‘In your cities, there is so much noise and filth everywhere. You need money for everything: for food, for water, even to relieve yourself! I have been to Sambhalpur. What filth and dirt! It was everywhere. I had to pay to go to a toilet but it was so dirty, I didn’t use it the whole time I was there. Why should I give up my Niyamgiri? You walked through the forest to reach here. You saw how clean it is. Everything here is free. I have an identity here, amongst the forests and hills. My people have an identity. In a city, our identities will be lost.’ This is what Lado Sikaka, a Dongria Kondh elder said, when asked about his views on our so called ‘civilized and developed’ world.

Bari Pidikaka, Ganesh Jakesika and Dodhi Pusika singing a folk song in praise of Niyamraja (Photo Credit: Meenal Tatpati)

It was a pleasant winter afternoon in Lakhopadar village, of Rayagada district, our third day in the Niyamgiri hills. Our visit to the villages of Niyamgiri range in Odisha in December 2014 was guided by a quest to understand these aberrations pointed out by Lado in the development story of this country[1]. Such pockets like the Niyamgiri hills exist today where communities like the Dongrias are challenging the set tenets of growth and development conceptualized by the civilized world. Through articulations such as these, we were seeking to understand the ties that bind this community to the Niyamgiri hills, fostering a deep respect and a sense of belonging to the land, and their perspective, which may be lost in the loud cacophony of the mainstream narrative.

The Niyamgiri hills or the ‘the hills of law’ and their foothills and plains are part of an important biodiverse landscape in Odisha, and constitute the habitat of Dongria and Kutia Kondh adivasi communities which have, along with some settled scheduled castes, been part of the Niyamgiris, and have themselves developed a close association with the forests and the fertile soil accumulated at the foothills. The Dongria identify themselves as Jharnia, the ones living near and protecting the numerous streams of the Niyamgiri ranges[2]. They believe that the hills are the abode of Niyamraja (the King
of Law), their supreme deity and ancestral spirit who rules the hills along with other deities associated closely with nature. The way of life practiced by the Dongria is therefore the law as prescribed by Niyamraja. It does not allow unsustainable exploitation of the forest and the land at the behest of greed.[iii]. Every Dongria elder we met reiterated that everything within their habitat belonged to Niyamraja and Niyamraja was everything. Their relationship with Niyamraja and the hills became evident at Gorota village when a few Dongria elders and youth broke into an impromptu song, describing the hills and plains of Niyamgiri and extolling Niyamraja, calling themselves his children. This is their identity; this is what Lado had spoken about.

In Niyamgiri, government schemes have helped fund well intentioned motives like the building of pre-schools and primary schools, road networks and tube wells, introducing varieties of horticultural crops to ‘enhance’ the agricultural output and providing free rice through the PDS (Public Distribution System). However, the school building we saw at Gorota village in Rayagada district was being used as a storage space. The Dongrias we spoke to told us that the education system alienated them, lessons are taught not in the native Kui dialect but in a language (Odiya) that barely anyone uses, and the curriculum which features nothing of the local history or culture, is taught only by outsiders rather than village elders.

Tarred roads are seen as unnecessary. Dongria elders we met were of the opinion that these would increase the influx of outsiders in the village. The Dongrias practice

swidden or shifting agriculture and cultivate several different varieties of millets on their fields (podu), along with lentils, tubers, cereals and oilseeds, which reflects their self-sufficiency in food production and highly nutritional choice of crops rather than the staple rice and wheat that the PDS supplies. Thus, the developmental schemes being implemented by the modern State have perpetually been at odds with their way of life. We realized that welfare initiatives had in many ways failed to address the needs of the tribe.

While on the one hand, the government continues to administer inappropriate developmental schemes, on the other hand the State has rapaciously tried to assist corporations in extracting the bauxite from the Dongria habitat to feed its growth fetish. A MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) between the State of Odisha and Sterlite Industries (now Sesa Sterlite, the Indian arm of the global mining behemoth Vedanta Corporation), had attempted sealed the fate of the Niyamgiri hills and the Dongria Kondh. An aluminum refinery was set up in the foothills of the Niyamgiri ranges at Lanjigarh in Kalahandi district by circumventing several laws, and the bauxite was to be sourced from the Niyamgiri ranges. For years, the Dongria struggled against this MoU, refusing to give up Niyamgiri in spite of repression, threats and even murder. As the struggle progressed, this battle which the Dongria had taken to the Supreme Court resulted in a landmark judgment, where the court ordered the Government of Odisha to hold gram sabhas in the Dongria villages and obtain consent from the community on mining. The judgment hailed the provisions of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, (Forest Rights Act or FRA) and upheld several constitutional provisions regarding the protection of schedule tribes in Indian law. Because of the unanimous rejection of the mining proposal by the gram sabhas, the bauxite mining from Niyamgiri ranges was disallowed.

[iii]

[iv]
It is no surprise then that the Dongria are skeptical of the current developmental paradigm. They have witnessed the effects of this kind of development on the Kutia Kondhs and other communities of Lanjigarh. With land being taken away for setting up the refinery in the foothills and the promised jobs nowhere in sight, the money has long been spent on alcohol, and criminal activities abound. The operation of the refinery has created severe water, air and noise pollution resulting in health problems and loss of livelihoods dependent on village commons land in the foothills. Apart from these tangible effects, the inroads of the State through ill conceived schemes, repressive police action and false criminal charges on the Dongria community members, and the increased interaction with the world outside Niyamgiri that the struggle against the refinery brought, has pushed the ‘outside culture’ as the Dongria elders put it, too close to home for this community. Increasing dependence on liquor, the increased monetary transactions and loss of traditional medicinal knowledge are all threats that the Dongrias have perceived, and have begun pondering over such issues in their local meetings. While we were in Niyamgiri, there was a series of anti-liquor meetings in which several aspects of the loss of cultural values, the need to revive and stay true to their culture and the need to protect forests were stressed upon by the Dongria elders and youth alike.

Through our interactions with the Dongria Kondhs, we have come back with the realization that the essence of their living depends upon the well being of Niyamgiri hills. The Dongrias as a community have resonated the willingness to die for the Niyamgiri, if protecting it so requires. This dependence on the forests or rather independence (to a large extent) from the outside market system fosters a sense of pride in the Kondh.

The enduring memory from Niyamgiri that we carry with us is from Lakhopadar. After speaking to Lado Sikaka about the struggle, our curiosity about the podu fields got the better of us, and we asked him if we could visit his field. He happily took us along. We saw his wife and daughter working the fields alongside him. The frown on his face, so prominent while he spoke about the advent of the state’s aggressive development, had given way to a joyful, pleasant smile. It grew wider as he saw us smacking our lips in delight while polishing off the delicious mandia (finger millet) gruel he had prepared in the field. It was the smile of a man content in living life as his ancestors had lived, satiated in the so called ‘primitiveness’ of his culture and identity. While we did perceive the threats to this community and its habitat, we saw that it was necessary to allow them to articulate, debate and assert the development that they wanted for the future of Niyamgiri.
The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People

[v]

\[\text{control by indigenous peoples over developments affecting them and their lands, territories and resources will enable them to maintain and strengthen their institutions, cultures and traditions, and to promote their development in accordance with their aspirations and needs.}\]

We believe that if given an opportunity to develop and protect their identity and land on their own terms, the Dongria can help us to introspect on the current notions of progress, growth and development and the evolution of the human civilization towards 'modernity without regard for nature'.

[i] We visited Sherkapadi, Kesarpadi, Gorota and Lakhopadar Dongria villages in Rayagada district, Odisha.

[ii] See: http://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/dongria

[iii] Interview with anthropologist, Dr. Felix Padel. See: http://www.survivalinternational.org/articles/3322-interview-with-felix-padel

[iv] Detailed account of the gram sabhas are available at: http://www.downtoearth.org.in/content/battle-nyamgiri


Contact the authors
Meenal Tatpati
and
Rashi Mishra
who are with
Kalpavriksh
Pune. Read a case study on Niyamgiri - The Niyamgiri Story. The study attempts to present the articulations of the Dongria Kondh about the current model of 'development' practiced by the state through wrongly envisaged welfare schemes as also extractive industries. What emerges is their strong view against this form of development, their attempts to counter it, through the Niyamgir Surakshya Samiti, and glimpses of their alternative worldview.