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The Challenges of Neoliberal Policies and the Indigenous People's Resistance Movement in Odisha, India

Os desafios das políticas neoliberais e o movimento de resistência dos povos indígenas em Odisha, na Índia

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THE CHALLENGES OF NEOLIBERAL POLICIES AND THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S RESISTANCE MOVEMENT IN ODISHA, INDIA

Abstract: This paper focuses on a social movement struggling to preserve the natural environment and the traditional livelihood of the Kondhs who live in the shadow of the Niyamagiri mountains in the Indian State of Odisha. This region is rich in bauxite and people are exploited by the state and Vedanta, a multinational private company in the name of extraction and development. These developments are indicative of the state and central government's covert and overt resolve of becoming a facilitator for the big corporate houses to take over the development projects at the cost of local communities and natural resources. The Indigenous people's resistance movement is primarily in opposition to such projects, which have harmed their social and natural environment. The Kondhs have organized themselves in opposition to neo-liberal economy run by globalization and promoted by the state. Niyamagiri has become a site of resistance of forces unleashed by capitalist neo-liberal economy and the state run by upper caste elites.

Keywords: multi-national corporations, neo-liberal economy, state, tribal resistance.

OS DESAFIOS DAS POLÍTICAS NEOLIBERAIS E O MOVIMENTO DE RESISTÊNCIA DOS POVOS INDÍGENAS EM ODISHA, NA ÍNDIA

Resumo: Este artigo debruça-se sobre um movimento social que procura preservar o meio ambiente natural e o modo de subsistência tradicional dos Kondhs, que habitam à sombra das montanhas Niyamagiri, no estado indiano de Odisha. Esta região é rica em bauxite e as populações são exploradas, em nome da extração e do desenvolvimento, pelo estado e pela Vedanta, uma empresa multinacional privada. Estas mudanças são indicativas da intenção oculta e manifesta, por parte do estado e do governo central, de tornar o estado num facilitador das grandes empresas corporativas. O movimento de resistência das populações indígenas opõe-se principalmente a esses projetos, que prejudicaram o seu meio ambiente natural e social. Os Kondhs organizaram-se em oposição a uma economia neoliberal sustentada pela globalização e promovida pelo Estado. Niyamagiri tornou-se um local de resistência de forças desencadeada pela economia capitalista neoliberal e pelo estado, que é liderado por elites das castas superiores.

Palavras-chave: economia neoliberal, empresas multinacionais, Estado, resistência tribal.

Globalization has become a fashionable concept these days, and it is on everybody's lips. Neo-liberalism is a powerful political and economic dogma under globalization. As an ideology, it promotes forceful defence of private property, competitive markets and 'individual freedom', in addition to an all-round attack against state intervention (Harvey, 2005). Globalization is promoting increasingly homogenized global modern capitalist culture on the one hand and at the same time bringing together various civil society organizations (hereafter CSOs) focused on women's struggles around the defence of place as the source of new forms of creativity, culture, ideas, alternative development and alternative economies (Harcourt and Escobar, 2002). The world is facing contradictions in the years following globalization. On the one hand, the rise of neoliberal philosophy is making the state a receding player in the process of development and welfare. On the other hand, the rising consciousness for inclusion and protection of human rights has reinforced the global commitment to ensure opportunities to all by increasing access, equality and quality. This paradox has led to the upsurge of civil society organizations (CSOs) as organized non-government organizations (hereafter NGOs) in countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America (Salamon and Anheier, 1997) which rank low in human development indicators. In many instances, these NGOs have become both supplements to and substitutes for state led development interventions. Current trends in social research reveal that women's multiple modalities of activism and leadership are extending both the meanings of gender and the contours of social action and political engagement across a number of formal and informal domains within civil society, government, and the economic sphere (Harrison, 2013).

It is well known that the problems faced by the indigenous peoples are by and large universal. They suffer from the consequences of historic injustice, including colonisation, dispossession of the lands, territories and resources, oppression and discrimination, as well as lack of control over their ways of life. Their right to development has been largely denied by colonial and modern states in the pursuit of economic growth. As a consequence, indigenous peoples often lose out to more powerful actors, becoming one of the most impoverished groups in the country (UN, 2010).¹ In India, despite the presence of several laws to protect the Adivasis and their habitats such as Schedule V, PESA (Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas, 1996), FRA (Forest Rights Act, 2006) and Land Alienation Act (non-transfer of adivasi lands to non-advasis), all of which have been systematically violated and encroached upon by mega national companies and multinationals for extraction of minerals and other natural resources available on their

¹ State of the World's Indigenous Peoples Press Release United Nations Report, 14 January 2010. Accessed on 26.03.2018, at <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/SOWIP/press%20package/sowip-press-package-en.pdf>.

land. The state is responsible for allowing corporate encroachment on indigenous lands. The profits made by the corporate sector are siphoned out of the area leaving the indigenous population resourceless and pauperised. In the process, indigenous communities are also exposed to a whole range of development induced changes in their habitats. Indigenous women are worse off as compared with their male counterparts among such communities as they are largely responsible for provision of household resources (food, fodder, fuelwood and water) and raising their children (adopted from Panda, 2014).

India is an emerging economy with a massive migration from rural to urban areas, and with 70% of the population under 35. It is going through a paradigm shift in development through opportunities wrought by globalization, with the emergence of civil society groups led by women. The Indian experience provides a unique model to study indigenous people's resistance movements in the context of globalization and development. In India nearly 1.5 million indigenous people have been displaced due to a number of irrigation, mining, industrial and conservation projects (Kumar and Choudhury, 2006). Moreover, environment, marginalization, deprivation of life and livelihood and resource sustainability is overlooked within the narrow paradigm of cost-benefit analysis in economic rationalization. Indigenous people from the mineral rich hills have been forced to move to slums, for example, Salia Sahi and Kargil (the largest urban slums) in Bhubaneswar, the capital city of Odisha. Tribals² have sunk into the quandary of 'involuntary nomadism', 'the homeless people'.³ N.C. Saxena Committee⁴ came out with startling findings that 85.39 lakh tribals in rural India have been displaced since 1990 for mega projects of MNC's. "Since 1980, 9.8 lakh hectares of forest land that of the rural/tribal people have been diverted for 11.282 projects", the note stated, giving the example of Orissa where 54-56 percent of tribal land has been lost to non-tribal over the last 25-30 years (Mukherjee, 2010).

The indigenous people's resistance movement is primarily in opposition to such projects, which have harmed their social and natural environment. My paper is based on the fieldwork I have conducted over a period of time among the Dongria Kondhs, beginning in January-February 1987 and followed by return visits during the summers of 2004, 2012 and 2016. In the last few decades, I have observed the quite disturbing

² The concept of tribe developed in the context of census operations conducted under the auspices of British colonialism and remained a legal and anthropological term commonly used in India. Now Adivasis or Indigenous are used in place of 'tribals'.

³ Please refer, Vinay Kumar Srivastava, "In the Context of Tribes of India" (unpublished paper), Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, 2017.

⁴ Refer to Dhurjati Mukherjee (2010), "Tribal Displacement: Their Right to Livelihood Cannot be Denied", in Kurukhetra, *A Journal on Rural Development*, 59(1), 10.

dismantling of social structure of the indigenous life which culminated in a massive plan for a mega mining project. Here I would like to argue that the exploitation and marginalization of the indigenous people can be explained through “internal colonialism” as in the British period K.S. Singh and others have documented (Singh, 2002 and Rao, 1978) and the development model as imposed from above totally disregarding the interests and the well-being of the people, in this case, the Dongria Kondhs. Development theorists and World Bank economists utilize models that make the non-western peoples mirror westerners in their worldview both in ideology as well as in their way of life (Bairoch, 1977; Pandey, 2012; Sen, 2007). I would also expand on Rama Chandra Guha’s observation that the Adivasis as a whole have gained least and lost most from six decades of democracy and development in India (Guha, 2007).

ODISHA: A CASE STUDY

The state of Odisha is one the poorest in the country, with around 32.59% of the population living below poverty level.⁵ The ST⁶ (22.85%) and SC⁷ (17.13%) put together form nearly 40% of the total population of the state, mostly living in rural areas. 83% of the total forty million people of Odisha still live in rural areas. Further, poverty among the ST is 63.52%, SC is 41.39% and OBC⁸ is 24.16%. The tribal people in rural areas are primarily dependent on forest gathering, swidden cultivation and wage labor for their livelihoods. The irony is that the forest, minerals and tribals are concentrated in the same region in Odisha. Statistics suggest that there is a decline from 0.84 hectare in 1961 to 0.61 hectare of forest land available to the rural people in 2011 (Forest Department of Odisha, 2011).⁹ From the time of independence, deforestation and displacement have impoverished the tribals and other communities dependent on natural resources for their sustenance. Manoranjan Mohanty (2014) very aptly considers Odisha to be a case that presents a crisis of democracy with upper castes and patriarchal domination that has been consolidated through the formation and expansion of the middle class, that provide services to the capitalist extractive economy, while vast sections of the population,

⁵ “Percentage of Population below Poverty Line by States – 2011-12”. Accessed 26.03.2018, at <https://data.gov.in/resources/number-and-percentage-population-below-poverty-line-states-2011-12-based-tendulkar>.

⁶ ST stands for Scheduled Tribes as per the Constitution of India. Also, the term Adivasis is used as an umbrella term for a heterogeneous set of ethnic and tribal groups considered as the aboriginal population of South Asia, including India.

⁷ SC stands for Scheduled Castes defined by the Constitution of India.

⁸ OBC stands for Other Backward Classes – “notified as socially and educationally Backward Classes by the State Governments or those that may be notified as such by the Central Government from time to time”, Source: National Commission of Backward Classes, Government of India. Accessed on 26.03.2018, at <http://www.ncbc.nic.in/Home.aspx?ReturnUrl=%2f>.

⁹ For reference, “Economic Survey, 2011-2012”. Accessed on 26.03.2018, at http://pc.odisha.gov.in/Download/Economic_Survey_2011_12.pdf.

especially Adivasis, Dalits and agricultural workers remain marginalised. This process has been accentuated in the recent times of neo-liberal policies during which the scale and magnitude of mining based industries and pro-corporate mafia have grown to a great extent (Panda and Pandey, 2017).

In Odisha, the nature of industrialization is based on extraction of natural resources – more specifically minerals. The mining sector has been vibrant in the state of Odisha compared with agriculture, which is the only significant determinant that the per capita income is lagging behind (B. Mishra, 2010). The government of Odisha as of December 2014 has signed 93 Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) to the tune of 2.15 lakh crores rupees (thirty three billion dollars) with industries to set up steel (48), power plants (28), aluminium (3) and rest in other plants in different parts of the state (Business Standard, 2014). Industrialization and growth of the economy is desired in a state like Odisha, where poverty and unemployment continue unabated. But the question remains whether the local communities are being benefited by such development efforts. Minerals (mainly iron ore and bauxite) are by and large concentrated in areas that are inhabited by the tribal communities. The extraction of minerals have either led to the displacement of local communities or to the drastic reduction in the natural resource base (land, water and forests) leaving them homeless, resourceless and pauperised (Padel and Das, 2010; Padel, 2011). The local communities depend for their survival on their land and forests for their livelihood.

Odisha is known for its distinct indigenous population – every fourth person out of 42 million belongs to one of its 62 Scheduled Tribes (STs).¹⁰ In the statistical profile of the state, tribals constitute 22.1% of the total 42 million, the second largest tribal population in the country (as per 2011 census). The State holds about 9% of the tribal population of the country and has the highest number (13) of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)¹¹ out of a total 62 tribal communities. In the name of the special protection of the scheduled tribes,

tribal areas especially called scheduled areas have been treated as separate administrative categories in order to protect the rights of scheduled tribes over their land, forests and water. Fifth and sixth schedule of the constitution of India carried

¹⁰ ST stands for Scheduled Tribe as per the Constitution of India.

¹¹ The Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) refers to the tribals who have not benefitted from the democracy and development process of the state and have remained educationally, economically and politically marginalized and deprived. They are characterized by Pre-agriculture level of technology; Stagnant or declining population; Extremely low literacy and Subsistence level of economy. The Government of India designated 75 such groups, out of which 13 (the highest number) are based in the state of Odisha. Source: Panduranga and Honnurswamy (2014), pp. 245-252.

over the principles of the Scheduled Districts Act of 1874 which excluded scheduled area from the operation of ordinary laws of British India. (Shah, 2010: 18)

Ironically, nearly half the State's area (44.70%) is under Schedule V of the Indian Constitution, some of the most poverty-ridden areas in the country (Elwin, 1936). Despite being extremely rich in resources, 72% of the tribal households in Odisha live beneath the poverty line. Since much of the country's mineral resources are located in these protected scheduled areas, they are constantly amended by the state in order to extract all the rich resources and help the state to improve its growth rate rapidly.

TWO CASES

The government of Odisha signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Pohang Steel Company (POSCO), a South Korean company on 22 June 2005 for setting up an integrated steel plant in an area that, if implemented, would affect eight villages in three panchayats of Jagatsinghpur district in Kujang Tahsil – Dinkia, Gadakunjanga and Nuagaon. The twelve-billion-dollar project was focused on acquiring 2,700 acres of land for the production of 8 million ton of steel per annum (Mining Zone People's Solidarity Group, 2010). So far the attempts by the district administration to acquire land and impose 'extractivist' models have been thwarted by strong local opposition, primarily by the POSCO, Pratirodh Sangram Samiti (PPSS), a people's organization that has spearheaded the movement against POSCO. In response to this resistance, the state government has criminalized activists by filing numerous false accusations against all persons resisting the project. Even though POSCO has decided to move out of Odisha, the state government has declared the land as reserved state, depriving people of their traditional livelihood (betel leaves, fish and paddy). Even twelve years after the state's acquisition of 2700 acres of land, nothing has been done so far for restoring alternatives to the traditional livelihood of the local people. Similarly, in the case of Vedanta Alumina project in Lanjigarh of Kalahandi District, after the direction of the Hon'ble Supreme Court, special Grama Sabhas were held and accordingly people rejected the proposal of Odisha Govt to lease Niyamgiri Buxite hill to Vedanta Companies. The Dangaria Kandha shows an example of how they united to fight against the unholy nexus between multinational companies (MNCs) and Odisha government which have made several illegal attempts to displace the Dangaria Kondhs and want to deprive them of their home and sacred land (Das, 2014). Even after Vedanta bauxite mining was not supported by the people, the state has used fear tactics by openly criminalizing the activists as branded Maoists. The mega mining projects such as the TATA Project in Ganjam, Kalinga Nagar

Steel Project in Jajpur District, Vedanta Companies in Lanjigad, among many others leave the rural people landless and force them to join urban poor in India.

ECONOMIC IMPACT AND DISPLACEMENT

The impact of mining-based industrialization has a differential effect on women and men. It is observed that within the framework of division of labor, women are responsible for provision of household resources in the form of water, forest products, fodder and fuelwood. With increasing mining activities, there is a decline in the natural resource base of the local communities. In reaction to the mining venture of Vedanta company and antecedent displacement of the Dangaria Kondhs in Niyamagiri hills, Laxmi Gouda, a Dangaria Kondh woman speaks up:

Vedanta came here and promised many things, roads, tubewell, water, but did nothing. Now they ask us to take money and leave the village. Where do we go? Life will be miserable. They may give us some money for a day or two. If we go to a new village for resettlement, we will be like fish out of water after that. They will chase us away and say “Vedanta has chased you out, why do you come here?” Where do we go then? (T. Mishra, 2015)

Gajendra Gouda, a Dangaria Kondh man, also speaks up:

Vedanta company is engaging fixers, goons, leaders. They have been of no help to us so far. Has the company fed anyone here? No, nothing. They say they will give you aluminum, sheets, rice, clothes. Do we need company clothes to live? We said we don't need aluminum sheets. We took rice in the beginning. We did not know its source. When we were told it was from the company, we immediately stopped. Company was approaching the Hills. From this village we erected a gate to stop them, they created many paths in the forest. How can we trust them? They are a fraud, misleading company. Trying to get its work done by goons, leaders, and harassing our people. Let them try their tricks now. If we leave Niyamgiri, we will be like a fish out of water. Government and company are spreading their net to catch us, wanting us to die without water. (*ibidem*)

Although Odisha's economy continues to be in a high growth trajectory, the diversification of the economy leading to a structural shift from agriculture to industry and service oriented economy, has affected rural indigenous women adversely (Hans, 2014). Industrialization in Odisha saw rampant mining in different parts of the state during the

last decade. The women in rural communities have neither the education nor the necessary skills to obtain alternative means of employment outside their habitats. At best they can migrate to urban centers to find jobs in the labor market as unskilled workers. Most men migrate to urban areas to engage in menial jobs. Women are left behind to care for the children, the old and the sick along with a depleting resource base. There are numerous cases of atrocities against women, for example, Manorama Khatua, a 32-year grassroots woman leader from Dhinkia village shares that “I have 54 cases against me in order to weaken me. I can not leave this village or will be arrested by the Police” (personal conversation with Manorama Khatua, September, 2014). Manorama along with 1500 women were mobilized to protect their livelihood resources and possessions in reaction to POSCO (South Korean) company’s proposal to set up a Steel Plant in *Dhinkia*, Jagatsinghpur in Odisha. Women explained that with mining, they will lose their livelihood. People live on paddy, *Paana baraja* (betel vine) and fish. In *Paana baraja* (betel vine), both men and women work together; as a result, both came forward to fight against this mining venture.

Besides, sex determination tests leading to abnormal gap in the sex ratio of boys and girls, sexual abuse of girls and trafficking of girls along with child labor are alarming in rural Odisha.

KONDH RESISTANCE MOVEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF NEO- LIBERAL ECONOMY

The exploitation of the Kondhs is nothing new. It has gone on for a very long time as F.G. Bailey and other scholars have reported. During the British colonial period, Kondhs’ land was classified and became available for profit-making, leading to its alienation. The role of missionaries, money lenders, zamindars (large landowners), and the British punitive rules and regulations were major sources of their exploitation (Bailey, 1957, 1960, 1969). What is new is the fact that the Kondhs are being robbed of their land and livelihood by state supported and sponsored multinational mining projects.

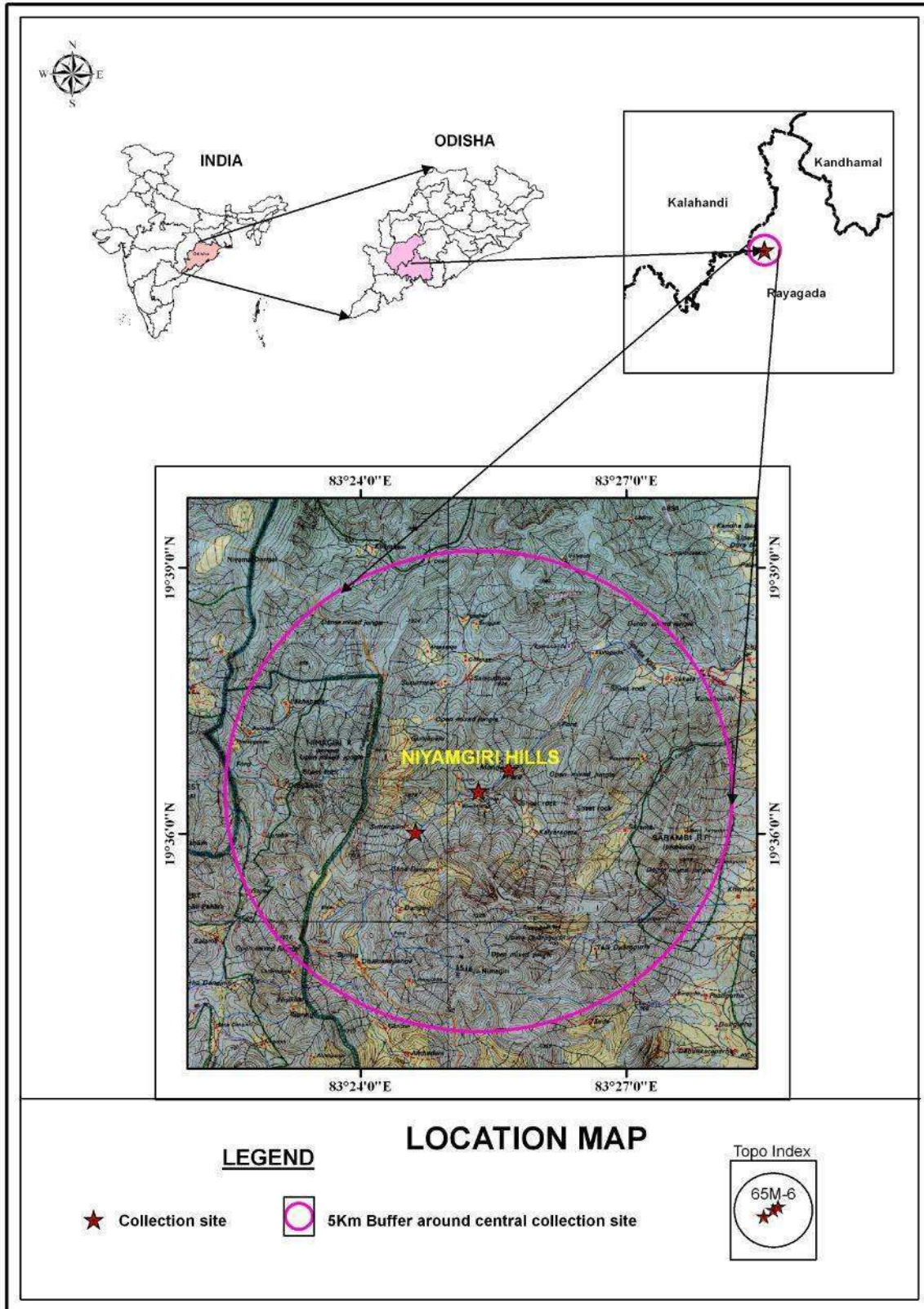


FIGURE I – Location Map of Niyamgiri

Source: Forest Rights Act (<http://fra.org.in/>).

This research is devoted to a tribal resistance movement in Odisha led by the Dongria Kondh tribe living in the hills of South Western region of the state. Niyamgiri hill extends over Kalahandi and Rayagada districts of Odisha and Dangaria Kondhs live in the upper reaches, while the Kutia Kondhs inhabit the foot hills. Dangaria Kondh population is around 15000. Niyamagiri is known for its rich biodiversity – both flora and fauna, grassland, deep forest and streams. Kondhs depend on the hill for food gathering, medicines, fodder, firewood and construction materials. Niyamgiri is the sacred abode of the Kondhs – their god and identity. In the voice of one of my respondents,

Niyamgiri provides us food, the basic necessity of life. No one will die of starvation – whenever you go over the hill you will get plenty of food there. He brings rainfall, provides us water, fresh air, and also provides a habitat for different kinds of animals. If the hill is cut off and we aspire for progress, he will not support us, and finally the land will get barren and we all will die. (personal conversation, May, 2015)



FIGURE II – Kondh Women

Author: Annapurna Devi Pandey (2016).

The tribe, including men, women, and children live in Niyamgiri hills and have mobilized against a bauxite mining operation on their homeland run by the Vedanta

Corporation of the United Kingdom since 1997. Niyamgiri is rich in bauxite which is required for aluminium production – estimated at Rs 156,000 crores. Vedanta Aluminium Ltd based in Lanjigarh in Kalahandi district wanted permission to mine (open cast) in seven square kilometres, affecting important wildlife and vegetation. Also the cultural and ecological heritage of Dangaria Kondhs would be destroyed if mining is permitted by the state in Niyamgiri. Mining bauxite from these mountain tops is also an assault on their religion. For Kond religion recognizes mountains as prime sacred entities and sources of life – a connection which geologists recognized when they named the base rock of these bauxite-capped mountains as Khondalite (*apud* Padel and Das, 2008: 581). The Dongarias and other communities protested through *Niyamgiri Surakhya Samiti* (2004) (Niyamagiri protection committee) and other local, national and international groups like Survival International, Foil Vedanta and Amnesty International, which joined the movement.

The Dangaria Kondhs successfully took up their grievance to the Supreme Court and ultimately stopped the mining expansion proposed by Vedanta. Niyamgiri covers thousands of acres of densely forested hills, abundant streams and is known as the food bowl of South Western Odisha. Dongria Kondhs worship Niyamgiri as Niyam Raja, King of the Law, who is their source of living, their identity and their heritage. The deep reverence that the Dongrias have for their hills and streams pervades every aspect of their lives – art, music, dance and textile, among others. Their name Dongria is tied to the dangar, meaning 'hill' and the name for themselves is Jharnia: protector of streams. Kondhs I interviewed, say that even if they are provided all modern amenities and alternative means of livelihood, they would never leave Niyamgiri as it is their most precious sacred shirine. The World Conservation Congress promotes the concept of Indigenous Community Conserved Areas (ICCA's). Niyamgiri is the living example where bio diversity co-exists with bio-cultural diversity- Dangaria Kondhs maintain a taboo on cutting trees there in Niyamraja's name out of recognition that the natural vegetation conserves the fertility of their land through an abundance of streams (Mathur, 2011: 163). The state protects the land and the environment that are tied to the identity of the Dangaria Kondhs and they are given the responsibility to conserve their environment in order to promote biological and cultural diversity. Ironically, in these hills Vedanta – a multinational mining corporation – has planned to mine bauxite driving them out of their land, which is the source of their identity and livelihood.

The state of Odisha has developed a partnership with the multinational corporations in order to extract its natural resources – bauxite, copper, coal, iron ore among others, most of them in areas inhabited by its tribal people. Odisha has more than 60% of the bauxite reserve in India, the world's largest inventory – the Government of Odisha

discovered bauxite in these areas in the late 1980s and following financial liberalization in 1991-1992, the state has been working with a number of multinational corporations extracting bauxite in this area for aluminum production. The state of Odisha through the Odisha mining corporation (OMC), entered into a memorandum of understanding with Vedanta Group in 2004 to set up an integrated aluminum refinery power complex along with power plants at Lanjigarh, the foothills of the Niyamgiri hills, to extract its bauxite reserve. OMC entered into a joint venture company with Vedanta. Sadly, the required guidelines of Forest conservation Act (1980) was not followed and the forest and the people were in danger. The greenfield aluminum refinery, a subsidiary of Vedanta, became operational in 2008. Vedanta proceeded to build their factories without having first acquired proper environmental clearance for the mines they were depending on (Padel and Das, 2008). Vedanta/Sterlite¹² industries clearance for mining Niyamgiri came after the Norwegian Government Council on Ethics released a report (2007) that detailed a long list of transgressions of Law by the Sterlite-Vedanta group, as well as abuse of the environment and human rights in India and other countries (Padel and Das, 2008: 592). "Mining projects are fuelled by an entrenched notion of development so powerful, that democracy and human rights often seem to wither in the face of it" (Padel and Das, 2010: 10). For example, mining in Niyamagiri threatens the integral values of the Kondhs. The mountains carry the stories and myths and are sacred entities for the indigenous people who live on them and around them (*ibidem*: 71). The market-based and profit-oriented development pushed by the state is not in sync with the tribal vision of development. For the Dongaria Kondhs,

We are the hills, we are the streams, we are the water, we are the air, we are Adivasi, Dalit peasants, mothers, sisters, crop, fields, all carry the same meaning for us. We are the smile of the soil, we are the branches of the same tree. Oh dear, we can't live without each other. I can't live without you, you can't live without me. (T. Mishra, 2015)

12 Sterlite Copper is a business Unit of Vedanta Limited ('Vedanta Limited'). Vedanta Limited, a Vedanta Group company. It is based in Mumbai, India. According to a source, Sterlite, a Vedanta group firm, is a major copper smelter. sulphur dioxide is a byproduct of smelting and the effluent is considered toxic by western countries for a number of reasons. Inhaling it can cause death, it has a corrosive effect on the skin and eyes and can permanently damage the respiratory system. It is also said to cause damage to the genetic structure, leading to mutation. Owing to sulphur dioxide's fatal qualities, heavy regulations are imposed on how industries must handle and dispose the gas. Yet, this is where developing nations like India become a ready target of such industries. Source: <https://www.dailyo.in/variety/sterlite-protests-sulphur-dioxide-vedanta-tamil-nadu/story/1/23101.html> accessed 26. 03. 2018.

Vinay Srivastava observes that “the gains of development largely go to the upper classes, for they are the ones who have benefitted from the state in the name of development” (Srivastava, 2017). For example, pro-mining state government in Odisha in connivance with its district administration wholeheartedly promotes the corporate mining houses like Sesa Sterlite’s – formerly known as Vedanta Aluminum – expansion of its Lanjigarh facility in Kalahandi district in Odisha, where the Dangaria Kondhs reside. These developments are indicative of the state and central government’s covert and overt resolve to become a facilitator for the big corporate houses to take over the development projects at the cost of local communities and natural resources.

Let me explain the changing life conditions and vanishing social structure of the Dongria Kondhs observed during my visits over the last three decades. It is well known that the problems faced by the indigenous peoples are by and large universal. They suffer from the consequences of historic injustice, including colonization, dispossession of the lands, territories and resources, oppression and discrimination, as well as lack of control over their ways of life. Their right to development has been largely denied by colonial and modern states in the pursuit of economic growth. As a consequence, indigenous peoples often lose out to more powerful actors, becoming one of the most impoverished groups in the country (UN, 2010). In India, despite the existence of several laws to protect the adivasis and their habitats such as Schedule V, PESA (Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas, 1996), FRA (Forest Rights Act, 2006) and Land Alienation Act¹³ (non-transfer of adivasi lands to non-adivasis), all of them have been systematically violated and encroached upon by mega national companies and multinationals for extraction of minerals and other natural resources available on their land. The state is responsible for allowing corporate encroachment on indigenous lands. The profits made by the corporate sector are siphoned out of the area leaving the indigenous population resourceless and pauperised. In the process indigenous communities are also exposed to a whole range of development induced changes in their own habitats. Indigenous women are worse off as compared with their male counterparts among such communities as they are largely responsible for provision of household resources (food, fodder, fuelwood and water) and raising their children.

¹³ Forest Rights Act, 2006 was initiated by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs to protect the Adivasis from eviction from their own land. Even though they lived on their land since time immemorial, they had never possessed any document proving their ownership. This Act was introduced to the advantage of the Adivasis, but in reality they have not benefitted much from it. This policy has not stopped the state from introducing multi-national corporations in their habitat in order to extract natural resources. In the name of “public purpose”, as in the name of mining and dam building for greater good, sanctions have been given even without the knowledge of the Adivasis living in the area, thus endangering their life, livelihood, environment, religion and their identity. For details refer to Bela Bhatia (2005).

Several missionaries and anthropologists have already studied the Kondhs since late 19th century. In the late 1980s the Indian anthropologist Prasanna Kumar Nayak (1989) conducted an in-depth study of the Dongria society. In 2002 a voluminous collaborative work analysed the social, economic and religious worldview of the Dongria (see Jena *et al.*, 2002). The most impressive anthropological study is by Felix Padel and Samarendra Das and it has been reported in several books, articles, and videos (Padel, 2011; Padel and Das, 2010). Besides, there are significant studies of contemporary socio-religious life of Kondhs (Pfeffer and Behera, 2002; Hardenberg, 2016).

KONDHS RESISTANCE AGAINST STATE PROMOTED DEVELOPMENT

Kondhs are the largest tribal group in the state of Odisha with a population over a million (Padel, 2011). They are largely concentrated in the Kondhmal, Koraput, Rayagarha, Nabarangpur, Kalahandi and Gajapati districts. When I visited Kondhmal in 1986-1987, I was struck by the natural beauty of this region and by the rich, vibrant and multilayered spiritual lifestyle of the Kuttia Kondhs and nearby Dongria Kondhs¹⁴ living in the area. The name of this tribe ('Dongria' and 'Kondh', both meaning 'mountain') as well as the rich ethnography clearly show that the 'land of the hill' (*neta* or *horu*) is the focus of their oral traditions, rituals and economic activities (Hardenberg, 2016). "The Dongria argue that without jiu [soul] of the hills, neither trees, nor forest, nor streams and animals would exist." (Jena *et al.*, 2002: 267). The Kondhs speak a distinct language and are known for their distinctive culture. Their gods do not reside in temples but are tied to the hills, forests, and streams of their surroundings. Every village, at its entrance, had a wooden pillar known as the *bata debata*, the gatekeeper, as the divine marker of the village and at its center, *Darni Penu* the Earth Goddess (the divine feminine as their main deity) was worshipped along with *Bura Penu*, the Sky God. At that time, I was studying the exploitation going on in this area with the influx of people from the plains, namely government officials, businessmen, contactors, moneylenders, and other entrepreneurs grabbing land and living well at the cost of the Kondhs.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, the Kondhmal area attracted many people from all over India in search of a better life. In the name of progress, mega constructions took place in Kalahandi and G. Udayagiri (transliterated spelling), and the capital city of Phulbani (predominantly a Kondh district) that have witnessed a massive influx of the mainstream population into the tribal areas. Many of the officials and businessmen were

¹⁴ For details, please refer "Royal descendants of the mountain God" Accessed on 06.02.2017, at <http://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/dongria>.

temporarily assigned to work in the forests of Odisha in fulfillment of government or forestry contracts, to build roads and to work in the steel mining projects.

It became a common practice among these migrants to marry Kondh women with a meager bride price and exchange of a few gifts. However, most of the men were already married and had families in their native states. They knew full well that this new marriage was not in compliance with the Hindu Marriage Act (1956),¹⁵ but local custom supporting the independence of Kondh women sanctioned their living with a Kondh woman as their wife. This arrangement was indeed extremely beneficial for the man: in his Kondh wife, he got a sex provider, caretaker, housekeeper and cook, for a meager sum. In a few years they would have children. Being the wife of a Hindu, the Kondh woman would start wearing vermilion, bangles, and anklets, and cover her head as a symbol of marriage. But this fairy-tale marriage did not last long. The men, as I stated, had a parallel family back home; eventually, at the end of the business contract or state transfer, they left the area, promising they would come back soon to collect their beloved wife and children. Of course, they never returned. This practice introduced a growing number of dejected wives and children in G.Udayagiri, which became popularly known as *Premnagar* ("Pleasure Town"). It attracted lots of tourists in search of sexual pleasure for free. The abandoned women did not have the face to return to their communities.

This major social problem gave rise to the emergence in 1979 of an indigenous women's organization known as Ghumusar Mahila Sangathan (GMS) led by Maka Naik, a Kondh woman. With support of other activist groups and student organizations, GMS attracted a lot of media attention. GMS challenged the men in court and succeeded in getting traditional marriages recognized as legal. As a result, in forty cases, women were declared legal wives entitled to financial support (GMS, 1998). The state ultimately acknowledged the helpless situation of these women and provided adequate compensation for them and their children. The men were also charged with human rights violations. Today this practice of men working in the region marrying Kondh women illegally is not common. But now with the bauxite mining in the area, new problems have

¹⁵ The Hindu Marriage Act (1956) applies to all the citizens of India except the Scheduled Tribes and specifies that a marriage may be solemnized between any two Hindus, if the following conditions are fulfilled, namely: (i) neither party has a spouse living at the time of the marriage; (ii) at the time of the marriage, neither party, (a) is incapable of giving a valid consent of it in consequence of unsoundness of mind; or (b) though capable of giving a valid consent has been suffering from mental disorder of such a kind or to such an extent as to be unfit for marriage and the procreation of children; or (c) has been subject to recurrent attacks of insanity or epilepsy; (iii) the bridegroom has completed the age of twenty one years and the bride the age of eighteen years at the time of the marriage; (iv) the parties are not within the degrees of prohibited relationship unless the custom or usage governing each of them permits of a marriage between the two; (v) the parties are not *sapindas* (related by blood) of each other, unless the custom or usage governing each of them permits of a marriage between the two.... Source: The Hindu Marriage Act, 1956 (Act 25 of 1956). Accessed on 26.03.2018, at http://www.delhihighcourt.nic.in/library/acts_bills_rules_regulations/The%20hindu%20marriage%20Act.%201955.pdf.

emerged – massive displacement of the tribal people from their own land; the depletion of the forests due to large-scale mining; and urban migration for livelihoods that often end up being sex trafficking for women, due to poverty and unemployment.

When I visited that area in 2004, the community house (Dhangari Ghara) where boys and girls used to socialize was almost deserted. When I asked about it, I was told that the Kondhs had faced continuous rampage by the outside community. In fear for the safety and security of their women, they had stopped the practice of young men and women meeting on a casual basis and getting to know each other. Women were wearing vermilion and covering their faces so as not to be teased and mistreated by the mainstream Hindu society. Even though there had been a consistent effort to improve the education of boys and girls in the area, the constant threat of rape and abduction of the Kondh girls even by their non-tribal teachers made the schools an unsafe place to be in.

Since the tribal women are traditionally equal partners with men in producing and collecting food from the forest, their relationships have been disrupted by the multiple levels of oppression they experience due to the multinational corporate mining venture, urbanization, and the industrialization of this region. They see a correlation between the rise in alcohol consumption by men and their violence towards women; between women's lack of access to the forest resources and their poverty; between gender and sexual exploitation; and between culture loss and identity crisis. GMS today focuses on many aspects of tribal women's problems: poverty, health and nutrition, economy, development, education, biodiversity training and empowerment, violence against women, media attention, and participation in decision-making (M. Mishra, 2001). In the development model borrowed from the West, a clear discrepancy can be observed between the state's ideology and the existing cultural, social, and economic realities of tribal women in Odisha and elsewhere in India. As Kim Berry observes, "Ideas about women and their needs are created out of and are nested within unequal power relations" (Berry, 2003: 78); the increasing role of state and capitalist ideologies and practices in the region is particularly oppressive to Kondh women.

KONDHS OF NIYAMAGIRI AND THE STATE

Odisha has these percentages of the mineral reserves of India: 25% of its coal reserves, 33% of its iron ore, 59.5% of India's bauxite, 92% of its nickel, and 98% of its chromate. As Padhy and Panigrahi report (2011: 25), since the independence, Odisha has set up 190 mining development projects, which have deforested 24,124 hectares of land, the basic source of livelihood of the tribal people.

The state of Odisha, especially the southern belt comprising of Koraput, Balangir and Kalahandi districts (KBK), is endowed with 1733 million tons (70%) of the total bauxite resources of the country. In the post-liberalization period, this mineral resource has attracted many multinational corporations both from within and outside the country, dragging this state into the globalization arena. The state wholeheartedly supports these initiatives, attracting huge revenues from the mining. During the 1992-1997 period, bauxite resources in Odisha have pulled in \$20.5 billion dollars. Vedanta Aluminium Ltd has set up and is operating a one-million ton alumina refinery at Lanjigarh, in the district of Kalahandi, based on a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed with the Government of Odisha which stated that up to 150 million tons of bauxite for the plant will be supplied from nearby Niyamagiri hills (Vedanta report, 2012). However, with the protest of the local Dongria Kondhs, the Union Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF) has disallowed bauxite excavation at Niyamgiri.



FIGURE III – Factory Belt across Niyamagiri

Author: Annapurna Devi Pandey (2016).

These mining projects have had an adverse impact on the local tribal people, leading to their physical displacement, loss of land, loss of access to the forest and its resources,

as well as affecting their indigenous livelihood. The state is getting plenty of revenue and has fervently promoted mining as a sure way to curb unemployment among the youth in Odisha. Middle class ambitious youth and entrepreneurs from different parts of the state have flocked to these areas and have found a quick way of making money. But the mining project areas are inhabited by tribal people – they live and breathe around these mines.



FIGURE IV – Vedanta Mining Complex

Author: Annapurna Devi Pandey (2016).



FIGURE IV – Vedanta Factory

Author: Annapurna Devi Pandey (2016).

The Niyamagiri hills provide major livelihood sources to the Dongria Kondhs – not only the sources of food and water, but also their identity and spirituality. According to their origin myth, Donger *raja* is their god, ancestor, and the source of their being. They realize that with bauxite mining in the area, their kin and clan are displaced and have suffered severe blows – depletion of forest resources have become the biggest threat in the wake of mining projects in the surrounding districts. This has been accompanied by the “piling up of solid effluents such as red mud and tons of sodium hydroxide, leaving a high PH level in the soil and loss of vegetation and natural habitats” (Padhi and Panigrahi, 2011: 43), a major health hazard.

BAUXITE MINING AND ITS IMPACT ON PLACE AND PEOPLE

It is interesting to note that the state government advertises the establishment of bauxite mining by NALCO¹⁶ at Damanjodi only 110 kilometers from Kashipur as the symbol of state pride. In reality, it has adversely affected the tribal people and their livelihood. With the depletion of the forest source, people are displaced from their own land and are forced to perform wage labor. Around every bauxite mine, local people testify that their water sources that were perennial have dried up – this is just part of the danger faced by farmers in the area. I observed similar situations while visiting the Aditya Birla mining project in the neighboring city of Barbil, in Keonjhar district. There are eighty iron ore mines operating in this region around Barbil as it is known as the fifth largest deposit of iron ore and manganese ore in the world. I was shocked to see the thick red dust all over the trees, roads and houses. While visiting the mining sites, one could see the open cast mining mile after mile; the hills have been cut down and piles of iron ore mounted and transported by trucks to the nearby railway station. The people have moved away from the hills and are now living in small makeshift housing and were standing in line to work in the mines. All the managerial jobs are held by the non-tribal *babus*¹⁷ while the low-paying manual jobs are given to the tribal people. Clearly, one can see that there was no fair sharing of the profit made by the mines. Even though the multinational mining corporations are making excessive profit, illegal mining is common and it has created scores of millionaires coming from the plains, while the tribals remain poor and mostly are illiterate.

¹⁶ National Aluminium Company Ltd (NALCO) Nalco, a public sector company was incorporated in 1981 to extract and process a part of the large deposits of bauxite discovered in the state of Odisha. The Captive Power Plant (CPP) & Smelter Plant are situated near Angul. 26.03.2018, at <http://www.angul.nic.in/nalco.htm>.

¹⁷ The term *babu* was used by the British administrators for low level clerks working for them. Over a period of time, it acquired various meanings such as in Bengali: it was used affectionately for middle caste and class. Now there is ambiguity in the way it is used, sometimes affectionately and sometimes derogatively. In the above context I am using it for non-tribal managerial employees.

KONDH RESISTANCE: A SUCCESS STORY

It is because of the dedication and courage shown by the Dongria Kondhs that the Niyamgiri hills are still untouched (apart from the refinery below). For the people, the Niyamgiri hills are too precious to be touched. Everyone knows that once the machines move in, it is a slippery slope and those hills will become history. The Dongria Kondhs in the Niyamgiri hills have raised their voice against such mega-development projects. They have questioned these development projects by asking “Development for whom and at whose cost?” noting that it steals tribal people of their livelihood resources. This is one of the reasons why there have been several protests of the tribal people in Odisha against the state-sponsored bauxite mining operations in 1985, 1996, 1997, 2000 and 2005 (Padhi and Panigrahi, 2011). This shows the conflict between the state-sponsored development, which favors industrialization and mining, and that of the people who prefer sustainable livelihood provided by their environment. In all these movements women have taken an active part through picketing, processions and public hearings. The emergence of an indigenous leadership made all these movements more widespread.

Since 1991 – when the state liberalized its policies and got rid of the permit quota system –, different business interest groups are competing in the globalized arena in order to maximize their own profits. This leaves out the protection, which the state had provided in the name of the uplift of the tribal people. Many people have made a lot of money – legally or illegally – from various mining operations and some of that money has gone into financing various state enterprises. Unless and until the state rises up to its obligation to protect all citizens – marginalized as well as privileged – these tribal people are going to be exploited, leaving them to fend for their own lives and livelihood.

The India of today, by all accounts, is becoming a very different country, no longer a predominantly agrarian society. Due to world-class information technology and the revolution in telecommunications, it has been pushed to become the third largest economy in Asia with a rising middle class, close to the total population of the United States. Both internal and foreign industrial houses and corporations have contributed to this massive growth since the advent of liberalization and globalization in early 1990s.

Odisha – known as a “backward” state – also wants to have its own share of the benefits of globalization. The state has much of the country’s mineral reserves (a million tons), mostly concentrated in its tribal areas. In order to increase its per capita income, it has collaborated with many multinational corporations and big industries in India to do mining, which is affecting the life of the people in many adverse ways. The state has adapted neoliberal policies to promote growth without taking into account the impact it is bound to have on the health and well-being of the tribal people living in the area.

NIYAMAGIRI TODAY: CHALLENGES FACED BY THE KONDHS

Despite all the protest movements and the Supreme Court decision against proposed mining described in this section, in July 2013 the news came that the refinery in Lanjigarh will reopen and even expand its refinery after seven months of being closed due to lack of availability of bauxite.¹⁸ With the protest of the local tribals called Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti (NSS), the Supreme Court of India ordered the state of Odisha to halt any mining operation until ascertaining the views of the local people through the Palli Sabhas (village panchayats). The tribal people expressed fear that money power, coupled with the muscle power, would co-opt some of their leaders who would favor state's agenda in promoting the interest of the Vedanta mining corporation against their own people. Unless and until a wider resistance movement of the oppressed is mounted against the oppressors – the state and the corporations – nothing is going to be achieved in the name of preserving the pristine land and the livelihood of the tribal people in that region.

Niyamagiri has become a site for contestation by various agencies. Dongria Kondhs and their supporters are still fighting to save their natural resources, their cultural and religious rights. Though lying low, state government of Odisha is still supporting mining operations in the adjacent mines and bringing the bauxite for processing at the Lanjigarh refinery. It wants to give lease to multinational and other mega national corporations in the hope to get some investment in the state. Central government has its own environmental mandate in line with the Constitution. Different political parties have their own agenda regarding mining. The state to its advantage can invoke the “eminent Domain” in support of Vedanta mining operation in Niyamagiri. The argument is that communities will be forced to give away their lands for the larger benefit of the public, in the process disregarding the customary laws and the cultural and religious rights of the local communities. History shows that the state invariably has used force to invoke “eminent domain” thus causing the indigenous people immense suffering. There is tremendous uncertainty looming large as Vedanta Aluminum factory is still present in Niyamgiri area. The state has increased the patrolling by CRPF where innocent people are picked up – implicated in false cases or branded as Naxalites. With low level of education and employment possibilities, they are unable to aspire for any alternative livelihood. Despite creating an oppositional space for themselves, the indigenous people are unable to stop atrocities and discrimination by outsiders. One can see why Medha

¹⁸ See the source: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/indl-goods/svs/metals-mining/vedanta-hopeful-of-restarting-lanjigarh-refinery-by-july/articleshow/20132673.cms>, accessed on 26.03.2018.

Patkar, the eminent environmental activist would say that in doing that, state is openly favouring corporate interests and their profit over the well-being of people.¹⁹

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¹⁹ Foreword to "Displaced by Development", edited by Lyla Mehta (2009: xiv).

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