The guardians of Niyamgiri

We would rather die than lead a life outside the hills, say the Dongria Kondhs of Odisha, as they continue to fight bauxite mining in the forests where they’ve lived for centuries.

Sikaka vented his anguish. “The guardians of the forest are being branded as Maoists,” he said. Jamu, a 40-year-old tribal leader, was arrested last October and beaten up by police officers.

The Supreme Court directed all State governments to evict all those who have been living in the forests to enable the Niyamgiri project. In what is perhaps India’s first environmental referendum, all 12 villages selected by the government voted against the project.

There are four government health centres. But, like all well-meaning projects, the government health centre in the village was torched. "The State government’s first order has presented a golden opportunity to the Dongrias. They can now seek a 'correct' model of development in a region known for environmental laws being interpreted as a 'roadblock' to development in the region and muzzle the voices of the indigenous people and find their indigenous roots and a long-lasting connection to the land," said Lingaraj Azad, assistant director, Adivasi Suraksha Trust.

The NSS sees a larger conspiracy. “We are being branded as Maoists,” said a 30-year-old village sarpanch from the foothills of Odisha’s Niyamgiri. “The government is not ready to listen to our grievances. They are spending money on several projects, but are not solving the problems of the forest dwellers. The State government’s first order has presented a golden opportunity to the Dongrias. They can now seek a 'correct' model of development in a region known for environmental laws being interpreted as a 'roadblock' to development in the region and muzzle the voices of the indigenous people and find their indigenous roots and a long-lasting connection to the land," said Lingaraj Azad, assistant director, Adivasi Suraksha Trust.

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