

## 'No' to Vedanta

People in recent years have watched with horror the government and corporate prove themselves unwilling and unable to truly deal with environmental and survival crisis. Whether Jairam Ramesh's 'no' to Vedanta, the Britain-based Indian multinational, can save Orissa's Niyamgiri Hills is not yet clear but for the time being the tribals belonging to the most marginalised Dongria Kondh tribe have reasons to heave a sigh of relief. The Centre's refusal to give environmental clearance to the group's \$1.7 billion bauxite mining project in Niyamgiri is unlikely to force the notorious Vedanta house, with dubious distinction of having violated a number of laws in its short period of operation, to leave the country. They are running the Lanjigarh Alumina refinery at the base of Niyamgiri hills, by sourcing bauxite from 14 mines, mostly in Jharkhand and 11 of them are illegal. The Centre has not asked the company to stop illegal mining and close the plant, despite gross violation of laws of the land. Niyamgiri Tribals have been agitating for long against the onslaught of Vedanta without any positive response from the Centre. Civil society reacted apprehending massive dislocation of poor and marginalised people but the Centre didn't move. On the contrary they gave in principle approval to the project in 2007 knowing full well the consequences and Vedanta lost no time to go ahead trumpeting the much publicised and yet less understood, the song of growth and job creation.

Orissa has long been a chosen destination of foreign and domestic investors for more than one reason. It is fabulously rich in mineral wealth and absence of labour militancy is being counted by all—the Centre, state government and investing companies. Orissa witnessed massive loot of its mineral resources, particularly high grade iron and manganese ores, during the second world war. The companies involved were mostly British and their Indian subsidiaries. The Patnaik family that now runs the dynastic democracy of Orissa, reportedly had substantial stakes in mining business in the fifties and sixties. In those days the scale of operation was limited to a few select areas and dispossession of tribals living in hills and jungles, was not that alarming, albeit the people of Orissa plains never treated the hill people as human beings.

But globalisation has made all the difference. The power of capital is now being felt in almost every state where there are mineral resources and prime land to set up SEZ. Vedanta apart, they have also give green signal to controversial South Korean Venture—POSCO Steel project. The people of Orissa are resisting the onslaught of POSCO and Vedanta by sacrificing their lives and luckily for them they are not yet Maoists in official parlance, Vedanta continues to propagate the idea that the economic benefits of the aluminium factory including the Niyamgiri mining project far outweigh the displacement of the Dongria Khond tribe. In due season the authorities in Delhi are likely to swallow the pill because all of them can only think in terms of growth.

Not that the all important decision to impose checks on Vedanta and its backer—the BJD government of Orissa—has no political indication. Maybe, a little bit of arms twisting is not against the interests of Congress that has long been out of power in Orissa otherwise regarded as an exclusive reserve of Congress monopoly in the yester years.

The controversy over the Vedanta mines project has been going on since 2004, inviting international outcry from international human rights and environmental groups. Though Congress Secretary Rahul Gandhi's visit to the troubled Niyamgiri where the Dongria Khond tribals are somehow surviving on hunting and subsistence farming, in 2008 was not that important but his observation that the mining of the Niyamgiri hills would destroy environment, water supply source and the traditional culture and livelihood of tribals, was in a way boost to the anti-mining agitationists. Also, being the AICC General Secretary, Mr Gandhi was the first political bigwig from Delhi to address the *Adivasi Adhikar Divas* (Tribals Rights Day) two days after the centre's rejection of stage-II environmental clearance to Vedanta's Mining Project.

The hard reality is that so long as the union government's policy of wooing foreign capital and opening up the economy continues unabated the marginalised section of the population has no respite from being haunted by the elite club. For all practical purposes, globalisation is rewriting human's relationship with the earth and her people, alienating land, water and bio-diversity from local communities in a scale that was unthinkable even four decades ago. They are transforming commons into commodities—it is a break from all earlier stages of human relationship with nature and natural resources.

The majority of Indians seem to be in a free fall towards disaster to meet the appetite of a tiny minority. What is urgently needed is to project alternatives—alternatives beyond corporate violence, non-sustainability and economic injustice. Then survival imperative is not on the agenda of the left. They too dance to the tune of corporate-scripted development paradigm and routinely organise a protest bandh or two. □□□