

**TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND
APPROACHES**

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Lecture55

Lecture 55: Case Studies on Tribal Social and Environmental Movements

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Tribal Studies in India: Interdisciplinary Approaches and Perspectives. Today, we are going to look at tribal social movements, and we will discuss some case studies, including the Narmada Bachao Andolan, the Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti, and the Niyamgiri Heart Movement. According to Peter B. Evans and John D. Stephens, development has not followed an easy or clear course. In fact, it has been continuously challenged by competing elite factions operating both within and between nations.

So the question of development and the allied question of natural preservation—preservation of nature— have been working in tandem. They operate together both at the national level and at the level of international or transnational relations. Amita Baviskar writes in her work, *In the Belly of the River*, published in 1995, that the attempts by the elites to exploit populations under the banner of development, progress, and modernization have been met with opposition and continued unified resistance from marginalized people, including tribes.

Within India's numerous struggles that question exploitative forms of so-called development, resistance through social movements has become a subject of growing scholarly focus in the last 15 years. Critic and scholar Ghanshyam Shah notes that a minimal degree of organization is necessary for a social movement, although this can manifest in violence. Various forms, from a loose, informal, or partial structure to something highly institutionalized and bureaucratized—even a corporate group or corporate formation. According to Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, ecological conflicts in India are ongoing struggles over production and extraction. Forest conflicts,

for example, have long pitted the state's profit-driven agenda against local communities' subsistence needs.

Introduction

- Ghanshyam Shah (2004) notes, a **minimal degree of organisation** is necessary for a social movement, though this can manifest in various forms, from a loose, informal, or partial structure to a highly institutionalised and bureaucratized movement, or even a corporate group.
- According to Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, **ecological conflicts in India are ongoing struggles** over production and extraction. Forest conflicts, for example, have long pitted the state's profit-driven agenda against local communities' subsistence needs (1992).



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In India, between 1950 and 1990, an estimated 21.3 million people have been displaced due to projects like irrigation schemes, mines, thermal power plants, wildlife sanctuaries and industries. A disproportionate 85% out of this displaced population are from the tribal communities. Therefore, it wouldn't be wrong to infer that over the past six decades of democracy and development in India, the tribal population as a whole has experienced the least manifest and the most significant losses they have been on the receiving end of numerous disadvantages and the least number of benefits and advantages have been channelized in their direction. Although not inherently a critic of development, the Indian environmentalism is largely centered on preservation of nature and natural habitat.

One of its earliest and most well-known successes was in Silent Valley in South India, where the central government intervened, overriding the objections of the state government and local population to cancel a planned hydroelectric project within an untouched tropical rainforest. In this regard, Vandana Shiva and J. Bandopadhyay assert that through centuries of living in a sustainable relationship with nature, the Adivasis have developed profound knowledge and understanding of the ecological processes which make them the ideal managers of natural resources. Scholars of social movements conclude that the rural women as well as the indigenous people have maintained what they call as the Aranya Sanskriti or forest culture, which is a cultural framework built upon the creative interdependence between human evolution and the protection of forests. This is once again to remind us to harken back the basic tenets of any tribal religion or spiritual practice.

Introduction

- Scholars of social movements conclude that rural women and indigenous people have maintained the “aranya sanskriti” (forest culture), a cultural framework built upon the creative interdependence between human evolution and the protection of forests (Baveskar, 1995).



At the heart of any tribal religion is, you know, preservation of nature because they consider the different aspects of nature, the flora and the fauna, as their deities. And so they worship them. Their religion is premised on protection of nature and natural objects. Bhaviskar elucidates that the persistent struggle of the Adivasis in Central India's Narmada Valley served as a clear example of the indigenous cultural communities resisting development. So here we are talking about the famous, very well-known Narmada Bachao Andalan.

Narmada Bachao Andolan

- Baveskar (1995) elucidates that the persistent struggle of the adivasis in central India's Narmada valley served as a clear example of 'indigenous' cultural communities resisting development.
- The Indian government's plans to dam the Narmada River to harness its water for irrigation and power would inundate forested hills, displacing the adivasis who rely on this environment for their survival.
- **Protests against the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) first erupted in 1978** in Nimar, triggered by the Water Disputes Tribunal's award. At the time, the Janata Party was in power both centrally and in Madhya Pradesh.



The Indian government's plan to dam the Narmada River to harness its water for irrigation and power would inundate the forested hills, displacing the Adivasis who had historically and immemorially relied on this environment for their natural living and survival. Protests against the Sardar Sarovar project (SSP) first erupted in 1978 in Nimar, triggered by the Water Disputes Tribunal's award. At that time, the Janata Party was in power both centrally and in Madhya Pradesh. Key leaders from the Janata Party

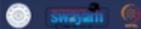
spearheaded a movement alongside the local population in Nimar concerning the displacement issue, which was later renamed the Nimar Bachao Andolan to save Nimar.

However, as mainstream political support for the movement waned, this protest gradually collapsed and faded. The second attempt to organize opposition to the Sardar Sarovar project (SSP) occurred around 1985 when Medha Patkar, a social activist involved in community mobilization, began working in the SSP submergence zone villages of Maharashtra. Despite the need to resist the massive Narmada Valley project (NVP) entirely, local opposition to all the dams proved impossible beyond a point. Therefore, the Andolan concentrated its collective action on the NVP's two largest dams: the SSP and the upstream Narmada Sagar.

Narmada Bachao Andolan

- Key leaders from Janata Party spearheaded a movement along with the local population in Nimar concerning the displacement issue, and this movement was later renamed as the Nimar Bachao Andolan (Movement to Save Nimar).
- However, as the mainstream political support for the movement waned, it gradually collapsed.



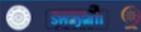


The Andolan's initial strategy was to organize affected populations to advocate for proper rehabilitation without contesting the project's overall validity. However, the state's evident inability to adequately resettle all displaced people, coupled with other concerns about the project, led the Andolan to adopt a stance of total rejection, famously articulated through the slogan: 'No one will move, the dam will not be built.' The Andolan also received help from Western NGOs, which pressured the international financial community to stop supporting the SSP. In 1989, for instance, three U.S.

Narmada Bachao Andolan

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- However, the evident impossibility of the state adequately resettling all those displaced, coupled with other concerns about the Project, led the Andolan to adopt a position of total rejection, famously articulated in the slogan "**Koi nahin hatega! Baandh nahin banega!**" (No one will move! The dam will not be built!) (Baveskar, 1995).
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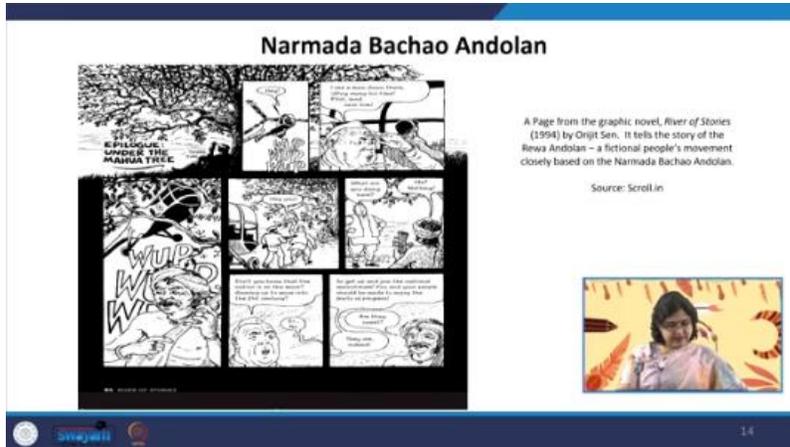

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Environmental NGOs, the Environmental Defense Fund, Environmental Policy Institute, as well as the National Wildlife Federation, had urged the U.S. Congress to make the World Bank withdraw its SSP funding. In June 1992, the Independent Review presented a highly detailed report, which consistently and strongly criticized both the project and the World Bank for funding it in violation of its own guidelines. Sustained pressure from international NGOs made the World Bank's involvement increasingly problematic in this regard, leading to its decision to ultimately halt funding for the SSP by March 1993. Similarly, the persistent efforts of the group called Friends of the Earth in Japan persuaded the Japanese government, which is typically unresponsive,

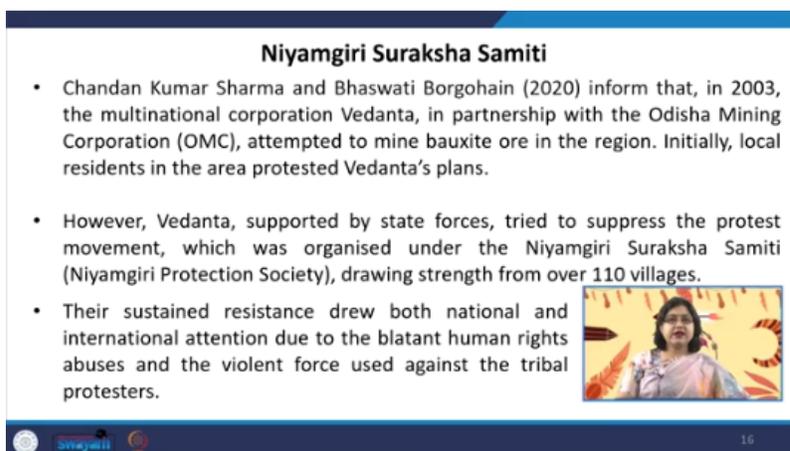
to the environmental concerns about its foreign-funded projects, to suspend aid to the SSP. So, the Friends of the Earth in Japan also dissuaded the Japanese government from staying involved in the aid to the SSP. The dam served as both an instrument and a symbol of development, and yet the concerned movement, the Narmada Bachao Andolan against this dam, represented cultural resistance by the local people and a contrasting approach to this question of development. So, the alternative vision of development that was emerging here was motivated by the Adivasis or the indigenous local populists and their very method of political engagement, which is a decentralized, community-based mobilization that questions the state's sole right and monopoly to act for the people without even consulting them. So, we see that the Narmada Bachao Andolan or Save Narmada movement embodied the marginalized alternative political culture of the Adivasis.

Here we have a page on display from the graphic novel titled River of Stories, which came out in 1994. It has been produced and created by Orijit Sen and River of Stories tells the story of Reva Andolan, a fictional people's movement, which is closely based on

and draws on the real incidents centering on the Narmada Bachao Andolan. So, this is a page from the graphic novel River of Stories by Orijit Sen. So, from here we will move on to the Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti.



According to Annapurna Pandey, bauxite mining has dismantled the social organization of the Kondh tribe that lives in the vicinity of the Niyamgiri hills in Odisha. Pandey argues that the tribe's exploitation and marginalization mirror the internal colonialism documented by K.S. Singh and other critics, thereby providing a framework for understanding the tribe's current situation in the light of such questionable forms of development. Chandan Kumar Sharma and Bhashwati Borgohain have noted that in 2003, the multinational corporation Vedanta, in partnership with the Odisha Mining Corporation (OMC), attempted to mine bauxite ore in the region. Initially, the local residents protested Vedanta's plans and schemes.



However, Vedanta, supported by state forces, tried to suppress the protest movement organized under the Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti (Niyamgiri Protection Society), drawing

strength from over 110 villages. The local villagers, mostly tribal people, sustained resistance that drew both national and international attention due to blatant human rights abuses and the violent force used against tribal protesters. These local villagers, these tribals, organized roadblocks, formed human chains, and mobilized large numbers of people for demonstrations. Citing violations of local rights under the Forest Rights Act of 2006, the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests rejected the second phase of forest clearance for the mining project in 2010. Vedanta subsequently appealed this decision to the Supreme Court.

Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti

- They organized roadblocks, formed human chains, and mobilized large numbers of people for the demonstrations (Sharma and Borgohain, 2020).
- Citing the violation of local rights under the Forest Rights Act, 2006, the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests rejected the second phase of forest clearance for the mining project in 2010.
- Vedanta subsequently appealed this decision to the Supreme Court. On April 18, 2013, the Supreme Court ruled that the clearance was contingent upon the approval of the gram sabhas, or village councils.



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On April 18, 2013, the Supreme Court ruled that the clearance was contingent upon the approval of the Gram Sabhas, or village councils. Thus, the onus, or some degree of responsibility, was given to the local villagers. Following the Supreme Court's ruling, all 12 villages designated by the state government for the Gram Sabhas voted against the project. In 2016, the Supreme Court further upheld this decision by rejecting a plea from the Odisha Mining Corporation (OMC) to conduct fresh Gram Sabhas. Next, we will discuss the Netarhat Movement.

The Netharhat movement was officially established in 1992 as a reaction to the Indian government's proposal to convert native land for military use. The tribal people's land and natural habitat would be converted into grounds for military training, which was vehemently resisted and opposed by the local people. This plan threatened to evacuate 245 villages spanning 3,000 square kilometers, leaving the inhabitants uninformed about their resettlement. They were not given any alternate resettlement plans, and their natural habitat would be taken away. The Jan Sangharsh Samiti (JSS), a committee for the people's struggle, was formed in 1992 when the government proposed expanding the

military ground to 245 villages, aiming to permanently evacuate 250,000 residents while treating indigenous communities as disposable.

Appearing two to three times a year, the army would begin artillery exercises with little to no advance notice, sometimes arriving just days or hours beforehand. Without warning, the army would arrive and disrupt the lives of the local villagers. These exercises would persist for weeks, forcing locals to evacuate to adjacent forests, enduring extreme heat in summer and heavy rains during monsoon. Their daily routines were severely disrupted as they had to hurriedly return home to cook during the Army's intermittent breaks from firing. According to Sunita Purti, the Indian Army had conducted firing practice in the Netarhat region regularly since 1964.

Netarhat Movement

- Appearing two to three times a year, the army would often begin its artillery exercises with little to no advance notice to community leaders, sometimes just days or even hours beforehand.
- These exercises would then persist for weeks, requiring people to evacuate to the adjacent forests, enduring extreme heat in the summer and heavy rains during the monsoon.
- Their daily routines were severely disrupted, as they would have to hurriedly return home to cook meals during the army's intermittent breaks from firing.





The first heavy artillery firing occurred in 1965, lasting 10 days and forcing locals to seek refuge in jungles or find alternative shelter. During this particular drill, 75 by 24 mm howitzers, 105 mm field guns, and 120 mm mortars were positioned near Bastoli and Jokipokhar villages. Near these residential areas, where ordinary people, mostly tribals, lived, these gun practices and mortars would be exercised and used.

So the shells fired would reach altitudes of up to 23,000 feet before landing 12 to 15 kilometers away, in very close proximity to the villages of Shakhaupani, Kairipat, and Polpolpat in the Vishnupur block. So basically, it was a complete disruption of the natural lifestyle and the natural habitat of the Netharhat people, of these villages in Netharhat. The drills, the gun practices, and the exercises would be done for days together without consultation or without even the consent of the local people. They were seen as

Netarhat Movement

- According to Sunita Purty (2024), the Indian army had been regularly conducting firing practice in the Netarhat region since 1964. The first instance of heavy artillery firing occurred in 1965, lasting for ten days and forcing local residents to seek refuge in the jungle or find alternative shelter.
- During this drill, 75/24 mm howitzers, 105 mm field guns, and 120 mm mortars were positioned near Banstoli and Jokipokhar villages.
- The shells fired reached altitudes of up to 23,000 feet before landing 12-15 kilometres away, in close proximity to the villages of Sakhuapani, Khairipat, and Polpat in the Bishnupur block.



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non-entities, as a disposable population who could endure any kinds of challenges and difficulties that were imposed on them. Consequently, we see that after these drills, the inhabitants of the said villages—the nearest villages that were just adjacent to the firing grounds—were compelled to evacuate their homes due to the intense artillery firing exercises. Putihir observes that despite various legal protections, the tribal displacement from native lands persists due to loopholes and inadequate implementation. Contradictions within tribal land acts also undermine the tribal people's rights. So on the one hand, we have the 1908 Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (CNTA), which restricts land transfer.

Netarhat Movement

- Consequently, the inhabitants of these villages were compelled to evacuate their homes due to the intense artillery firing exercises.
- Purty observes that despite various legal protections, tribal displacement from their native lands persists due to loopholes and inadequate implementation. Contradictions within tribal land acts also undermine their rights; while the 1908 Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act (CNTA) restricts land transfer, and the 1949 Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act (SPTA) allow state acquisition for purposes like military camps.
- The situation has worsened, with development and militarisation jointly causing tribal displacement in Central and Eastern India.



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And on the other, we have the 1949 Santal Pargana Tenancy Act (SPTA), which allows state acquisition for purposes like military camps. So there is no one uniform rule that protects tribal rights and prevents the tribes from sudden, unconsulted, or unplanned displacement from their native lands. So the situation has gradually worsened, with development and militarization jointly causing tribal displacement in both Central and Eastern India. In the case of the Netarhat movement, the affected community has been

engaged in sustained protests for about 30 years, demanding the cancellation of the Netarhat field firing range notification.

Demonstrating their continued opposition and resistance, the protests were held on March 22nd and March 23rd every year against the Netarhat field firing range. From August 1917 to 2022, finally, Chief Minister Hemant Soren, citing public interest, agreed not to re-notify the Netarhat field firing range thereby ending a 30-year tribal struggle. So, here is an excerpt from a documentary movie known as Vijay Bingu, which came out in 2020, Vijay Bingu, based on the people's struggle in Netarhat.

Netarhat Movement

- The affected community in the Netarhat region has been engaged in a **sustained protest for about 30 years**, demanding the cancellation of the Netarhat Field Firing Range notification. Demonstrating their continued opposition, protests were held on March 22nd and 23rd against the Netarhat Field Firing Range every year.
- On August 17, 2022, Chief Minister Hemant Soren, citing public interest, agreed not to re-notify the Netarhat Field Firing Range, ending a 30-year tribal struggle.



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And we have a leader who is mobilizing the people, motivating them amid rains, telling them they must understand their rights. Let us all go together to Joki Pokhar, this leader says. The light is lightning, the victory trumpet is resounding. We see women taking part in this movement, the Netarhat movement, in a vociferous way. This documentary draws on women,

you know, real lives, real incidents, as is typical of any documentary film. So, the people give their opinion that the military should not enter their area. They say that they are ready to die, but they will not let their lands become, you know, sites for military practice. And we look at the struggling people who are you know, in very ordinary professions.



They are wage workers. They don't, they are not, obviously not very wealthy people. They work in fields, maybe as peasants. Another video that we have here is an excerpt, once again, from the documentary movie, Vijay Bingle, and we see the different posters and banners, mostly written in Hindi language. Adivasi unity long live, long live.

These are mostly students. The educated youth, do not plunder our ancestors' land. We will give our life. We will not give our land. Stop the firing range.

These are the slogans being given mostly by female educated youth. You are oppressing us, but we won't leave our land. We won't leave our land. This is something an old member, an old resident of Netarhat, has to say. The land belongs to us.



So, to conclude, the tribal social movements in India, which have been exemplified by the Narmada Bachao Andolan against dam-induced displacement, the Niyamgiri struggle against bauxite mining, and the successful Netarhat movement against military land acquisition, demonstrate the persistent resistance of the tribal communities against development, against the question of development which happens by crushing and

collapsing even their basic needs. and the state actions that threaten their land, livelihoods, and cultural identities. So all these movements, often employing grassroots mobilization and gaining national as well as international attention, highlight the ongoing fight for tribal rights, self-determination, and the protection of their unique ways of life in the face of modernization and resource exploitation. Their resistance, often employing grassroots mobilization and garnering national and international attention, highlights the ongoing tension between development paradigms and the rights and ecological knowledge of India's tribal populations.

Conclusion

- Tribal social movements in India, exemplified by the Narmada Bachao Andolan against dam-induced displacement, the Niyamgiri struggle against mining, and the successful Natarhat Movement against military land acquisition, demonstrate the persistent resistance of tribal communities against development and state actions that threaten their land, livelihoods, and cultural identities.
- These movements, often employing grassroots mobilization and gaining national and international attention, highlight the ongoing fight for tribal rights, self-determination, and the protection of their unique ways of life in the face of modernization and resource exploitation.



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So with this, we come to the end of our lecture today. Let's meet with a new topic and another round of discussion in our next lecture. Thank you.