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From Chilika to Niyamgiri: Grassroots Resistance Against Neoliberal Development in Odisha

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Abstract:
Post-independence economic development in India has historically relied on a Westernized, resource-intensive modernization model that equates national progress with industrialized macroeconomic growth. In the resource-rich geography of Odisha, this market-driven agenda has led to the aggressive expansion of mineral extraction and commercial aquaculture, transforming environmental commons into market commodities and marginalizing vulnerable populations. This paper applies a qualitative, analytical case study framework to evaluate how subaltern grassroots protests challenge top-down state-corporate initiatives, focusing on two historic movements: the *Chilika Bachao Andolan* and the *Movements for Protecting Niyamgiri*. Moving beyond the post-materialist aesthetic concerns of Western environmentalism, these mass-based movements articulate a "Livelihood Standpoint" in which the preservation of ecosystems is directly tied to the politics of absolute human survival, social justice, and cultural identity. Ultimately, this comparative discussion demonstrates that grassroots environmentalism in India functions not to replace the state, but to democratically reform it from below. By forcing the calculation of hidden ecological externalities and demanding participatory stewardship over local natural resources, these subaltern assertions reshape the state-civil society relationship and establish a deeper, life-centered vision of ecological democracy.

Keywords: New Social Movements, Sustainable Development, Environmental Justice, Chilika Bachao Andolan, Niyamgiri Movement & Odisha.

Introduction

Environmental movements in India emerged as significant expressions of New Social Movements, challenging the dominant development paradigm that prioritizes economic growth at the expense of ecological balance and local livelihoods (Gadgil & Guha, 1995; Guha, 1989). These movements, often rooted in conflicts over natural resources such as forests, water, and land, represent the voices of marginalized communities—including tribals, fisherfolk, and peasants—who bear the disproportionate costs of state-sponsored industrialization. In the post-liberalization era, Odisha has become a critical site for such contestations due to its abundant mineral resources, rich biodiversity, and ecologically sensitive coastal ecosystems. The Chilika Bachao Andolan (CBA) of the early 1990s and the Save Niyamgiri Movement of the 2000s stand out as two landmark environmental struggles in Odisha. The former successfully resisted large-scale commercial shrimp aquaculture in Asia's largest brackish water lagoon,

while the latter halted bauxite mining in the sacred Niyamgiri Hills, home to the Dongria and Kutia Kondh tribes. Both movements exemplify "environmentalism of the poor," in which livelihood security and cultural survival are inextricably linked to ecological protection (Guha & Martinez-Alier, 1997).

This article presents a comparative case study of these two movements to understand their genesis, actors, strategies, leadership, and outcomes. It explores how grassroots resistance can challenge corporate-state alliances and influence discourses on sustainable development. By analyzing these cases, the study highlights the transformative potential of subaltern environmental movements in redefining development priorities in resource-rich regions. The persistent tension between neoliberal development models and people's rights to livelihood and environment underscores the relevance of studying these movements. Despite legal victories and heightened awareness, implementation challenges and continued extractive pressures remain. This research contributes to the broader understanding of environmental justice and civil society's role in deepening democratic governance in India.

Odisha's development trajectory after independence closely followed the national Nehruvian model of industrialization, which emphasized rapid exploitation of natural resources to achieve economic growth. The state, endowed with vast reserves of bauxite, iron ore, coal, and a long coastline, attracted significant industrial interest, particularly after the economic reforms of the 1990s. Successive governments signed numerous Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with national and multinational corporations, often at the cost of local ecosystems and indigenous communities (Padel & Das, 2010).

The Chilika Lagoon, a Ramsar site of international importance and the largest brackish water lake in Asia, became a focal point of conflict when the Odisha government entered into a joint venture with the Tata Iron and Steel Company (TISCO) for the Integrated Shrimp Farm Project (ISFP) in the early 1990s. The project threatened to enclose large portions of the lagoon for intensive prawn cultivation, leading to pollution, disruption of natural fish breeding cycles, and loss of traditional fishing grounds for over 50,000 fisherfolk (Mohanty, 2003; Das, 1996). This sparked widespread local resistance supported by students, intellectuals, and civil society organizations. In contrast, the Niyamgiri Hills in southern Odisha represent a classic case of conflict between mining interests and tribal rights. The hills, revered as sacred by the Dongria Kondh and Kutia Kondh Primitive Tribal Groups, are rich in bauxite and serve as a critical watershed for rivers like the Vamsadhara and Nagavali. Vedanta Resources' proposal to mine the hilltop for its alumina refinery at Lanjigarh threatened biodiversity, water security, and the cultural identity of the tribes (Saxena et al., 2010; Padel & Das, 2010). The movement gained national and international attention through sustained local protests and legal battles.

These two movements, though separated by geography and resource type—one aquatic and the other forest-mineral—share common threads of resistance against top-down development. They illustrate how state policies favoring corporate investment often override constitutional protections under the Fifth Schedule and Forest Rights Act, leading to organized people's protests. The background of these struggles reflects deeper structural issues of dispossession, ecological degradation, and the assertion of subaltern rights in contemporary Odisha. The success of these movements in forcing project withdrawals or rejections highlights the power of collective action. However, they also reveal the ongoing challenges posed by powerful state-corporate nexuses and the need for alternative development visions that integrate ecological sustainability with social justice.

Statement of the Problem

Odisha's development trajectory has repeatedly pitted state-corporate extractive projects against the sur-

vival needs and cultural rights of local communities. The Chilika and Niyamgiri movements raise fundamental questions: How do subaltern groups contest elite-driven development? What are the dynamics of ideology, leadership, organization, and outcomes in these struggles? To what extent do they succeed in redefining "sustainable development" and influencing policy? The state's frequent alignment with corporate interests, repression of dissent, and failure to uphold constitutional protections (e.g., Fifth Schedule, Forest Rights Act) exacerbate conflicts, threatening both ecological integrity and social justice.

Literature Review

Scholarly literature on Indian environmental movements provides a strong theoretical and empirical foundation. Ramachandra Guha's pioneering works document the historical evolution of ecological struggles, particularly in the Himalayas, and classify Indian environmentalism into distinct ideological strands such as crusading Gandhian, ecological Marxist, and appropriate technology perspectives (Guha, 1989; Gadgil & Guha, 1995). Amita Baviskar's ethnographic study of the Narmada Bachao Andolan remains a benchmark for understanding tribal resistance, cultural politics, and the paradoxes of development (Baviskar, 1995).

Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies have significantly contributed through the lens of ecofeminism, linking gender, ecology, and indigenous knowledge systems in resistance movements (Mies & Shiva, 1993). Broader theoretical frameworks situate these movements within New Social Movement theory, globalization, and state-civil society dynamics (Omvedt, 1988; Dwivedi, 2001; Nepal, 2009).

Specific to Odisha, studies on the Chilika Bachao Andolan analyze it as a struggle of traditional fisherfolk against commercialization and globalization. Researchers have highlighted the role of local cooperatives, student groups, and organizations like the Odisha Krushak Mahasangha in mobilizing resistance and using legal avenues effectively (Mohanty, 2003; Pattanaik, 2003). For Niyamgiri, Felix Padel and Samarendra Das offer a comprehensive critique of the aluminum industry's impact on Adivasis, while the Saxena Committee Report (2010) meticulously documents legal violations and ecological risks (Padel & Das, 2010; Saxena et al., 2010).

While single-movement case studies are abundant, comparative analyses of multiple movements within Odisha remain limited. Existing works tend to focus either on livelihood aspects or conservation angles, but rarely integrate both to draw broader insights into patterns of resistance, state responses, and long-term impacts on development discourse. This study bridges this gap through a focused comparative lens.

Research Gap

While individual studies on Chilika (e.g., Mohanty, 2003) and Niyamgiri (e.g., Padel & Das, 2010; Saxena et al., 2010) are available, there is a paucity of comparative research that examines both movements together. Such a comparison would illuminate common patterns in leadership, actor networks, strategies (local mobilization, legal recourse, transnational alliances), state responses, and the role of these in challenging neoliberal development. This article addresses this gap by adopting a comparative case study approach grounded in secondary sources and theoretical insights from environmental sociology.

Objectives

1. To identify major issues, actors, ideologies, and strategies in the Chilika Bachao Andolan and Niya-

mgiri Movement.
2. To analyze the relationship between these movements and the dominant development paradigm.
3. To examine the role of leadership, civil society networks, and state responses.
4. To assess the movements' impacts on environmental awareness, policy, and grassroots empowerment.
5. To explore whether they articulate viable visions of alternative development.

Hypothesis

- Environmental movements in Odisha, such as Chilika Bachao Andolan and Niyamgiri, emerge not spontaneously but from deep-rooted livelihood threats and perceived injustices in the development process.
- The state has often failed to adequately address the concerns raised by these movements, prioritizing corporate interests over ecological and social justice.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to understanding environmental justice movements in resource-rich but politically marginal regions. By comparing two iconic Odisha movements—one coastal (fisherfolk) and one inland (tribal)—it highlights shared subaltern resistance strategies and their potential to foster alternative development visions centered on livelihood security, cultural autonomy, and ecological sustainability. Findings are relevant to policymakers, activists, and scholars amid ongoing extractive pressures in Odisha and similar contexts across India and the Global South. It underscores the role of civil society in deepening democracy and environmental governance.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study research design to examine the Chilika Bachao Andolan and the Save Niyamgiri Movement. Comparative case study methodology is particularly suitable for exploring complex social phenomena such as environmental movements, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of contextual factors, processes, and outcomes while enabling systematic comparison across cases (Yin, 2018). The two movements were purposively selected as critical cases representing distinct ecological settings—one lacustrine/coastal (Chilika) and the other forested/hilly (Niyamgiri)—yet sharing common themes of subaltern resistance to state-corporate development projects in Odisha.

Data Sources and Collection

The research relies primarily on secondary sources, consistent with the descriptive and analytical approach used in similar studies of Indian environmental movements (Guha, 1989; Baviskar, 1995). Data were drawn from multiple categories of documents, including:

- Academic books, journal articles, and edited volumes on environmental movements in India and Odisha.
- Official government reports, such as the Saxena Committee Report (2010) on Niyamgiri and various reports on Chilika Lagoon.
- Publications by civil society organizations, NGOs, and movement participants (e.g., Odisha Krushak Mahasangha, Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti materials).

- Newspaper articles, magazines, and investigative reports from sources like *The Hindu*, *Down to Earth*, and *Economic and Political Weekly*.
- Anthropological and ethnographic studies, particularly the works of Padel and Das (2010) and Mohanty (2003).

These sources were identified through systematic searches in academic databases, university libraries, and online repositories. Additional grey literature, including movement pamphlets, court judgments, and policy documents, was reviewed to capture grassroots perspectives and official responses.

Analytical Framework

A thematic comparative analysis was employed to examine both movements. Data were organized and analyzed around key themes derived from New Social Movement theory and environmental sociology literature, including:

- Genesis and contextual triggers
- Major issues and grievances
- Actors, leadership, and organizational structures
- Ideologies and discourses
- Strategies and tactics (protest forms, legal battles, networking)
- State responses and outcomes
- Impact on environmental awareness and development discourse

The analysis followed an iterative process of reading, coding, pattern identification, and cross-case comparison. This allowed for the identification of both unique features and common patterns between the two movements. The study integrates insights from materialist environmentalism (Guha & Martinez-Alier, 1997) to understand the livelihood-ecology linkage central to both struggles.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

As this study is based entirely on secondary data, ethical concerns related to primary fieldwork (such as informed consent) were not directly applicable. However, care was taken to represent the voices and perspectives of movement participants fairly and to acknowledge potential biases in activist and official sources.

Limitations of the study include a heavy reliance on secondary sources, which may reflect the dominant narratives in the published literature. The absence of primary fieldwork limits deeper insights into current ground realities post-movement. Despite these constraints, the rich archival and documentary base provides robust material for a comprehensive comparative analysis.

This methodology enables a nuanced understanding of how environmental movements in Odisha have contested dominant development models and contributed to environmental justice discourses.

Results

This section presents the key findings from the comparative analysis of the Chilika Bachao Andolan (CBA) and the Save Niyamgiri Movement based on secondary sources. The two movements, though emerging in different ecological and socio-economic contexts, reveal significant similarities and differences in their genesis, dynamics, and outcomes.

Major Issues and Grievances

The Chilika Bachao Andolan arose primarily from the threat posed by the Integrated Shrimp Farm Project (ISFP), a joint venture between the Tata Iron and Steel Company and the Government of Odisha in the early 1990s. The project involved intensive prawn cultivation over 600 hectares, raising serious environmental and livelihood concerns. Key issues included pollution from chemical inputs, obstruction of natural water flow and fish/prawn breeding cycles due to embankments, destruction of grazing lands and traditional fishing grounds, and the enclosure of commons traditionally used by over 50,000 fisherfolk (Das, 1996; Mohanty, 2003). The movement highlighted the conflict between commercial export-oriented aquaculture and the sustainable livelihood of traditional fishing communities.

In contrast, the Save Niyamgiri Movement emerged against Vedanta Resources' proposal to mine bauxite from the sacred Niyamgiri Hills for its alumina refinery at Lanjigarh. The core grievances centered on the desecration of a culturally and religiously significant site (abode of Niyam Raja), massive deforestation, loss of biodiversity, disruption of perennial streams that form the watershed for Vamsadhara and Nagavali rivers, and the threat to the survival and cultural identity of the Dongria Kondh and Kutia Kondh Primitive Tribal Groups (Padel & Das, 2010; Saxena et al., 2010). The movement also exposed large-scale violations of the Forest Rights Act, Forest Conservation Act, and environmental clearance procedures.

Both movements were fundamentally livelihood-based struggles intertwined with ecological protection, reflecting "environmentalism of the poor" where threats to subsistence resources triggered collective action (Guha & Martinez-Alier, 1997).

Actors, Leadership, and Organization

The Chilika movement was driven by traditional fisherfolk, supported by a broad coalition including non-fishermen farmers, students from Utkal University (through "Meet the Students" and Krantadarshi Yuva Sangha), intellectuals, and organizations such as Chilika Matsyajibi Mahasangha (CMM), Odisha Krushak Mahasangha (OKM) under Banka Bihari Das, and Ganatantrik Adhikar Suraksha Sangathan (Mohanty, 2003; Das, 1996). Leadership was relatively decentralized with strong local participation, especially by fisherwomen.

The Niyamgiri movement was led by the Dongria Kondh and Kutia Kondh communities through the Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti. It received critical support from local activists, organizations like Loka Sangram Manch, Green Kalahandi, and Samajwadi Jana Parishad, alongside national and international networks including Survival International, Amnesty International, and ActionAid (Padel & Das, 2010). Local leaders such as Lado Sikaka played a prominent role in articulating cultural and religious claims.

In both cases, urban-educated middle-class activists and civil society organizations played crucial facilitative roles, while the core strength came from the directly affected local communities.

Strategies and Tactics

The Chilika movement employed a mix of Gandhian non-violent strategies including dharnas, rallies, padayatras, symbolic embankment breaking, gheraos, public awareness campaigns, and legal petitions that ultimately reached the Odisha High Court and Supreme Court (Mohanty, 2003). It effectively combined local mobilization with urban intellectual support and media engagement.

The Niyamgiri struggle similarly used peaceful protests, rallies, cultural performances, and songs, but gained unique strength through sustained legal battles in the Supreme Court and the historic Gram

Sabhas (village councils) held in 2013, which rejected the mining proposal—the first "environmental referendum" in India (Saxena et al., 2010; Padel & Das, 2010). Both movements skillfully leveraged national and international solidarity networks.

State Response

In both movements, the state government of Odisha exhibited strong alignment with corporate interests. For Chilika, the government facilitated the Tata project despite environmental concerns and later failed to effectively curb illegal encroachments even after the Tatas withdrew (Das, 1996). In Niyamgiri, the state overlooked serious violations of forest and environmental laws and attempted to limit the scope of Gram Sabhas (Saxena et al., 2010).

State responses included initial repression, use of police force, and attempts to delegitimize the movements as anti-development. However, judicial intervention and sustained public pressure eventually compelled policy reversals.

Outcomes and Impacts

The Chilika Bachao Andolan achieved a significant victory when the Tatas withdrew from the project in 1994 following judicial orders and sustained protests. It succeeded in highlighting the ecological fragility of the lagoon and the rights of traditional fisherfolk, though illegal prawn farming and encroachments continued as subsequent challenges (Mohanty, 2003).

The Save Niyamgiri Movement achieved a landmark success when all 12 Gram Sabhas rejected the mining proposal, leading to the cancellation of environmental clearance for bauxite mining. It strengthened the implementation of the Forest Rights Act and demonstrated the power of tribal assertion over sacred landscapes and resources (Padel & Das, 2010; Saxena et al., 2010).

Both movements significantly raised environmental awareness in Odisha, strengthened civil society networks, influenced national policy discourses on tribal rights and environmental governance, and provided models of successful resistance against neoliberal extractive development. They also contributed to the broader assertion that development must respect local livelihoods, cultural rights, and ecological limits.

Discussion

The comparative analysis of the Chilika Bachao Andolan and the Save Niyamgiri Movement provides valuable insights into the nature, dynamics, and significance of environmental movements in Odisha. The findings strongly support the first hypothesis that these movements did not emerge spontaneously but were rooted in deep-seated livelihood threats and perceived injustices arising from the dominant development model. Both movements were triggered by direct threats to the survival resources of local communities — traditional fishing grounds and the lagoon ecosystem in Chilika, and sacred hills, forests, and water sources in Niyamgiri (Das, 1996; Padel & Das, 2010; Saxena et al., 2010). This aligns with Guha and Martinez-Alier's (1997) conceptualization of "environmentalism of the poor," where ecological struggles in the Global South are fundamentally materialist and livelihood-oriented rather than post-materialist.

The two movements shared several common features while differing in important ways. In both cases, the primary actors were the directly affected local communities — fisherfolk in Chilika and Dongria-Kutia Kondh tribals in Niyamgiri. However, urban-educated middle-class students, intellectuals, and

civil society organizations played crucial facilitative and networking roles (Mohanty, 2003). Leadership was largely charismatic and decentralized, with figures like Banka Bihari Das in Chilika and local leaders such as Lado Sikaka in Niyamgiri emerging from within the affected communities. Strategies combined traditional Gandhian methods (dharnas, padayatras, rallies) with modern tools such as legal advocacy, media engagement, and transnational alliances. The Niyamgiri movement additionally derived strength from the institutional mechanism of Gram Sabhas under the Forest Rights Act, demonstrating innovation in democratic assertion.

Both movements fundamentally challenged the neoliberal, corporate-driven development model adopted by the Odisha government. They exposed how state policies systematically prioritize foreign exchange earnings, industrial growth, and corporate profits over the rights and survival of marginalized communities. The findings confirm the second hypothesis: the State has largely failed to address the core concerns raised by these movements. Instead, it actively facilitated corporate projects, overlooked environmental and legal violations, and often responded with repression or attempts to delegitimize protests as "anti-development" (Padel & Das, 2010; Saxena et al., 2010). This reflects a deeper structural bias in India's development process that Guha (1989) and others have repeatedly critiqued.

The movements achieved notable successes. The Chilika Bachao Andolan forced the withdrawal of the Tata project and brought national attention to the rights of traditional fisherfolk. The Niyamgiri movement resulted in a historic rejection of mining through Gram Sabhas, strengthening the application of the Forest Rights Act and setting a precedent for tribal consent (Saxena et al., 2010). Both movements significantly enhanced environmental awareness among the general public in Odisha, strengthened civil society networks, and contributed to policy debates on sustainable development.

Importantly, these struggles articulated a clear vision of **alternative development** — one that is people-centered, ecologically sustainable, and culturally sensitive. They emphasized the protection of commons, recognition of indigenous knowledge systems, respect for sacred landscapes, and democratic decision-making through local institutions. This directly contests the dominant paradigm that equates development with large-scale industrialization and GDP growth (Mohanty, 2003; Padel & Das, 2010).

The study reinforces New Social Movement theory by showing how these movements are issue-specific yet carry broader transformative potential regarding democracy, governance, and development. They demonstrate the power of "subaltern environmentalism" in bridging local struggles with national and global discourses on environmental justice and indigenous rights. The cross-scalar alliances (local–national–international) observed particularly in Niyamgiri highlight the evolving nature of contemporary environmental resistance in the era of globalization.

While both movements achieved partial victories, their long-term success remains partial due to continued illegal encroachments in Chilika and persistent extractive pressures in Odisha. This underscores the limitations of judicial and protest-based victories in the face of entrenched state-corporate interests.

Conclusion

The Chilika Bachao Andolan and the Save Niyamgiri Movement stand as two powerful examples of environmental resistance in Odisha that successfully challenged the dominant neoliberal development paradigm. Both movements emerged not spontaneously, but as organized responses to direct threats to local livelihoods, cultural identities, and ecological integrity posed by large corporate projects backed by the state (Das, 1996; Padel & Das, 2010). The findings confirm both hypotheses of the study: these

movements arose from deep-seated livelihood concerns and perceived injustices, while the state consistently failed to address the genuine issues raised by the protesting communities, often prioritizing corporate interests over ecological sustainability and social justice (Mohanty, 2003; Saxena et al., 2010). Through sustained grassroots mobilization, strategic use of non-violent protest, legal advocacy, and building of multi-scalar alliances, these movements achieved significant victories. The withdrawal of the Tata shrimp farming project in Chilika and the historic rejection of Vedanta's bauxite mining proposal through Gram Sabhas in Niyamgiri demonstrated the efficacy of subaltern environmentalism (Guha & Martinez-Alier, 1997). They not only protected vital ecosystems — the Chilika Lagoon and the sacred Niyamgiri Hills — but also strengthened democratic practices, environmental awareness, and the assertion of indigenous and fisherfolk rights.

These movements reaffirm the central argument of environmental sociology in India that conflicts over natural resources are fundamentally conflicts over different visions of development (Gadgil & Guha, 1995; Guha, 1989). They highlight the limitations of a top-down, growth-centric model that treats nature and local communities as mere resources for extraction. Instead, they advocate for an alternative development vision that is ecologically sustainable, culturally sensitive, and people-centered. By bridging local struggles with national and global discourses on environmental justice, these movements have contributed significantly to the redefinition of development priorities in Odisha and beyond.

In essence, the Chilika Bachao Andolan and Save Niyamgiri Movement illustrate the transformative potential of civil society and subaltern agency in deepening democracy and promoting environmental governance in India.

Recommendations

For Policymakers and the State Government:

- Strictly implement the provisions of the Forest Rights Act 2006 and the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution, ensuring free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) of local communities, especially Primitive Tribal Groups, before approving any development project (Saxena et al., 2010).
- Conduct genuine, independent Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) and Social Impact Assessments with active participation of affected communities.
- Recognize and protect common property resources such as lakes, forests, and grazing lands from commercialization, and prioritize the livelihood security of traditional users over corporate profits.

For Civil Society and Activists:

- Strengthen horizontal networks among different people's movements in Odisha to create sustained pressure for policy change.
- Continue combining legal strategies with mass mobilization and cultural assertion, while documenting and disseminating successful models of resistance.
- Focus on long-term capacity building of local communities to monitor and resist illegal encroachments even after apparent victories.

For Future Research:

- Conduct longitudinal studies to assess the long-term ecological recovery of Chilika Lagoon and the socio-economic conditions of communities in both regions.

- Comparative research involving more movements in Odisha (such as POSCO and Kashipur) to develop a broader theoretical understanding of environmental resistance in the state.
- Explore the role of digital media and youth participation in contemporary environmental movements.

Sustainable development in Odisha and India can only be achieved when the voices of the most affected communities are genuinely heard and their rights are respected. The lessons from Chilika and Niyamgiri must inform future development planning if the state is to move towards genuine ecological and social justice.

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