

SACRED HILLS AND THE POLITICS OF NIYAMGIRI

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ABSTRACT

The Niyamgiri hills of southern Odisha form one of the most ecologically and culturally significant landscapes in the Eastern Ghats. When Vedanta Resources proposed large-scale bauxite mining on these hills in the early 2000s, the project collided with something far older than any corporate timeline. For the Dongria Kondh, the hills were not a mineral reserve but the living domain of Niyam Raja, their supreme deity and protector. This paper argues that Niyamgiri was protected not only through legal battles and environmental activism but through indigenous sacred beliefs that transformed a mountain into a political and ecological symbol. Drawing on scholarship about the Dongria Kondh, the Forest Rights Act, the Gram Sabha process, and global indigenous struggles, this paper examines how sacred geography became the grammar of resistance. The central contribution lies in introducing the concept of Sacred Environmental Governance, meaning the protection of ecosystems achieved through cultural and spiritual institutions rather than through state regulation alone. In a period when climate change and biodiversity loss demand new frameworks of protection, the Niyamgiri case demonstrates that indigenous knowledge systems carry serious governance potential. The paper traces how spirituality, ecology, politics, and law worked together to turn a tribal community's faith into one of the most recognised environmental victories in contemporary India.

KEYWORDS: *Niyamgiri, Dongria Kondh, Sacred Environmental Governance, Vedanta, Forest Rights Act, indigenous resistance, Gram Sabha, Odisha.*

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