

Indian Environmentalism: Discourse, Politics and Fragments

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Abstract

It is often customary to represent environmentalism in the industrialised North as a predominantly middle class phenomenon whereas Indian environmentalism is hyphenated with questions of equity and distributive justice. When it is true that Indian environmental activism is a response to developmental challenges posed by the state and the penetration of global capital, there is an uncritical and unproblematic theorization of such activism that often reduces Indian environmentalism to questions of life and livelihood.

The present paper challenges conventional theoretical assumptions of Indian environmentalism by highlighting the fractures within the theory and practice of Indian environmental discourses. It engages with questions like how competing conceptions of environment and development bring forth new dimensions to human-environment relationship. How the political expressions of these movements repress and produce conflicting narratives? What counts as environment and environmental problems?

Drawing from the theoretical vocabulary of post-structuralism, the paper uses existing theoretical literature as an entry point to engage with more critical questions of representation, authenticity etc. It also uses qualitative data drawn from visits to two areas of environmental activism (anti-POSCO movement and anti-Vedanta movement in Odisha) which includes interviews with various groups of people.

At a theoretical level, the paper argues that representing Indian environmentalism as a survival imperative not only zoifies affected people, but also projects the North as the subject of environmental history. The site visit and interviews establish that affected people in the POSCO and Vedanta project areas are not uniform in their response to ideas like, „development“, state and „people“. It is also revealed that questions of identity, class and gender mediate the way people experience state and „development“.

Key words: *Environment, Development, People, Discourse*

Introduction

It is widely recognized that modern environmental consciousness is of a Western middle class origin and is a response to the growing realization of

global environmental degradation that often accompanies industrialization, capitalism and affluence. Third World environmentalism, in contrast, is not fired by any such global awareness and instead concerns itself with “the question of equity”.¹ Scholars after scholars highlight how Third World environmental actions “stem primarily from a concern with livelihood” and are occupied with “productive use of natural resources”.² It is thus a kind of given to theorize Indian environmental action as radically different from First World enterprise, and also foundationally different from the concerns of the omnivores or the beneficiaries of globalization and market economy. This is a trope which has found exaggerated expressions not only in policy and research documents of international organizations, but also has been internalized by Third World environmental scholars themselves. Thus, Sunita Narayan distinguishes between “protectionist conservationism” in the First World and “utilitarian conservationism” in the Third World, referring to the dependence of a large section of people in the Third World on environment for food, water, fodder etc.³

It is interesting to note that in Western environmental discourses, the West remains the subject of environmental history where the exploitation of environment is no longer seen as an imperative for growth given that mass industrialization has already happened and countries have already moved away from industry to the service sector. This condition generates a concern for environment, unlike the Third World where the struggle between man and environment is an everyday matter of survival. Gadgil and Guha borrow from an American economist Thurow who argued that “environmentalism is an interest of the upper middle class” and that “poor countries and poor individuals simply aren’t interested”.⁴ This is not only an attempt to sanitize environmental consciousness, but also an experiment to limit the scope of environmental action that robs the Third World of any environmental sensibility. The Third World remains stuck either in pre-modern subsistence condition of the people or the mass modernization drive by the postcolonial developmental state.

Gadgil and Guha⁵ borrow from Thurow who believed that after a decent standard of life, the next important thing for Americans is a clean environment as the latter can make other goods and services more enjoyable. They also refer to the work of R. Nash and other American scholars who saw environmentalism as a full-stomach phenomenon. In this imaginary, environment is the latest luxury that will make life complete and clean by offering better aesthetics and conveniences. They quote Moore who believed that prosperity will come when everybody becomes environmental and that “greenness is the ultimate luxury of the consumer society”.⁶ But while taking issue with these Western scholars, Gadgil and Guha,⁷ as other scholars, replicate the same idea by locating Indian environmental movement in the context of distribution and equity thereby

implying that if it were not for livelihood, environmental consciousness would not have taken root at all.

Western notions of environmental consciousness, as an antidote to the evils of modernity, did not find much favour with postcolonial countries that were desperately trying to justify their independence by catching up with the West. In the early days of industrialization, environment and sustainability were anathema as they were seen as Western tools to stall the progress of postcolonial states. The postcolonial developmental state had no patience for such Western preaching as they saw in it a manifestation of Western hypocrisy. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad was such an exponent who challenged the dishonesty of Western environmental policies which he thought would arrest the growth of postcolonial countries like Malaysia. Speaking in the 1992 Rio conference on Environment and Development, Mohamad said, “When the rich chopped down their own forests, built their poison-belching factories and scoured the world for cheap resources, the poor said nothing. Indeed they paid for the development of the rich. Now the rich claim a right to regulate the development of the poor countries...As colonies we were exploited. Now as independent nations we are to be equally exploited”.⁸ He was thus articulating the resolve of the postcolonial world not only to catch up, but also tell the West about its double standards which after having exploited environment in Europe, wants it to be preserved elsewhere in Asia and Africa so that it can act as a safety valve to protect humanity. Similarly, India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru promoted an idea of progress which was based on mega projects and dams. In the development vision of leaders like Mohamad and Nehru, environment was the background against which national progress was realized.

Third World environmental action not only challenges Western ideas of environment as luxury and an extra service, but also as a response to the developmentality of the postcolonial state. There is a tendency to exaggerate from the West by foregrounding the survival question as the quintessential feature of Third World environmentalism. When it is true that people in Third World countries depend on environment for their everyday life, it is simplistic to imagine these livelihood mobilizations as environmental activism outside their representation and co-option by global environmental discourses. When statist discourses see environment in an instrumental manner and as a resource base, environmental discourses overstate the human-nature relationship thereby excluding the contested nature of environment and their production of social imaginaries. Similarly, people affected by development plans are projected as pre-modern in state narratives whereas they are presented as the children of earth standing between the marauding capitalism and a helpless environment.

Both statist and environmental discourses ignore the generative capacity of discourse and do not see themselves as producers of developmental/environmental truths. So instead of ontologizing Third World difference in terms of life and livelihood questions and projecting native-nature relation as definitive of Third World environmentalism, it would be eminently beneficial to see how such difference is produced in discourse, what its implications are and how representations shape the way we know things, and also see what counts as environment and environmental problems. It is equally important to debate what such discourse means for Third World environmentalism based on the question of livelihood and what the foundations of Third World environmental subjectivity are. Or how does discourse help produce Third World environment and movements? Or how specific places are imagined, produced and sustained.

The first part of the paper, with this aim of problematizing environmental discourses, offers a critique of Third World environmentalism as a derivative discourse which reduces the former to a biological imperative and places Third World people outside environmental history. Taking cue, the second part exposes the way Third World difference vis-à-vis the survival question is produced in representation thus limiting the appeal of Third World activism. While addressing these issues, we will be drawing from two environmental movements in the eastern state of Odisha in the Indian Union, the region the authors know well. The conclusion summarises the issues raised in the main body of the paper and reiterates the constructive nature of language.

The Politics of Livelihood

From the perspective of the First World, it may appear that Third World environmentalism is not yet mature as it still depends on environment for the biological survival of the people. There is a clear division in terms of participation in environmental activism, one characterized by distance from the environment and another by dependency. In scientific discourses, the latter can be dismissed as one-sided, something which must cross a few more rungs to reach the level of First World environmentalism and its objectivity. Gadgil and Guha echoed this idea when they said that in the West “environmentalism as a popular movement is ... an unmistakable product of postindustrial economy and a postmaterial society” whereas in India which still remains an agrarian society, “environmental movement has emerged at a relatively early stage in the industrialization process”.⁹ Unlike the West, where much of environmental activism is often about saving wilderness, Indian variants are often about land-use and water-use, or a matter of people’s safety as in Plachimada, Chilika or Kudankoolam. Indian environmentalism cannot move beyond body, food, water and survival which, in a way, biologizes Indian environmentalism. It is no surprise that terms like ‘life’ and ‘livelihood’ are often used in Indian

environmental movements which give it a biological character where environmental consciousness cannot move beyond the physical well-being and its needs. However, in the West, environmental awareness is possible only when the individual has moved away from dependency on environment and so can imagine himself as a protector of the environment. It is assumed that such a detached person can guide others; only this disinterested person can produce environmental knowledge. This detachment makes one an environmental Subject; this also completely intensifies the idea of Indian/Third World difference. When Western theorizations represent Third World environmental consciousness as an economic condition and push the Third World outside such consciousness, Third World scholars themselves over-believe in the outsidership of the Third World.

It may be noted here that Gadgil and Guha¹⁰ saw three distinct strands in Indian environmentalism viz. ecological Marxists, crusading Gandhians and intermediate technologists. It comes as no surprise that Indian activism is often seen as ecologically Marxist because of its concern with the question of distribution. This theorization produces Third World difference and it is in the process of producing this difference that Third World environmentalism is 'third-worlded'. We don't mean to say that Third World environmentalism is no different from the First World, but that this difference is produced in such theorization. Gadgil and Guha, however, simplify the issue when they argue that Western environmentalism runs parallel to the consumer society and does not question its socio-ecological basis whereas Third World, with its subsistence and survival economy, offers a "thorough-going critique both of consumerism and of uncontrolled economic development".¹¹ This is something which is simplistic to say the least, because Third World environmentalism is often a product of capitalism itself, and not always its critique. The villages in anti-POSCO movement are not fighting for survival in a literal sense nor do they belong to the subsistence/food crop economy. Rather, they are into cash cropping of betel leaves and prawn farming, and are against POSCO because it does not offer them a good deal. However, scholars like Gomes seem to have romantic notions about sustainability and believe that "Indigenous peoples are generally noted for their traditional ecological knowledges and practices that enable them to live sustainably with the natural environment".¹²

This Third World difference has some kind of existential solidity that forms a part of any environmental scholarship passing off as an article of faith. Ghai and Vivian¹³ outline various ways in which such an imaginary is built. First, in the Third World, environmental resources are valued as source of livelihood. Secondly, because of the economic, social and spiritual importance of environment, people in these parts of the world developed systems of institutions balancing between livelihood needs and integrity of the environment. Thirdly, historical processes like colonialism undermined and

often destroyed these indigenous management systems. Fourthly, the affected people resist these alien development processes to safeguard their livelihood from postcolonial development states. These people not only mobilize themselves at the local level, but also create broad based coalitions by seeking support from foreign environmental and human rights groups. There is a distinct attempt of tutelage from First World activists, as we will discuss later, who speak for Third World problems. By making environmental awareness a class/economic condition, such discourses rob a large part of the world of realizing their potential of being environmental citizens. Since the Third World will continue to remain in that condition because of slow economic progress, environmental awareness will continue to remain a Western condition.

Michael Redclift too sees three different dimensions to sustainability which distinguishes Third World from First World practices. These are economic, political and epistemological dimensions. The third one, in particular, provides a polar difference in terms of a different epistemology in the Third World which challenges the scientific and universal pretensions of First World epistemology and its abstract tradition. It offers a Third World epistemology of historical traditions which later become “encoded in rituals, in religious observations and in the cultural practices of everyday life”.¹⁴ This creates a utopian world of plenty and places people in a period of innocence before the Fall. Usually contradictions among the affected people are ignored as these people are projected as an unchanging mass without any ambivalence towards land or the movement. We may call this Third World environmental romanticism. Such views fail to see the presence of multiple epistemologies neither within the postcolonial developmental state nor in the so-called people-driven movements. Redclift goes on to argue that since the West uses a scientific epistemology, its experts tend to “devalue the contribution of local knowledge to environmental planning”.¹⁵

However before we proceed with our interpretations, we would like to introduce the origin and development of two environmental movements in Odisha. One is in the coastal region involving the South Korean Steel company POSCO which plans to develop a steel plant in the district of Jagatsinghpur and the other involves a British company Vedanta Aluminium Limited which has already constructed a refinery at Lanjigarh and has been seeking permission to mine bauxite from Niyamagiri hills, which is worshipped as god by the local tribe called Dongria Kandhas. The first project requires about 4000 acres of land (has been revised to 2700 acres) and is estimated to displace people from three grampanchayats or clusters of villages named Dinkia, Nuagaon and Gadakujanga. The land acquisition for POSCO is more or less complete and work may start anytime, though we also hear that Odisha state is planning to go ahead with the original plan of 4000 acres. In contrast, Vedanta’s appeal to mine bauxite has just been stalled by the Supreme Court of India as the latter

recognized Kandhas' cultural right to worship Niyamagiri hills and authorised *gram sabhas* or village councils to take a call within three months on mining rights to Vedanta. The decision is awaited.

In the anti-POSCO movement, we have POSCO Pratirodh Sangram Samiti (PPSS), roughly translated as Association against POSCO, which has been at the forefront of the movement demanding the withdrawal of the steel plant. Dhinkia grampanchayat, consisting of four villages like Dhinkia, Gobindpur, Trilochanpur and Patana has been the ground zero of this movement as the PPSS leader Mr. Abhay Sahoo hails from this area. Every now and then the movement gets support from noted human rights groups and environmentalists. Vandana Shiva, the famous anti-globalization activist and environment scholar, visited Gobindpur village and offered support to the agitation. She reportedly said that "There is no justification for setting up the steel plant in the fertile land in the area where rural economy has prospered with multi-crop farming and other economic activities like fisheries and plantation".¹⁶ This goes well with her advocacy of multi-crop farming through indigenous seeds and techniques. But what is interesting is that these areas are dominated by cash crop farmers investing heavily in betel vines which are usually built on revenue land or sand-dunes facing the sea. Shiva also justified the use of children in the movement (after being moved out of their schools to participate in the movement) and argued that it involves their existence and future. Other activists like Medha Patkar and Swami Agnivesh too have lent their support to the movement. Similarly, People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) members visited the site and saw large scale rights violation.

The Dongria Kandha tribe of Odisha are up against bauxite mining rights, as they were opposed to the construction of refinery, given to the Vedanta. It may be noted here that the Niyamagiri hill is worshipped as God and is named Niyamaraja or Budharaja. This perfectly suits the global environmental discourses highlighting tribals living in the lap of nature and having a pre-modern and pre-capitalist epistemology. The organization leading the movement against Vedanta Aluminium Limited is Niyamagiri Suraksha Samiti (NSS) or Organization for the Safety of Niyamagiri. The movement reaches corridors of power in Delhi through lobbying and also in London where activists sensitize the people about the aggrandizing mentality of the company and its mission of uprooting tribes from their place. While it is easy to question this idea of capital induced progress or development, what is ignored is the question of authenticity and representation. It is more or less taken for granted that it is the anti-industry group which is the authentic representative of Dongria Kandhas because they conform to our preconceived idea of a tribe. When the developmental state represents project supporters as authentic tribals, NGOs and other environmental groups dismiss them as a small faction. When the anti-project group is represented in environmental discourses as the good guys with

a belief system of their own, the pro-project group is often represented as morally and materially corrupt who have betrayed the cause and the very core of tribalism.

Rendering Indian environmentalism as a survival mechanism may be interpreted as a systematic act of infantilization of the Third World which still remains at the stage of bread and butter/livelihood, thereby restricting entry into the adult world of environmental consciousness. In this struggle for survival, the Third World subject cannot think beyond his everyday need of food, water, firewood, shelter etc. which paralyses his vision of an environmentally sustainable world. In the anti-POSCO movement children are used as human shields to arrest the march of police and state machinery trying to acquire land, which literally infantilizes this movement. To make the movement look progressive and children-friendly, school teachers are brought to the protest sites to teach various subjects to the children sitting in the *dharna*. In psychoanalytic terms, Indians will forever be condemned to depend on environment as a child depends on mother.

The anti-POSCO movement also saw women protesters stripping themselves to shame and stop the movement of police, thus establishing the feminine nature of the movement. Considering the fact that rural women in India consider topics on body and sexuality a taboo subject, such stripping sexualizes the movement where land is symbolically represented as both helpless and violent. Strip march by women or sand burial by children (burying the body in sand up to waist height) during anti-POSCO agitation reduces the movement to a highly theatrical event or a spectator-sport. Such an Oedipal relationship is confirmed when we hear terms like mother nature or mother earth which is less about nature's motherhood and more about the Indian's infancy. Often we see the earth represented as mother where *maa* (mother) and *maati* (soil/earth) are used interchangeably. This gets highlighted when we read tales from *adivasi* (indigenous) traditions that often represent the child-like innocent hero who cannot be separated from his land or tribe. In the literature of displacement when affected people often confront an indifferent state, they are represented as living in the lap of nature, the reason why displacement or rehabilitation will bring disaster.

The exoticization of Third World environment and its people is another facet of global environmental discourse which often finds echo in middle-class city based activists who take a fascination with rural problems. It goes well with our preconceived ideas about the Third World as radically different from the First World where tribes and peasants live in a subsistence or food crop economy. This idea resonates among people where a large chunk of humanity depends on agriculture and where most farmers own small patches of land. Coupled with that, we have national narratives valorizing the contribution of farmers to the

Indian economy and the metaphor of the farmer as an indicator of national prosperity. Tsing is right when she says “Southeast Asian environmental movements use tribal and peasant allegories in a creative, eclectic manner to further their mobilizations”.¹⁷ The same is true of India as well though peasant-related problems get more attention because of the sheer number of peasants involved which may impact elections and also because of their participation in national slogans like ‘*jai jawan, jai kissan*’ (glory to the soldier, glory to the farmer). As in Southeast Asia, the Indian environmental landscape is peasantized or shaped in relation to peasant allegories. Along with it goes the idea of the farmer as everyman and his problem becomes everyman’s problem and by implication the country’s problem.¹⁸ Tribes instead do not carry such electoral prospects and are often left to fate or for stories to recount their experience until they attract the attention of Western environmental media looking for some ‘authentic’ Third World difference. This may be because tribals are more concerned with the loss of stories, rootedness, land ethics rather than pressing needs for water and land. Interestingly, tribal resistance fascinates First World intellectuals and activists more than peasants.

The Politics of Representation

As we have discussed in the first part, Third World difference is constructed carefully by focusing on the questions of life and livelihood or basic human survival. It is often ignored that this Third World reality cannot exist outside representation, and that it is created and sustained within discourse by iteration and performance. Though conventionally, the symbolic realm of language is seen to have direct access to the origin of a movement, our constructivist approach instead will propose that environmental problems are not always existing realities; rather they are everyday problems which are co-opted into the environmental discourse to make them reappear as environmental problems. Amita Baviskar has exposed how such Third World movements are hailed into global environmental discourse when she argues that “claims to environmentalism are more likely to be accepted if they fit into a pre-existing template of ‘green politics’ as developed in the North”.¹⁹ Thus environmental citizenship comes with the subjection of a version of livelihood question to a global vocabulary which not only appropriates this Third World problem, but also reproduces this problem as environmental. Environmental meanings are not just there; they become so in language while being represented and while being decoded. It is only within a specific signifying space that a problem becomes known as environmental problem and gets established as reality.

We can argue that environmental discourse uses various ways to environmentalize Third World livelihood problems as environmental problems thus retaining the right to ascribe environmental subjecthood to Third World people. This not only depoliticizes Third World movement; it also robs the

movement of its agency by locating it within the framework of livelihood and basic life. But news media and external activists who come to provide a sense of direction to environmental movements and produce environmental consciousness among the people sustain these Third World differences. This fits into the idea of a corrosive capitalism and a pre-modern homogeneous people. It is in language that Third World difference is pitched as geographically and epistemologically different and where this difference in terms of climate, race and ideology are discursively constructed and commodified. Part of this discourse is to erase the multiple dimensions of space/environment and its contested nature into a frozen fact where Third World places and people become objects of knowledge. People as a fancy term are then pitted against the state, in spite of the fact that there are many way of becoming people and so many ways of subalternization through representation. The peopling of people in resistant discourses is believed to be realized only through resistance to state leading to further subalternization “so that we privileged First Worlders, and our Third World middle-class counterparts, might help them “resist” ”.²⁰

In this discourse, native morphs into nature, sharing with the latter some kind of spiritual kinship. This kinship is always celebrated uncritically in environmental literatures. Baviskar has brought into light the ambivalence of tribal leaders towards tribal-nature relationship which activists believe is the bedrock of tribalism. A tribal leader Amarsinh Chaudhari once said that though tribals have a relationship with forests and land, it is because they have no other choice and that if they could, they would come out of the forest and benefit more.²¹ Baviskar adds that “life in the forest is not desired by *adivasis* but is forced on them”²² as it makes a perfect case of Third World environmentalism. In such a scenario, there is a subtle attempt to produce tribals in environmental literature that conforms to global ideas of Third World resistance, though it elides the complex relations tribals have with land and also the larger question of development. Though tribals are silenced by academics/activists and become objects of knowledge, they interestingly have the epistemic privilege of being topics of environmental debate. While enjoying the epistemic privilege of the oppressed, they simultaneously are dispossessed from authoring their own stories.

Let us see how representation creates environmental platitudes by drawing from anti-Vedanta agitation. In a meeting organized by NSS in May 2013 in Muniguda, Odisha, thousands of Dongria Kandhas came in a procession demanding the complete withdrawal of Vedanta from Niyamagiri. All of them were in tribal gear, with musical instruments and weapons that made their social and epistemological difference visible, and contributed to the visual solidity of difference from modernity and statist/capitalist development. That difference was contrasted to sameness which was made manifest in the banner which carried slogans in both Odia and English: “Save our land, forest, water, life and

livelihood” which was meant for media, NGOs and sympathizers or powers that be. The visualization of difference and performative tribal tradition here act as staple diet for global environmental discourses. Third World difference is made visible in dresses and language, and sameness is made manifest by its performance in English so that it can be appropriated by global discourses. It is no surprise then that such rallies are organized in different Indian and European/American cities condemning development projects. This appropriation is necessary for the resilience of the global discourse through its co-option of voices of the exotic other. This sameness-difference also complicates the notion of Third World environmental movement as a spontaneous movement and presents it as orchestrated, planned and packaged. Here we can also see the simultaneous territorialisation and deterritorialization of tribals; they appear in their traditional gear, as carriers of their culture. At the same time, they need to come out of their territory to rally while communicating in English (mentored by external activists) through their banners.

The coverage of the anti-Vedanta movement uses language and metaphors which perpetuate the anteriority of the Kandhas and represent them as relics of the past even while romanticizing their pre-modern life-style. There are some commentators who replicate the state's understanding of normative development as a movement away from tradition and subsistence farming while being sympathetic to people's resistance to the so-called development projects. It comes as no surprise that Martinez-Alier and Temper see all resistance movements, including Kandha struggle against Vedanta, as a clash between development and tradition.²³ Even though there are fragments within the movement as it is in any other movements, these contradictions are never projected, or are minimized, to create an idea of a united ecological people standing against state development. These discourses painstakingly produce notions of Dongria Kandhas as hunter-gatherers who have opted to live outside modernity and civilization. The subjecthood of these tribals are to be found in the act of resistance to state versions of development, though in reality it is the tribals' subjection to environmental discourse and their representation as an anti-state formation which actually rob them of their agency.

The agentic notion of tribals is thus possible in the act of submission so that the environmental discourse can legitimate itself as a rescue narrative. Tribals who do not subscribe to this narrative are no tribals as they have apparently succumbed to the state or foreign company. If the development discourse stereotypes tribes as the background of modernity, environmental discourse more or less does the same by not letting them speak or write their own history. In the anti-Vedanta movement, what is overlooked is the existence of another group called Lanjigarh Anchalika Vikas Parishad (Association for the Regional Development of Lanjigarh), a pro-‘development’ organization which accuses NSS of stalling the progress of the region. One of the leaders of this group is

Jitu Jakesika who was once actively associated with the NSS, but now claims that he was misled by NGO activists who did not want his area to develop. In the mainstream discourses though people like Jitu are often seen as traitors or as company agents who have sold themselves for money or alcohol. While it is easy to question the state's idea of progress or development, what is evaded is the question of authenticity and representation.

Writing in *Sydney Morning Herald*, Matt Wade promotes an idea of Dongria Kandha as those who “hunt, gather forest products and carry on subsistence farming in the area”.²⁴ This conforms to the conventional idea of a text-book tribe living a self-sufficient life in the lap of Mother Nature. In one of the protest meetings, Dongria leader Lodu Sikaka addressed a group of protesters determined to save their hills and said, “We are not going to let go of Niyamgiri ... Let the government and the company repress us as much as they can. We are not going to leave Niyamgiri, our Mother Earth”.²⁵ These movements also give an opportunity to many international organizations or states to reinvent themselves not only as environment conscious but also as ethical/responsible Western powers. Thus the Anglican Church and the Norwegian Government legitimated themselves when they sold their Vedanta shares to make a political statement that they care for affected Kandhas and that Kandhas should be left in their state of innocence and environmental plenitude. It is not surprising that the tribals came to the Norwegian Embassy in Delhi to express their gratitude in their traditional attire thereby reiterating their struggle as one between tradition and modernity and by posing themselves as children of tradition. The success of the campaign against Vedanta got a boost when the Supreme Court of India rejected the Vedanta proposal to extract bauxite from Niyamagiri Hills without the approval of the tribes. *The New York Times* celebrated this resistance as a fight for “livelihoods and traditional culture” and argued that the globalization of these movements will help change the attitude of investment community in influencing corporate behaviour.²⁶

The success of these movements is believed to have benefited from internationalization. When the Supreme Court decided not to grant the mining right to Vedanta, *Survival International's* Director Stephen Corry expressed his satisfaction: “this is a huge relief, and shows that companies like Vedanta are not all-powerful: local and global campaigning really does work”.²⁷ Here he was creating a notion of resistance which cannot operate outside international forums and so must be articulated through global discourse. At the same time, global discourses must reinvent themselves as caring and concerned with local difference. This difference is to be found in people's subsistence life-style, language and clothing which will make them appear pre-modern, vulnerable and in need of rescue. Whenever we see a photo of a tribe, care is taken by the publisher/editor to make sure that it evokes senses of pre-modernity and survival, the reason why they are often seen with their axe or nets, tribal head

gear etc. so that they can look different (and so become different). *Survival* as an organization sees itself as a human rights group and aims at protecting the rights of indigenous peoples. The Home Page of its website tells us that “tribal peoples are being destroyed, and their lands stolen. Ultimately this affects us all, but with your support we can help them win their struggle for survival”, which though laudable, appears as a rescue narrative.²⁸

This brings us into another interesting debate. If there is no real outside representation and the latter is the producer of the former, then it leads to a situation where the real must depend on the representation to be real. When the sequencing of real and representation breaks, we enter into a universe which is governed only by images and signs. It comes as no surprise that for Kandhas to be real, they must be seen as an imaginary tribe called Navi in an imaginary place called Pandora as in James Cameron movie *Avatar*. Though there are some parallels between the movie script and the struggle of the affected tribe around Niyamagiri, what is not told is the mediatisation of Kandha struggle and the public relation exercise to realize the Kandhas. Thus Matt Wade calls his article “Indian hill tribe scores 'Avatar' victory”,²⁹ *Survival International* celebrates “Ban upheld: Avatar tribe ‘to decide’ future of Vedanta mine”³⁰ and Jyoti Thottam in *Time Magazine* proposes “Echoes of *Avatar*: Is a Tribe in India the Real-Life Na'vi?”³¹

While being aware of similarities between Cameron’s story and the Kandha struggle, we must open ourselves to the constructed nature of facts and how their imaginary recreation conditions the way we make sense of the Kandha plight. The immediate mental association of Kandhas with the Navi also uneasily brings into focus the reality or un-reality of such ways of knowing. It may be mentioned here that some international activists wrote to James Cameron to get his support to internationalize Kandha struggle. They also published an advertisement in February 2013 in a Hollywood publication *Variety* seeking the support of Cameron. The ad read “*Avatar* is fantasy ... and real. The Dongria Kondh tribe in India are struggling to defend their land against a mining company hell-bent on destroying their sacred mountain. Please help the Dongria”.³² If *Avatar* is fantasy and real, then the Kandha struggle is real as well as fantasy. This is why it can get reality status and legitimacy when it is compared to a fantasy movie and when this comparison is published in a Hollywood magazine. In 2010, anti-Vedanta activists protested outside Vedanta’s office in London while dressed as Navi tribe with placards reading “Save the Real Avatar Tribe”. Though we see here an attempt to publicize Kandha resistance, there is also a subtle attempt to virtualize reality as it is an attempt to materialize the cinematic. It is no surprise that director James Cameron and actor Joanna Lumley extended their support to anti-Vedanta movement.

Conclusion

As we have discussed in the preceding sections, fundamental to the environmental discourse is the ontology of Third World difference materialized in the questions of life and livelihood which then act as sites of difference from First World environmentalism. This difference invites Western scholars or Indian activists to articulate and represent that difference in language, seminars, debates and discussions leading to epistemological and material difference between First World and Third World. At the global level, this difference is produced by NGOs, rights and environmental groups and finds echo among national civil society activists and left-leaning academics who help this difference appear materially real. At the local level, this is carried forward and sustained by people who project a united front against the state or a private company. But a highly localized problem affecting a few hundred or thousand people can become a major environmental problem only when it is represented and made known and when the delivery of such theorizing captures the movement without any room for contestation.

So far as environmental discourse is concerned, both global and local depend on each other for their visibility as well as legitimacy. What would have passed as a local problem gets legitimated because of its implications for global environmental situation. Similarly, global discourse also gets strengthened because of its concern with local problems. Michael Dove highlights the power of global environmental discourses which have the capacity to produce self-evident truths. Such discourses represent Third World environment as a global problem by developing powerful metaphors. One such metaphor is a reference to tropical forests as “the lungs of the world”.³³ Though the metaphor is intended to highlight the efficiency of tropical forests to absorb carbon dioxide, “it also can be read as a pragmatic effort to persuade a global audience to take an interest in a regional matter by representing it in global terms”.³⁴ But, hyphenating local problems with global environmental agenda is both giving voice to the voiceless as well as the appropriation of that voice, implying that Third World can only speak through First World. Third World movements congeal themselves in response to some activists who take a fancy to peasant/tribal otherness so as to rescue them from state/capitalist exploitation. Similarly, seeing environmental action as spontaneous and concerned with livelihood problems depoliticizes the movement and reduces Third World environmentalism to biological narratives.

Before we close, we should mention the arrival of a postcolonial vocabulary in environmental discourses that further contributes to and complicates Third World geography and environment. One of the pioneers of eco-criticism Cheryll Glotfelty argued that “Ecocriticism has been predominantly a white movement. It will become a multi-ethnic movement when stronger connections are made

between the environment and issues of social justice, and when a diversity of voices are encouraged to contribute to the discussion”.³⁵ This has not only consolidated Third World environment as a site for equity and distribution, but has also brought us to an apparently liberatory framework called postcolonialism. However, while challenging the Western model of understanding environment and its racialization of Third World ecology, postcolonial framework ends up exaggerating Western power and ignores the complicity of Third World scholars in producing particular notions of environment. This has failed to see the contradictions in the delivery of Third World environmentalism in theory and practice. It has also taken a simplistic view of environment as an innate fact of nature, or at most an effect of Western gaze.

* The paper draws upon two environmental movements in viz. anti-Vedanta movement and anti-POSCO movement. The situation in the anti-Vedanta movement, which created conditions for the present paper to be written, has changed. The Supreme Court of India had earlier ordered a referendum to know the wishes of the people (consisting of Dongria Kandhas and other *adivasis*) around Niyamagiri Hills and find out if mining activity by Vedanta Aluminium Limited (VAL) will infringe upon the religious and cultural rights of the tribals living there. Since then all the twelve *gram sabhas* (village councils) have rejected mining activity in Niyamagiri, thus threatening the presence of VAL in the region.

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