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## India: A human chain to defend Niyamgiri Hill from mining

The Niyamgiri Hill, in Orissa, an outstanding natural beauty place rising more than one thousand meters, has some of the most pristine and dense humid forests in the region and is the source of Vamshadhara river and of major tributaries of Nagaveli river. It is also the most sacred site of the Dongria - literally 'hill people' -, a dwindling sub-section of the Kondh peoples, who have inhabited the forests of eastern India for several thousand years.

The Dongria Kondh depend on the forest hill for their livelihood: they farm its slopes growing crops in among the forest. Their fruit gardens high up on the hillside require hard work; a man may spend 10 days there protecting precious crops from elephants, wild boars and light-fingered monkeys, warning them off with tribal songs and the banging of drums. They obtain cash from the sale in the local market of wild fruit, flowers and leaves gathered in the forest.

The Niyamgiri forest is ecologically vital to the entire ecosystem of the hills as it enables the numerous streams and lush forests which sustain the Dongrias to continue to thrive. The mountain has also rich deposits of aluminium ore. This has become a curse for the hill and the peoples that depend on it since their future is at stake by mining interests.

Reporter Peter Foster (1), who visited a Dongria village and heard their complaints, wrote that "digging up the Niyamgiris will be a social and environmental catastrophe, they say, destroying rivers and streams on which tens of thousands of people depend to irrigate their crops, polluting rivers with the toxic 'red mud' that is a by-product of aluminium manufacture and - most importantly, according to the anthropologists - wiping out the Dongria Kondh, who worship the sacred hills named after their god, Niyamraja."

Mining the Niyamgiri Hills may represent a genocide for the Dongria. According to anthropologist Felix Padel, quoted by Peter Foster, "The Dongria are hill people, resettling them on the plains is a form of ethnicide. They live in the hills, they worship the hills, they survive off the hills. The Niyamgiri Hills are not simply where the Dongria live, but the very essence of who they are. To resettle them is to destroy them.' An elder of the village visited by the reporter said: 'We can't go. The hills are who we are.'

The fate of a resettled Dongria village –Sakata- looms as a sad premonition. Foster tells that the people received concrete houses and land to grow crops "but have since done nothing with the government's gift. Almost all the men of the village are dead from taking too much of the potent local liquor, which is far stronger than the sago-wine of their tradition. 'With the connection to the forest gone,' a local social worker says, 'the men of the village simply earned enough as day labourers to drink

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themselves to death.”

Although India's Supreme Court has forbidden Vedanta –a firm majority owned by London-based Indian billionaire Anil Agarwal- from mining the mountain, the hunger for raw materials has led it to welcome Vedanta's Indian subsidiary, Sterlite Industries. In August 2008, Sterlite was given the green light to mine on Dongria land upon following certain guidelines. The company has tried to build roads for the mine. However, the Dongria and other Kondh tribes have marched through the dense forest to create a 17-km-long human wall across at the base of Niyamgiri Hill on the 27th January to blockade the roads and keep the British company off their sacred mountain.

According to Survival International, some reports put the number of men and women from Orissa's Niyamgiri area taking part in the protest at over 10,000. Placards carried by the protesters bore slogans including 'Vedanta, go back' and 'Stop mining in Niyamgiri'.

It was the second large-scale demonstration in ten days: on 17 January up to 7,000 protesters marched to the gates of Vedanta's aluminium refinery in the nearby town of Lanjigarh.(2)

If the mine succeeds, a whole ancient world may be destroyed. As Bijaya Kumar Baboo, who has worked with the tribes of Orissa since the rice famines in the 1980s, was quoted by Foster: “The Dongria people have lived on so little for so long without destroying their world. And yet we are destroying our world at an unsustainable rate. Before the Dongria cease to exist, shouldn't we be asking if we have anything to learn from them?”

A campaign has been organized by Survival International to support the Dongria Kondh by either writing to the Prime Minister of India, your MPs, your Indian embassy and/or donating to their campaign (see <http://www.survival-international.org/news/4152>)

(1) Mining in Orissa threatens Dongria Kondh tribe, Peter Foster, Telegraph Media Group,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/>

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[environment/3340194/Mining-in-Orissa-threatens-Dongria-Kondh-tribe.html](http://environment/3340194/Mining-in-Orissa-threatens-Dongria-Kondh-tribe.html)

(2) Tribe forms human chain to keep British company off sacred mountain, 29 January 2009, Survival International, <http://www.survivalinternational.org/news/4152>