



## Unlikely Alliances in Fight for Sacred Lands

Major shareholders are joining the Dongria Kondh tribe's fight to protect their homeland from mining by Vedanta Resources.

by **Tess Thackara**

posted Aug 12, 2010



Photos courtesy of Survival International.

In the verdant mountains of Niyamgiri, India, a movement led by the Dongria Kondh people is gathering speed. The tribe, whose members have called Niyamgiri's mountains their home and gods for thousands of years, has been fighting an ongoing battle for the right to remain on their ancestral lands, protect their sacred home, and forge their own future.

Abundant deposits of bauxite lie beneath the mountains where the Dongria live, and London-based mining company Vedanta Resources plans to build an enormous mine in the heart of their land.

The Dongria Kondh, who number just over 8,000, fear that this would mean the destruction of the forests and rivers on which they depend—and the end of life as they know it. “We are mountain people,” explained Rajendra Vadaka, a member of the tribe. “If we go somewhere else, we will die.”

Vedanta's efforts to placate the Dongria with offers of money and development projects have not weakened the tribe's spirit of resistance. They have seen, first-hand, the impact of Vedanta's nearby refinery on other Kondh groups who were displaced in its path. Some now live in fenced-in concrete homes without land to farm; they depend on hand-outs or back-breaking jobs with Vedanta to survive.

The Church of England sold its shares, stating that Vedanta had failed to show “the level of respect for human rights and local communities that we expect.”

Nor have aggressive intimidation tactics silenced the tribe. This week, according to local reports, two leaders of the Dongria's resistance were abducted at gunpoint and have not been in communication with the tribe since. Unidentified people have blocked roads to prevent journalists from speaking to the Dongria, and mystery surrounds the death of a local activist in Niyamgiri last month.

The tribe has retaliated by using human roadblocks to bar Vedanta machinery from entering Niyamgiri. They also burned a Vedanta jeep when it was driven onto the mountain's sacred plateau—the seat of the

Dongria's greatest god, Niyam Dongar.

Now, the Dongria Kondh are attracting support for their struggle from powerful sources far from India. Over the past three years, major Vedanta shareholders have been lining up to withdraw their investments from the company. Most recently, Dutch pensions giant PGGM withdrew investments worth \$16 million. Earlier this year, the Church of England sold its shares, stating that Vedanta had failed to show "the level of respect for human rights and local communities that we expect." In 2007, the Norwegian government divested its shares in Vedanta, advised by the country's Council of Ethics that the investment posed an "unacceptable risk of complicity in current and future severe environmental damage and systematic human rights violations." Scottish investment company Martin Currie followed in 2008.



Photos courtesy of Survival International.

Not long ago, the Dongria Kondh were little known beyond Niyamgiri. But supporters from Bianca Jagger, Arundhati Roy, and Michael Palin to Survival International and Amnesty have worked to share their story with the world. Even members of [James Cameron's Na'vi tribe](#) showed up in London two weeks ago to express their solidarity with the Dongria Kondh during a protest outside Vedanta's annual meeting.

Pressure is also coming from within the Indian establishment. An investigation published by the Indian government in March concluded that the mine "may lead to the destruction of the Dongria Kondh [as a people]" and Vedanta is currently undergoing investigation from India's Ministry of Environment and Forests and the Odisha state government.

Around the world, people have been moved by the resistance of this small tribe in the face of Vedanta's bulldozers. But India's Supreme Court has approved the project in principle, and work on the mine could begin in a few months. The movement is building momentum and Vedanta is feeling its force—but still more international pressure must be brought to bear on the company if the Dongria Kondh are to survive.



Tess Thackara wrote this article for [YES! Magazine](#), a national, nonprofit media organization that fuses powerful ideas with practical actions. Tess is the U.S. coordinator of [Survival International](#).