Indigenous onto-epistemology and the Niyamgiri Movement in India

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Abstract

Climate crises and other manifestations of environmental degradation are inextricably linked to the universalizing technoscientific paradigm underpinning capitalist industrialization and modernization. This study aimed to problematize the modern/colonial ontological dualism underpinning environmental crises and advocates the indigenous/Adivasi relational onto-epistemology. It offers a different reality that questions the virtues of science, capitalism, the colonial narrative, and its continuation in subjectivities and social relations with the modern state. Drawing from the new materialist insights of human and non-human imbrications and the framework of political ontology, this study further analyzed the Dongaria Kondh people's political success in defending their relational way of worlding against corporate-driven extractivism. The state perpetuates violence and takes development initiatives in this mineral-rich eastern Indian province. While other political movements have succumbed to combined corporate and state power, the Dongaria's political struggle continues in different forms. Finally, the article makes the point that knowledge and insights born out of political struggle against a particular ontology, masquerading as universal, press the need for engagement between different realities, knowledges, and recognition of a pluriverse, a world of multiple ways of worlding, where each ontological story exists not as superior or inferior, but as equal, with space for mutual engagement and dialogue.

Keywords

political ontology, worlding, betweenness, relational cosmology, mass worship, state violence, collective well-being, engagement, interdependence

1. Introduction

Coloniality encompasses the material reality of colonization. Its immaterial, ideational, and ideological aspects – in consciousness and thinking – permeate social relations, culture, mentalities, and subjectivities (Adelman, 2015). The idea of coloniality is founded on dualistic epistemology that celebrates the virtues of science and capitalism. Climate coloniality as an analytical concept interrogates the hierarchical power relations established during active colonialism and its continuity in post-colonial space-times (Sultana, 2022). As an idea, it questions the connection between the Eurocentric epistemologies of mastery, science and capitalism, and unequal climate change impacts in the global South, including the continued ecological destruction that has caused the dispossession and impoverishment of many indigenous and local communities. In its pursuit of universalizing Western values, climate coloniality seeks to subalternize non-Western ways of being, seeing, and knowing. Can the underlying epistemological assumptions underpinning climate coloniality be challenged? What are the alternative onto-epistemology systems for saving the Earth and preventing extreme climate change in various forms and manifestations in the long run?

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An alternative lens to colonial mentalities comes from indigenous and local tribal communities inhabiting specific local ecosystems. Rooted in the practices and experiences of many generations, indigenous epistemology is viewed as a "way of being/worlding" that is informed by an overlapping connection between cosmic worldviews and shared community life that accords values to the non-human world.

In this article, the second section lays down the theoretical framework of new materialism and decolonial indigenous perspectives aimed at unsettling the dualistic epistemology underpinning modernity and coloniality. The new materialist "ontology of becoming and movement" and "human-non-human manifold entanglements" are combined with the decolonial conceptual lens of "border thinking" to delve deep into "differently rational" interwoven indigenous lifeworld practices that oscillate between dualistic ends. Section 3 examines colonialism, science, and Adivasi/tribal identity in the Indian context and how the 'Adivasi' political ontology, which lies in-between, has been challenging colonialism and agents of colonization in post-independence India. With this background of the Adivasi discourse, section 4 dwells on the interwoven lifeworld practices of Dongria Kondhs, who believe in the interdependence of all beings. The fifth section sheds light on the Dongaria's defense of their relational world/lifeworld practices through continuous resistance to the overt and covert manoeuvers of Vedanta Aluminum Ltd to extract bauxite from the deeply revered Niyamgiri Mountain. The continued political defense of the "sacred" mountain against the state's violence and benign development narratives is analyzed from a comparative perspective. The final section brings together insights and knowledge born out of the Dongaria's political struggle and Latin American indigenous people's struggles against extractivism and the great ontological divide. These political struggles bring to the fore the idea of the intertwining of being and knowing, interdependence of humans and non-humans and a pluriverse where each onto-epistemology exists as an equal, with space for mutual engagement to prevent ecological destruction and the consequent climate crisis that threatens both a prosperous and a less well-off world equally.

2. Methodology and theory

Methodology

This article draws on indigenous methodologies/decolonizing methodologies, combining secondary data from research articles with primary qualitative data gathered from semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation-based fieldwork. Indigenous/decolonial methodologies take a self-reflexive approach in engaging with the relational ontologies and epistemologies of indigenous and Adivasi/tribal communities (Smith, 1999; Tripura, 2023). In transcending subject/object or knowing/being distinction, indigenous methodologies aim to privilege indigenous voices and epistemology (Kovach, 2010) and view the intertwining of knowing, being, and doing (Martin & Miraboopa, 2003).

As regards the disclosure of the researcher's "positionality" (Kapoor, 2004), I studied political science at the University of Delhi, India, before joining the same to teach. As an observer and participant in various subaltern and social justice movements in India, I have kept myself updated about the Dongaria Kondh's resistance against mining corporations since 2008. This awareness, together with academic colleagues with socialist leanings, helped me gain access to some prominent activists associated with the Niyamgiri movement. This in turn helped me obtain access to some Adivasi villages in the Niyamgiri hills.

I visited ten to twelve Dongaria Kondh villages inside the Niyamgiri chain of hills bound by the Rayagada and Kalahandi districts in October 2022 and September 2023 (Figure 1). Apart from observing Dongaria Kondhs everyday life and their relationship with their places, I conducted six in-depth unstructured oral history interviews (Thompson, 2006) and engaged a few interviewees in conversational methods (Kovach, 2010; Tripura, 2023) to understand their experiential knowledge that has been handed down from generation to generation. Three Odiya activists who knew Hindi, Odiya, and the Kui language (spoken by the Dongaria Kondh) participated in the interviews as interpreters. One of them belonged to Kutia Kondh, living at the foothills, while the other two were from a farming community in other parts of the Kalahandi district. Most interviews/conversations lasted 2 to 3 hours. I also interviewed six activists associated with Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti (NSS) in Muniguda and Kalahandi who had participated in a protest rally in Bhawaniatna, the district

capital of Kalahandi, in October 2022. Activists-interpreters also made available various YouTube videos in the local language that showed the Dongarias' mass worship of Niyamgiri Mountain every year. I also interviewed the heads of a few nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) who worked for the betterment of the Dongarias.

A few official reports and data were also gathered from institutional websites to testify to the reference made by activists regarding the government's coercive measures to weaken the Dongarias' collective mobilization to protect their sacred hill. Most fieldwork data were analyzed around the Dongarias' political onto-epistemology. They are quoted directly in some places and paraphrased in others in major sections of the article. All the mandatory ethical protocols, including the interviewees' anonymity, were maintained.

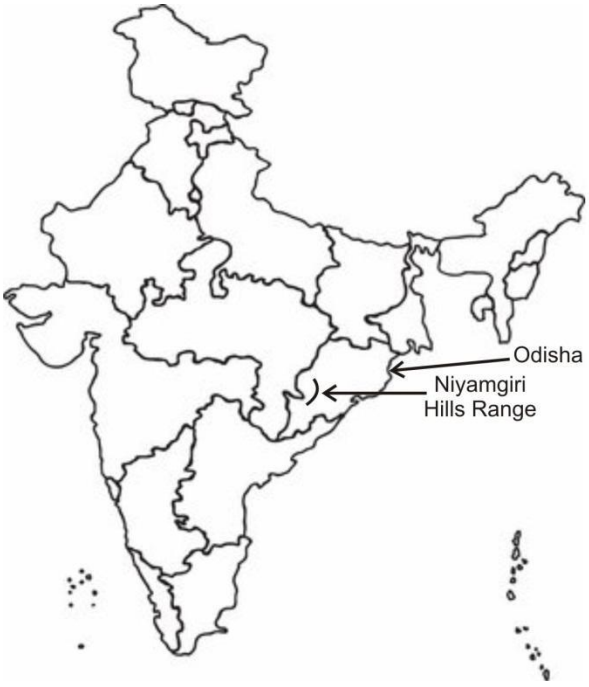

Figure 1: The political map of India, with a focus on Odisha, where Niyamgiri Hills is located.

Figure 2: Glimpse of the Niyamgiri Hills. Source: vikalpsangam.org, credited to Ashish Kothari

Theoretical framework

This article draws on a new materialist political ecology paradigm and decolonial thinking, synthesizes these perspectives to question assumptions underpinning capitalist modernity, and examines the indigenous/Adivasi onto-epistemology and its political implications. Despite the diverse scholarly positions, new materialist political ecologists reject the Cartesian dualism intrinsic to modernity: matter/spirit, nature/culture, and human/non-human. Scholars associated with science and technology studies (STS) have unsettled the ever-expanding dualism on the basis of the modern ontological great divide between nature and culture or object and subject, and proposes a flat ontology in which performance precedes entities (Blaser, 2010; Latour, 1993). Unlike post-structuralism, which undertakes a linguistic or textual deconstruction of oppositions, they insist upon "irreducible imbrications of human/non-human system or natural /social process" (Coole, 2013, p. 454). From this perspective, humans are not exceptional in having *agency* and *rationality*, and terms such as *self-consciousness*, *rationality*, and *cognition*, are reified abstractions that omit manifold and

intricate non-human processes. Therefore, new materialist ontology decenters humans and focuses on how relational networks or animate and inanimate assemblages affect and are affected (DeLanda, 2006, as cited in Fox & Alldred, 2015). From this perspective, "the manifold interaction between human and non-human processes goes on and on, ceaselessly generating new form" (Bennett, 2001, p. 165). New materialists understand materiality in a relational and emergent sense (Coole & Frost, 2010) and focus on processes and interactions (Deleuze & Guattari,1984, as cited in Fox & Alldred, 2015). Drawing from Deleuzian philosophy, science and technology studies, and some versions of phenomenology, new materialists thus delineate a "picture of socio-material worlds as always-emergent heterogeneous assemblages of human and more-than-human" (Blaser, 2012, p. 50).

The decolonial paradigm strives to delink knowledge from Western-centric epistemologies that silence non-Western voices, knowledge, and languages within the totalizing hierarchy of a single modernity (Mignolo, 2007). Thus, an alternative epistemology to the "totality of Western epistemology" presupposes "border thinking" that connects diverse local histories and subjectivities subjected to colonial wounds and imperial subordination (Mignolo, 2007, p. 493). Border thinking is 'thinking in exteriority', in spaces and in time, that the self-narrative of modernity invented as its "outside" to legitimize its own logic of coloniality. As such, this process involves violence and coercion in the subalternization of non-Western voices (Mignolo, 2011). "Border epistemology is thus thinking outside the epistemic and ontological borders of the modern/colonial world, not the borders of the national state" (Mignolo, 2011, p. 277). By speaking of "colonial difference" and "delinking from modern rationality" (Mignolo, 2007, p. 498), the border thinking framework brings to the fore the "power dimension" that is often lost in the relativistic account of "cultural difference" (Escobar, 2007b, p. 189). With the "ontological turn in social theory" (Escobar, 2007a, p. 1), the category of ontology, as a way of worlding, seeks to replace "culture," because the notion of "cultural difference" is associated with the modern ontological assumption that there is only one reality or world and that there are multiple perspectives or representations of it (Blaser, 2012, p. 52). Thus treating "difference" as cultural, we advance a particular ontology, which does not do justice to ontological differences, as there are multiple realities or worlds (Blaser, 2012, p. 52).

The framework of political ontology (Blaser, 2010), drawing from the intersection between indigenous studies and science and technology studies with momentous developments in socio-natural life such as Latin American indigenous uprisings and struggles (Escobar, 2016, p. 21), "operates on presumptions of divergent worldings coming about through negotiations, enmeshments, crossings and interruptions" (De la Cadena & Blaser, 2018, p. 6). The idea of political ontology fully recognizes the existence of "other worlds"—not cultures—that are "different" from the modern world. "Different ways of worldings" also get enacted/performed with reference to "their world making effects" (Blaser, 2012, p. 54). Thus, unlike other modalities of analysis, political ontology is not concerned with a supposedly external and independent reality; rather, it is concerned with "reality making," and this includes its own participation in reality making. Treating reality-making in this way opens up space for engagement with different ontological positions, without subalternizing anyone or anything, and thus enacting a pluriverse (Blaser, 2013, p. 552). It subsumes "culture," which, as an analytical category, limits our capacity to recognize other ontologies in their own terms (Blaser, 2009, p. 890). Thus, political ontology, being part of the "ontological turn" in social theory, seeks to understand how different ways of worlding can sustain themselves even as they interact, interfere, and mingle with each other (Blaser, 2013, p. 552).

The Adivasi/tribal communities in India pursue lifeworld practices that constitute a *different relational onto-epistemology*. This alternative mode of being and knowing stands in tension with colonial/modern ontology and epistemology that sees the non-human world, separate from the human world, as a source of resource appropriation. The next section will shed more light on the complex Adivasi/tribal discourse in post-independence India and reflect on their peculiar position of "betweenness" in colonial and post-colonial discourse.

3. Adivasi/tribal identity and colonialism in India

The ideas of "tribe" and "Adivasi" are conflated and confused. The colonial state defined "tribe" essentially in terms of fixed and identifiable characteristics distinguished from the institution of "caste" and

other organized religions such as Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity (Roycraft & Dasgupta, 2011, pp. 3–4). Whereas imperial officers and ethnographers have presented themselves as "men of science, academia and civilization," "tribes/Adivasis" have been portrayed as primitive people who lacked scientific spirit and civilized culture. Even as the nature of "otherness" varied according to changing binaries such as forest dwellers compared with people of the plains, or animists compared with polytheists, the "tribe" typified geographical, cultural, and economic "separateness" and hence resonated with notions of "the primitive" (Roycraft & Dasgupta, 2011, p. 4). This portrayal of tribes as forest-dwelling animistic people who use primitive technology is a *colonial narrative premised on a binary* wherein science and reason were accorded a superior position in comparison with culture and nature.

Against this backdrop, Indian scholarship has employed the trope of "Adivasi" instead of "indigenous communities" to contest modernity since the 1980s (Banerjee, 2006, p. 32). In the Indian context, "Adivasis" is considered a local community living largely in forested areas with its own political agency during the colonial era, and in post-independence India. They are also called "scheduled tribes," who are entitled to government affirmative action measures in official documents. For the purpose of this study, Adivasis remains a more relevant political category.

Colonial ethnological accounts depict Adivasis as cohesive communities that were absent in mainstream caste society and representing a culture of subversive and marginal politics, which is not quite shared by mainstream Indian society. They became a "critical alterity" to the Indian state, as it became evident that the development of modern India meant meeting most of India's timber and mineral resources from exhausting tribal forest lands (Banerjee, 2006, pp. 102–105). Prathama Banerjee also pointed out that a "culturalist" lens to approach Adivasi/tribals has been strengthened by the emergence of environmental discourse in India (Krishnan & Naga, 2017, p. 5). Environmentalists have cast the colonizer, market, and state as agents of ecological destruction and Adivasis as "nature's conservators" (Krishnan & Naga, 2017). Traditional Adivasi communities, who are a subgroup of subaltern ecosystem people, were natural conservationists who lived in socially harmonious and environmentally sustainable ways and believed that the golden age was destroyed with the onslaught of *colonialism, science, and development* (Gadgil & Guha, 1993).

Vandana Shiva, for example, drew attention to ecological destruction and crisis in corporate-driven developments within the limits of the market economy and how its costs are borne by local Adivasi communities who participate in the survival economy on the same land, thus creating new forms of poverty and dispossession (Bandyopadhyay & Shiva, 1988).

This position, though taken by subaltern scholars and activists who support resistance movements against development projects, has attracted critical attention from anthropologists. Their works challenge the existence of an essentialist Adivasi culture that has remained the same and fixed at a low evolutionary state, and has showed how Adivasis in India exhibit variations in lifestyles, languages, and religion, therefore making strict comparison with international indigenous discourse challenging (Shah, 2007, as cited in Oskarsson, 2017).

The Indian state has sought to legally define tribal communities and grant certain legal rights such as forest rights and other welfare provisions. Therefore, Adivasis are expected to integrate into modern government. At the same time, they are expected to be "tribal" (by state classification and by the fact of their dependence on forests for subsistence needs). While identity performance through ceremonies and rituals and ways of being are critical to the Adivasi encounter with the Indian legal apparatus in the context of mining and looming dispossession, they may also generate certain uneasiness by simultaneously pulling people toward and against ideas of modernity (Nielson & Oskarsson, 2017; Ramesh, 2017).

Under the constitution of India, tribal communities are entitled to live their collective life while representing the "borderline" condition of temporal disjuncture; both inside and outside the logic of the nation state, market, and capital (Dastidar, 2016). Owing to their "collective agency", this typical temporal "in-betweenness" makes them differ from groups that speak in the name of progressive projects of the nation (Bhabha, 1997, as cited in Dastidar, 2016). Whereas the Indian state champions industrial development and growth based on harnessing mineral and other natural resources, Indian environmentalists point to the "dispossession" and "displacement" of Adivasi and other land-dependent communities (Guha, 2007). In the

post-1990s liberalization era, as the Indian state allowed private capital to access its regions with mineral resources, this entailed disciplining the "subaltern" who are "presented as inhabiting a series of local spaces across the globe that, marked by the label social exclusion, lie outside the normal civil society…their route back…is through willing and active transformation of themselves to conform to the discipline of the market" (Cameron & Palan, 2004, p. 148 in Kapoor, 2011).

Gayatri Spivak raised a fundamental question about representation of these global South subaltern voices by international and local activists whose intellectual horizons are imbued with a Western rationalistic ethos (Borde, 2017): "Can subaltern speak?" It is this messy and contested world of scientific rationality underpinning a universalizing extractive developmentalism, the nation-state, and the existence of the Adivasi community's relational way of worlding – challenging universalizing colonial modernity – that forms the backdrop on which to reflect Dongaria Kondh politico-onto-epistemology.

4. Dongaria Kondh onto-epistemology

Relational ontology conceives of the world as ongoing processes of relations and interconnections. Sentient or insentient, and organic or inorganic entities are not objects. Rather, they are in motion. According to anthropologist Tim Ingold (2011),"the relational world is a world in movement, flux and becoming. There is continuous formation and transformation through the interplay of wind, water, and stone…within a field of cosmic forces" (p. 131). Furthermore, he explained that "beings do not simply occupy the world, they inhabit it. And in so doing—in threading their own paths through meshwork—they contribute to its ever-evolving weave" (Ingold, 2011, p. 71). The Dongaria Kondh onto-epistemology also contributes to this ever-evolving weave.

The Dongaria Kondh community, an Adivasi community that has inhabited the Niyamgiri hill tracts of the Rayagada and Kalahandi districts of Southern Odisha, India, for centuries, leads a life intertwined with a more-than-human world.[2] This deeply forested chain of hills, stretching over 200 square kilometers, is rich in biodiversity with thousands of plant species and numerous local streams and springs dissecting the hilly landscape.[3] As I, along with interpreters, entered the deep forest from the Munniguda block (Rayagada district) and walked along a narrow path, I was amazed by the sublime beauty of the lofty hills covered by dense forests and the gushing sound of local streams. Daitree, who belonged to the Kutia Kondh community at the foothills, accompanied me as my interpreter and explained the web of such streams feeding the entire assemblage of plants, people, animals, and various crops on hills and plains:

> There are over thirty such local streams flowing through these Niyamgiri range of hills, which combine together to form two major rivers, Vasamdhara and Nagavali, that provide water for drinking and irrigation in downstream areas, thus supporting the ecology and livelihood of a large population, other than roughly 8,000 Dongaria Kondh living on the hills.

This large assemblage itself encompasses both animate and inanimate non-human entities such as forests, streams, and hills, not as isolated components but as deeply enmeshed components in ongoing

[2] The Kondhs are a larger Adivasi group scattered in three major districts of Odisha: Rayagada, Kalahandi, and Kandhmal. While the Dongaria Kondhs, with an estimated population of 8,000 (2001 census), live in the upper reaches of the Niyamgiri hills, the Kutia Kondh inhabit the foothills. The Dongaria Kondhs derive their name from *dongar*, or hill. These are scheduled tribes with the Schedule V of the Indian Constitution, which enjoins the government to respect and uphold the land rights of scheduled tribes applying to the entire Niyamgiri hill regions. These tribes are also notified by government as a "primitive tribal group" and "eligible for special protection."

[3] Saxena *et al.* (2010) has outlined the broad ecological significance of the Niyamgiri hills. An excerpt from the report is as follows: "Niyamgiri Hills is surrounded by dense forest and is habitat for diverse species of plant and animal life. The Niyamgiri massif is important for its rich biodiversity. In addition, it plays a critical role in the living forests of Kandhamal and the forests of the Rayagada, Kalanahdi, and Koraput districts. These forests also join the Karlapat wildlife sanctuary in the north west and Kotagarh wildlife sanctuary in the northeast. The forested slope of the Niyamgiri hills and many streams that flow through them provide means of living for the Dongaria Kondh and Kutia Kondh. They are scheduled tribes."

interactive processes that have existed for centuries, well before human groups such as the Dongaria Kondh and their oldest member can recall the time of their ancestors' settlement in this rugged terrain. The Dongaria community practices swidden cultivation on hillslopes owned by the entire village community/clan. By and large, they practice a subsistence economy. This communal ownership has existed for generations and, as such, does not require any written documentation. Whatever they grow on these hill slopes—millets, fruits, and spices, among others—are taken to be blessings of their ancestral god, Niyam Raja (King of Law) and Dharni Pennu (Mother Earth).

Lado Sikka, a community leader from the village of Lakh Padar, described the relational world as follows: "From generation to generation, hills, mountains, forests, water, and Earth belong to us, and we belong to them. There is no life without them." Thus, the Dongaria life is intertwined with the non-human world in a way that an inseparable relation defines existence. Every Dongaria Kondh reveres the top hill forest (Trunjelimuneri) of the Niyamgiri Mountain (in Lanjigarh, Kalahandi, of triangular shape, over 1,500 meters high[4]) as the abode of their god, Niyam Raja. Therefore, they regard the top hill forest as "sacred" and follow traditions and regulations prescribing appropriate behavior for the members of Dongaria society. They do not cut trees for any individual or common purposes.

Behind these moral restraints lie oral stories, legends, myths, and chants that link the Dongaria origin and existence to Dharma Devta (religious deity), who is believed to have sent Niyam Raja on Earth; that Niyam Raja is the creator of hills and the different *varieties* of plant species; and that he became king of the hill gods and chose the highest peak as his abode, Niyam Dongar, from where he could observe his people. Being preoccupied with the people's welfare, he would receive a part of the yields of those who tilled the soil in his kingdom as ritual offerings (Jena *et al.*, 2002). The Niyam Raja, a mythical god-king of hills, thus constitutes a spiritual/supra-world that connects complex assemblages of non-human realms involving sentient and non-sentient beings such as plants, animals, hills, streams, and winds with the human world. For Dongarias, connecting with the earth, sky, streams, hills, forest, rains, wind, sun, moon, stars, lineage, and cereals (*LahiPennu)* is a "way of worlding" and "existence," and each one attracts some sort of reverence, respect, and reciprocity devoid of utilitarian calculations. This spiritual relationality with "more than human world" finds expression in cultural celebrations and ritual observance such as Miriaparab/Niyam Rajaparab (festival), worshiping Dharni Pennu (Earth Goddess) and other deities.

Rupuli Majhi, an elderly woman from the village of Phuldhumbe, narrated the relational way of worlding during the interaction: "There is *jeev* (soul) in every being and life form. We (Dongaria Kondhs) respect every soul (*jeev)…*We worship *jangal*, *jameen*, *dongar*, *parvat*, *jharna*, *Pashu*, *Pakshi* (forest, land, hills, mountains, springs, animals, birds). Dongaria's existence is unthinkable without worshipping Niyam Raja and Dharni Pennu. For Dharani Pennu (Earth Goddess), a shrine is dedicated to each village (Borde & Bluemling, 2021). After every new harvest, they offer food grains to Dharani Pennu before personal use.

Samya Wadka, one of the elders from the village of Khajuri, described the relation of humility, reciprocity, and reverence with Earth: "We owe our existence to Dharni Pennu. We worship her. Whatever we produce—from varieties of millets such as khosla, *kandul*, *mandyas* to fruits, spices, and oilseeds—belongs to Mother Earth." The mountain god and other deities cannot be seen by human beings, but they may be summoned by ritual specialists, priests, and shamans who represent gods and deities by going into a trance. When summoned, the gods leave their homes, visit human hosts, and then return (Hardenberg, 2016).

Thus, in Dongaria Kondh onto-epistemology, nature, with all its or sentient and insentient materiality, spirituality, and culture, and rituals and observances, is inseparable and constitutes a way of worlding/cosmology that oscillates between dualistic ends: rational/irrational, traditional/modern, and matter/spirit. In such non-Western cosmologies, the sensory world, according to Henry Corbin, is mediated through the imaginative function of the "spirit" and "sacred" world. This imagined world is not simply utopian fantasy; instead, it is a realm of being rooted in both the cognitive and cosmological function of the imagination (Corbin, 1972). In other words, cognitive rationality is mediated by imaginative faculty to find meaning in relation to the "realm of spirit and sacred," thereby enacting a "different" onto-story, escaping the dilemma of

[4] https://peakvisor.com/peak/nimgiri.html

current rationalism, which leaves a choice between two terms of banal dualism: either matter or spirit. There is coming and going between the human, non-human, and spiritual worlds (Restrepo, 1996, as cited in Escobar, 2015). Through cultural practices, sounds, and chants, they interact with the noumenal/sacred world and reaffirm their manifold connection/entanglement with the latter.

Jane Bennett, representing a materialist-spiritualist intellectual tradition, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization of cosmos as "energetic aspects of things, thoughts, matters …forces, densities … not thinkable in themselves", maintained that "repetitive sounds like chants and refrains provide sensory access into the cosmological dimension of things" (Bennett, 2001, p. 166). Thus, enchantment is a feeling of being connected in an affirmative way to existence (Bennett, 2001). The Dongaria's way of worlding, in advocating deeper connection with the cosmos that evokes reverence, humility, and reciprocity, thus inspires ecological wisdom to resist unjust modes of commercialization. Although they make their daily livelihood from forests and forest resources, including fuel and even selling small logs in nearby local markets, they do so in a way that does not harm the local ecosystem.[5] Thus, everyday material practices do not contradict their onto-epistemology, which sees Dharni Pennu (Mother Earth) as the life giver to all beings and therefore as sacred. The preservation of their community life, with all its celebrations, myths, and tales of enchantment, and their local ecosystem is bound with the earth's existence, with all its life forms and materiality. Next, does the Dongaria's way of worlding obtain a political expression in defending their relational cosmology and challenge a particular ontology, masquerading as "universal," of individuals and markets (the one-world world) that attempts to transform all other worlds into one (Escobar, 2016, p. 20)?

5. The Dongaria's political defense of relational onto-epistemology

The Dongaria Kondhs' political defense of their relational word against the combined might of transnational corporations and the state has spanned more than two decades, and they have witnessed violence, torture, and even inducements of all sorts. The Dongarias' way of worlding came under attack from Vedanta Aluminum Ltd, a London-based Mining Corporation with plans to mine bauxite in the sacred hills, in the early 2000s. A political movement began involving the Dongaria Kondhs, non-Dongaria subaltern communities living on the plains, activist academics, and various Marxist organizations who supported the relational lifeworld as a critical alterity against universalizing capitalist modernity in the guise of "developmentalism." Local protests and opposition began in the early 2000s, as it became public that the London-based company sought to mine bauxite with an aluminum refinery plant set up at Lanjigarh, Kalahandi.

While local organizations such as the NSS and Kalahandi Sacheta Nagrik Manch mobilized the Dongarias and local people at grassroots levels and faced state repression, many activists and organizations filed legal proceedings in the Supreme Court of India on the grounds of destruction of ecology and biodiversity (Kumar, 2013).[6] The movement had a setback, as a Supreme Court ruling (2008) allowed mining within certain conditions. This heavy blow led the host of local and national organizations and international nongovernmental organizations to politicize rather dispersed and village-level ritual tributes to Niyam Raja, whose spirit is

[5] During the in-depth interview/conversation with Laddo Sikka, an elderly Dongaria Kondh from the village of Lakhpadar, the Dongaria's everyday life practices emerged. According to him, Dongaria women go to a weekly market to sell their horticultural produce such as fruits and spices and sometimes wood and charcoal. These local markets are held at different places in the Munniguda block, Lanjigarh block, and other areas. Local activists also confirmed these practices. Dongaria women carrying wood can be seen on any normal day in Munniguda. On return, they buy a few essential items from the market. They also practice slash-and-burn cultivation on limited patches of the vast, dense forests of the Niyamgiri range, and these regrow in 3 to 4 years.

[6] Various local organizations and concerned activist academics, Marxist organizations (including Maoist organizations that believed in radical politics) and other national and international non-government organizations joined the movement in due course. Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti (NSS) was formed in 2006 and emerged as an umbrella organization that believes in constitutional means to put pressure on the government not to allow mining the Niyamgiri hills and to take pro-poor, pro-Adivasi policies. Radical Marxist organizations are believed to have been at the forefront against mining extraction in the region, and suffered state repression in various forms. Maoist organizations reject the bourgeois Indian state and capitalist development. They believe in armed revolution and have waged war against the Indian state. Therefore, they have been banned.

believed to reside in the Niyamgiri Mountain, located very close to Lanjigarh (Kalahandi district), where the aluminum refinery was built. Thus, mass worship ceremonies were started on the top of the Niyamgiri Mountain, Hundaljali, which was also the mining site for bauxite. This "mass worshiping" was a political performance to defend not just a specific mountain that was to be mined by Vedanta Ltd., but also the entire Niyamgiri chain of hills. Thus, the political expression of "sacred belief" and "indigeneity" was made public to show the organic connection to nature, against nature-devouring corporate extraction and consequent ecological destruction and displacement of the Dongarias (Krishnan & Naga, 2017, p. 11). The anti-Vedanta movement did suffer tensions and ruptures between foreign NGOs and local and national Marxist political organizations (Kraemer *et al.*, 2013, as cited in Borde, 2021).

The continuing political struggles, together with the efforts to utilize the Forest Right Act, 2006 to defend territory, finally culminated in a landmark Supreme Court judgment (2013) that empowered the Dongaria community to decide whether mining should be allowed on the Niyamgiri.[7] All the concerned village assemblies unanimously rejected the proposed bauxite mining by Vedanta and claimed that the "entire Niyamgiri range of hills as sacred and not just specific site of mining, Hundaljali, at Niyamgiri Mountain" (Borde & Bluemling, 2021, p. 82) and that we "do not need any individual land ownership from the government; we need Niyamgiri only" (Jena, 2013, p. 15). Therefore, the Indian Ministry of Environment and Forest banned the mining project on the Niyamgiri Mountain in 2014, but it did not extend the ban to the entire Niyamgiri range of hills.

Therefore, the Dongarias' claim to the entire Niyamgiri range of hills as "sacred" remains verbal only. In fact, the Dongaria Kondhs and other Kondh communities and farmers living in and around the Niyamgiri hills strongly believe that unless the existing aluminum refinery does not get closed permanently, the threat to their sacred mountain and Dongarian life will persist. In this context, the mass worship of their hill god, Niyam Raja, on top of Niyamgiri Mountain every year is a covert political strategy against the combined might of Vedanta Corporation and the Odisha government. Over the years, this mass worshiping, which is held in February every year, has seen increasing participation of common people from Odisha, activists, and organizations across India. According to activist Lingraj Anand, who is associated with the NSS, "many local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and activists attend Niyam Raja Parab (mass worshiping of Niyam Raja) every year in February. The increasing participation of non-Dongaria activists and common people boost our morale to fight corporate drive to take over Niyamgiri in guise of development." Thus, civil society members and activists are standing with Dongaria's way of worlding against any future possibility of allowing bauxite mining. Activists have mentioned that not many movements have been successful in resisting the takeover of hill areas by corporations in India. Lalin Kumar, an activist from Kalahandi, stated that the

> Kashipur movement, which continued for twenty-one years, could not stop Utkal alumina project, a subsidiary of Aditya Birla Group Hindalco, to secure around 200 million tons of bauxite from the Baphli Hills in Rayagada. The Jagatsinghpur movement also proved weak to stop the POSCO steel project, and there are other cases as well in this mineral-rich state.

Recently, Sigmali Hill, located a few kilometers away from Niyamgiri Hills, has been auctioned by the Odisha government to mine and supply bauxite to the Lanjigarh refinery (Barik, 2023). Concerns have been

[7] In its judgment (*Orrisa Mining Corporation vs Ministry of Environment Forests and others*, Supreme Court writ [civil] No. 180), the court drew on the Panchayats (extension to scheduled areas) Act of 1996 (PESA), which promised to "safeguard and preserve the traditions and custom of the people, their cultural identity, community resources and customary mode of dispute resolution." The Forest Right Act 2006, which was passed during the left of center Congress-led UPA alliance, was also invoked, granting forest-dwelling communities the right to habitat if they have been living in the forest for three generations and more. The court stated that the duties of the local community in the "scheduled" Niyamgiri include the preservation of habitat from any form of destructive practices that affect their cultural and natural heritage. Scholars such as Prakurti Ramesh (2017) critically examined the FRA's right to habitat, which requires Adivasi/forest dwellers to produce proof of their association with nature and that they are conservationists, even though they have accessed and used forest products for centuries.

strengthened by the Odisha police's increasing use of intimidation, surveillance, and arrest of Dongarias and non-Dongaria activists associated with NSS on false charges of being Maoists. These cases have been documented by the fact-finding committee of the People's Union for Civil and Democratic Rights (PUDR) and the Communist Party of India Marxist-Leninist (CPI-ML). In the period after the Supreme Court landmark judgment (2013) that banned mining in Niyamgiri Mountain, overt and covert cases of state violence emerged on a regular basis, which were meant to prevent the holding of public meetings and rallies. Needless to say, the number and frequency of protests and rallies have decreased significantly, especially after the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020.

Parallel to the increasing state surveillance and violence against activists, the Dongaria's relational worlding also negotiated with the modernist development narrative. Vedanta Corporation claims to support schools, *agandwadi* (primary level child development centers), and hospitals in the Lanjigarh area, where the refinery is located, as part of their corporate social responsibility (Kraemer *et al.*, 2013). Local staff employed in these institutions appreciate the Vedanta initiatives, though activists see them as a mask for corporate plunder of minerals and the permanent destruction of ecology. The Odisha government too, with its decentralized local institutions and dedicated development agencies such as DKDA and OPELIP, aims to provide welfare measures and uplift the Dongarias' socioeconomic status, although these measures are implemented half-heartedly and haphazardly (Tatpati *et al.*, 2018).[8] Activist Angad from Kalahandi provided a critical account of these development initiatives: "Most of the schools run by government do not impart education in local Kui language, which is easily understandable by Dongaria kids. In the deep forest, there are no school buildings or hospitals." One coordinator associated with the NGO named Adivasi Kalyan Parisad (Council of Adivasis' Welfare) based in Rayagada also pointed out that "bureaucrats handling OPELIP are more concerned with cornering commissions/bribes in the name of development of Dongaria and that involving local NGO in the development task is mere tokenism."

On the ground, very little has been done for the Dongarias. Field observations show that a few things like solar panels and water tanks are visible in the villages. I was told that local people also receive rice from the public distribution system managed by local self-governance institutions. Thus, the Dongaria's way of worlding interacts with local self-governance institutions and bureaucratic agencies entrusted with development. Can these welfare measures be seen as an unnecessary interference into the Dongarias' relational cosmology? To the extent that these measures do not break the organic connection with broader ecology and do not lead to the dispossession of Adivasis, they can be taken in a positive way to better their material condition, although such welfare-centric development must be tailored to listen to more grassroots local voices rather than being expert-driven. However, there is a modernist economic growth model at work, based on a nature-culture ontological separation that determines the state's economic policies towards hills and forests and the broader non-human world.

This colonial capitalist growth model builds on the universal applicability of science and value given to profitable mineral extraction (Oskarsson, 2017). Minerals are considered vital inputs in industrial processes or for providing crucial export revenues, which are key to technical and economic progress (Lahiri-Dutt, 2016, as cited in Nielson & Oskarsson, 2017). Many Odiya youth, especially the so-called urban educated, subscribe to this modernist position that development involves sacrifice of nature to some extent and that large corporate investment in the "backward regions" brings employment and poverty alleviation. This typically rosy picture fails to account for "dispossession" of many Adivasis of their traditional means of life and livelihood through extractivism, as well as causing havoc to local ecologies. In fact, the Indian environmentalist Ramchandra Guha maintains that in post-independent India, the Adivasis of central and eastern India who live in mineral-rich regions had to make way for commercial forestry, dams, and mines in the name of economic and industrial

[8] Most Dongaria Kondhs are critical of the Dongaria Kondh Development Agency's (DKDA) role. In most villages, the schemes carried out by the DKDA are not done in consultation with the village. There is no follow-up regarding the distribution of items such as solar lamps and seedlings for horticulture. Likewise, local nongovernmental organizations are critical of commissions obtained and the corruption involved in the program implementation by officials of the Odisha Particular Vulnerable Tribal Group Empowerment and Livelihood Program (OPELIP), a dedicated department for the development of scheduled castes and tribes of the Odisha government.

development (Guha, 2007) and that universalizing science and technical experts are to engage with place-based indigenous knowledge practices and experiences (Gadgil & Guha, 1993).

The ideology of development involves violence against those cultural communities who do not subscribe to universalizing homogenized mass consumption. Therefore, struggle against developmentalism is a struggle for reclaiming the dignity of culture waiting to be sacrificed (Nandy, 1994). Despite the constitutional and legal protection under the Forest Right Act, 2006, and PESA (the Panchayati raj/local self-governance institution extension to scheduled areas 1996), which grants rights to village communities/forest-dwelling communities to decide the use and regulation of local forest resources, Adivasi communities such as the Dongarias face the threat of dispossession and displacement. This is due to the tacit collusion between the state and capital. Therefore, the political struggle of Dongaria Kondhs continues in defense of relational and interwoven ways of being, knowing, and doing.

6. Modern ecological and climate crisis and relational ontology and epistemology

The Dongaria's political struggle to protect the "sacred Niyamgiri hill" finds parallel in Andes indigenous movements in Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador to protect the human non-human relational world. These Indigenous communities see mountains such as Ausangate (Peru, 6,384 m) or Quilish (Peru, 3,864m) as "earth beings" or sentient beings threatened by the neoliberal wedding between the capital and the state (De la Cadena, 2010, p. 342). By politicizing the affective interaction with other-than-human, earth beings, Andean indigenous movements seek to dispute the monopoly of science to define "nature" and thus provincializing the alleged universal ontology of the West as one world among others in a pluriverse (De la Cadena, 2010, p. 346). These movements went on to push for the recognition of *pachamama* (Mother Nature) as a subject with rights in the new constitutions that emerged from the struggles in the mid-2000s (and most recently in 2024, the Marañón River in Peru received recognition by a local court[9]). This constitutional recognition of the rights of nature and the idea of *good living* or *collective well-being* (*buen vivir* in Spanish) that flows from it have emerged as alternative life projects to those offered by development and progress (Blaser, 2013). *Buen vivir* as a notion of collective well-being that grew out of indigenous struggles in South America represents a different philosophy of life that subordinates economic objectives to interlinked criteria of ecology, human dignity, and social justice (Escobar, 2016).

Although the Dongaria Kondh's political struggle did not lead to a similar categorical and concrete constitutional recognition of Earth beings with rights, it advanced an idea of well-being that is in harmony with nature, with all its spiritual energy and perpetual connections. In defending the specific sacred Niyamgiri hill, they went on to claim the entire chain of hills as sacred and therefore "extraction" in the name of "development" would amount to destroying manifold entanglements between the human, non-human and cosmic world. Thus, the Niyamgiri movement privileges ecological and social interdependence over pure economic rationality. That the government of the day has not legally banned mining on the entire range of hills is the reason that they vow to fight till death. No material inducements such as government jobs and even government welfare measures have shaken their resolve to defend their relational way of worlding, even if they are seen as poor and backward in modern "development" discourse.

Both the Andean indigenous movements and Dongaria Kondh's political resistance against capital and the state bring to the fore a "different reality," even as multiple ways of being, knowing, and doing have been subalternized through relentless processes of expansion and colonization that also involve a great deal of violence and coercion (Mignolo, 2007; Blaser, 2010). Both the Dongaria's political movement and Latin American indigenous movements, though thousands of miles apart, have established the idea of *ontological and epistemological pluralism* and the *coexistence of many ways of worlding without dominating each other*. The engagement and dialogue between the different ontological positions and ways of worlding have become more important today, as universal ontological assumptions are seen as underpinning factors behind the contemporary ecological and climate crisis (Escobar, 2015; Pandelton-Julian & Brown, 2023). This continued

[9] https://www.internationalrivers.org/news/landmark-ruling-the-peruvian-court-of-nauta-recognizes-the-rights-of-the-maranon-river-and-the-indigenous-communities-as-its-guardians/

intensification of the climate crisis, threatening both modern and pre-modern societies, cannot be addressed by more capitalist forces and "totalizing" rationalities (de Sousa Santos, 2014).

While climate coloniality manifests through capitalist extractivism and technoscience, the idea of "collective well-being" as deeply connected to the "sacred hill/living hill" constitutes epistemic disobedience to coloniality/modernity. To see a non-sentient entity such as a hill as a "living spirit" that evokes awe, respect, and restraint is to engage with a different cosmovision that challenges science and development experts' monopoly in efforts to represent nature. Science, to turn the world into an *object* of concern, places itself above and beyond the very world it claims to understand (Ingold, 2011). Science must be rebuilt on the foundation of openness rather than closure, and engagement rather than detachment, to regain the sense of astonishment. Knowing must be reconnected with being; epistemology, with ontology; and thought, with life (Ingold, 2011).

The Dongaria's way of worlding, as viewed from a decolonial framework, involves an interwoven existence wherein ties with more than human define existence. And, "where each connected term in a human-non-human web/network and the way it is connected with others define its identity" (Stengers,2018, 24). Thus, Adivasi thinking is 'political thinking', as it offers a contrasting view of governing the collective self and the surrounding natural world (Dastidar, 2020, p. 51). The Dongaria's way of worlding might be characterized as what Guattari calls an "ecosophical perspective" (Guattari, 2000, p. 65) that is at once theoretical, ethicopolitical, and aesthetic. Dominant capitalist subjectivity, which is already eroding social relations and destroying the natural environment, can be countered through an ecosophical approach that aims to reinvent human existence and subjectivity in a new historical context (Guattari, 2000).

7. Key findings and conclusions

The Dongaria's onto-epistemology represents an interwoven and enmeshed cosmovision that mediates the human world, non-human world, and spiritual world/noumenal world in deeply intricate ways that cannot be captured by the instrumental rationality of natural science or labeled as a realm of mere beliefs and superstitions. The position of in-betweenness, as against dualistic thinking, provides a space for an alternative decolonial indigenous/Adivasi onto-epistemology working against the hegemonic discourse of modernity and associated ecological destruction and crisis. The manifold interconnectedness between nature and culture, or material and meaning presents an ever-dynamic and 'becoming' reality.

The political struggle and movement in defense of their relational worldviews, and consequent success, reinforces the idea of "community consciousness" as a greater force to preserve nature and Earth, and a multitude of life forms against the 'individual rationality' or 'state's instrumental/technocratic rationality.' The Dongaria community's way of worlding represents a 'wisdom tradition' that is different from established technical knowledge. It must be seen as an 'alternative epistemological frame' to see reality from the 'vantage point of relationships and interdependence.'

The political resistance defending the "sacred Niyamgiri Mountain" extends to claim the entire Niyamgiri chain of hills, stretching over 200 square kilometers, as "sacred," prohibiting mining. However, this political claim has not yet obtained legal and constitutional recognition on the part of the government and the judiciary. Hence, political struggle continues in various forms, although protests and demonstration rallies have died down. The continuation of mass worship of Niyam Raja every year on the proposed mining site, even after the legal ban on mining, has seen increasing participation of common people, activists, and various civil society organizations that support the Dongaria onto-epistemology and defense of the commons as against the statist development discourse that privileges economic profitability over a relational way of worlding.

The Odisha government has been implementing welfare measures through dedicated development agencies and self-governing local institutions, members of civil society, and activists, but has found that these measures have been implemented haphazardly, reaching only a few villages. While civil society, non-government organizations and activists, and other common people belonging to caste Hindu groups living in and around the Niyamgiri hills support the Dongaria onto-epistemology, the Odisha government, in collusion with Vedanta Ltd., has been detaining Dongarias and activists on flimsy grounds, to weaken the movement. Even at the time of fieldwork, a few prominent activists were under state surveillance.

Both the Dongaria's political struggle and Latin American indigenous movements recognize collective well-being in harmony with nature as an alternative to modernist development based on Cartesian dualism. They advocate the existence of multiple ontological realities, wherein one is not dominated by others. Instead of a hierarchy of ontologies, every ontological story has to be engaged with others on the basis of equality and being 'differently rational.' The dialogue and engagement between multiple ways of being, knowing, and doing are the ways to establish a pluriverse and save the planet from ecological destruction.

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