

Politics of Knowledge as a Cause of Unfair Development: Revisiting the Case of 'Niyamgiri'

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Introduction

Practices of development fuelled by the spirit of resource-intensive industrialization have undoubtedly bolstered India's economic growth. However, they have also negatively implicated the lives of a significant section of the Indian citizenry — the *adivasis* or indigenous peoples. Such forms of development practice have not only threatened them with displacement but also with cultural genocide. The case of 'Niyamgiri' from the eastern Indian state of Odisha proves to be one among a plethora of instances exemplifying the same.

If empirically-minded critiques have argued that economic growth has not entailed egalitarian distribution of benefits of that very growth, normatively-oriented ones have stressed that certain practices of development have resulted in serious normative violations. Although, both these critiques offer important insights into the problem, they have not been able to address an important aspect of development – its epistemological dimension.

By analysing the case of Niyamgiri, I argue that resource-intensive practices of development in India such as mining negatively affect the lives of *adivasis* because such politics of development is premised upon a politics of knowledge, which affects knowledge-practices upheld by them. This, in turn, exacerbates the social exclusion of *adivasis* making their existence extremely precarious.

The following analysis progresses over three sections. In Section 2, I briefly adumbrate the dominant vision of development that fuels India's major development practices. In Section 3, I present the case of Niyamgiri showing how resource-intensive practices of development negatively implicate the lives of the *adivasis*. In Section 4, I problematize the overarching vision of development

of India by arguing that the politics of development in India proves to be unfair for certain sections of the society because it is premised upon a politics of knowledge.

The Dominant Vision of Development in India: A Brief Outline

The fountainhead of India's dominant vision of development can be traced to the years following the independence of the country. Primarily envisioned and articulated during Jawaharlal Nehru's tenure as independent India's maiden Prime Minister, development as modernization was considered to be the sole remedy to impoverishment that prevailed in the country. For all practical purposes, development as modernization implied development as economic growth.

For the architects of independent India, economic progress was a precondition for the promotion of "national dignity, private profit, the general welfare, or a better life for the children".¹ Capital-intensive industrialization was a non-negotiable imperative so that the country could swiftly become economically self-sufficient. Institutions like the Planning Commission were created to chart India's story of development. If the First Five Year Plan "emphasized a more prominent role for the Indian private industry and agriculture", the Second Five Year Plan "witnessed the ascendance of heavy capital intensive industrialization, largely within the public sector".²

However, despite some early success, the Indian economy stared at a serious economic crisis towards the close of the twentieth-century. By 1990-91, economic slowdown had reached a tipping point. Public debt had risen up to 76 per cent of India's GDP.³ Even, "the current account deficit in the balance of payments...was more than 2.5 per cent of GDP"; and "debt-service amounted to 21 per cent of current account receipts".⁴ The dismal economic situation prompted the then Congress-government to restructure the Indian economy so as to overcome the impending the financial crisis.⁵

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The Indian economy was deregulated on the premise that liberalization of the economy would attract a greater quantum of private-cum-foreign investment, which would lead to accelerated rates of economic growth. With the restructuring of the Indian economy, market forces became the main harbingers of development. Industrial policy witnessed the greatest change. Industries reserved solely for the public sector such as mining, minerals, oil and the like were opened up to the private sector.⁶

Thus, even though there have been noticeable changes in terms of how to bring about development in the country, the paradigm of development defined as economic growth has remained constant. The case of Niyamgiri proves to be an inevitable outcome of such an understanding of development.

Revisiting the Case of Niyamgiri

The Niyamgiri hills located in the eastern Indian state of Odisha is a part of the eastern highlands of India. It traverses the districts of Rayagada and Kalahandi in the south-western part of the state. Niyamgiri is home to the Kondh community of indigenous people or *adivasis* as they are referred to in India.⁷ They are considered to be “among the few peoples in India still classed as a Primitive Tribe”.⁸ The *Dongria Kondhs* being a hill-dwelling tribe inhabiting the upper reaches of the Niyamgiri hills, whereas other sub-groups of the Kondh community for example, the *Kutia Kondhs*, *Desia Kondhs*, *Majhi Kondhs* occupy its foothills. They speak the ‘Kui’ language, which does not have any written script.

The Kondhs “retain worldviews and practices that go back to millennia, and embody forms of knowledge and relationships with nature that have been lost to many of the so-called civilized peoples”.⁹ They exemplify “everything that the Indian state and urban educated folks would call ‘backward’: an absence of literacy, simple levels of technology, shifting cultivation, animism, lack of schools and hospitals, *kachcha* paths to their villages, no electricity and so on”.¹⁰

Agriculture practiced in the form of shifting cultivation is one of the main customary occupations of the community. The villages have a “demarcated territory” wherein, shifting cultivation is practiced.¹¹ Alongside agriculture, the Kondhs depend upon the forests of Niyamgiri for their livelihood by procuring and selling “minor forest produce”.¹² Moreover, the Kondhs rear animals for purposes of agriculture, ritualistic sacrifices as well as for consumption.¹³

The Kondhs are also known for their art of weaving. The Kapdanganda shawls exemplifies a rich heritage of the Kondh community. Woven mostly by the unmarried Kondh women, the shawls symbolize “their heritage

and ethnic identity”.¹⁴ The off-white thread that is used to weave them “is procured from the Domb community, a local Scheduled Caste community, by bartering harvested crops”.¹⁵ The different motifs that are depicted in the shawls represent the visceral relationship, which the Kondh community shares with the Niyamgiri hills.¹⁶

Niyamgiri’s thick forests have a wealth of “rare medicinal herbs”, which the Kondhs “use to treat a range of ailments”. The medicinal plants also prove to be a vital source of their livelihood. Susanta Dalai, a development professional who works with the Dongria Kondhs, argues, “Uncultivated plants have multifunctional roles, which add diversity to local food system, reinforce local culture and contribute diversity to farming systems. They are equally important for ensuring food, nutrition, social and economic security”.¹⁷

Another characteristic feature of the Kondhs is that they are animistic. Animism is the belief that all plants, animals and objects have spirits. For the Dongria Kondhs, the Niyamgiri hills is not just their home more importantly, it is also the abode of *Niyam Raja*. “The Dongria Kondhs who believe that they are the descendants of the *Niyam Raja* or *Neba Raja*, also worship him”.¹⁸ It is *Niyam Raja* who provides them with all that they require and desire: meat from wild boars for consumption purposes as well as sacrifice for ritualistic practices, fruits such as mango and jackfruit, fresh air, and clean water from streams.

Apart from *Niyam Raja*, the Kondhs worship *Dharani Penu*. “She is recognised as the creator of the world and is venerated as she sustains life”.¹⁹ She “resides in every Dongria village” and “is represented by three long pieces of stones posted upright and another two pieces of stone placed horizontally over it”.²⁰ Furthermore, every village entrance has “a small square piece of earth, enclosed by four bamboo posts...and covered on the top by perforated umbrella made of leaves” representing another God – “Jatrakudi Penka who protects the village from drought, epidemics and other natural calamities”.²¹

The Kondhs’s way of life gains more significance when their intrinsic relationship with their immediate ecosystem comes to light. “More than 100 streams flows from the Niyamgiri hills and most of the streams are perennial”. The main rivers of the region are Vamsadhara and Nagavali, of which the former is referred to as the ‘Life Line’ of Kalahandi district.²² It is because of this reality that Dongria Kondhs refer to themselves as *Jharnia* or “the protectors of the many streams of Niyamgiri”.²³

I highlight these characteristic features of the Kondhs and of Niyamgiri in order to establish the fact that these peoples exhibit a way of life that is “known for their harmonious, sacred and symbiotic relationship with nature”.²⁴ They articulate a conception of life that is starkly different from urban ways of existence. But, what

could be the reason for such variance? A chief reason for such variance is that the epistemological frameworks upon which they conceive of their way of life prove to be distinct and antithetical to their urban counterparts.

However, such a distinct way of life came to be assaulted and threatened with obliteration by the imperatives of economic development. Apart from being home to the Kondhs, Niyamgiri is rich in mineral resources. It has huge quantities of bauxite. The government of Odisha aided by the altered economic context of the country and in order to meet the objectives of economic development facilitated Vedanta Resources Limited, a United Kingdom based mining company to mine the bauxite ores available in the Niyamgiri hills.

Mining as a form of industrialization is deemed to ensure rapid economic growth, which it was thought would fuel social development. Bhakta Charan Das, a former Member of the Indian Parliament, had stated in 1996 that the "Government of India and the Orissa Government should take a keen interest to set-up at least a large alumina plant because" of heavy deposits of bauxite "in Niyamgiri and Sijimalli of Kalahandi district" and he justified such a project on the grounds that "a minimum of 40,000 people can be sustained out of the different kinds of earnings."²⁵

Vedanta had first set up an alumina refinery plant in Lanjigarh, Kalahandi located around the foothills of Niyamgiri in the early 2000s. Thereafter, in 2004, Vedanta signed a memorandum of understanding with the Government of Odisha to mine the bauxite deposits available in the Niyamgiri hills.²⁶ The bauxite ores would provide Vedanta's Lanjigarh plant with unabated supply for manufacturing aluminium.

The alumina refinery in the Lanjigarh block of Kalahandi district also threatened the Kutia Kondhs and the Majhi Kondhs who lived in the foothills of Niyamgiri with displacement.²⁷ It destroyed the Kinari village, "displacing over a hundred Majhi Kondh families to a settlement known locally as 'the rehab colony'. This is a walled compound of concrete houses, circled with barbed wire. Residents have no farmland, and although some work as labourers for Vedanta, most survive on hand-outs".²⁸

In a self-published report, Vedanta offered the following justifications for their projects in Niyamgiri. "In a region where inhabitants have witnessed virtually no major development interventions since Independence, the Lanjigarh Project is regarded by the local population as presenting a significant opportunity for progress and growth".²⁹ Furthermore, the report also argues "that the state's mineral wealth represented the most viable route to achieving rapid economic improvements".³⁰

The crux of Vedanta's justifications brings to light

a key issue pertaining to the theory and practice of development. What is development or when it is needed is more often than not authoritatively imposed by such people who are deemed to possess expert knowledge. They are the ones who can claim to know what the people on the ground need or want. This top-down mechanism of authoritative allocation of values pertaining to the politics of development signifies the manifestation of a politics of knowledge. This politics of knowledge in turn delegitimises all such forms of epistemological practices that prove to stand in the way of development.

Vedanta's assault on Lanjigarh had alerted the hill-dwelling Dongria Kondhs. They did not want to suffer the same fate as their foothills cousins and had resolved to fight overtures to mine the Niyamgiri hills. "The fight against Vedanta was for our homes and our God God *Niyam Raja*" asserts Ladho Sikaka, a male Dongria Kondh elder of the Lakhpadar village located in the recesses of the Niyamgiri hills. On a separate occasion, he offered a much more nuanced justification for the Dongria Kondh's anti-Vedanta, anti-development struggle:

See what has happened in Lanjigarh. When the Company (VAL) was not there, the Kui folk (the Kutia and DesiaKondh communities inhabiting the foothills of Niyamgiri) were like us, we lived like brothers. You could identify them as Kandha (Konds). But when the company came, everything changed. Land was lost, culture was lost, and identity was lost. Now, they are labourers. They were kings, owners over their own land before. Now you cannot make out who is pano, who is kandho, everything is mixed. What is the use of that kind of development? We will at the end become labourers.³¹

Landi Sikoka, a female Dongria Kondh elder makes the same argument albeit in a more rudimentary manner, which nevertheless possesses an intuitive appeal: "Try throwing a currency note at the hen – it won't even peck at it. Of what use is such money? One whiff of wind can take away all the (currency) notes, but if you take away our forest we will not be able to survive".³²

Two observations—one specific and the other generic—emerge from the abovementioned assertions. First, the life practices of the Kondh community are "still predominantly non-monetised".³³ And, the Dongrias "spurn wage-earning, as they feel it denigrates the self-esteem of a self-sufficient community such as theirs".³⁴ Secondly, to reiterate a point made earlier, the epistemological frameworks that govern the life of the Kondhs are incommensurate to knowledge-practices upheld by majority of the Indian populace. Since India's politics of development is largely geared towards achieving macroeconomic standards for example, economic growth; the little cultures of India and their concerns such as the Kondhs are often overlooked by the enterprise of development.

The struggle of the Kondhs echoed beyond Niyamgiri and soon “an assemblage of resistance” emerged “out of interactions between Dongria Kondh, civil society organizations, corporations and government”.³⁵ As a result, the Niyamgiri Surakshiya Samiti (NSS) led by Prafulla Samantara and Lingaraj Azad came into being launching a social movement against the development project.

The NSS organized the Dongria Kondhs’s struggle for justice by taking the fight to Vedanta on various fronts: from long-drawn legal battles to protest marches and sit-ins. It was even successful in convincing powerful international actors such as the Norwegian government and the Church of England for withdrawing their support to the mining project.³⁶

Prafulla Samantara, one of the primary faces of the Kondhs’s struggle against Vedanta, states that mining projects do not ensure development for the *adivasis*. “The Dongria Kondhs are not acquainted with modern education and the skill-sets that such education provides. Hence, they will not be able to acquire any benefits from the mining project”.

According to him, one of the many ways in which actual development could be brought to the lives of Kondhs was through education in their own language that reflected their societal imperatives. “The villages in the Niyamgiri hills do not have any primary schools and the schools present near the foothills do not teach in the language of the Kondhs. Real development can only happen when schools are established in the villages of the Kondhs across the hills, where, they will be able to get formal education in their own language”.

Kalpavriksh’s study on Niyamgiri in 2016 vindicates such arguments as well. Although there were state-government run residential schools in Parsali and Chatikona, very few Kondh children attend them as they are situated far away from the pristine climes of Niyamgiri. Moreover, the Kondh children “do not understand and cannot relate to the syllabus since the medium of instruction is Odiya as opposed to *Kui*, the kondh language”.³⁷ The consensus among the Kondhs is that they are not opposed to formal education, but such educational institutions must be centrally located in their terrain and that the medium of education has to be in their own language.

A community of indigenous peoples such as the Dongria Kondhs is marked by very specific economic, kinship, religious, material-cultural systems. The mining project in the Niyamgiri hills sought to threaten all such features with complete erasure. The resistance put up by the affected community of indigenous peoples against the development project reified their stand vis-à-vis the dominant paradigm of development: the Dongria

Kondhs “cannot be seduced with money or belongings. Their value systems are entirely different, centred around nature and human dignity”.³⁸

The struggle for justice championed by the NSS was fundamentally about ensuring that a certain section of the Indian society is not denied their fundamental right to lead a life that they have chosen for themselves, a way of life that they believe in and one which ensures their self-respect and dignity just because they happen to be a numerical minority.

In 2013, the Supreme Court of India directed the villages that were affected by the development project of Vedanta to undertake a referendum regarding its viability. Although more than hundred villages spread over the Niyamgiri hills qualified the criteria of having been affected by the mining project, the Government of Odisha allowed only 12 such villages to exercise their votes. To the dismay of the pro-development lobby (the state government and the multinational mining giant), all the twelve villages unanimously rejected the mining project.

The case of Niyamgiri proves to be a departure from the established norm, where a minority community’s rights and interests could not be sacrificed at the altar of development. However, ever since the Kondhs vetoed the mining project, several attempts have been made in the recent past by the pro-development lobby to overturn the verdict. Furthermore, since development is viewed as the panacea for almost all problems plaguing the Indian society it becomes extremely difficult to ascertain whether the victory of the people of Niyamgiri would be an everlasting one:

There is no doubt that the current demand for industrial growth and development, based primarily on the extraction of minerals, water and forest resources is obliterating indigenous communities and their habitats. The model of economic development being followed worldwide has resulted in glaring inequity, is entrenched in structural violence against certain communities and the natural world and is slowly obliterating the diversity of societies, cultures and livelihoods that exist around the world.³⁹

Through the exposition of the case of Niyamgiri, I strove to argue that certain practices of development prove to be unfair for certain sections of the society (for example: the *adivasis*) not just because they have been left-out by the existing patterns of resource distribution; not also because the overarching vision of development have produced serious normative violations.

Such practices of development prove to be unfair because they are premised upon a politics of knowledge. Such politics of knowledge is not only not accommodative of epistemological diversity, but also one that delegitimises all such epistemological frameworks that do not adhere

to the dominant paradigm. In the following section, I will theoretically vindicate the above assessment.

Politics of Knowledge as a Cause for Unfair Development

Development is dependent on knowledge. As Anna Malavisi puts it, "Understanding what development is relies on knowledge; decisions about development policies and programs are based on a certain knowledge; often the knowledge of some can be deemed to have a higher epistemic authority and, hence, credibility than the knowledge of others".⁴⁰

Let us analyse the case of Niyamgiri in light of such insights. The practice of natural resource-intensive industrialisation such as mining betrays an inherent epistemological bias towards modern science and technology and their application for achieving development. Such a vision of development is reified by the fact that "humanity's history with minerals is one of growing drumbeats of demand stimulating ever more elaborate dances of supply".⁴¹ Vedanta's justification for their aluminium refinery at Lanjigarh as iterated in the preceding section reifies such a viewpoint.

What kinds of implication do such epistemological biases have for the practice of development? The way in which development is defined and practiced in India has the power to delegitimize other epistemological frameworks that are not upheld by the majority. In the case of Niyamgiri, the refinery-cum-mining project was given more priority even if it came at the cost of knowledge-practices upheld by the Kondhs.

The case of Niyamgiri shows that the "epistemology of development" is based upon a specific epistemology "embedded within a particular social imaginary".⁴² Such an underlying premise of development "excludes other epistemologies" for example, "those from poorer countries or of those living in less advantaged situations", herein exemplified by the Kondhs.⁴³ The hierarchy that is created by the manifestation of such politics of knowledge is actually "where the power begins".⁴⁴

Knowledge-practices upheld by the Kondhs being steeped in their specific traditions do not adhere to the standards set by modern science. They are treated merely as superstitions or false knowledge-claims by the hegemonic epistemological framework that fuels the enterprise of development. As a consequence, they are regarded merely as impediments to development. But how is the politics of development justified?

Development practitioners in India essentially uphold that the notion of development, being "embedded in the older idea of progress", represents "an unfolding of potential" whereby it is conceived of as "a purposeful

improvement on the old".⁴⁵ Such a "vision of the developmental state" is engineered "to cast India in the mould of mainstream modernity and would brook no obstacle in this path".⁴⁶

Incidentally, that vision of development has a modular form in contemporary Europe and North America, which it seeks to emulate. It was put in motion "to prove a point to the dominant structures in the international arena that India had the capacity and potential to be as advanced in science and technology as any other 'developed' nation".⁴⁷ Simply put, development entailed catching up with the West.

The epistemological bias betrayed by the overarching vision of development evinced by India bears the imprint of Social Darwinism. According to it "the history of human civilization as a series of connected economic stages described as hunting-gathering, pastoral, agricultural and commercial or industrial".⁴⁸ However, as Debal Deb suggests such an evolutionary understanding of the phenomenon of development is flawed both in terms of its interpretation and its application.

In Darwinian evolution, there exists no perfect model, and evolutionary superiority cannot be attributed to any organism or individual in terms of strength or size. This fundamental feature of Darwinism was missed by social theorists of the 19th century, who reproduced current prejudices about social evolution with an aura of scientific authority. The misreading of Darwinian view of evolution and its misapplication to social evolution gave birth to Social Darwinism...⁴⁹

A key implication of the Social Darwinist account of development relevant for the present purposes proves to be the following: aboriginal inhabitants or indigenous peoples for example, the Kondhs of Niyamgiri are deemed to represent "primitive stages of human evolutionary history".⁵⁰ Primitive ways of life are considered to be hurdles in the path of progress that needs to be surmounted. A lack of industry is equated with "the lack of industriousness", which in turn justifies "the progressive encroachment of industrial development upon the pre-industrial".⁵¹ Vedanta's intervention into the terrains of Niyamgiri was justified by the same logic.

If such forms of reasoning proved to be of foundational importance for colonialism, they have certainly played an equally important role, albeit in a different manner for the onward march of postcolonial nations. Similar justifications have been used by postcolonial India to exploit natural resources in terrains inhabited by the *adivasis* not only to legitimize its developmental aspirations but also to reify its majoritarian national culture.

Consequently, can such a vision of development be really deemed to be fair? Even if one were to argue that such practices of development are just by the standards

of political economy, a case could still be made against such a claim. It could be argued that such practices of development are essentially unfair because the very vision of development from which they emanate is premised upon a politics of knowledge.

A politics of knowledge creates an epistemological hierarchy, whereby, certain knowledge-systems and practices originating from them are accorded legitimacy at the expense of others. The same can be discerned in India by the nexus between the politics of development and modern science and its applications. As Ashish Nandy puts it, in "the name of science and development one can today demand enormous sacrifices from, and inflict immense sufferings on, the ordinary citizen".⁵²

The practice of development in the form of mining is a clear instance of science and technology being employed to ensure modernisation and economic progress. But mining is an intrusive industrial process, which not only destroys "the pre-existing natural order" but also "the livelihood and cultural practices of surrounding communities".⁵³ The mining project in Niyamgiri implicated the lives of the Kondhs in the very same manner. The disequilibrium that it generated in the region not only reveals an antithesis of cultures, but more significantly the clash of two distinct epistemological frameworks that sustains them.

If in the chosen case, the pro-development lobby (a developmental state and the mining company) looks at the Niyamgiri hills as a natural resource that needs to be exploited for economic development, the anti-development lobby (the Kondhs and the wider civil society that supports their cause) views the Niyamgiri hills as a foundational element that gives meaning to the life of the residents of the region. For instance, the Kondhs regard the Niyamgiri hills as the abode of their deity *Niyam Raja*, thereby, attaching a sacred meaning to it.

Vandana Shiva argues that the "treatment of nature as a resource which acquires value only in exploitation for economic growth has been central to the project of development".⁵⁴ The reconceptualization of nature as natural resources also entails the transformation of the "relationship of people to nature". A relationship "based on responsibility, restraint and reciprocity" becomes one of "unrestrained exploitation".⁵⁵ How does such an argument play out in the chosen case? Niyamgiri, which is sacred to the Kondhs, becomes desacralized; cultural ties are rechristened as economic relationships. In the process, the crisis inherent to the politics of development comes to the forefront.

The "organizing principle of economic development based on capital accumulation and economic growth renders valueless all properties and processes of nature

and society that are not priced in the market and are not inputs to commodity production".⁵⁶ Whereas bauxite ores available in the Niyamgiri hills are seen as paths to progress, its negative effects on the region are passed-off only as costs that a people must bear for future promises of development. The politics of development defined as economic growth renders the Kondhs's intrinsic relationship with Niyamgiri valueless.

India's paradigm of development proliferates certain invasive practices of development, which do not accord due recognition and respect to the way in which *adivasis* conceive of their lives. The case of Niyamgiri shows that the way in which members of the Kondh community envisages their lives, their relationships with each other, their immediate environment and the wider society is at odds with the epistemological framework that governs the politics of development in India.

Such practices of development not only threaten peoples such as the Kondhs with displacement, cultural genocide and more catastrophic consequences. Intrusive practices of development, exemplified in Niyamgiri by mining sought to completely exterminate how the Kondhs lived their lives: the way in which they practice their agriculture; their weaving; their medicine; their visceral relationship with their immediate environment; their faith in their Gods; even their native language.⁵⁷ Therefore, the chosen case proves to be an instance of unfair development because development being based upon a politics of knowledge engenders a life threatening politics for the Kondhs of Niyamgiri.

Conclusion

It is widely expected that India will soon graduate to a developed state from a developing one. Such a transition now seems to be only a matter of time. However, will that onward march be regarded as one that has been fair to the diverse ways of life it represents? The case of Niyamgiri proves to be instructive in that regard, it provides different vantage points to take a stock of the substantive and the procedural aspects of India's development politics.

Although the phenomenon of development might be perused from both empirical as well as normative premises, I have attempted to make an epistemological critique of the same through the case of Niyamgiri. In the process, the essay has attempted to illuminate a substantive concern regarding the politics of development in India, unless and until the dominant vision of development recognises and accommodates different epistemological frameworks present in its society it would continue to be an unjust enterprise.

Notes

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