
The Role of Art and Culture in Fostering Resistance: A Case Study of Niyamgiri in Kalahandi

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Abstract

Art and culture have long been influential in fostering resistance and asserting identity, particularly in marginalised communities. In Odisha, the Niyamgiri Hills of Kalahandi represent an important case study where Indigenous art and cultural practices have been crucial in resisting industrial encroachment and ecological degradation. The Dongria Kondh and the Kutia Kondh tribes are, custodians of the Niyamgiri Hills, and have effectively used their rich cultural heritage for mobilisation, advocacy, and resistance against corporate exploitation.

The Niyamgiri movement, which gained global attention due to its opposition to mining projects intimidating the sacred hills, is deeply rooted in the Dongria Kondh and Kutia's cultural practices. Their songs, dances, and oral narratives are not merely artistic expressions but also profound declarations of their spiritual connection to the land. The Dongria Kondh view Niyamgiri as a living deity, and their rituals and festivals symbolise their commitment to protecting the hills. Art, in this context, becomes a powerful medium for communicating their identity, struggles, and ecological concerns to the outside world.

This paper examines how Dongria and Kutia Kondh utilised cultural symbols, traditional knowledge, and artistic expressions to resist the proposed bauxite mining in Niyamgiri. It highlights the intersection of cultural preservation and environmental activism, where art becomes both a mode of storytelling and a strategy for resistance. By analysing the Niyamgiri case, the study demonstrates how art and culture can serve as potent tools in challenging socio-political and economic domination while fostering a sense of solidarity and resilience among oppressed communities.

The paper concludes that the role of art and culture in resistance movements like Niyamgiri emphasises their enduring relevance in safeguarding not only heritage but also human rights and environmental integrity in their culture.

Keywords: Art, culture, resistance, tribe, Longoria kind, Niyamgiri, Bauxite mining, Vedant

1. Introduction

1.1 Contextual Background

The Dongria Kondh, a tribal community in Odisha, are known for their deep connection to the Niyamgiri Hills, which they regard as sacred. Their vibrant art and cultural practices are not merely aesthetic expressions but also a medium of resistance against external forces threatening their existence.

The Niyamgiri Hills, located in Odisha's Rayagada and Kalahandi districts, are not just the habitat of 8000 Dongria Kondhs but also their spiritual and cultural cornerstone. These hills, rich in bauxite deposits, attracted mining interest from Vedanta Resources in the early 2000s. The Dongria Kondh, who consider the hills their deity (Niyam Raja), opposed the project, fearing it would destroy their environment, livelihood, and sacred spaces.

The Niyamgiri Hills are more than a physical entity for the Dongria and Kutia Kondh; they represent a sacred cosmos where their deity resides. The hills provide sustenance through agriculture, forests, and water sources, forming the basis of the tribe's livelihood.

This case study examines how the Dongria and Kutia Kondh utilised art and culture to resist the proposed bauxite mining by Vedanta Resources in the Niyamgiri Hills, emphasising the role of Indigenous art in environmental and cultural activism

1.2 Problem Statement

Industrial encroachments on indigenous lands often result in the erasure of cultural identities, with the loss of traditional knowledge systems and artistic practices. This paper investigates how the Dongria and Kutia Kondh tribe turned their cultural expressions into tools of resistance to defend their homeland and heritage.

2. Research Objectives

2.1 To explore the role of Indigenous art and culture in mobilising the Dongria and Kutia Kondh community.

2.2 To assess how cultural practices influenced the perception of the movement at national and international levels.

2.3 To understand the implications of cultural resistance in safeguarding indigenous heritage and ecosystems.

3. Thesis Statement

The Niyamgiri movement exemplifies how indigenous art and culture can serve as a unifying force and a mechanism for resistance, effectively challenging powerful industrial and state apparatuses.

4. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design using a case study approach to examine the Niyamgiri resistance. It incorporates ethnographic elements to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of art and culture in the movement.

5. Data Collection Methods

5.1. Primary Data:

- i) Field observations during cultural ceremonies and protests.
- ii) Semi-structured interviews with Dongria and Kutia Kondh tribe members, activists, and anthropologists.
- iii) Participation in rituals and festivals associated with Niyam Raja.

5.2. Secondary Data:

- i) Analysis of literature on indigenous resistance movements.
- ii) Review of media reports, documentaries, and photographs of the Niyamgiri movement.
- iii) Examination of traditional songs, dances, and visual art forms.

6. Analytical Framework

The study employs cultural theory, emphasising the symbolic and communicative functions of art and rituals. Theoretical perspectives from Stuart Hall on representation and Clifford Geertz on interpretive anthropology inform the analysis of cultural expressions.

Case Study: The Role of Dongria Kondh Art in Resisting Mining in the Niyamgiri Hills

Cultural Significance :

The Niyamgiri Hills hold profound cultural and spiritual significance for the Dongria and Kutia Kondh, shaping their identity, beliefs, and way of life. These hills are not merely a physical space but a sacred entity that embodies their worldview and cosmology. Key aspects of their cultural significance include:

1. Niyam Raja as the Central Deity:

The Dongria and Kutia Kondh believe Niyam Raja, their supreme deity, resides in the hills, and his presence governs their lives. Niyam Raja is seen as a protector who ensures the balance between nature and the community. Religious rituals, such as the Meria Puja, are conducted to honour the deity and seek blessings for health, prosperity, and ecological harmony. These practices emphasize the interconnectedness of their spirituality and the natural environment.

POEM ON NATURE, CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Niyamraja created fruits in the hills, and grains in the plains,
He is the first of the Dongria Kondh.

No one knows his story, and lakhs of people are unaware I will sing, I will sing.

Why the outsiders? They must spare our land.

After making pineapple, mango, jackfruit and grains Niyamraja said to us

‘live on what I have given you’ Niyam Raja decided where there would be fruits and grains Which seed would be soft and which one would be hard.

What will we do without the fruits, grains and buffaloes?

What will we do without Niyamgiri...?

What will the animals do without the big forests?

What will we do without the plants that save lives? -From the lament of Niyamraja
(sung by the late Dambu Praska

(Source: <http://www.cultureunplugged.com/play/57/The-Lament-of-Niyamraj>)

2. Traditional Knowledge and Practices:

The Dongria and Kutia Kondh's cultural heritage is deeply intertwined with their knowledge of the forest and its resources. Their traditional agricultural practices, such as shifting cultivation, are sustainable and respect the ecological balance of the region. They cultivate crops like turmeric, millet, and beans, which hold both economic and ceremonial importance.

3. Oral Traditions and Folklore:

The tribe's stories, songs, and oral traditions emphasise the sanctity of Niyamgiri and its role in their history. These narratives have been passed down for generations, preserving their cultural identity and reinforcing their relationship with the land. Folk songs often speak of the hills' beauty, abundance, and the tribe's duty to protect them.

4. Community Identity:

For the Dongria and Kutia Kondh, the Niyamgiri Hills are inseparable from their collective identity. Displacement from these sacred lands would not only mean a loss of physical space but also the erasure of their cultural essence. Their festivals, dances, and attire are all reflective of the natural surroundings, underscoring their cultural integration with the hills.

5. Ecological Significance

The Niyamgiri Hills are a biodiversity hotspot, providing crucial ecological services that benefit not only the Dongria and Kutia Kondh but also the surrounding regions. The ecological significance of these hills includes the following dimensions:

6. Biodiversity Hotspot:

Niyamgiri is home to a wide variety of flora and fauna, many of which are endemic to the Eastern Ghats. The dense forests of the hills support wildlife such as tigers, leopards, elephants, and rare bird species. The hills also serve as a critical habitat for

medicinal plants, which the Dongria and Kutia Kondh use in their traditional healing practices.

7. Watershed for Rivers:

The hills are the source of several perennial streams and rivers, including the Vamsadhara River. These water bodies sustain agriculture, forests, and human settlements downstream, making Niyamgiri an essential part of the regional hydrological cycle. Mining activities would have disrupted these water sources, leading to droughts and water scarcity in the area.

8. Forest Resources:

The forests of Niyamgiri provide non-timber forest products (NTFPs) such as honey, fruits, bamboo, and medicinal plants, which are vital for the Dongria and Kutia Kondh's livelihood. The tribe's sustainable harvesting methods ensure that these resources are preserved for the future. The dense forest cover of Niyamgiri plays a significant role in carbon sequestration and mitigating climate change. By protecting these forests, the Dongria Kondh contribute to global efforts to combat deforestation and environmental degradation.

10. Sacred Ecology:

The Dongria Kondh's spiritual beliefs foster a form of ecological ethics that prioritises conservation. For example, certain trees, water bodies, and hills are considered sacred and are protected from exploitation. This deep respect for nature has created a sustainable model of coexistence between humans and the environment.

11. Resilience Against Environmental Degradation:

The ecological integrity of Niyamgiri acts as a buffer against soil erosion, floods, and other forms of environmental degradation. Mining operations would have disrupted this balance, leading to long-term ecological consequences for the region.

Interconnection of Cultural and Ecological Significance

The cultural and ecological dimensions of Niyamgiri are deeply intertwined. The Dongria and Kutia Kondh's cultural practices are shaped by the ecology of the hills, while their spiritual reverence for nature fosters ecological stewardship.

This interconnection is evident in:

Rituals and Ecosystem Conservation: Rituals like Meria Puja involve offerings to Niyam Raja, which also serve to regulate resource use and maintain ecological balance.

Sacred Groves: Certain parts of the forest are designated as sacred and remain untouched, acting as biodiversity reserves.

Sustainable Practices: The tribe's traditional farming and resource management methods are aligned with the principles of sustainability, ensuring that ecological systems remain intact.

By emphasising both cultural and ecological significance, the Dongria and Kutia Kondh have successfully resisted industrial encroachment. The Niyamgiri Hills are not just a physical space but a repository of intangible cultural heritage and ecological wealth, making their protection a global imperative.

Challenges from Industrial Encroachment

The mining project proposed by Vedanta Resources posed severe threats:

Ecological Impact: Bauxite mining would devastate the biodiversity of Niyamgiri, affecting flora, fauna, and water systems.

Cultural Erosion: The displacement of the Dongria Kondh would sever their spiritual connection to the hills and disrupt their traditional practices.

Example: Protesters sang traditional songs during public meetings and rallies, articulating their grievances and asserting their cultural identity.

Art as a Medium of Resistance

1. Ritual Art and Symbols

The Dongria and Kutia Kondh use art forms such as painting, embroidery, and tattoos to express their identity and spirituality. During the resistance, these forms became symbolic tools for preserving their culture and communicating their message to a global audience.

1.1 Motifs of Nature: Their art prominently features motifs of trees, hills, animals, and rivers, symbolising their symbiotic relationship with the environment. These motifs were displayed in public demonstrations, emphasising the environmental stakes of the mining project.

2. Storytelling and Songs

The Dongria and Kutia Kondh's oral traditions, including songs and folktales, played a crucial role in mobilising their community.

Songs composed during the movement highlighted the sanctity of the Niyamgiri Hills and criticized the exploitation of natural resources. These songs were performed during protests and meetings, galvanising support from within and outside the community.

3. Folk Songs as Protest Tools

The Dongria expressed their resistance through folk songs that narrated their deep connection to the hills. These songs emphasised themes of harmony with nature, the sanctity of Niyamgiri, and their rejection of external interference.

4. Handicrafts and Public Demonstrations

The tribe used their distinctive textiles and crafts to draw attention to their cause. At public rallies and international advocacy events, Dongria women wore traditional attire with embroidered motifs representing their struggle, creating a visual narrative of resistance.

5. Rituals and Religious Practices

The tribe's religious practices, such as the annual Meria Puja, became acts of defiance. By performing these rituals on disputed land, the Dongria and Kutia Kondh reinforced their spiritual claim over Niyamgiri and communicated their resistance to industrial exploitation.

6. Dance and Performance

Tribal dances, performed during protests and gatherings, served as a medium for storytelling and community bonding. These performances attracted media attention and became a visual representation of the movement's cultural vibrancy.

7. Visual Art as Resistance

Local artists and craftsmen created artworks and symbols representing Niyam Raja and the sacredness of the hills. These artefacts were used during protests and shared on global platforms, spreading the message of resistance.

8. Symbolism and Identity

Traditional attire, ornaments, and tools of the Dongria became symbols of indigenous resistance. Protesters deliberately wore traditional dress to assert their identity and contrast it with the modern industrial apparatus they opposed.

Impact of the Artistic Resistance

1. National and International Attention:

The use of art and culture in their resistance gained widespread attention. Organizations like Survival International amplified their cultural expressions, presenting their case as an example of indigenous resistance to corporate exploitation.

Niyamgiri Surakhya samiti, Visthapana birodhi Janbikash Andolan, Green Kalahandi, Lokshakti Abhiyan are few among others who supported the movement.

The cultural dimension of the movement resonated with environmentalists, human rights organisations, and activists worldwide. NGOs and international bodies like Amnesty International supported the movement, framing it as a fight for indigenous rights and environmental conservation.

2. Legal Victory

The Dongria Kondh's artistic and cultural assertion contributed to a larger narrative that influenced the Supreme Court of India's decision in 2013. The court mandated

gram sabhas (village councils) to decide on the mining project. All 12 Gram sabhas rejected the proposal, marking a significant victory for the tribe.

Justice Aftab Alam, Justice K.R . Radhakrishnan and Justice Ranjan Gogoi led to the victory of Niyamgiri Satyagraha.

3. Global Solidarity: The case highlights the need for global networks to support indigenous art as a means of resistance.

This case study exemplifies how art and culture can act as powerful tools of resistance, bridging the gap between local struggles and global advocacy. Let me know if you need further details!

The movement not only protected the Niyamgiri Hills but also revitalized the Dongria Kondh's cultural identity. Their art gained recognition as a symbol of environmental and indigenous resistance, ensuring its transmission to future generations.

Resistance as a Cultural Duty:

The community's fight against industrial encroachment is rooted in their cultural obligation to protect Niyamgiri. By safeguarding the hills, the Dongria Kondh fulfil their spiritual and cultural duty to Niyam Raja, ensuring the continuity of their traditions for future generations.

Challenges and Lessons Learned: While the Dongria Kondh achieved a landmark victory, the case underscores the vulnerabilities faced by Indigenous communities:

1. Economic Exploitation: The community continues to face economic challenges, limiting the
2. potential growth of their art and craft forms.
- 3.Despite the movement's success, the Dongria Kondh face challenges in preserving their culture amid increasing exposure to external influences. The younger generation is particularly vulnerable to assimilation pressures.

Preservation of Culture and Environment

The movement ensured the continuation of traditional practices while protecting Niyamgiri's biodiversity. It highlighted the need to integrate Indigenous perspectives into environmental governance.

Representation and Stereotyping

The portrayal of the Dongria Kondh in media and activist narratives, while supportive, sometimes risked romanticising or simplifying their culture.

Lessons for Future Movements

The Niyamgiri movement underscores the importance of integrating cultural identity into resistance strategies. Future movements can draw inspiration from its ability to blend traditional practices with modern activism.

Conclusion

The Niyamgiri movement demonstrates the transformative power of art and culture in fostering resistance. The Dongria Kondh tribe's use of folk songs, rituals, visual arts, and performance highlights how indigenous communities can assert their identity and challenge exploitative forces. As global environmental crises deepen, movements like Niyamgiri offer valuable lessons in sustainable, community-driven activism.

THE GUARDIAN SAYS

After years of controversy and confusion, Vedanta's project to mine bauxite on a forested hill considered sacred by an ancient tribe has been stopped by the Indian government.

"There's no emotion, no politics, no prejudice," environment minister Jairam Ramesh said as he announced that Vedanta would not be allowed to mine in the Niyamgiri Hills of the eastern Orissa state. "I have taken this decision purely on a legal approach – laws are being violated."

IAS EXPRESS SAYS

In 2013, The Supreme Court gave its judgement, in favour of the tribes, in the historic Orissa Mining Corporation Limited vs Ministry of Environment & Forest Case:

- The court recognised the tribe's cultural, religious and spiritual rights over the Niyamgiri hills as taking precedence over Vedanta's claims over bauxite deposits.

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- 7.kalahandi Ra Sabdakosha .