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NATURAL RESOURCE CONFLICTS IN ODISHA- A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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Abstract: *Odisha has been at the forefront of conflicts over natural resources with many conflicts taking place ever since Independence. The moot of the conflict over natural resources in Odisha revolves around the twin issues of displacement-rehabilitation and denial of rights. The failure to implement developmental policies, poor rehabilitation measures, failure to understand the plight of the locals and patronising attitude towards the deprived sections has given birth to voices of dissent and ushered in a milieu of protest and conflicts. Against this background, the paper discusses the nature of natural resource conflicts in Odisha by taking up the major protest movements that have emerged in its recent history. The paper based upon extensive secondary literature analyses the conflicts over the use and access to natural resources in Odisha with the aim of delineating the common threads that run across all these conflicts.*

1. Introduction

The state of Odisha, situated on the eastern coast of India, is surrounded by West Bengal to the northeast, Jharkhand to the north, Chattisgarh to the west and north-west, Telengana to the south-west and Andhra Pradesh to the south. It covers approximately 4.7 % of the total area of the country and its population according to the 2011 census is 41,947,358. Odisha has nearly 12 percent of the total tribal population in the country with about 62 communities and as many as 22 different tribal dialects. Around 44.7 percent of the total land of Odisha has been declared as a scheduled area under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution.

It is abundant in natural resources and is one of the mineral rich states of India accounting for around 18 percent of the total mineral resources in the country. It is endowed with rich forest resources along with mineral deposits of coal, iron ore, chromate ore, manganese ore, bauxite, dolomite and limestone. The forest cover in the state constitutes 31.38 percent of the total geographical area (Directorate of Geology, 2013; India State of Forest Report, 2013). The rich mineral deposits has attracted much industrial investments in the state with most of the industrial growth taking place in areas where raw materials, water and power are available.

In fact Odisha is an early example of industrialisation in post-independence India. Its untapped natural resources made it an attractive and lucrative industrial hotspot and caught the attention of the country's policy makers. Notwithstanding, the state's early venture into industrialisation and the presence of many industrial units, it has remained one of the poorest states in India. It lags behind in many indicators of social and economic development including health, infant mortality rates, literacy, and poverty among others (de Haan and Dubey, 2005). Despite being a land abundant in mineral wealth, the state has not been able to utilise the full potential of its riches. Industrialisation has failed to live up to its promise of providing prosperity, rather it has led to the nascence of negative consequences such as rampant poverty and displacement with no proper rehabilitation measures.

Although some parts of the state have reaped the benefits of industrialisation, large areas especially in the northern and southern regions remain undeveloped and in a dismal condition. The worst off are the deprived sections which comprise of dalits and tribals (Mishra, 2009). Further the era of globalization and liberalisation has brought in new evils which have further deteriorated the plight of the already

disadvantaged communities. The presence of Maoist activities in many of its poorer districts coupled with conflicts over the use and access to natural resources epitomizes the quotidian lives for a majority of its rural and poorer populations.

The moot of the conflict over natural resources in Odisha revolves around the twin issues of displacement-rehabilitation and denial of rights. Dearth of accessibility to forests, land and water resources due to mining and extractive industries and large hydro-power and irrigation projects has emerged as the bone of contention between the displaced- disadvantaged communities and the state. Often the local population has been made the dupe in the name of the larger interest of the nation. This parochial attitude towards the indigenous and local population is often echoed by local as well as national leaders. Failure to implement developmental policies, poor rehabilitation measures, failure to understand the plight of the locals and patronising attitude towards the deprived sections has given birth to voices of dissent and ushered in a milieu of protest and conflicts.

Against this background, the paper discusses the nature of natural resource conflicts in Odisha by taking up the major protest movements that have emerged in its recent history. The paper based upon extensive secondary literature analyses the conflicts over the use and access to natural resources in Odisha with the aim of delineating the common threads that run across all these conflicts. It also brings to the fore the struggles of the marginalised in fighting for what are rightfully theirs.

2. Nature of Natural Resource Conflicts in Odisha

The conflicts over natural resources in Odisha has primarily occurred over the issue of displacement and the loss of rights over commons like forests and water due to mega hydro-power and irrigation projects, extractive industries, and other developmental projects. The issue of displacement and rehabilitation has remained the most contentious issue with the state involved in large-scale mega projects since Independence. The ominous remark made by India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru: "*if you have to suffer, you must suffer in the interest of the nation*" is still followed with the present Chief Minister echoing his words in televised programs, "*No one- I repeat no one – will be allowed to stand in the way of Odisha's progress.*"

Nehru's belief of dams being the modern temples of progress was initiated early on by laying the foundation stone of the Hirakud Dam in 1948. The dam's main purpose was outlined as meeting the irrigation needs, flood control and hydropower generation while it displaced at least 1,60,000 people with over 50 percent of them tribals (Viegas,1992). The dam also served the important purpose of supplying power to Alcan/Indal's Hirakund smelter in present day Jharkhand (Padel and Das, 2010). The nexus between the construction of dams and the opening up of mining and extractive industries was thus laid and was believed to be the path to growth and progress while the poor and hapless tribals and peasants were made to sacrifice for "the greater common good" (Roy, 1999).

The benefits accruing from these developmental projects and its adverse impacts on the local and tribal communities have formed the basis of most of these protests and conflicts. These movements occurring at different levels seek to retain access to life sustaining natural resources, socio-cultural rights and rights of indigenous communities and ameliorate the issues of displacement, rehabilitation and the loss of access to commons. Invariably, much of these conflicts are seen through the prism of development, hence the people protesting these projects are labelled as anti-development, anti-national or having a Maoist agenda and have to bear the brunt of the state's brute force.

A major factor for the conflict lies in the fact that these developmental projects displace a huge number of people who are dependent on the same resources that these projects require. While industrialisation has become the *sine qua non* for displacement and pauperisation of the local and indigenous communities, it also cannot be denied that industrialisation is necessary and one of the major forces that has pushed and sustained the Indian growth trajectory. Nehru's statement of "*...India, we are bound to be industrialised, we are trying to be industrialised, we want to be industrialised, we must be industrialised*" has been pursued with all seriousness but the adversity and destitution faced by the local and indigenous populations is wallowed away as collateral damage. The benefits from these projects which were meant to trickle down to the lower rungs of the society never materialised but the process of development through industrialisation continues unabated.

Many events have played their roles in shaping up and determining the conflicts over natural resources in Odisha. While the forces of colonialism laid the foundations for the alienation of the local indigenous populations from the life sustaining natural resources, the process came to a full circle under the post liberalisation era initiated during the nineties. The displacement of hundreds of tribals by the Hirakud dam immediately after Independence might have been considered as fait accompli and in the interest of the nation, but subsequent continuous uprooting of peoples along with their cultures and life systems have created a domino effect wherein past experiences come to play a major role in resisting these 'developmental projects'.

The nature of natural resource conflicts in Odisha is not without its set of historical misgivings and present day modalities of domination and destitution. Statistics of displacement due to development projects provides a terrifying picture but somehow the harbingers of development want these to be forgotten and hope to provide a better future. The story being repeated throughout Odisha in Kashipur, Lanjigarh, Jagatsinghpur, etc rests on this basic truth. Anti-mining, anti-dam, anti-land grabbing and so on are only variations in the fundamental fight for life and livelihood and every single conflict has the same basic fears and demands which the state and the corporates chooses to ignore. The conflict is reflective of the differing ideologies of growth and development between the state and its elites and the impoverished masses of tribals, dalits and other communities. The capitalistic mode of production believed to bring in development has in turn ravaged natural resources and with it, the people dependent upon them for subsistence. Consequently, conflicts over natural resources in Odisha can be largely segmented into anti-dam movements and movements against mining and industrialisation. These protest movements have paved the way for epitomizing the current nature of natural resource conflicts in Odisha.

2.1 Anti-Dam Movements

One of the earliest protest movements against the state led model of development in Odisha was the movement against the construction of the Hirakud Dam in the 1940's. The project was mooted to prevent the devastating annual floods of the river Mahanadi and to provide for the irrigation needs of the low lying coastal districts. Other ancillary benefits like power generation, industrialization, infrastructure development, navigation, and the availability of water for domestic and industrial purposes were also highlighted but the immediate and long term repercussions were kept under wraps (Goldsmith and Hildyard, 1984).

The anti-Hirakud campaign was started by the people of Sambalpur district where the dam was to be constructed as it was expected that the dam would submerge 108 full and 141 part revenue villages of Sambalpur which were the most fertile tracts of the district along with large scale uprooting of people and destruction of community life (Baboo, 2009). Mass agitations were organized and after several demonstrations the demand culminated into the separation of the Sambalpur district from Odisha which was strongly resisted by the Congress party and other national leaders. The movement subsequently fizzled out as it was projected as an anti-development activity led by the feudal rulers along with the backtracking of its members and the imposing image of the Congress at that time. The Hirakud dam was officially inaugurated in the year 1957 becoming the world's longest earthen dam and Asia's largest artificial lake. It also submerged 249 villages, 22144 families, 18432 houses and 112,038.59 acres of cultivate land while compensations to around 4000 families still remain unpaid (Baboo, 2009).

The displacement and discontent engendered by the Hirakud dam continued at a much larger scale at every subsequent project taken up by the government. The Salandi Irrigation Project in Keonjhar, Rengali Multipurpose Dam on the river Brahmani in Dhenkanal district, the Upper Kolab and Upper Indravati Hydroelectric projects in Koraput and Kalahandi districts, witnessed similar displacements and submergence of villages, fertile fields and forests (Dalua, 1993; Ota, 1998; Garada, 2015). The construction of these dams and multipurpose projects were justified on the basis of flood control, irrigation needs, generation of hydropower and subsequent industrialisation. These projects came to represent the pillars of modern India while displacing millions of its poor and marginalised.

The protests and oppositions to these projects were largely local and involved those who were likely to be displaced and dispossessed but were unsuccessful in preventing the construction of these projects. However, it brought into the fore the issues regarding rehabilitation and resettlement and adequate

compensation for those displaced and dispossessed. It is worth mentioning that prior to the early 1970's; Odisha did not have any resettlement policy for people displaced by dams and other industrial projects. The assistance provided to the displaced people from the government depended on the bargaining capability of the protestors often led by rich farmers. *"The policy depended on the organisational and bargaining strength of the displaced and the degree of success of their protest movements. There was no definition of a displaced person and a displaced family or standardized compensation norms for acquisition of different types of properties such as land, trees, ponds, wells, etc"* (Parida, 2000: 113).

It was only after the movement against the construction of the Rengali Multipurpose Dam in the early seventies that a formal rehabilitation policy for the oustees was formulated in 1973 (Mahapatra, 1991). The protest against the Rengali dam lasted for nearly seven years and was led through the formation of a coalition of political forces known as the "Bandha Pratikriya Samiti" which within two years of its formation, split into two factions with different objectives. The first faction was named "Bandha Nirodh Committee" and was led primarily by the landlords of the region. They continued their stance against the undesirability of the project and opposed the construction of the dam through public meetings, mass dharnas and courting arrests. The protest movement was organised following the ideals of non-violence but the volatile national political scenario during the seventies, made the movement seek judiciary recourse rather than opt for direct confrontations. The second faction was named "Rengali Rehabilitation and Resettlement Committee" and as the name suggests worked towards getting better compensation rates and better facilities of resettlement and rehabilitation (Nath and Agarwal, 1987). The construction of the Rengali dam was completed in 1985 and submerged 263 villages while providing for flood control, irrigation and hydro-power generation (Mishra, 2002). It also laid the framework for the formulation of a formal resettlement and rehabilitation policy in Odisha.

While the earlier protest movements against dams were organised by the landlords and ruling elite class, the protests against the Upper Indravati Hydro-electric project was led by the tribals of Kalahandi and Rayagada districts. The Upper Indravati Hydro-electric Project, financed by the World Bank, was commissioned in 1978. The protests primarily revolved around the issue of adequate compensation and proper rehabilitation and resettlement of the displaced which numbered around 40,000 mostly from the Paraja and Kondh tribal communities. The first phase of displacement in 1989 led to the formation of a frontal organization to address their plight but failed to advocate for their rights as the leadership was taken over by scrupulous politicians who instead harassed and intimidated the displaced tribals. In 1990, the "Indravati Gana Sangharsh Parishad" was formed with the support of "Ganatantrika Adhikar Suraksha Sanghatan" and pleaded for the rights of those displaced. The movement became volatile in 1991 due to the deaths of 200 tribal workers from the sudden flooding of an under-construction tunnel and led to mass protests. These protests were dealt with an iron hand and crushed with lathi charges and mass arrests by the state administration while the demands of the tribals for just and adequate compensations remained unfulfilled (Padel and Das, 2010).

The mass displacement of tribals and dalits by the construction of multi-purpose dams has made these dams the edifice of domination and pauperization of the poor and marginalised local communities. The protests and movements by the affected people have been usually dealt with force and the plight and concerns of the poor brushed aside to make way for development and prosperity for the larger majority. The absence of proper mechanisms for adequate compensation, resettlement and rehabilitation has further marginalised the displaced and created an anti-poor/anti-people image of these developmental projects. The conflict over the construction of dams has usually been over the issues of displacement and consequent resettlement and rehabilitation and the protest movements have inevitably fizzled out after a period of time.

Also the rate of success of anti-dam movements in India is very low and even the most celebrated anti-dam movements like the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) have had to eventually make way for the construction of these mammoth structures. The failure of these movements, while being intricately linked to the political and social milieu of the society (Baviskar, 2003) also has to contend with the natural forces. Once a dam is built, it is only a matter of time before the water level starts rising and submerges villages and the affected people have no option but to settle for demanding better resettlement and rehabilitation. It is a zero-sum game wherein the dam proponents have only to build

the dam and wait for the river to take its natural course while the protestors are left scurrying for higher land.

2.2 Movements against Mining and Industrialisation Projects

On the other hand, movements against industrialisation and mining enterprises have one less force to contend against; nature. The absence of natural forces against the protestors makes the conflict violence prone with intimidation tactics involving both coercion and force. The process utilized by the state for mining and industrialisation projects has been aptly described by Sudeep Chakravarti (2014) as a “*Clear, Hold and Build*” strategy wherein the land is first cleared from humans, then it is occupied with the use of police and paramilitary forces and then the construction of the industrial unit is commenced. A striking feature of the conflicts over mining and other industrial projects is the use of force in the form of police firings and the violence meted out by company hired goons. Direct confrontations between the opposing parties inevitably results in violence, bloodshed and many instances of killings of innocent tribals, dalits and the poor.

The human factor at play creates two situations; firstly, these conflicts are more prone to violence and human rights abuses but also results in hardened resolve of the protestors, thereby making a few of them successful in thwarting the plans of the state and big corporates. Secondly, the conflict is drawn out over a considerable period of time making it intractable and what has been described as “*an unequal and unstated war being waged by the government, the companies and the police forces against the tribals and dalits, with consent being obtained through coercion and force*” (PUDR, 2005:17).

One of the first protest movements against mining in Odisha was the movement against bauxite mining in the Gandhamardhan hills by BALCO (Bharat Aluminium Company) during the 1980's. This movement marked a watershed in the history of anti-mining protests through its continued resistance and success in preserving the ecology of the hills. The Gandhamardhan hills, a designated forest reserve, straddles the borders of Balangir district to the Southeast and Sambalpur district to the Northwest and is located in the west central part of Odisha. It is also the abode of the tribal communities of Kondhs and Binjal who consider it as a sacred grove and the source of two important perennial rivers, Sutkel and Onga. The top of the hill is estimated to have a bauxite zone that covers an area of 735 hectares. BALCO had plans to mine nearly 1500 crores rupees of bauxite from the Gandhamardhan hills and transport it to its aluminium plant, at Korba in Madhya Pradesh (Gallo, 2007). The foundation stone was laid by the then Chief Minister of Odisha on May 1983 and infrastructure development for mining bauxite was started.

The protests were carried out over the issues of livelihood, subsistence and religious significance by an alliance of tribal and dalit communities along with Hindu and other activists. The Gandhamardhan Suraksha Yuva Parishad (GSYP) formed in 1985, started by creating awareness about the ill-effects and ecological destruction by bauxite mining through songs, prayers and dharnas (Pegu, 2011). The protests retained its non-violent character throughout the course of the movement while certain incidents helped it in gaining the mass support that played a crucial role in its eventual success. Firstly, around 6,000 trees were cut down for construction of roads and other logistics required for BALCO which made the locals apprehensive about the sustainability of the life supporting forest and rivers. Secondly, a portion of an ancient temple including the Garuda Stambha was damaged due to blasting work being carried out by BALCO workers. To add fuel to fire, the idol of Lord Nrusingnath was also stolen which the agitators blamed on BALCO. Thirdly, the catch dam which was built by BALCO at Manabhanga, and portrayed to be beneficial for the locals instead submerged about 30 acres of fertile land including the famous orchards of Madhuban, which was the primary source of livelihood for the people of five Gram Panchayats (Pegu, 2011).

These events led to the intensification of protests and strikes and blockades were held to disrupt the plying of BALCO's vehicles and the transportation of any materials. Blockades were held at all the four major entry points to the hills as well as the under-construction rail links. The government reacted by arresting the agitators and in the course of the movement more than 1000 people were arrested but it only further intensified the protests. In the face of continued opposition, the project was abandoned for some time in 1987 owing to environmental reasons and the government finally withdrew the permission allotted to BALCO on 15th September, 1989.

The success story of Gandhamardhan however, could not be emulated at Kashipur, which has become infamous for police excesses, blatant human rights violations and unprovoked killings. The conflict has been going on for over two decades between the local adivasi/dalit communities and International Corporate Bodies hand in glove with the state government. Utkal Alumina International Ltd (UAIL) was formed as a joint venture between Hindalco, Alcan and Norsk Hydro of Norway in 1993. TISCO joined the venture but withdrew subsequently and Norsk Hydro also withdrew in 2001 following large scale protests against the project (Menon, 2005). UAIL aims to mine around 200 million tonnes of bauxite from the Baphlimali hills around Kashipur in Rayagada district. The extracted bauxite would be transported through a 22 km conveyor belt to its refinery at Doraguda near Kucheipadar and the aluminium exported to the rest of the world (Srikant, 2009). The operating cost per tonne of Alumina is one of the lowest in the world and the plant is expected to produce more than 8 million tons of aluminium annually (Goodland, 2007). The land acquired for the Utkal project is 2800 acres out of which 2,153 acres is private land and the remaining is government land including 92 acres of non-forest community land and 206 acres of village forestland (Indian People's Tribunal, 2006). According to Utkal's estimates, 147 families will be affected for whom the resettlement and rehabilitation procedures are planned, but the figures of other agencies varies significantly (Srikant, 2009).

The project has been opposed on the grounds of involuntary displacement, destruction of livelihoods of the local communities, and adverse effects on the ecology and environment of the region. The protests have been organised through the efforts of organisations such as the 'Prakrutik Sampada Surakhya Parishad' (PSSP), 'Baphlimali Surakhya Samiti' (BSS) and the 'Anchalik Surakhya Samiti' (ASS) ever since the local people came to know about the project in 1996. The protests have involved a large section of the local adivasi and dalit communities and organised massive rallies, blockades along with the filing of petitions and memorandums to the government and concerned agencies. The voices of the local people which includes a large number of tribal population has been met with repressive measures from the state in "*the form of large scale arrests, disruption of public meetings by force, violent beatings to disperse gatherings, official encouragement to the employment of private goons by UAIL, midnight raids by the police, unmitigated violence on women and children, etc*" (Indian People's Tribunal, 2006: 1).

The extreme repressive measures of the state came to the fore on 16th December, 2000 when the police opened fire at unarmed local tribals at Maikanch village killing three adivasis and injuring 16. The actions of the police were condemned as "preplanned and premeditated" cold blooded murder while connecting Utkal to the shootings by Justice Tewatia and Swami Agnivesh report (Tewatia Agnivesh Report cited in Goodland, 2007). The report further concluded that "*the entire state's administrative machinery, the police in particular, appeared to have worked at the behest of the powerful aluminium consortium, rather than under the rule of the law*" (Tewatia Agnivesh Report cited in Goodland, 2007: 31). This incident further intensified the protests along with the resolve of the local population and received much support from national and international civil society groups and support organisations. The state government on the other hand also intensified its coercive practices through arrests, detentions, increased police presence and the blacklisting of NGO's and other organisations working amongst the tribals in Kashipur. The state finally became successful in repressing the voice of the marginalised in Kashipur through its repressive and coercive tactics with UAIL finally starting its operations in 2013 amidst plans' to produce one million tonnes of aluminium in the fiscal year 2014-15 (Business Standard, 2013).

The repressive tactics employed by the state in favour of mining companies was yet again emulated at the Niyamgiri hills- a redoubt of the local tribal population. The conflict between a defiant Dongria Kondh indigenous population and a mighty multinational mining company Vedanta Aluminium Ltd (and its subsidiaries) has been described as a modern day 'David and Goliath' duel. The conflict that went on for over a decade between the multinational corporation and the local people and indigenous groups has marked a watershed in the history of conflict over natural resources and the corresponding environmental and indigenous movement in India. The foundation of the conflict goes back to April 1997 when the state owned Odisha Mining Corporation (OMC) transferred its rights to mine bauxite from the Niyamgiri hills to Sterlite Industries India Limited (a subsidiary of Vedanta Resources) along with the setting up of an aluminium refinery plant at Lanjigarh (Amnesty International, 2010). The project was subsequently halted within a few months due to the Samatha Judgement of July 1997 in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh which ruled that the provisions of Fifth Schedule of the Constitution also

applied to the transfer of private or government land in Scheduled Areas to non-tribals (Samatha Judgement, 1997).

This judgement should have put an end to proposals to mine bauxite from the Niyamgiri hills, a Scheduled Area with Kondh indigenous groups forming a significant part of it and the related aluminium refinery scheme. However, the Government of Orissa had other plans and in July 2002, it came out with a notification stating that the Samata Judgement did not apply to Odisha as it already had sufficient procedures for the protection of indigenous rights and compulsory land acquisition was started for the Lanjigarh refinery. Also, MoU's were signed between Vedanta and Odisha Mining Corporation for a 1MTPA refinery at Lanjigarh which was to be expanded to 6MTPA and mining bauxite from the surrounding Niyamgiri Hills (Nostromo Research, 2005). The land acquisition for the refinery at Lanjigarh was held in two phases in 2002 and 2004 and 118 families were fully displaced and a further 1,220 families sold their farmlands for the refinery and related infrastructures (Rights and Resources Initiative, 2012). The work on the refinery started even before the mandatory clearances from the Ministry of Environment and Forests were acquired and the plant was operationalised in 2006, amid growing discontent and protests amongst the local populace (Padel and Das, 2010).

The aluminium refinery at Lanjigarh operated through bauxite outsourced from nearby mines while it started building conveyor belts to mine bauxite from the adjacent Niyamgiri hills. It also applied for clearances to the Ministry of Environment and Forests for six-fold expansion of its operations at the Lanjigarh refinery. Though Vedanta continued its operations with a 'business as usual' attitude and was successful in acquiring lands -through coercion and force- required for setting up the refinery and related infrastructures, the protests against the planned bauxite mining in the Niyamgiri hills grew larger day by day. The indigenous Dongria population and the local Dalit families were being united through the support of local/regional activists, national and international NGO's, civil society groups, anti-mining organisations and environmental groups along with politicians and political parties (Padel and Das, 2010).

The protests were led through a frontal organisation called 'Niyamgiri Surakhya Samiti' which apart from organizing spontaneous protests and mass rallies at the ground level, also submitted petitions at the Supreme Court against mining in the Niyamgiri hills. The Supreme Court appointed Committees (to investigate the instances of environmental and forests laws violations) came out with reports indicting Vedanta of gross irregularities and circumventing regulations (Kraemer et.al., 2013) On the other hand, transnational environmental and human rights groups publicized human rights violations and imminent threat to the religion, customs and culture of the Dongria Kondhs at a global level eliciting huge support at the international level and also resulting in protests during Vedanta's annual general meetings at London (Chakravarti, 2014).

Within the span of a decade, the movement against Vedanta took a global and colossal form unanticipated either by the state government or the multinational corporation and came to represent the 'legend of Niyamgiri'. For the actors involved in the conflict, it involved a see-saw ride with the fate of the mining venture and the Niyamgiri hills hanging in a limbo. Threats and coercion, police repression, protests and counter-rallies, defection of leaders, fatalism and dogged resistance put Niyamgiri hills and the nondescript valley of Lanjigarh into the natural resource conflict map of India and the world. The conflict went through many phases during the course of the movement until the final verdict was sealed through the Supreme Court appointed Palli Sabhas (Gram Sabhas) in 2013.

The Supreme Court ruled that the final say with regard to mining in the Niyamgiri hills lay with the local people and a referendum of the Palli Sabhas was sought. The project was unanimously rejected in the referendum heralding an unprecedented victory for the indigenous Dongria Kondhs in protecting the abode of their gods, the Niyamgiri hills and with it their beliefs, culture and traditions. The referendum also marked an epoch in the struggle for indigenous rights and environmentalism and placed the Forest Rights Act of 2006 as a potent tool in protecting the rights of tribals and other forest dwelling communities (Samadrusti and Mishra, 2015).

Another long drawn conflict was played out at Odisha's southern coastal district of Jagatsinghpur against South Korea's Pohang Iron and Steel Company (POSCO) for more than a decade. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Government of Odisha and POSCO was signed on

22nd June, 2005 and was touted as the biggest Foreign Direct Investment since liberalisation of the economy in 1991. According to the MOU, POSCO was to invest US\$ 12 billion (Rs. 52,000 crores) for establishing a 12 million tonnes per year steel plant with a captive port and the necessary infrastructure for the integrated steel plant and mining of iron and other related ores in Odisha (Das, 2005). The MOU required the Odisha Government to supply non-renewable minerals and fuel resources, water and land, the facility for the construction of a new port at Paradeep and various other incentives and concessions including recommendation of “Special Economic Zone (SEZ)” status to POSCO (Mukhopadhyay, 2006).

The land required for the project had been estimated at around 12,000 acres, including 4,004 acres for the steel processing plant and port at Jagatsinghpur district, 2,000 acres for the company town and related infrastructure and another 6,177 acres for the iron ore mining in Khandadhar hills (International Human Rights Clinic, 2013). The steel plant and port projects in Jagatsinghpur district would affect eight villages from the three Gram Panchayats of Dhinkia, Nuagaon, and Gada Kujanga where 4,004 acres of land would have to be acquired including 3,566 acres of forest lands and 438 acres of private land (Mahapatra, 2013).

The project ran into trouble ever since its inception with the local villagers opposing the project against the proposed displacement and destruction of the rich economy and livelihood of the region. The unique environmental features of the area, such as high water table, rich soil composition and proximity to the sea, have created a vibrant, productive and sustainable local economy where the local farmers sustain themselves throughout the course of the year. The chief mainstay of the area is the cultivation of betel leaf and cashews, shrimp farming, fishing, rice paddies and animal husbandry which has formed the background to a robust local economy (International Human Rights Clinic, 2013). The three Gram Panchayats affected by the project, is estimated to have 5,000 betel vineyards supporting 10,000 cultivators. A vineyard of 100-150 vines produces an annual profit of about Rs. 200,000 apart from the income generated through the sale of cashews and shrimps among others (International Human Rights Clinic, 2013). The POSCO project would destroy this vibrant self-sustaining economy and push the villagers into destitution and poverty.

Many ‘people’s groups’ were formed to voice their concerns with the POSCO Pratirodh Sangram Samiti (PPSS), Nav Nirman Samiti (NNS), Rashtriya Yuva Sangathan, United Action Committee (UAC) among others fighting tooth and nail against the proposed industrial project. The protests carried out in the Gandhian way of non-violence involved dharnas, village resolutions denying consent for diversion of forests lands, submissions to government committees, issuing press releases and demonstrations at various important places including New Delhi. They also formed blockades around the three Gram Panchayats and refused access to representatives of POSCO or the state governments’ representatives (Mahapatra, 2013).

The government on the other hand resorted to violence and intimidation tactics along with arbitrary arrests and detentions against the anti-POSCO protestors. The state even resorted to barricading entire villages with the help of the police and leveled fabricated criminal charges against individuals opposing the project. The villagers were forced to live under siege with constant threats of attacks by company sponsored goons. In one such instance, four villagers were killed when company sponsored goons attacked a village meeting with bombs. In May 2010, the police attacked fleeing villagers with rubber bullets, tear gas, metal pellets and batons and injured over 100 people at Balitutha while around 3,000 charges were filed by the authorities against individuals opposing the project (Mahapatra, 2013). Notwithstanding the repressive measures adopted by the state against peaceful protestors, the fate of the project went into a limbo with the state government being unable to acquire the required land to be transferred to POSCO. The project was finally shelved in March 2017 marking a definitive victory for the local farmers and their self sustaining economy (Sahu, 2017).

3. Conclusion

The nature of natural resource conflicts in Odisha can be argued to be conflicts over the nature of development adopted by the state. At a micro level, the conflict and protests over development projects primarily revolves around the issues of loss of livelihoods, displacement and pauperisation of the forests and agriculture dependent communities. A combination of these factors along with the negative

effects of similar developmental projects in recent time and place makes the conflicts seemingly intractable and with hardened stance adopted by both parties. Odisha has witnessed several protests and conflicts over these issues with both the state and the opponents of its developmental paradigm adopting hardened stance and attitudes. Though some of these protests have been successful in thwarting the state-led process of development and change, others have failed, some have become a protracted issue and many more are yet to materialise. Interestingly a recurrent theme in each of these protest movements has been the overt use of force by the state against its own people and for whom it envisages to bring development.

At a fundamental level, these conflicts represent opposing strands of belief in which two contending perspectives are pitted against each other. The first perspective represents the state's vision of the rationality of economic growth through industrialisation. The latter represents the concerns of adivasis, dalits and other marginalised sections of the society whose lives are intertwined with the natural resource base and who stands to lose the most. The magnitude of the gulf between the two perspectives in which fundamental self-interests are at stake makes the possibility of mutual comprehension and the ability to appreciate the rationality of the other side increasingly difficult (Chakravorty, 2013).

Conflict between these two opposing forces becomes inevitable with each party galvanizing support for its cause and belief systems. These conflicts with local and regional roots over localized issues of land, forests and water often take on national and even global dimensions and represent the conflict between 'two India'- one with an economic and super-power ambitions and the other with sustenance and livelihood concerns. Thus, conflicts over natural resources are intrinsically the assertion of the weak and the powerless to have control over their lives and resources. It is "not a rearguard action-the dying wail of a class about to drop down the trapdoor of history- but a potent challenge which strikes at the very heart of the process of development" (Bhaviskar, 1995: 47).

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