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The sacred mountain: Confronting global capital at Niyamgiri

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ABSTRACT

Translocal mobilizations on issues of social and environmental justice have arisen across the world, often in response to the depredations of extractive industries linked to global capital networks. A key challenge in theorizing such mobilization is to understand how dispersed and diverse actors come together contingently around common campaigns of justice, and enable powerless and marginal actors to contend with powerful state and corporate actors. In my paper, I draw on DeLanda's work on assemblages to engage with this question in the context of the case of Niyamgiri in India. The proposal to mine Niyamgiri, a mountain located in South Odisha in India, gave rise to a transnational mobilization which included local grassroots movements, activists, lawyers, conservation organizations and human rights/indigenous rights networks from around the world. I describe the mobilization as a translocal assemblage of resistance, individuated out of interactions between diverse actors across locations and scales. I discuss how this assemblage emerged through interactions between pre-existing actors, networks and institutions, and enabled marginalized and powerless communities to contend with powerful assemblages of state and capital. I argue that thinking in terms of assemblages can provide a strategic depth to social and environmental justice movements, which totalizing discourses of capital, power and revolution often foreclose.

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1. Introduction

Global flows of capital, information, material and cultures are accompanied with increasingly dispersed, cross-boundary and networked mobilizations on issues related to social and environmental justice (Holifield et al., 2009; Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Many scholars and practitioners have started labeling these mobilizations as “global environmental justice movements” (Bickerstaff and Agyeman, 2009; Carruthers, 2008; Faber, 2005). A theoretical challenge in such global environmental justice movements is to understand how dispersed and diverse actors come together contingently around common campaigns of justice, and enable powerless and marginal actors to contend with powerful state and corporate actors. My involvement in a translocal environmental justice movement to save Niyamgiri, a mountain in South Odisha, India, from mining operations, brought home to me the difficulties in theorizing the complex configurations of agency, structures, scale and contingency inherent in these mobilizations.

The Niyamgiri struggle drew in heterogeneous actors and participants, with diverse interests and capacities, from around the world. The mountain is held sacred by the local people, especially by the Dongaria Kondhs,¹ for whom it is the abode of the deity

Niyam Raja, “the giver of law”. It also contains a rich deposit of high-quality bauxite, proposed to be mined to supply feedstock to a multinational-owned alumina refinery located at the foot of the mountain. The mining and the refinery have been opposed by a large number of local people on livelihood, environmental, religious and cultural grounds. In 2004, when I first climbed Niyamgiri, and observed the scars of construction of the alumina refinery in the plains below, the possibility that a weak and fragmented local opposition to mining could succeed seemed farfetched. Yet, within a few years, Niyamgiri has become well-known in India and abroad, and efforts to mine the mountaintop remain stalled.

The translocal mobilization to save Niyamgiri emerged from the contingent actions of many diverse actors located in different places. The ideologies and beliefs of many of these actors were divergent, and often conflicting. Seemingly inconsequential intersections between people, places and non-human actors had major consequences, while other seemingly significant encounters led to dead ends. Subjectivities of various actors, individual and institutional, shifted with (or through) their involvement in the movement. Humans as well as non-human artifacts like photographs and videos traveled long distances, physically and virtually, creating ripples of effect and emotions in far-flung places. Tropes of indigeneity, human rights, conservation, and social justice intersected with each other in varied contexts. Yet, these contingencies and mobilities occurred within stabilized landscapes, institutional arrangements, discourses and power relationships. Histories, context and place *mattered*, and

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¹ Dongaria Kondhs are a very small, ethnically-distinct tribe, (around 8000 in number), who reside only in the Niyamgiri Hills. They are notified as a Primitive Tribal Group (PTG) by the Government of India.

intentional agency of individuals and institutions came into play.

Network approaches remain the predominant framework for examining social movements (Della Porta and Diani, 1999; McFarlane, 2009). However, as Haynes (2012) pointed out, these network approaches, though powerful for empirical descriptions, fall short on explanatory power. The interplay of scale, contingency, structure, and agency in the Niyamgiri movement pushed me to consider alternative theoretical frames of assemblages (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; De Landa, 1997, 2006) that can account for both relational dynamics and stability of entities and structures. The paper mobilizes assemblage theory, as discussed by DeLanda, to consider the Niyamgiri struggle, and to illustrate how additional avenues of inquiry and practice are opened by considering social and material formations as assemblages (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; De Landa, 2006).

I begin the paper with a brief description of DeLanda's assemblage theory and its applicability to social movements. I frame the translocal mobilization to save Niyamgiri as an emergent assemblage, and map its major constituents; and I then discuss agency, maintenance, and power relationships within the assemblage. I conclude by discussing how social movements can be visualized as open-ended, dynamic rhizomatic entities, which can inter-penetrate and affect assemblages of state and capital. This perspective provides a strategic depth to social and environmental justice movements not afforded by worldviews which see state and capital as reified totalities.

2. Assemblage theory

Network paradigms, with their focus on interdependence and relationships, have become the standard theoretical and methodological approaches to conceptualizing social movements (Escobar and Osterweil, 2010), including translocal mobilizations. In spite of their powerful capacity for empirical descriptions of social phenomena, network approaches, with their emphasis on flows and fluidity, have been criticized for diminishing human agency; being deficient in addressing power issues; and ignoring stabilized entities such as place and state, or categories such as class, gender and ethnicity. Many of the issues mentioned above arise from the ontological fuzziness underlying these approaches (Escobar and Osterweil, 2010; Haynes, 2012). Haynes points out that network approaches in general do not make explicit the nature of the nodes or the relations that constitute network theory's basic concepts (Haynes, 2012). The problems of essentialism, reification and atomism are not addressed, and reductionism is often deferred from the macro- to the meso- or micro-scales (Haynes, 2012). In terms of social movements, these ontological confusions can give rise to issues such as reification of place and the local, lack of attention to transformation of subjectivities, and confusion about scale, etc.

In recent years, the concept of assemblages, drawing from the work of Deleuze (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; Bennett, 2005, 2010), is being increasingly employed within the social sciences. Theories of assemblages have the potential to address some of the shortcomings of network theories, especially in relation to the ontological status of connected elements or nodes (Haynes, 2012), and to provide an alternative analytical lens to examine social movements and contentious politics (McFarlane, 2009; Srnicek, 2007). I specifically mobilize the realist theory of assemblage developed by DeLanda, whose realist ontology of assemblages (De Landa, 1997, 2005, 2006, 2011) draws on Deleuze's philosophy to develop a realist ontology of assemblages (De Landa, 1997, 2005, 2006, 2011). DeLanda explicitly links Deleuze's work with complexity theory, and incorporates insights from non-linear

dynamical systems and population dynamics (De Landa, 2005), as well as providing a substantive common theoretical ground for natural sciences and social sciences. DeLanda's realist ontology does away with reifying categories or essences, and describes reality in terms of historically-constituted assemblages. He proposes a flat ontology, made up of unique, singular individuals, different in spatio-temporal scales but not in ontological status (De Landa, 2005). These unique, singular individuals are assemblages, defined as wholes that emerge out of interactions between heterogeneous elements. The constituent elements of any assemblage are themselves assemblages.

Assemblages are individuated through relationships of exteriority between constituent elements (De Landa, 2006). These relationships of exteriority are "contingently obligatory": the component elements that form an assemblage are affected by, but are not fully determined by, these relations. This implies that components (themselves assemblages) may be detached from one assemblage and plugged into another assemblage, where they may exercise very different capacities.

Since assemblages are individuated through interactions of diverse constituent elements, the properties of these elements cannot, in general, account for the emergent properties of the individuated assemblage (De Landa, 2005, 2006). At the same time, the emergent properties of the individuated assemblage may constrain, shape, or influence the constituent elements through various mechanisms. Assemblages have emergent properties that allow them to exercise *capacities* in interactions with other assemblages. The capacities of an assemblage offer an open-ended set of potentialities that cannot be deduced from its properties, since "these capacities do depend on a component's properties but cannot be reduced to them, since they involve reference to the properties of other interacting elements" (De Landa, 2005, 2006). For DeLanda, reality is composed of an infinite regress of assemblages on diverse spatio-temporal scales. Thus an atom, a word, a human, a nation, a discourse, a galaxy—all can be conceptualized as assemblages that have emerged out of historical processes of interaction between their own constituent assemblages.

Constituent elements within assemblages play both expressive and material roles (De Landa, 2006). Internal processes or external interactions can stabilize the assemblage (territorialization) or destabilize it (deterritorialization) (De Landa, 2006, p. 13). All assemblages, even the most stable ones, are dynamic entities, undergoing processes of territorialization and deterritorialization, on varied timescales. Analysis in assemblage theory is not conceptual, but causal, concerned with the discovery of actual mechanisms operating at a given scale (De Landa, 2006, p. 31).

The assemblage approach revisits many of the basic assumptions of the social sciences by avoiding reifications of entities and processes; and it provides explanation for social entities as assemblages emerging through historical processes (Escobar and Osterweil, 2010). It implies attention to the objective and historical processes of assembly through which a wide range of entities, from persons to nation-states, come into being (De Landa, 2006). Assemblages can have diverse temporal and spatial scales. An assemblage (e.g. a mountain) may seem static and unchanging on one temporal scale (human lifespan) but become dynamic on another timescale (erosion over millions of years as a result of interaction with water and wind). A social encounter can be seen as an assemblage, lasting for a few moments. Organizations or nation states are also assemblages, which may exist for decades or centuries. All have ontological status, with material and expressive elements, and are constituted by elements which are themselves assemblages (De Landa, 2006). Another useful insight is that a particular entity (an assemblage) may be a constitutive element in multiple assemblages, which may have widely-varying spatial or temporal extent, and exercise different capacities in each assemblage depending on

the forms of relational linkages. Thus, a person is at the same time a part of a family, part of a crowd traveling in the train, part of a workforce, a citizen of a state, etc.; and the relationships between the person and the larger assemblage in each are diverse (Allen, 2011; De Landa, 2006).

DeLanda's theory of assemblages provides an ontology which posits mind-independence of reality, an absence of essences, and emergence of entities as assemblages. While the assemblage theory appears to be similar to the relatively more established Actor Network Theory (ANT), there are important differences. ANT also draws from the Deleuzian notion of assemblage. It conceives of the world as "a collection of heterogeneous activities, constantly in motion and made up of numerous networks of association that are constituted by these associations" and "by the movement of 'traffic' through their links" (Latour, 1993). It sees reality as being constituted by "sociotechnical" networks, which are links composed of the circulation of "immutable mobiles" such as animals, tools, machines, money and people. The emphasis is on relationships, circulations, and flows, rather than entities (Latour, 1993). However, Law (2002), one of the key ANT theorists, argues that entities are achieved when different heterogeneous elements are continually assembled together. This closely parallels DeLanda's definition of entities as assemblages. Thus, the heterogeneous elements mentioned by Law can be thought of as assemblages that interact with each other contingently to be assembled into entities. ANT's "immutable mobiles" or "traffic" can be seen as relatively stable assemblages, such as people, words, or laws, which move from certain "links" of networks to others. Actors and actor-networks can both be described as assemblages.

A critical difference between ANT and DeLanda's assemblage theory is the manner in which they treat "relationships". As Anderson et al. (2012) explain, the relationships as conceived in ANT are "logically necessary", whereas for DeLanda, they are "contingently obligatory". This implies that ANT's Actor Networks are a "seamless whole that fully assimilates its component parts; nothing stands outside the description that actor network theory performs," (Anderson et al., 2012), whereas the assemblage theory allows us to conceptualize the "outside" environment of an assemblage. Assemblages that interact with any other given assemblage provide the external environment or context for the given assemblage. When these external assemblages are temporally stable, they can provide relatively stable context or structure for a given assemblage.

At the same time, ANT concepts like "translation" and "enrollment" can enrich DeLanda's assemblage theory to describe the dynamics of entities (assemblages) as they move from one "context" to another. I use these concepts to show how assemblages of texts, images and ideas travel from one "context" to another, and how they are reconfigured (translated), and become "meaningful" in altered assemblages; and how multiple entities are "enrolled" in these reconfigurations.

2.1. Assemblages and social movements

The assemblage theory visualizes entities such as state or capital as dynamic assemblages of diverse, heterogeneous elements, individuated through historic processes (Allen and Cochrane, 2007; De Landa, 2006). Assemblages of state and capital operate at multiple interlinked scales and locations, contain centralized hierarchies, and can draw upon power of various kinds, forming "powerful assemblages" (Allen, 2011). Yet they are themselves assembled from diverse assemblages, of varying capacities and powers. This way of visualizing state or capitalist enterprises as assembled entities, formed of often-fractious constituents, brought and held together by various mechanisms, has implications for those who seek transformative changes. Instead of viewing state

and capital as totalities and seamless wholes that need to be "taken over" to bring about transformations, this perspective draws attention to gaps, interstices, and openings that are amenable to strategic interventions and actions. Furthermore, as an analytical lens, this perspective helps to understand how social movements can act in these gaps and interact with powerful assemblages of states or capital to bring about social transformations.

Social movements are also assemblages that come together by the actions of diverse actors. Many of the important concepts in social movement theory, such as mobilizing structure, resource mobilization, repertoires of contention, and opportunity structures (Tarrow, 2011), can be explained in terms of assemblage theory (Srniczek, 2007). Existing interpersonal networks of individuals and groups are precursors to social mobilization, and constitute the substrate or mobilizing structure for movements (Srniczek, 2007). Social movements can be visualized as emergent "individuation" from existing networks of relationships as common grievances are articulated, shared, and become the basis of action. Articulation of shared grievances, claim-making, stories, narratives, written memoranda, etc., are the expressive elements that stabilize i.e. help in territorializing the assemblages and correspond to the "collective action frames" in social movement theory. The material elements of social movements include configurations of bodies and material (e.g. barricades, demonstrations, etc.), that form part of the repertoires of contention of the emergent movement. The emergence of social movement assemblages from existing interpersonal relationships, creation of collective action frames, and creation and maintenance of repertoires of contentions, all consume resources, energy and creativity of diverse actors.

Social movements (SMs) are embedded within multiple overlapping social assemblages, which are part of their environment and constitute its opportunity structure. SMs can link up with other assemblages, and this in turn may lead to individuation of assemblages at higher scales. From an analytical perspective, it is important to understand the causal mechanisms underlying the emergence of social movement assemblage; the relationships between its elements; its framing and its actions; and its internal dynamics arising out of recurrent interaction between its constituent elements and its environment, while remaining cognizant of the exteriority and contingency of relationships.

The interpersonal relationships that give rise to social movements may be face-to-face, place-based relationships, or virtual relationships mediated by printed media or the Internet. In the ontology of assemblages, there need be no reification of place, but rather, strong empirical analyses of historical emergence and dynamics of social movements, whether place-based or translocal. The approach provides theoretical explanation for translocal formations such as the one which emerged to save Niyamgiri. The Niyamgiri struggle can be seen as an assemblage of heterogeneous constituents located in diverse places and scales, that hold together without being an essential totality (Allen, 2011). The assemblage theory allows for the diversity and divergences within actors, focuses on identification of the actual relational mechanisms functioning at the micro-political scale, and explains the capacities of the social movement assemblage as emerging out of interactions between constituents.

Assemblage theory as discussed by DeLanda remains a work in progress, though others have drawn from his theories to address social contestation (Escobar, 2008; Escobar and Osterweil, 2010; Srniczek, 2007). I draw from this theoretical frame to explore the translocal mobilization around Niyamgiri, while flagging issues that need further theorizing and explanation. I discuss some of the processes through which the translocal Niyamgiri assemblage was formed. My positionality within the assemblage was that of a brokerage agent (McAdam et al., 2003) as I helped link the Odisha-based activist networks with the lawyers in the Supreme Court.

This gave me an insider view of the assembling processes. I draw from this positionality to explore the applicability of assemblage theory to the diverse, multi-scalar, translocal processes.

3. The Niyamgiri Struggle

3.1. Mountain, me, and translocal assemblages of resistance

“You can chop off our heads, but you can’t take Niyamgiri” (Lado Sikaka, Dongaria leader)

It was after three villages were displaced in 2004 for an alumina refinery for Vedanta that I tagged along with my activist friend to Lanjigarh, nestled in the valley of Vamshadhara at the foot of Niyamgiri Mountain. Niyamgiri is topped by a rich bauxite deposit, the extraction of which was sought by the London-based Vedanta Resources PLC, a mining and metals multinational corporation. In 2002–2003, Vedanta, with the support of the Government of Odisha, started to build a 1.5 million tonne alumina refinery in Lanjigarh, and applied for permission to mine bauxite from the mountain top.² The proposed refinery would lead to full displacement of 118 families, and partial displacement of 1,220 more families in local villages (AI, 2010).

Local contacts told us that the land acquisition for the refinery, carried out by the government, had been strongly opposed by the local people. The local resistance was supported by organizations like the Samajwadi Jan Parishad.³ We heard about the arrest of local activists by the administration, and the beating up of protesting villagers by goons. We also talked to a number of displaced people. They described their forcible removal from their houses before they were bulldozed: *“People were wailing and begging, holding onto their doors and posts, crying that we will go tomorrow.... not today. . . but they were forcibly dragged out by goons hired by the company”*. The freshly-bulldozed site was back-grounded by the brooding Niyamgiri. Repeatedly, people talked about the mountain as if it were a close friend or family member, a local and beloved perpetual presence. We made a long and tiring trek to the top of the mountain. I photographed the evidence of teeming bio-diversity, the magnificent forests, and the red scar of the alumina refinery site visible below. The whole visit affected me profoundly, and drew me into the struggle. My friend told me that both the administration and the local elite strongly supported the company, and that the local struggle faced long odds. We discussed possible strategies to help strengthen the movement and generate more support for it. We realized that the importance of the biodiversity of Niyamgiri could be leveraged to undertake legal intervention on conservation grounds, and to generate support from environmental and conservation networks.

Through our NGO contacts, we came to learn that Biswajit Mohanty, a Bhubaneswar-based conservationist, had already filed a complaint against the alumina refinery and the proposed mining with the Central Empowered Committee (CEC)⁴ of the Supreme Court, on the grounds of violations of forest and environmental laws. After meeting with him, we decided to coordinate legal action. Another colleague, active at the national level with the forest rights movement, put us in touch with Mr. Ritwick Dutta, a young environmental lawyer based in Delhi. We used the available material, including analysis of the Environmental Impact

Assessment Report for the alumina refinery and mining project, to draft a petition that was submitted to the CEC by Prafulla Samantra, a Gandhian environmentalist. Meanwhile, we helped to organize studies on Niyamgiri’s biodiversity; and, based on these studies, prepared a report called *“A Brief Report on the Ecological and Biodiversity Importance of Niyamgiri”*. The report was released both through the email networks and on a website called www.epgorissa.org, managed by activists based in Bhubaneswar. These studies and the report documented the environmental and conservation importance of Niyamgiri, and were quoted in various official reports.

Two CEC members visited Niyamgiri to assess the situation in 2005. I accompanied the CEC members to the top of the mountain, and observed their increasing disquiet with the misrepresentation of the biodiversity of the mountain by the company and the state government. The path was strewn with elephant dung, as elephants love to eat the mangoes growing just below the top of the mountain. Fortuitously, as we reached the top of the mountain, a large, majestic *Sambar*⁵ crashed through the undergrowth. The rich bio-diversity richness of the mountain-top disproved the state government’s assertion that it was a wasteland.

Based on its observations and analysis, the CEC recommended to the Supreme Court that the mining of Niyamgiri should not be allowed in view of its rich biodiversity. It also noted that the environmental clearance to the refinery was based on wrong information, and recommended withdrawal of this clearance (CEC, 2005, 2007). There was celebration amongst the local people and the activists, as the Supreme Court (SC) generally tend to accept the recommendations of the CEC. However, the SC asked the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MOEF), Government of India,⁶ to conduct additional studies on aspects of wildlife conservation and impact on water due to the proposed mining. These reports said that mining could be taken up, with certain safeguards (CMPDI, 2006; WII, 2006).

Meanwhile, the local Member of Parliament, involved in the campaign against the mining of Niyamgiri, reached out to the heir apparent of Congress-I,⁷ Rahul Gandhi, and managed to get him to visit Niyamgiri and express his support to the Dongaria Kondhs in 2008. This, along with a change in the minister in charge of MOEF, reduced the political pressure on the MOEF to support Vedanta’s proposal.⁸

After a number of hearings, in 2008 the Supreme Court rejected the CEC recommendations, and observed that there always have to be compromises for development; and ruled that the MOEF could allow the mining project on Niyamgiri to go ahead as per law. The decision sent shockwaves through the conservation and tribal-rights community. In the affected area, there was deep disappointment amongst the people involved in the struggle; but they vowed to continue their protest in spite of the SC decision. Based on the Supreme Court Judgment, the MOEF gave a conditional clearance for diversion of forest land for mining on top of Niyamgiri in 2009, although the final clearance for forest diversion was not yet given.

Many of the activists involved in Niyamgiri struggle, including myself, were also deeply involved in the politics of the new Forest Rights Act (Kumar and Kerr, 2012), and investigated the possibilities of using its provisions for stalling the forest clearance. Petitions were sent to the Forest Advisory Committee (FAC), which

² The application of mining was by Odisha Mining Corporation Ltd., a corporation owned by the Government of Odisha, in order to circumvent legal requirements of mining in Schedule V areas. However, in reality, except for the name, all the operations were to be carried out by Vedanta.

³ Samajwadi Jan Parishad is a political formation which draws from socialist thought, primarily from Ram Manohar Lohia and Kishen Pattanaik’s work.

⁴ The CEC is a special committee set up by the Supreme Court on matters related to conservation. It holds independent hearings on cases submitted to it, and then these cases are taken up in front of the Supreme Court, with the CEC represented by Amicus Curiae to the Supreme Court.

⁵ Rusa unicolor, a large deer.

⁶ MOEF provides clearance to large projects under environmental laws and forest laws. In 2008, there was a change in leadership in the ministry, and the new minister was far more willing to examine the Vedanta project critically than his predecessor had been.

⁷ Congress-I is the largest party in the UPA, the coalition in power at central level.

⁸ The ruling parties in the state of Odisha and at national level are different, and both the politics of electoral competition and tribal votes played into the changing stance of the MOEF.

advises the MOEF on forest clearances, claiming that the Forest Rights Act (FRA) was being violated in the forest clearance. The FAC recommended that the final forest clearance could only be given after the settlement of admissible community rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA). Two expert groups constituted by the MOEF visited the site, and were provided with information by both the company and the activist groups. These expert groups wrote scathing reports criticizing Vedanta, as well as the Government of Odisha, for having ignored the settlement of rights under the FRA (MOEF, 2009, Saxena et al., 2010). Based on these reports, and citing violations of FRA, in 2010 the MOEF canceled the forest clearance and refused to allow mining of Niyamgiri (MOEF, 2010). The decision was challenged in the Supreme Court by Vedanta; and recently, in April 2013, the Supreme Court, in a landmark judgement, said that Gram Sabhas (village assemblies) around Niyamgiri need to decide whether the proposed mining violates religious and other forest rights; and that the same must be considered by the government for forest clearance for mining. At the time of submission of this paper, the preparation for the Gram Sabha meetings is ongoing.

A timeline helps to understand the major events related to the Niyamgiri struggle during 2002–2013 (see Table 1).

I keep in regular touch with what has become a complex, multi-scalar mobilization with immense importance for India's environmental politics. Assemblage theory provides a framework that can be used to conceptualize the unlikely emergence of the trans-local mobilization on Niyamgiri. In the next section I map some of the main human and organizational elements of this translocal assemblage.

3.2. Mapping the translocal assemblage

The local, place-based movement on Niyamgiri emerged out of the pre-existing kinship, community ties and face-to-face relationships as large number of people and communities were affected by the Vedanta Project. Tenants and sharecroppers, people cultivating state-owned lands, and marginal farmers who lost their agricultural land and homesteads to Vedanta's factory were the worst affected (AI, 2010; Kumar et al., 2005). The enclosure of forests and perennial springs, loss of livelihood, displacement, and use of force and repression, all came together to create a deep sense of outrage and injustice amongst the affected people, and quickly spread by word of mouth to nearby villages whose inhabitants also feared eviction. As the Dongaria Kondhs came to know about the proposed mining on the hill considered sacred by them, they also joined the local resistance.

Odisha has a rich history of grassroots movements against displacement and mining, including movements against bauxite mining in Gandhamardan in the 1980s, and the nearby, ongoing struggle in Kashipur (Das, 2001; Sarangi et al., 2005; Swain, 2000). There are a number of politically heterogeneous activist groups sympathetic to grassroots resistance, many of whom remain in touch with each other. People from the Lanjigarh area reached out to some of these individuals and organizations. A major rally of the local people against Vedanta was organized in Lanjigarh in 2004, which was attended by Mr. Kishen Pattanaik of the Samajwadi Jan Parishad, Mr. Prafulla Samantra, and many other activists, as well as representatives from the Kashipur struggle (a movement against another alumina refinery) in the neighboring Rayagada district. A local organization called the Niyamgiri Suraksha Samittee (NSS) was formed, providing a formal structure to the emergent grassroots resistance.

Over time a number of individuals, organizations and networks at local, provincial and national levels became connected to the local movement in a more sustained manner. These organizations, networks and individuals served as bridges by which the local

movement for protecting Niyamgiri became connected to actors around the world. Dr. Felix Padel, an anthropologist, along with Mr. Samarendra Das, an activist, was a key link with activists in the UK and Europe (Padel and Das, 2007). Action Aid, India also became involved, as it had been working in the area. Along with a few other activists, I helped to establish links with environmental lawyers in the Supreme Court.

Some of the Odisha-based activists had existing relationships with human rights organizations such as the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) and Amnesty International. PUCL was the first external organization to document incidents of repression in 2003 (PUCL, 2003). Amnesty International's Indian office took a deep interest in the case and sent out alerts in the cases of repression and arrest of local activists. International anti-mining networks got drawn into the Niyamgiri struggle. UK-based anti-mining activists, already working on Vedanta's poor record elsewhere, visited Lanjigarh and Niyamgiri, and reported on environmental and human rights violations by Vedanta (Anonymous, 2005). They also helped facilitate communication across locations through an on-line listserv. The interest of UK-based activists drew in Survival International, which picked up on the threat to Dongaria Kondhs as a culturally-unique threatened indigenous group (see Fig. 1).⁹

Thus a translocal mobilization emerged out of the pre-existing networks and institutions becoming linked to each other and to the Niyamgiri issue. The translocal mobilization can be visualized as an assemblage that included the local movement, activist networks within India and abroad, lawyers, human and indigenous rights organizations, ethical investment networks, sympathetic media persons, etc. The boundaries of this assemblage were provided by a shared interest in preventing mining of Niyamgiri, and resistance against the proposed alumina refinery. From an external perspective, this assemblage can be visualized as an emergent entity having certain properties and capacities. The constituents drawn into the assemblage are also parts of other, more stable assemblages.

What are the processes through which diverse assemblages become linked to each other? I illustrate these processes by reflecting on my role as a link between the Odisha-based activist networks and the legal-conservation network centered at the Indian Supreme Court.

3.3. Linkages and translations: The legal-conservation assemblage and the Niyamgiri struggle

The Supreme Court of India has taken a strong judicial stance on conservation, and has appointed an *amicus curiae* and a Central Empowered Committee (CEC) to advise it on conservation-related matters. It has based these judicial initiatives on its interpretation of the powerful laws on forest conservation and wildlife protection (Rosencranz and Lele, 2008). The institutional innovations have opened up the judicial space for conservation-related public interest litigation at the highest levels, and allow any party to approach the Supreme Court through submitting petitions to the CEC. A powerful legal-conservation assemblage has emerged over time, centered on the forest bench of the Supreme Court and including the MOEF, the CEC, lawyers specializing in conservation litigation, and conservation organizations. It has its own particular forms of legal discourses and practices which have emerged through a historical process of assembling diverse elements of conservation laws, case laws and precedence, forms of legalities, etc. It is uniquely powerful due to the Supreme Court's ability to interpret and legally enforce the constitution and laws relating to

⁹ Survival International webpage <http://www.survivalinternational.org/about/niyamgiri>.

Table 1
Timeline of major events relating to the Niyamgiri Struggle.

1997	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MOU signed for a mining and alumina refinery project between Government of Odisha and Sterlite (later a subsidiary of Vedanta PLC)
2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land acquisition notice to twelve villages in the Lanjigarh area
2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land acquisition initiated in Lanjigarh area, leading to local protests and mobilization
2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rally against Vedanta attended by the affected people, Dongaria Kondhs, the socialist leader Kishen Pattanaik, and Gandhian Prafulla Samantra • Petition filed against Vedanta PLC on environment and forest law violation in front of the Central Empowered Committee, Supreme Court
2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CEC recommends that mining of Niyamgiri should not be allowed (CEC, 2005) • The “Vedanta Ravages Through India” report released (Anonymous, 2005) • EPGOdisha’s “Brief Report on Ecological and Biodiversity Importance of Niyamgiri” issued (EPGOdisha, 2005) • Dongaria Kondhs come to Bhubaneswar to protest against proposed Niyamgiri mining
2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Norway Pension Fund divests in Vedanta on the basis of the recommendations of the Council of Ethics, Norway, in view of the poor environmental and human rights record of Vedanta (Ethics, 2007) • CEC issues another report, which recommends that mining of Niyamgiri should not be allowed, and the environmental clearance for the alumina refinery should be canceled (CEC, 2007)
2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protests outside Vedanta’s Annual General Body Meeting in London, UK • Supreme Court ignores CEC recommendations and allows MOEF to give clearance for mining on Niyamgiri • MOEF gives clearance in principle for diversion of forest land for mining of Niyamgiri, with a number of conditions • Survival International names Vedanta as one of the worst three companies violating indigenous rights • Road blockades by local movement to stop mining equipment from reaching Niyamgiri hilltop • Rahul Gandhi visits Niyamgiri and assures Dongaria Kondhs of his support for their fight to protect Niyamgiri
2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MOEF gives environmental clearance for mining of Niyamgiri, contingent on final forestry clearance • Protests in front of Vedanta Refinery at Lanjigarh • Human chain of more than 10,000 people around Niyamgiri to protest against proposed mining • On recommendation of Forest Advisory Council, the MOEF constitutes the Ramanathan committee to examine whether the provisions in the Forest Rights Act have been followed before giving final clearance for the Niyamgiri forest diversion • UK National Contact Point (UKNCP) for the OCED Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises indicts Vedanta for rights and freedoms of Dongaria Kondhs (UKNCP, 2009)
2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MOEF’s Saxena Committee writes a scathing report citing violations of FRA and other forest and environmental laws by Vedanta and the state government (Saxena et al., 2010) • MOEF declines to give final forest clearance for mining Niyamgiri
2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writ petition filed by Odisha Mining Corporation in the Supreme Court to overturn the MOEF decision
2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supreme Court, based on its interpretation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006 and the Panchayati Raj Extension to Scheduled Areas Act, 1996, rules that the Gram Sabhas (village councils) shall have a say in whether mining should take place or not; and that MOEF will make its final decision based on the Gram Sabhas’ recommendations

conservation, and can affect other distant assemblages dramatically.

However, till efforts were made to link this assemblage with the mobilization to save Niyamgiri, it had no role in the Niyamgiri struggle. Once linkages were established through submission of petitions to the CEC through lawyers, an overlap occurred, with some of the elements of each of the assemblage playing roles in the other assemblage. These linking elements were diverse, including people, laws and their interpretations, photographs, technical reports, etc. The relationship between the two assemblages was asymmetric, as there was much larger potential for the processes in the legal-conservation assemblage to affect the Niyamgiri situation than there was for the reverse situation.

Individuals like me became part of both the Niyamgiri struggle and the legal-conservation assemblage. Apart from developing relationships of trust and reciprocity with actors in the legal-conservation assemblage, the bridging role included *problematization* (Callon, 1986) of material and expressive elements in the Niyamgiri assemblage in terms acceptable to the legal-conservation assemblage: i.e. to ask the question “whether the happenings in the Niyamgiri assemblage broke the accepted legalities as defined in the legal-conservation assemblage”. We worked to encode the lived experiences and events in the struggle area, scientific data about Niyamgiri and the refinery project, and laws and policies on the environment, into novel elements such as petitions, reports, and legal arguments. These elements needed to be comprehensible, legitimate and actionable in the legal-conservation assemblage, and traveled to become part of the legal case in front of the CEC and the Supreme Court (see Fig. 2).

Events such as the cutting down of trees were reframed in legal language as “violations of certain sections of forest law”, and were incorporated into the petitions. Actors, both human (lawyers) and non-human (provisions of laws such as the Forest Conservation Act, case law, legal procedures) were “enrolled” to make possible this translation. The concepts of “translation”—i.e. problematization and enrollment—are borrowed from the Actor-Network theory, which defines “translation” as a process wherein “heterogeneous entities are associated together to form an actor-world through assigning to each an identity, interests, a role to play, a course of action to follow, and projects to carry out” (Callon, 1986, 24).

The bringing together of the two assemblages through translation and linkages was hard work, requiring intentional efforts and capacities among the bridging actors. One outcome of these processes was that some of the human actors who were enrolled from within the legal-conservation assemblage became deeply committed to saving Niyamgiri. The lawyers fighting for the case in the SC visited Niyamgiri, interacted with the local struggle, and became emotionally invested in saving Niyamgiri. They are now parts of both the assemblages, and serve as a stable connection between them.

Similar processes and actors linked the Niyamgiri struggle with existing human rights, ethical investment, and indigenous rights assemblages. Each of these assemblages has emerged through historical processes of coming together of heterogeneous constituents around issues of human rights, ethical investments, or indigenous rights. As in the case of the legal-conservation assemblage, the development and dynamics of the linkages between the Niyamgiri struggle and these assemblages can be examined through empiri-

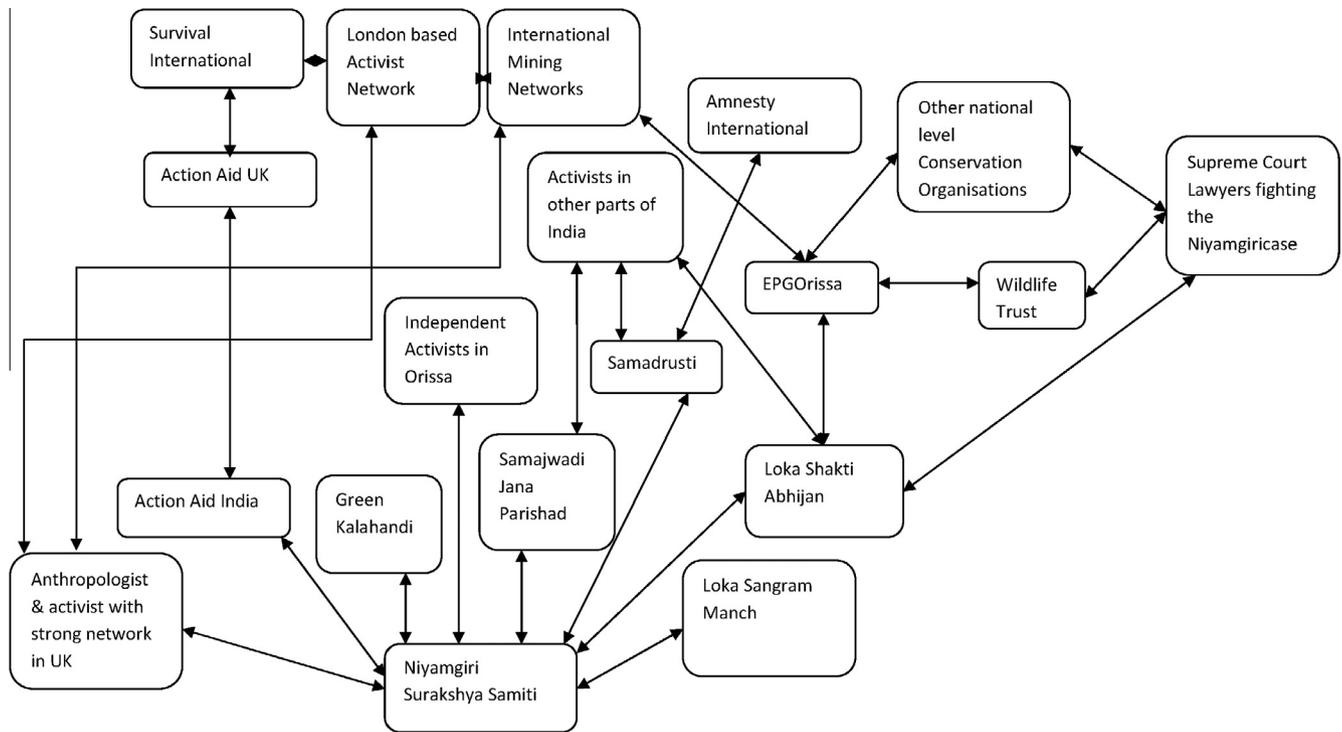


Fig. 1. A partial map of the key actors in the emergent assemblage around the Niyamgiri Struggle.

cal study. Activists involved in the Niyamgiri struggle were able to (i) link up with actors in these pre-existing assemblages; (ii) convince actors to take up the Niyamgiri issue and thereby enroll them into the Niyamgiri assemblage; (iii) together, carry out translations which made sense for the linked assemblages; and (iv) maintain the relationship with these actors and elements, thereby keeping the connections between the assemblages active. Arrests and beatings, injured bodies, oral testimonies, and destroyed forests were selectively incorporated into text, photographs and videos, which traveled from Niyamgiri to the human rights and indigenous rights networks, which then further reframed these into their campaigns. Anti-mining networks and human rights groups, with the help of activists working with the Niyamgiri issue, created extensive portfolios of environmental and human rights violations by Vedanta (ACTSA et al., 2007; Anonymous, 2005), strengthening the local claims of injustice, and de-legitimizing claims of Vedanta being a caring, responsible company.

The campaigns of these organizations, in turn, traveled through various media and informed key decision-makers in the Indian context. The framing of the Niyamgiri issue as a conservation, human rights, and indigenous rights issue in the international campaigns, in combination with official reports of the CEC (CEC, 2007) or the Ethics Committee of Norway Government (Ethics, 2007), legitimized the Niyamgiri struggle for critical actors at the national level. The campaigns also shifted collective and individual subjectivities at the local level, as tropes of human and indigenous rights, conservation, and legalities started to become incorporated in the local ways of being in the world.

4. Analysis

4.1. Agency and heterogeneity

An understanding of entities as assemblages of heterogeneous elements contingently linked together provides a more nuanced notion of agency as emergent and complex (Harman, 2008), an

outcome of interactions between constituents of the assemblage. An assemblage has properties which arise out of these interactions, and it exercises its capacities during interactions with other assemblages. From this perspective, one can think of agencies of entities such as states or capitalist enterprises as emergent, and empirically reflect on how hierarchical, routine, recurrent interactions within these assemblages lead to agency. In the case of networked assemblages, we can draw on the concept of a distributed network of multiple agents, whose recurrent interactions can lead to self-organized, emergent behavior. In practical terms, the notion that an assemblage composed of heterogeneous elements can have agency and be effective, without a hierarchical, centralized decision-making structure, helps re-think strategies for collective action. It is possible to bring change even without a complete alignment of ideologies or beliefs between diverse actors. It allows for an approach to activism which is open and exploratory, rather than ideologically closed. Thus, in the Niyamgiri struggle, the various actors, networks and institutions held diverse ideologies, beliefs and priorities in a “tangle of co-existing logics” (Allen, 2011). The diverse ideologies of key actors are illustrated in Table 2.

The different actors connected to the Niyamgiri struggle act in accordance with their own contexts, ideologies and interests. For the local people, the main concerns were the practical ones of livelihoods, access to land, social disruptions, cultural and social injustice, etc. These were lived concerns, mobilized through kinship and face-to-face interactions, embedded in the local context. Organizations such as the Samajwadi Jan Parishad and the Loka Sangram Manch, with distinctly-articulated ideologies opposing extractive globalization and neo-liberal capitalism, were primed to be receptive to the emergent local resistance against capitalist enterprises. These activist organizations wove the embodied experiences of the villagers with their own ideologies to create legitimacy frames which included ideas of democracy, capitalism, rights and resistance. On the other hand, individuals and organizations dedicated to conservation were concerned about the wildlife and biodiversity value of Niyamgiri. The indigenous rights organizations, such as Survival International, focused primarily on the charismatic

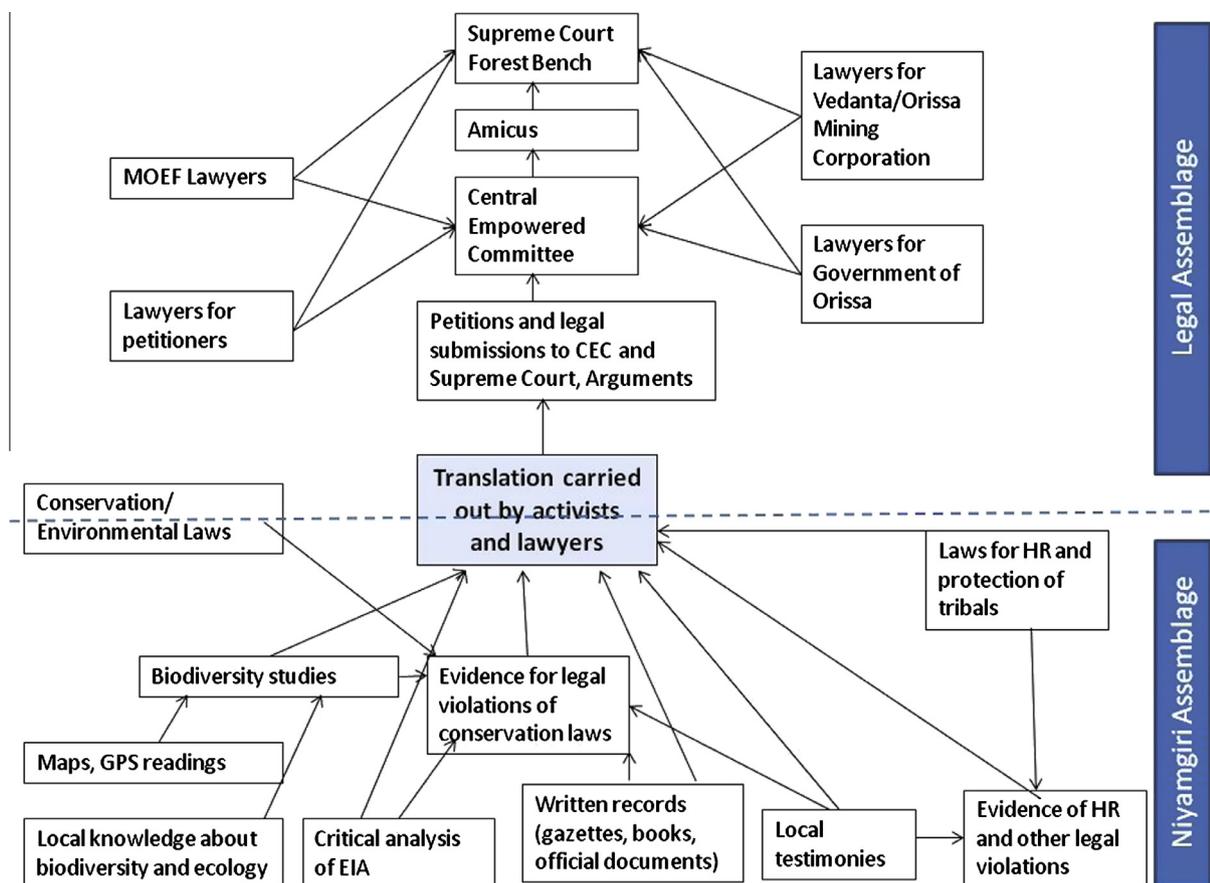


Fig. 2. Diagram of the translation process.

Dongaria Kondhs as a threatened indigenous group, building their campaign on the discourse of indigeneity, essentializing Dongaria Kondhs as the real “Navi”.¹⁰

There was no single over-arching discursive frame inscribing the translocal assemblage that developed around the Niyamgiri issue, apart from an interest in protecting Niyamgiri and foiling Vedanta’s plans. Instead, there were multiple frames in circulation. As different actors plugged into the assemblage, they chose the aspects which fitted their own ideologies and contexts, and transformed them or developed them further. Overlaps or encroachments into each other’s domain were frequent, and often led to conflicts. At the local level, these conflicts and contradictions were much more common, as actors overlapped with each other. Tensions existed between the radical left and the centrist organizations. The radical activists based at the provincial and national level were suspicious of international agencies. Kraemer et al. (2013) describe an interesting episode of tense interaction between activists and a film crew sent by Survival International. Many of these diverse actors were connected to each other through “bridging connections”, generally individual activists, who helped to buffer contradictions. Well-respected activists often stepped into mediate in open conflicts and tone down the differences leading to the conflicts.

4.2. Maintenance of the assemblage

The maintenance of linkages in the emergent assemblage required constant efforts and resources by various actors in the

¹⁰ After the release of the film *Avatar*, Survival International launched a campaign that depicted the Dongaria Kondhs as the real *Navi*, fighting to save their sacred mountain from mining.

assemblage. Local and provincial activists invested time and took risks, including that of physical harm. Lawyers at the Supreme Court gave their free time, and kept in contact with activists. Constant communication, including through websites and listserves, was maintained by many of the actors. NGOs supported research on the ecology of Niyamgiri, which was then shared with others through Internet and publications. International organizations such as ActionAid and Survival International put in substantial resources, including making documentary films and initiating advertising campaigns. International activists who work on mining issues also played critical roles, especially by undertaking research and being able to embed the local narratives of the Niyamgiri into larger struggles over mining and environment internationally. Much of this activity was intentional on the part of the actors, as they dealt with contingent situations and strategized on their roles and actions in their own respective contexts.

The heterogeneous elements constituting the emergent assemblage allowed it to plug into institutional and discursive spaces in different contexts. This capacity came about as a result of efforts by various actors in the assemblage, as they sought out openings within their own contexts, and leveraged these strategic openings using specific knowledge and expertise. This involved intentional, directed efforts drawing upon their respective capabilities.

Contradictions between the various constituents of the assemblage were common, and it became the responsibility of key activists to mediate these contradictions and conflicts. The key activists were critical to the maintenance of the assemblage. Located in varying contexts, they became deeply invested in the Niyamgiri struggle over time, and were a major source of its capabilities, as well as its resilience. The flexibility of the activists, their openness to pursuing varied trajectories, and their ability to grasp

Table 2
Diverse actors involved in Niyamgiri struggle and their ideologies and interests.

Actors/networks	Ideologies and interests
Niyamgiri Suraksha Samittee	Protection of livelihoods and lifescape, sacred mountain, social disruption and injustice
Samajwadi Jana Parishad activists	Socialist, struggles over land and forests, anti-imperialist, anti-MNCs
Loka Sangram Manch	Marxist-Leninist, struggles over land and forests, anti-imperialist, anti-MNCs
Wild Life Trust, Odisha	Conservation of wildlife and bio-diversity
Supreme Court Lawyers	Conservation and biodiversity protection, rule of law
Amnesty International	Human rights violations
Survival International	Indigenous people's rights
Mines and Communities Network	Human rights and environmental destruction by extractive industries

opportunities as they presented themselves stabilized the assemblage and made it effective. In contrast, a similar assemblage around the Kashipur movement¹¹ in the neighboring district of Rayagada has disintegrated, likely because certain key actors were too inflexible.

4.3. Asymmetries of power

Most of the networks and actors who participated in the Niyamgiri struggle were marginalized within their own contexts. Linking with other actors across contexts allowed them to access strategic openings and share resources, information, knowledge and skills. Decisions, events and narratives that had little power at a particular location gained power when transferred to other contexts, as illustrated by the two examples below.

The asymmetry of power was especially stark for the grassroots mobilization in Lanjigarh, where it faced the combined might of the state administration, the company, and local elites supporting Vedanta. An atmosphere of terror was created. False cases were filed against the leadership, many of whom were arrested. Activists were killed in suspicious circumstances. Pro-Vedanta goons threatened the movement's local leadership as well as outside supporters who sought to visit the area. Violations of constitutional rights and various laws were common, with little recourse from either the local administration or the judiciary. By translating the violations of environmental and forest laws by Vedanta into petitions submitted to another part of the state—i.e. the legal-conservation assemblage at the Supreme Court—activists set into motion dynamics which helped to reduce the local power asymmetry. The acceptance of the petition and the positive report opposing mining by the CEC provided greater legitimacy to the grassroots mobilization, afforded it visibility in the media, and drew the attention of potential allies. The fact that the case was in the Supreme Court and in the eyes of the media forced both the state administration and the company to be more circumspect in their use of repression.

In another example, the decision of the Norwegian Pension Fund to withdraw its investment from Vedanta on environmental and human rights ground (Ethics, 2007), had little impact on the availability of capital to the company from capital markets, but had a relatively large impact in India as it provided legitimacy to the narratives being used by the activist networks. The national media picked up the story and the decision by the Norway Pension Fund found its way into the Supreme Court Judgment of 2008.

The relationships within the Niyamgiri movement assemblage itself were laden with power flows, conflicts and tensions, not surprisingly given the varied capacities and endowments of its constituents. Certain individuals or organizations had greater capacities to change trajectories in the assemblage through their

action or inaction. For example, the MP of Kalahandi, who supported the Niyamgiri movement, exercised political power at local level, and had access to key decision-makers in federal government. Organizations such as Action Aid, with their status as donor agencies, had financial power and organizational capacities not available to other activist networks. The lawyers in Delhi had the capacity to intervene within the powerful legal-conservation assemblage, which allowed them to influence the course of events at the local level. These differentials set up power gradients within the assemblage.

Certain characteristics of the assemblage helped ameliorate these power asymmetries. The Niyamgiri struggle required strategic alignments rather than sustained coordinated action across constituents. Grassroots political formations for social justice and activist networks usually have a consensus-based, democratic style of functioning, and they tend to be vigilant against the concentration of power. The voluntary nature of participation in the Niyamgiri assemblage, and the capacity to withdraw and disengage from the assemblage, discourages concentration of power. The fluidity and diversity within the assemblage, given its spatial and scalar extent, also means that co-operation and reciprocity between actors in different contexts were necessary. Even if power centers emerged at certain locations, they needed to reciprocally cooperate with actors at other scales and locations.

5. Conclusion

Assemblage theory provides a useful framework for considering the complex and contingent nature of the translocal social movements like the Niyamgiri struggle. This approach allows one to step back and examine the whole process without reifying any particular location or scale; and to see each of the constituents within the translocal mobilizations as an assemblage in itself, which can be further examined and analyzed. The assemblage theory allows for the accounting of stable assemblages such as state or enterprises, as well for relatively transient assemblages such as the translocal mobilization around Niyamgiri.

Traditional social movement theory can be reworked through assemblage theory, while reducing conceptual confusions and allowing incorporation of powerful insights. As discussed above, social movement concepts such as mobilization structure, resource mobilization, framing of collective action, repertoires of contention, and opportunity structures can all be interpreted using assemblage theory. It allows the theoretical capacity to deal with reification of place-based movements, heterogeneity of actors, and contingent interactions across locations. The approach illustrates how diverse interests across locations and scales can come together in assemblages, and how complete ideological coherence is not critical for effective collective actions.

This understanding opens up the potential for alliances and solidarities across diverse contexts, and an understanding that friction and contradictions within assemblages are not disastrous, but rather are normal conditions of such processes. In my experience

¹¹ Kashipur movement against bauxite mining and the alumina refinery started in 1994, developed a similar transnational support network as the Niyamgiri movement, and was active till as late as 2006. However, the local struggle has become weak, which has led to the destabilization of the larger translocal assemblage.

with the Niyamgiri and other similar movements, ideological rigidity amongst many of the actors was one of the major obstacles in cooperation and collective action. These ideological rigidities were based in worldviews that focused on the negative rather than the creative and productive aspects of differences. One of the reasons that the Niyamgiri struggle was relatively more successful is the willingness of some of the key actors to embrace diversity and bridge differences. Assemblage theory provides a theoretical basis for this intuitive openness to diversity and difference.

The most important insight from assemblage theory for social movement actors is that even powerful assemblages such as state and capitalist enterprises are assembled and held together by diverse mechanisms, requiring significant and constant efforts; and are therefore vulnerable to change and subversion. Social movement mobilization can be strategically visualized as rhizomes, which flow into and penetrate spaces afforded by the assembled nature of state and capital, and seek to transform these assemblages. Thinking in terms of assemblages can provide a strategic depth to social and environmental justice movements that totalizing discourses of capital, power, and revolution often foreclose.

Yet social mobilization and movements remain highly under-theorized in terms of DeLanda's work on assemblages, and leave many questions that need to be addressed. A critical question is how to define the boundaries of assemblages such as the Niyamgiri movement; and how one can conceptualize the constant shifting of these boundaries, as new constituents are enrolled and others leave. Agency and intentionality in social movements need to be better defined and differentiated, as non-humans entities such as mountains or legal petitions clearly have agency; yet social movements are about intentionality of humans, individuals and collectives. It is important to theorize the differences between agency and intent, and to theorize intentional action. Another area which needs greater attention is that of power in its diverse forms within and between assemblages; and how to combine political economy theories with the assemblage approach. Though DeLanda's work provides a useful ontological basis for understanding social processes, further theoretical work needs to be carried out to conceptualize translocal social mobilization in terms of his theory.

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