

Red mud spill and people's resistance at Niyamgiri: A first hand report from the struggle.

On 16th May after heavy rain, toxic red mud poured from a breach in one of Vedanta's Lanjigarh refinery red mud ponds, spilling onto the village below. The next day landless people displaced by the project held two blockades demanding adequate compensation; a five day walking protest ended with a meeting of 500 people on the threatened Niyamgiri hills; and the funeral of a tribal movement leader, killed by factory pollution, was held. Two months before Vedanta's often-subverted AGM this will be bad news for the company. This is a direct report from the scene.

Red mud spill

On the evening of 16th May 2011 one of the Lanjigarh alumina refinery's red mud ponds burst its banks, spilling toxic waste sludge into an adjoining village. Only a month earlier a similar breach had occurred, polluting local streams and ponds.

When we reached the red mud ponds on the morning of 17th May the breach had already been largely patched up by the company. Local people recounted how after a heavy rain the sludge had poured through the earthen pond walls and flooded into the village and factory compound. Fearing bad press (particularly in the wake of the Hungarian disaster) Vedanta employees rushed out with bulldozers and hoses to wash down and patch up the evidence. However, trails of the wet mud could still be seen and a village pond was bright red with the toxic waste. The Wall Street Journal reported the incident, quoting local man Sunendra Nag on the pollution of the Vansadhara river by the red mud ponds:

“Now we don't drink its water because of the waste from the refinery that flows into it, but people still use the river for bathing and washing clothes. We are getting eye, skin and respiratory diseases due to this but we don't have other options”¹



Scar left by red mud spill.
Earthen banks of red mud pond in background.



A local washing pond filled with toxic red mud.

¹ Krishna Pokharel, 18th May 2011, 'Orissa Locals Fear Red Mud Spill', Wall Street Journal.

Incredibly, Vedanta's regional vice president responded to the spill by blaming the villagers. He claimed that;

“Due to agitation and dharna (sit in) at the site by local people, Vedanta Aluminium is not allowed to operate its second red mud pond. They are raising the dyke height of the first pond. During every rain, exposed red-coloured soil wash run off goes into streams.”

In fact Vedanta's red mud ponds are far from meeting international standards. They are soil lined instead of concrete, contain wet waste-mud instead of 'dry stacking', and are poorly located - directly uphill of the factory and villages. Approximately four tonnes of red mud are produced for every one tonne of aluminium. Red mud contains arsenic, heavy metals and radioactive trace elements, which can cause cancer, silicosis and other diseases.

Background

The Niyamgiri hills in the thickly forested tribal lands of central Odisha (formerly Orissa) have been prospected by various mining companies since 1976 for the 73 million tonnes of bauxite under the soil of the mountain's flat table top. The hills have achieved mythical status all over the world for the iconic fight playing out there. The battle is between tribal inhabitants who worship the mountain which sustains them, and the encroaching mining company, seeking the rich bauxite deposits for aluminium production.

After several contenders failed, the UK registered Vedanta Resources stepped in 2003 (Sterlite a subsidiary of Vedanta had the lease application pending since 1997) They quickly built the Lanjigarh alumina refinery at the base of the mountain before obtaining any permission to mine the hills. Contrary to the arrogant assumption that their money would buy the mountain against the inhabitant's wishes, years of local and international protest finally led to with-holding of the project by the Environment ministry in August 2010.



Lanjigarh refinery at the foot of Niyamgiri



The conveyor belt to carry bauxite from the hill

Today Lanjigarh is operating on just above break-even profit at 1 million tonnes per year, with bauxite transported by rail from the troubled neighbouring state of Chattisgarh. Though already one of the biggest refineries in India, the aim is to expand the plant to 6 million tonnes, for which the Niyamgiri deposits are crucial. Vedanta cannot afford to lose. They are currently using the state-owned Orissa Mining Corporation, who are applying to carry out the mining on their behalf. Worse, opposing communities are facing increased oppression by the Central Police Reserve Force, who have arrested, attacked and killed local leaders under the guise of their violent anti-Maoist combing operations 'Operation Green Hunt'.

In many ways the story really begins with the bloody colonisation of Odisha by the British in 1801. The first bauxite surveys carried out by the British geologist T. Walker in 1901 with the help of the King of Kalahandi then became the blueprint for today's extraction via so-called mining based 'development' of the region. Today this is headed by our most neo-colonial of agencies – the World Bank, the UK Department for International Development (DfID) and a hoard of private companies, and NGOs through reports such as 'Orissa Drivers for Change' that promote an unregulated mining sector in the resource-rich state.

An active resistance

Despite the forces trying to destroy them, Niyamgiri people's movements are alive and kicking. On May 17th, in the 45 degree heat of summer, landless oustees organised a rail and road blockade demanding adequate compensation. They felled a tree and blocked the only incoming road to the factory, creating a long line of heavy trucks unable to enter the plant to collect alumina. At the same time around 100 women and men sat on the railway that runs into the factory, planning to stay until their demands were met. They heard speeches from movement leaders on the politics of corporations and the importance of making global connections to strengthen their local struggle. They shouted slogans which recalled the 1855 killing of adivasis (tribals) led by Rendo Majhi, who revolted against British imperialism in Orissa:

'Rendo Majhi dakara deea'
'Ladhei kari banehi huea!'

Rendo Majhi is calling us
There is a dignity in fighting!



Slogans are chanted from the railway blockade.



Women sit on the tracks, with the factory behind.

Their actions are justified. Most of the land for the factory was illegally acquired, including some reserved forest which the company still claim was never there. 12 villages were bulldozed, but the company only partially rehabilitated 100 of the families, who now live in Niyamgiri Vedanta Nagar, a shoddy housing colony right beside the belching plant.

The un-housed live in shanty towns around the plant, and many local people are suffering skin diseases, lung problems and other ailments caused by the pollution and dust. We attended the funeral of Dai Singh Majhi, a tribal Kond and movement leader who was president of Niyamgiri Surakshya Samiti (Niyamgiri Protection Committee) in 2002. He lived in Belamba village, just beside the factory, and died in his fifties from illnesses caused by the toxins. During the fight to save the mountain he famously analysed the company's strategy saying; 'they are flooding us out with money', and recounted how the district administration had told him that 'only one foot of soil is yours, the rest is owned by the government'. He insisted that they would not give up their homeland for money, which would not last anyway.

In the end the blockade was called off on 20th May when Lanjigarh's Chief Operational Officer, Mukesh Kumar, brought the media to meet the protesters and claimed that all their demands would be met. This is the third time such false promises have been made to them in publicity stunts, but the blockaders usually submit in desperation for a way out of their poverty. It is very unlikely that the company will follow through on their apparent responsiveness, when they can avoid doing so and manipulate the media so easily.



Chandra Majhi in Belamba village



Activists block the road while trucks queue

On the same day, a five day Padayatra (walking protest) was culminating in Chhatarpur village on the Niyamgiri hills with a meal and meeting for 500 people from the Niyamgiri communities. During the march 40 people travelled from village to village, sharing stories and strategies on dealing with the state violence being enacted on them in the name of anti-terrorist policy. Operation Green Hunt is presented as a programme to eradicate Maoist extremists. In fact it is being used to divide and destroy tribal and other community opposition to industrial projects in the so-called 'red corridor' (Chattisgarh, Odisha, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh) by murder in fake-encounters, rape, harassment, and by labelling movement leaders as Maoist in the media.

In Chhatarpur we met Kond leader Lodo Sikaka who was abducted by the police shortly after the mountain was saved, and held for four days until media and international

pressure forced his release. He explained:

“ Niyamgiri is good for us. If we save our land and our forest it is good for us. The government is sending guns to our house. Those who are participating in the resistance are accused as maoists. We are not raising guns or opposing police, how can they say this? We don't have that business, so why are they targeting us? We don't understand. Why did they blindfold me and take me to the forest? Naveen Patnaik (Chief Minister)'s government is telling us that there are Maoists in Niyamgiri. After five days journey in these villages I haven't seen one. Only when the police come to our villages do we assume that there are Maoists.”



Tribal movement leader Lodo Sidaka at the Padyatra, and activists on the mountain.

CSR - Corporate Social Rip-off

Seeing the villages on the mountain gave a sense of what Lanjigarh might have looked and felt like before the refinery. Hazy mountains rose in the background while a line of women snaked back from the forest and fields with fresh produce on their heads. The ancient beauty of the Niyamgiri villages is sharply contrasted by the smoke stacks of Lanjigarh below it, which tower dark grey over the mud-clad village houses scattered on the plains. Beside the road an extensive fly ash dump fills the fields. The ash is piled high and left exposed, blowing dust into farms and homes, some of which back directly on to the dump. International standards state that fly ash ponds should be located a good distance from habitations and sealed from dust-blow as the ash contains significant amount of toxic substances - silicon dioxide, mercury, lead, arsenic, hexavalent chromium and with radioactive trace elements.

Further on, the conveyor belt which marches from the factory towards the sought after mountain now stands rusted and unused.

Vedanta logos can be found at every turn, advertising a school, a science college and mid day meal centre. But the company's claims to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) have been exposed as far from the reality. They have vastly over-exaggerated their good works in reports and have even been caught claiming ownership for existing government schemes in the area. Local people have whitewashed Vedanta's logo from walls on nearby schools which had nothing to do with the company.



One of many eco-messages on the factory walls. The fly ash dump piled high in village fields.

The company must have a sarcastic sense of humour since the walls of the factory are covered in slogans for environmental and social welfare. One reads 'mining happiness for the people of Orissa', while another explains that 'a healthy nature will lead to a radiant future'. Vedanta would do well to listen to its own advice.

A 2002 report prepared for BHP Billiton and Oxfam details research, carried out in Andhra Pradesh and Odisha, into how to use CSR to deal with local resistance to mining projects. The participation of Oxfam and local NGOs in this project, without informing local communities of the dangerous research is shocking and shameful, and reveals the role of NGOs who are often responsible for destroying people's movements instead of complimenting them.

Vedanta's AGM will be held in London in July along with the eighth annual protest outside and inside the building. Along with this year's scandals and injustices at Niyamgiri, activists will highlight Vedanta's illegal acquisition of 3000 acres of land for a corporate university near Puri in Odisha, which has recently been found to be in contempt of law on multiple counts by the Lok Pal (an ombudsman appointed by the State legislative body). Once again the company will have a lot to answer for, and will have to face the shame of losing the mountain and the university. If the shareholders are shaken and the media critical, this could be the start of their ultimate demise.