSCO mining project, will wipe away all the natural reserve and the people altogether. After extracting the minerals for 25 years, the area will be left completely denuded.

¹⁰ Panigrahi, Nilakantha. 2004-2005. Development of eco-tourism in tribal regions of Orissa: Potential and Recommendations



The Uskula stream.

The fear is much more in this case as the huge mining operation will release red oxide which will be deposited on the river bank polluting it. It is also feared that this will ultimately flow into the river polluting the catchment area and will affect the fertile land in the entire region. This will surely lead to destruction of one of the richest forest regions of the country which has been so carefully protected and nurtured by the Paudi Bhuyans.

House to a number of perennial streams, Khandadhar contributes to Brahmani river apart from acting as a natural recharger of groundwater. Few years of small-scale and often illegal mining in the area has already impacted the water table in the region as the streams are reportedly drying up and / or have polluted affecting the seepage onto the earth. Apart from mining operations affecting water bodies, it is also a water-intensive activity where a large quantity of water is drawn for mining purposes. Already, OMC is drawing up water from upper Khandadhar water fall resulting in drastic reduction of water in the area.

POSCO plans to mine the Chhelitoka mountain and this would severely affect more than 20 villages and people in the area fear that it will lead to drying up of the main and the highest stream of Khandadhar. The small irrigation dam on Korapani helps the villages in Lunipara block, and if POSCO mining is carried out, it will draw water from Khandadhar stream; the other two streams Uskula and Sasa of Korapani dam are already being used by the OMC. In any case, with the mountain mined, all the water sources originating from this mountain will be gone creating a dry zone around the area where thrives a sustainable Paudi Bhuyan community.

Two mountains, Chheliatoka and Bechakani, are proposed to be mined by POSCO to draw 600 million tonnes of Iron ore in 25 years for its biggest steel plant in Jagatsinghpur.¹¹ This plan has received a lot of opposition on the ground as Paudi Bhuyans have reacted to any attempt by the company to come in. The company, like in Jagatsinghpur, is trying its

¹¹ The struggle in Jagatsinghpur is discussed earlier in this paper.

best to woo people and there are reports already coming in on that. For the local community, allowing mining in this area would mean giving in to mindless development agenda propagated by the state as it would completely destroy one of Orissa's most biologically diverse and ecologically rich forest.



Paudi Bhuyan live with the nature and have a distinct culture – it is believed that they created oriya language.

Although many of the projects including the POSCO project claim not to displace many villages, the fact remains that displacement takes place in large numbers as the source of living is wiped out from the area once mining takes place. This region has already witnessed large-scale displacement over time as people have found very little resources for livelihood. With the POSCO project, which has a very high magnitude of mining, the agricultural activity in the area will be totally broken, thereby affecting the economy of the area. It is estimated that more than 30,000 people will be displaced directly and the indirect but equally intensive impacts will be on many more villages in the vicinity due to mining by POSCO. Like the Dongria Kondhs, the Paudi Bhuyans may become extinct due to this mining project with the destruction of their habitation.

Resilience in Resistance

Each of the communities discussed earlier in this paper follows a culture and livelihood patterns world away from what is called 'mainstream'. It is very alien to the middle class and people of upper echelon. At a time when policies are framed to facilitate the market, these communities present a worldview inter-connected with nature and rooted in rich cultural ethos. Everyday struggle to sustain themselves has led these communities to

have resilience and this is seen now even when they are required to fight against the giant capital forces. They have challenged the present 'development' concept which is measured by GDP growth, high technology invasion in daily lives and so on.

For the *Dongrias*, keeping the animals in cages is a sin as some of them told us during their visit to Delhi Zoo. For them, the animals are equally important as human beings in a natural habitat and they are better when free. Big roads, cars zooming past, high-tech savvy lives of a city are no less than choking oneself to death for these forest people. As Ranga, a Dongria Kondh of Daman Panga in Niyamgiri, candidly put across to us what freedom means for them as he said, "People in the cities live a caged life as they only move in vehicles. Look at us, we can hop, jump and cross many mountains on foot and still do not feel tired. Niyamgiri gives us the strength and protects us in difficult situations." Freedom was spelt out by Ranga in such beautiful manner! Yet, this is not understood by the market forces for whom only minerals, money and technology matter – at a very high cost of others' resources.

There has been massive displacement in the name of development in Orissa leading to extinction of many traditional communities, forcing people to redefine their identities while unrecorded number of people going into the oblivion. For example, in Kenojhar no one knows where 50,000 odd people, mostly adivasis, have gone – they have fallen victims to the mining industries which has ravaged an otherwise rich forest area.

For the traditional *adivasi* communities and those who have drawn life from traditional livelihood patterns, any kind of industries, be it Aluminium or Steel or Chromites, only mean de-linking them from their sustainable way of living. And they are not letting it happen. Thus the struggle continues amidst heavy state repression. The whole world has witnessed the killings of *adivasis* in Kashipur and Kalinganagar in Orissa as they fought against forceful acquisition of their land by corporations. Although many lives have been lost and many more lives are at threat, these communities are undeterred in their resolve to protect their traditions.



Women in a rally in Jagatsinghpur.

The ground-swell reflects that it is not only the resources that people want to protect, they are also very sure that with the resources will be gone their rich socio-cultural and political ethos. Many have termed this process of ‘development’ as cultural genocide as it breaks the basic fabric of the society. Cultural genocide is the least recognised but perhaps most painful aspect of the drastic drop in the quality of life of people who are displaced (Padel & Das). 2008 “*Ame ken ade jimu jadi aamarnu jangal nei jibe, puka machi bagir mari jibu*” (where would we go if they take our forest away, we will die like insects), is the usual expression of every member of these communities. This does not refer only to physical death; it rather talks about a more serious death of civilizations which have evolved naturally over thousands of years. This echoes the decision to die rather than leave their land by many indigenous peoples in America, where physical genocide – meaning the extermination of all members of a tribe – often went alongside cultural genocide, killing of cultures (Brown 1975)

The struggle for these communities have shifted from dealing with natural habitat and create a whole world around that to protecting it from the ‘development’ dinosaurs. The fight is against money taking over culture and network of relationships. It is a fight against losing their identity and to cling to their roots. The egalitarian system of society is the essence of these communities which is at threat due to the invasion of ‘development’ agenda on them. The ‘development’ process does not recognise them as an integral entity and are

pushed to the periphery by taking their resources away for corporate benefit. Any form of alienation from their resources only leads to disempowering the communities and it becomes very hard for these communities to fight against the capital. Thus for them the struggle continues – perhaps in a different form as they fight against other human beings’ destructive agenda. It is not a fight of the brains; it is the fight between cultures and ethos.

Far away from the maddening rush for capital, the *Dongrias*, the *Paudis* and the farmers sing a different song – that is of fulfilment, tranquillity with nature and happiness. This is now attacked and there is an eerie silence as one walks into these areas – it is like the silence before a storm. Let this storm pass without uprooting the essence of existence of these communities.

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