

India: Resisting Dispossession: The Odisha Story

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‘Resisting dispossession: The Odisha Story’ is a book written by Nigamananda Sadangi and Ranjana Padhi on people’s movements in Odisha, published in India by [Aakar Books](#). It documents the struggles, based on testimonials of the people who lost their land, livelihood, culture, dignity as well as lives of their relatives, friends and members of their community to the various so-called development projects imposed on them by the State Government, in favour of the public sector companies, infrastructural projects, defense facilities and multinational corporations. The book is as much about hope and defiance as it is about repression and disillusionments. But above all, the book, which is soon going to be published in Odiya and Hindi as well, is a mandate on a people’s revolution, largely narrated through the people’s own voices. Writes Alok Laddha.

“If you are to suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country.”

– Nehru at the Foundation stone ceremony of Hirakud dam project

The Indian state has constantly been at war with its own people. Some of these wars are better known than others. Wars on the people of the North-East and Kashmir are fought in the name of national unity. However, there are also wars raging within the “mainland” and these are wars “at the altar of development” of the nation. These wars are waged to grab the land, livelihood, and the dignity of people who are self-reliant and refuse to accept the state’s development paradigm.

A lot rides on these wars. In 2018-19 an investment of 13.7 lakh crores was riding on 330 out of 703 ongoing land conflicts. Fifty percent of these conflicts are tied to infrastructure development or mining projects and most of the areas involved fall into the fifth and sixth schedule of the constitution, waged in the mineral and resource rich lands of Chattisgarh, Odisha, and Andhra Pradesh. These are wars that the state simply cannot afford to lose, as the investment involved can go over 5% of the GDP, as was the case in 2018-19.

The resistance comes from people (mostly Adivasis and landless Dalits, fishing communities and marginalized peasants) who have lived on these lands for centuries, and have material, emotional and historical connections to them. *Resisting Dispossession: The Odisha Story* by Ranjana Padhi and Nigamananda Sadangi is about the people of Odisha, who fought valiantly to ensure that India never wins these wars easily.

At its core, this work is a memoir of the indigenous people of Odisha, chronicled through interviews of many of the activists the authors conducted between 2012 and 2019. It is a collective biography of the people who have fought these battles and stood against might of the state and national and international capital over the last seventy years. In modern political parlance, these are generations of “anti-nationals” and “road-blocks to development” who, to this day, stand in the path of India’s predatory development policies.

The book takes us through struggles since 1947 against land grabs by the State for public sector companies, infrastructural projects, defense facilities, or for multinational corporations like Tata, Hindalco and Vedanta. Each struggle contains a myriad of personal stories of triumph and suffering – stories of millions of people across generations whose mandate is loud and clear: “No one can remove us from our lands and destroy our culture, livelihood and ways of life.” This mandate does not fit into the paradigm of electoral politics and hence, irrespective of the governments in power, the State always tries to secure a victory rather than accept its own failing and win people over. The book effortlessly ties these chords together, the onslaught, the resistance, the collective and the human spirit behind it and the rationale of the people.

Resisting Dispossession traces the trajectory of these struggles, from Sambalpur in the '40s and '50s, where a people's resistance against building of Hirakud Dam and subsequent repression coincided with India's independence; to the villages surrounding the Brahmani River in the '60s, the site of the anti-Rengali Dam resistance movement; to the magic mountain of Gandhamardan, where anti-BALCO struggle took place in the '80s; to Jagatsinghpur district where the historical anti-POSCO movement began and continues to exist; and finally to the hills of Niyamgiri where people resisted the might of Vedanta and a militarized Indian state, winning an important victory. Each one of these struggles is against the state-capital nexus, launched by the people to preserve their land, livelihoods, and dignity and to contest the idea of development by the ruling class which is completely antagonistic to them.

The Introduction to the book is an important read in itself. Here, the authors outline the history of the people of Odisha, its geography, and explain the independent and subsistence living by indigenous communities over centuries. At the outset, the authors place all of these struggles into the conception of Indian State by the ruling class. This conception, post-independence, comprised of nation-building (now repackaged as development), which was the rationale for dispossession of people, and accumulation of natural resources. There is enough in this chapter to grapple with and understand including several important testimonies of women who were part of these struggles. Striking quotes like those of Jemma Kantakia who was involved in the anti-POSCO movement, who takes pride in her hard labour and ability of her people to cultivate on the most hostile of lands, make this chapter an absorbing beginning.

In the chapter **The Disease of Gigantism**, the authors trace the origins of the struggle back to the British era. The colonial Raj wished to tame the gigantic Mahabandi river – source of livelihood for almost 100 villages around Sambalpur – in order to control its water supply through embankments and canals. In the postcolonial times, these culminated into a proposal by Indian engineers to build the Hirakud dam. This chapter chronicles the long and ingenious struggles of the people in Sambalpur region in the form of satyagraha, rallies, as well as meeting congress officials including Gandhi. Women took a central role in this movement; some women like Kamala Devi even led the movement.

The anti-dam movement was first betrayed by leaders who were not from these villages, and later co-opted by the Congress. As if to highlight the irony of Indian democracy, on the night of independence when Nehru gave his famous speech, around hundred satyagrahi villagers of Sambalpur were imprisoned. The authors brilliantly analyze how this movement had all the facets of people's movements in the current epoch in India: from the false promises of prosperity by the government, to changing premise for construction of the dam, to the fractures within Odiya society between coastal and inland villages. Thousands of dispossessed people got little to no compensation. It was also the beginning of “repression through legal reforms” in independent India through

an act that the Odisha government formulated in the late '40s, stating that all compensation related grievances had to be presented in the court – a route that no villagers had the means to take.

In **What the King Gave Happily**, we meet some of the Bundelchalia (displaced people of submerged area), whose lives were destroyed by the Rengali Dam project in the '70s. This little-known movement saw a re-mobilization followed by the betrayal of the already fragmented Congress leaders – in particular, Morarji Desai and Biju Patnaik. A committee was formed that advocated complete stoppage of the project. In this chapter the authors include important lesser known facts, such as articulation by the locals as to what their own solution to the flood problem was, which involved not building one large dam but a number of small dams along the river. This was and so far has never been considered by the State.

Anti-Rengali Dam movement captured many of the coercive tactics employed by the State even today. The ruling government took advantage of the emergency to continue the construction of the project, aided by severe police repression, much like the BJP taking advantage of the coronavirus to push through many of its anti-people policies. As usual, the compensation and rehabilitation process was a farce, as many families testified in their interaction with the authors.

In **Jai Gandhamardan**, the authors take us through the victorious struggle by people of the Gandhamardhan mountain, targeted by the bauxite mining project of BALCO in the '80s. BALCO (Bharat Aluminium Co.) was a public sector company that acquired rights to mine this 'magic mountain', which was home to hundreds of plants, wildlife, herbs and a river flowing from the peak to the plains of Sambalpur. It was the State's desire to secure 23 million ton of Bauxite at the expense of these lives and livelihood of over a million people.

This chapter chronicles the entire trajectory of the struggle including a discussion on National Service Scheme Initiative that facilitated urban youth from universities to stay with Adivasi families and learn their ways of life, mass protests, awareness campaigns, cultural campaigns, and relentless community participation in blocking roads and other forms of resistance.

The MOU was cancelled in 1989 but the victory was short-lived. But the authors bring out the never-ending nature of these struggles that the indigenous people must fight against a predatory State. In 1991, the State Government renewed the mining proposal from a different side of the mountain and the resistance had to be reorganized. Finally, as BALCO was bought by Vedanta in 2010, yet another phase began. 2010 also brought the CRPF into the region and with it, new levels of state violence with fake encounters and sexual harassments. One recalls the farcical labeling of two villagers as Maoists after they were killed in cold blood by the CRPF; this was openly contradicted by the local BJP office as the murdered villagers were active BJP members!

This chapter is especially rich in details and analysis of the struggle and is a must read. It also addresses how these movements failed to give agency to women participants. The chapter ends on a somber note that despite resistance to mining, the destruction of the mountain continued. Subsistence became increasingly difficult in a neoliberal world and distressed migration from the villages to states like Andhra and Karnataka is the new reality for the youth in the region. These features surfaced in the context of other movements as well.

Conch and the Missile introduces us to the people of Baliapal district on the banks of the Subarnarekha river. The population comprised of mostly small farmers and fisherfolk for whom Subarnarekha provided fertile land and fishing. Their fight against the land grab by the Indian State to establish a defense facility and missile range involved mobilization by blowing into conch shells. Thousands of women, men and children joined the struggle, with women leading from the front – armed not with sickles or bows but only a slogan “Take our lives but not our land” that later evolved into “We want our land and peace, not war and missiles”. The “barricade from within” experiment by the villagers turned this into Odisha’s own Paris commune moment. The Indian government’s strategy of economic blockade had little effect on these self-sufficient people, so it unleashed armed forces on them in 1988. However, the missile project was shelved in the end.

In **Chilika Teere**, the authors revisit the struggles of the traditional fishing community of Chilika lake against the big capital (Tata), the state government and the fishing mafia. This chapter chronicles the influence of capitalism on fishing in Chilika lake which in the ’80’s became a huge profit-making industry due to artificial prawn cultivation. The authors take us through different stages of the struggle and narrate how the space for traditional fishing community continues to decline as they face encroachment by the State, violence by the mafia, and migration of the community youth as casual labourer – slowly ruining the once self-reliant community.

Tata reappears as the villain in **The Kia in Rage** in the battle of ‘steel versus flowers’. The Kia flower grows in abundance in and around Ganjam district and was a source of livelihood for multiple villages. Tata steel plant TISCO acquired the lucrative land from the Odisha government. The chapter takes us through each stage of the long resistance by this completely self-reliant community against TISCO and the Odisha Police for 3 years. Lack of experience and failure of the leadership ultimately resulted in displacement of the people from a number of villages including Chattarpur and Sindhigaon – both facing brutal violence by the police in 1997. As the authors point out, TISCO finally abandoned the project after turning villages into rubble. The intense sense of injustice led many to refuse the compensation. This chapter also brings to light the opportunism of parliamentary left, who extended invitation to TATA to set up a plant in exchange of seat!

Song of Mali is perhaps the most profound chapter in the book. It revisits the decades long but little-known struggle of the tribes of Maikanch against alumina plant and bauxite mining. As in other chapters, the authors lay out the history of the region, their way of life and livelihood. We learn of an important idea of Dangar (hills) cultivation done by farmers who own no land. Even in the ’90s, where most of the cultivable land belonged to landlords or the state, these hills belonged to no one and hence to everyone. In 1992 when a consortium of companies called UAIL (Utkal Aluminium International Ltd.) signed an MOU with Odisha Government for bauxite mining, people of Maikanch rose in revolt. The complex and long movement is brilliantly captured in this book, starting from the first stand-off between UAIL officials aided by the state police and the village women armed with chilli sprays! This was the first movement that brought together people from many earlier movements and thanks to this, companies like Hindalco, L&T (part of UAIL) etc. faced serious resistance till turn of the century.

Song of Mali documents a complex struggle facing coercion from the companies by various means, including NGOs penetration in the village community as well as use of force. A firing in 1997 on unarmed people killed three; CRPF turned the entire district

into a police barrack. But the most serious damage to the movement was done by the time and tested tactic of bribing the unemployed tribal youth with money in the early 2000s. We also witness, for the first time in the book, the influence of Maoists on reviving a degenerating movement and the appeal of the social justice advocated by the party to the youth, who had seen their parents beaten up by police over a decade. The encounter of 20 years old martyr Nirmala with nine others captures these emotions brilliantly. Nirmal died a day after she uttered to her mother: *I might die, I might live. You do not have to worry. I will never leave the party. I might die for my land, my village, my community...How does it matter if one person dies for the land? Thousands of brothers and sisters will live—some older, some younger.*

The two decades of struggle resulted in a defeat 2012. This chapter is a story of ultimate destruction not only of life and land but also of an entire culture. Liquor and money subsumed the people of Maikanch. In the words of Ambai Mahji, one of the veteran woman activists of the movement: *So much has changed forever. I hear that companies are still extracting bauxite from more and more malis. They will take more and more land. What will we Adivasis do? We will simply die. Earth and life are one and the same. If the earth goes, so goes life.*

Taste of Steel revisits the anti-land grab resistance primarily by the Ho community of Kalinganar against Tata's steel plant IDCO. Brutality of the security forces was perhaps most explicitly manifested in this struggle as a weapon against the resistance organized by BBJM (Bisthapan Birodhi Jan Manch). The worst came in January 2006, when a large platoon of CRPF opened fire on protesting villagers armed with bows and arrows, resulting in a dozen deaths (including one policeman) and scores of injuries. At this stage in the book, we witness a marked shift towards violence and arrests under sedition laws as the State's response to people's grievances.

The chapter has brilliant testimonies of Sini Soi and Mathura Honaga. Mathura, a long-time BBJM activist, continues to fight series of cases foisted on him by the state. Sini immersed herself in the movement after one of her sons was encountered. She was arrested under sedition law and remained in prison for close to two years. The degeneration of many leaders in this struggle and the destruction brought by Tata to the region are vivid in their testimonies.

In **Juhar Niyamraja**, the recent struggle by people of Niyamgiri mountains against Vedanta is revisited. In **Betel Smiles**, the authors talk about perhaps the most well-known anti-POSCO struggle by betel wine growers, marginal farmers and fisherfolk who defeated the South Korean Steel Giant POSCO in a struggle that stretched from 2005 to 2017.

There is a never-ending debate in Sociology regarding analysis of dispossession and accumulation of natural resources by the capital: Is it always primitive and lies outside the circuit of the capital (as formulated by Marx) or is it an ongoing process concurrent with development of capitalism (as formulated by Harvey)? Is it as central to our understanding of the political economy of a country and the class conflicts as expropriation of labour? Any book aiming to understand dispossession must contend with the theoretical framework in which the dispossession is analyzed. The brilliance of *Resisting Dispossession* is that it cuts through this theoretical mess and analyzes the political economy of dispossession from the eyes of the people who resist it.

The book is as much about resistance as about voices of people who understood and articulated paradigms of development for their regions, only to remain unheard. By rightly placing women's

participation and leadership in these struggles at the center and recording them in relation to the patriarchy they face in their own cultures, the book does a brilliant job of emphasizing what these struggles achieved as well as lacked (in terms of comprehensive political ideologies and looking beyond resisting the land grabs and means of livelihood).

Although *Resisting Dispossession* is an emotional testimony of people's sacrifices, it does not romanticize the struggles. The most disturbing parts of the book are not only the losses (of life, land, livelihood and dignity) and defeats suffered by the people; even when within a victory, we learn of the erosion of the lives and culture by neoliberal order. This raises complex questions that may require a separate book.

The book has something for everyone. For the urban intelligentsia who fear for their "democracy" under the RSS-led regime, this book shows whose heads, hands and bellies "the democracy they wish to save" really stood on. For political activists lost in theoretical debates surrounding dispossession and modes of production, this book offers a no-nonsense perspective from the people involved in direct never-ending battles. For historians, it is a documentation of a people who were never heard, and hence is indispensable. .

One could not have hoped more from this book. But seeing the authors' depth of understanding of people's movements, it would be certainly important to address some of the things left unsaid in the book. For example, although the role of the CPI(Maoist) is mentioned in several chapters, the view of the indigenous people regarding the relative importance of armed struggle as opposed to non-violent methods like satyagraha could find more space in this book. Equally importantly, the connections of these struggles as a core praxis of a political ideology has not been discussed; where do these struggles find a place in the radical politics of today and conversely? How do radical parties view these struggles *vis a vis* their programs?

One of the themes that reverberates throughout the book is the connection people of Odisha have with their lands, forests, mountains and rivers. The authors capture the depth of this connection, likening it to an umbilical cord that ties them to nature. It is this connection and their pride in their work (such as hill-farming done by tribes who are sophisticated agriculturalists) that make these people put their life on the edge for their land and heritage. The testimony of some of the villagers from Gandhamardan struggle shows, their way of life is threatened as urban jobs are considered more prestigious than traditional farming. But this loss of respect for indigenous professions is absent in the rest of the communities. We can contrast this with the rural peasantry in the plains which by and large are undergoing a systemic alienation from farming. This is why land grabs and agricultural reforms are met with far less resistance than what we witnessed in this book. It is similar for the urban working class, whose de-skilling is tied to the alienation from their labour, resulting in decreasing militancy in strikes. The book does not look into this question, but it is a question the authors (both activists also seeped in working-class movement) are highly equipped to answer.

Although the authors make it clear that many of these struggles did not go beyond their immediate aims, nor evolved into a large-scale social struggle, it will be interesting to understand better why this was so, and whether, during these struggles, attempts were made to address inequalities and hierarchies existing within the struggling communities.

The book is a mandate on a people's revolution and makes clear that any political ideology that wants to fight against fascists contra liberalization will have to place such struggles at its center.

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