

Rethinking the Rayagada Clashes: Development, Dissent and the Politics of Extraction in Odisha's Tribal Belt



Abhinita Mohanty 27/Apr/2026

The recent police action and clashes with protesting Kondh tribals in Odisha's Sijimali reignite unresolved tensions over how mining is seen by locals versus the state's framing of it as progress.



Illustration: Pariplab Chakraborty

On April 7, police brutalities against protesters in the Sijimali region of Rayagada in Odisha left **70 tribals injured**. The police conducted an early-hour raid to detain people who were opposing the construction of a three-kilometre road from Purulang to Sagabari. The lathi charge and firing of teargas resulted in serious injuries and minor loss of property.

Some 58 members of the police force were also injured. The Odisha government claimed that its actions were a necessary precaution to **maintain law and order**. Such a framing does

more than legitimise state violence; it depoliticises such conflicts and obscures the history of extraction in the region.

The protesters were simply opposing the construction of a road. For the tribal residents of the area, it was an active attempt to dismantle an infrastructure that would facilitate Bauxite mining in the region. It was not a neutral construction zone but a flashpoint, with the potential to disrupt the Kondh tribes' sovereignty over land and livelihoods. A deeper scrutiny would entail questions about legitimacy, political subjecthood and the logic of development enmeshed in extraction politics.

The **media extensively covered** the anti-Vedanta protests in Niyamgiri – located in and around Rayagada district – from 2008 to 2013. It ended with a rare victory. It asserted tribal consent and upheld the provisions of the Forest Rights Act (FRA). However, it did not ensure immunity from the precarity over their homes, land and livelihoods. The exploitative regime merely relocated to a site 78 km away.

A local from Lanjigarh, where a Vedanta refinery operates, says, "**minor clashes** are ongoing in the region since Vedanta [**set up locally**]. The farmers are noticing how the factory is polluting the adjoining agricultural land and river by discharging toxic wastewater. It is **leading to contamination** of land and river, harming the local ecosystem".

A young tribal activist and former member of a local NGO says, "Before this incident, locals were informally protesting against Vedanta as they neither give **locals employment** nor the promised compensation which they were assured of when the factory dust would settle over their land, making it infertile".

Reimagining the tribal in Odisha: From hungry to romantic to dissenter

In the 1980s and 2000s, these tribal geographies became symptomatic of starvation deaths, droughts and malnutrition. They highlighted the state's failures after decades of independence. In the 2000s, newspaper photos of tribespeople surviving on **mango kernels** sparked national outrage. Many interventions and welfare measures followed. Some improvements were recorded in those years.

In the mid-2000s, an attempt was made to revitalise the **region through tourism**. These regions, known for their pristine beauty and scenic nature, became "offbeat" destinations. Tribal weekly markets with local produce have become a site for fleeting engagement for tourists and foreigners alike. These 'experience sites' were photographed in international magazines. It invariably led to an aestheticisation of tribal life.

Rayagada became a separate district in 1992, and in the late 2010s, the gaze shifted to its mineral-rich, resource-laden land as active sites for industrial investment. Proposals for

mining sites, Bauxite mining zones, industries such as Vedanta Aluminium, and state-led infrastructure projects pushed a **specific narrative** about 'progress for the region'. The government began to **actively sign Memorandums of Understanding** with international **investors and industries**. Thus, the relationship with the state transitioned from neglect to tourism reconstruction and then to active intrusion.

'Grammar of greed': Beyond territoriality, redefining citizenship

The April 7, 2026 protests in Rayagada were a culmination of the precarity and vulnerability imposed by a governmentality that legitimises a linear development paradigm, which must be sustained at the expense of most marginalised communities. This paradigm ensures that development costs are localised, while Bauxite mined in these regions feeds the production system in affluent urban areas.

Enabling such infrastructure entails that the 'Shining-New-India' under the spotlight gets its supplies, from windowpanes and ACs to Coca-Cola and canned produce, while concealing tribal dispossession through token pay-outs of compensation.

In his book, *The New Imperialism*, social theorist David Harvey calls this "**accumulation by dispossession**". Here, such plunder travels outwards beyond territoriality to produce wealth. It sustains development through a systematic appropriation of existing resources from marginalised communities.

Anyone with a foundational knowledge of the history of extraction knows these are not aberrations of bad governance but a consistent, planned and predictable pattern.

An historical trajectory of it shows that it thrives on two main factors. First, the earlier tendency to view resource appropriation as a win for technological innovation and growth obfuscates its political undertones. It led to the simplistic idea that developing technical tools to extract resources efficiently and quickly is a natural path of growth. Second, the upending of victims as barriers to development and impediments to nation-building.

Both these factors point to a deep psychological attachment to our colonial pasts. This past, in its surviving imprint, demands a specific construction of the 'good citizen'. The valorised ones are silent, compliant. The 'other' citizens are those who dissent and, by default, become a 'threat to law and order'.

In this incident, the branding of the dissenting Kondhs as disorderly stemmed from the challenge they posed to the dominant grammar of development. Such settings positioned the Kondhs as outside the mainstream political subjecthood. This narrative delegitimises any recourse to justice. Protests are framed as disruptions and become an alibi for the state to perpetuate violence.

In his phenomenal work, *Grammar of Greed: Reflections on a Fatal Ecology*, Aseem Srivastava discusses how a certain syntax or, in this case, an infrastructure is organised and built. Such a systemic approach to greed plunges deeper into our consciousness. This universal imagination perceives pillaging of ecologies not just for material gain but as a part of everyday culture.

Such a structure of consciousness and imagination sustains greed by shifting ethical accountability from any single entity (government, bureaucracy, officials) to algorithms and to mechanised forms of development delegated to an 'invisible system'. In such a world, we need to pause, reflect and rethink our ethics. Hence, it is pertinent to give attention to such violence that the state legitimises in the name of restoring order. The active engagement and attention to such incidents can partially offer some clarity of our moral thought within a system designed to hinder it.

(The people spoken to for this piece have not been named at their request.)

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