

## FILM REVIEW

### *Khond Survival*

*Of Land, Labour and Love.* Ajay Bhardwaj, director and producer. DVD, color, 65 mins., 2008. In local dialects, English, and English subtitles. Distribution: [ajayunmukt@yahoo.com](mailto:ajayunmukt@yahoo.com) in New Delhi.

*Mine: Story of a Sacred Mountain.* Produced by Survival International, narrated by Joanna Lumley. DVD (PAL), color, 16 mins., 2009. English narration and subtitles, Odissi language. Distribution: <http://www.survivalinternational.org/films/mine>

In just sixteen minutes, Survival International's film *Mine*, about the indigenous Dongria Khondhs (*dongar* = "hill," hence hill-tribe) of Orissa, succeeds in getting across the salient facts about the effects of globalization on this Indian culture and environment. Beautiful shots of hilly forest landscapes, women hand-harvesting millet from *juma* fields (swiddens), freshwater creeks and giant trees hit the viewer hard with shocking contrasts to views of the Vedanta multinational mining plant installation nearby and what it has done and is doing to these people. Their sacred Niyamgiri mountain, referred to by one Dongria as "our *debi*"—goddess, but which the subtitle translates as "god"—the cynosure of their lives and well-being, is about to be strip-mined for bauxite by the London-based, partly Indian-owned, Vedanta Resources company. Both men and women are featured speaking about the effects on their lives of this modern invasion.

The film is just one part of Survival International's effort to call attention to political-economic hazards to people around the globe whom they refer to as "uncontacted tribes." However, Khondhs in general are far from uncontacted. The Khondhs have been known for some centuries to various neighbors in a broad region that spans several Indian states. The famous English anthropologist who made India his home and took Indian citizenship, Verrier Elwin (1902–1964), visited and photographed Khondhs, if not these particular people. Frederick G. Bailey wrote a fine ethnography about Konds too: *Tribe, Caste and Nation* [1960]. This short film belongs in the category of engaged anthropology, and as such would be suitable for in-class screenings in courses on globalization and on tribal India. On August 24, 2010 the Indian environment minister Jairam Ramesh announced that Vedanta Resources would *not* be allowed to mine in the

Niyamgiri Hills. "I have taken this decision purely on a legal approach—laws are being violated." That we hope will be the final word.

The longer film, *Of Land, Labour and Love*, documents another Orissan group of Khondh cultivators in the western Dasmantpur area, the Parajas—where there are two subgroups, the landed majority and the landless. The film surveys the significant food-producing activities of the villagers, with a bit of dancing and some hill-roaming as well.

The film opens with a Paraja man pointing to and naming the various hills nearby, including one that they call their *devata*—"god," the only reference to religious belief in the narrative; this move allows the film to pan across and situate the people in their vast expanse of territory. We see cultivators preparing hillsides by building stone bunds to prevent erosion, following instruction from a local nongovernmental organization (NGO), Ama Sangathan. (There is more on the work of this effective NGO at this link: [http://www.agragamee.org/publication\\_new.htm](http://www.agragamee.org/publication_new.htm).) An NGO employee is teaching the villagers how to prepare manure slurry for their crops. Other sequences cover intercropping of millet, beans and okra, tamarind-pod gathering and storage, weeding sweet potatoes and millet processing. The hard women's work of turmeric-tuber harvesting with long iron rods is detailed as their cash crop, one available every three years. The villagers' interactions with the helpful NGO had led to many improvements in their lives, such as constructing a canal by proudly donated unpaid volunteer labor to bring water from a hill spring; we see their NGO-donated bridge pipe and learn how they built the scaffolding for it.

We see them hiking into verdant hill forest and tree-denuded rocky areas, displaying cashew seedlings planted on NGO advice as a future cash crop. At this point some women tell about their NGO-supported women's organization which sponsored fruit-tree planting and the creation of a village grain store, plus a modest bank account for cash during lean monsoon times. A man speaks of, and we see, the NGO-promoted onion storage shed, a holdout strategy for higher market prices; another man praises NGO advice on intercropping.

In the last few minutes of the film, people from the village landless cadre speak of NGO help to apply for land titles, and how such titles will protect them from losing their lands to outside resource companies. We see them sitting in a line on a hill, surveying the land with longing as the film fades to a printed note that, 50 km. away, people had been driven off their lands by a multinational aluminum company, and that even the Ama Sangathan NGO was on the run to avoid falsely filed charges. The film leaves us there; we do not know what finally happened to the film's Parajas, both landed and landless.

The beauty of the Paraja people and of the different eco-zones of their environment has been fetchingly captured by Bhardwaj and his two other cameramen. I hugely appreciated his use of natural sound—of birds, of people interacting and children playing, of running canals, pounding iron diggers, dance drums, and the light click of tamarind pods shaken to the ground by a man up the tree—Bhardwaj eschews the muzak tendency that afflicts too many Asian documentaries.

*Land, Labour and Love* is about economic production and environmental constraints, not about other cultural aspects such as the Paraja religious imaginary,

oral literature, rituals, kinship and descent, or other typical ethnographic concerns. (The term "love" in the title refers to Parajas' love of their land and hills, not to romance.) In sum, the film offers a rich visual experience of one hill-tribe's lives in a part of Orissa, an area and a topic overlooked for some time as more documentary emphasis for India as a whole seems focused on gender and city topics: women, children and slum life. The effective development work of the Indian NGO, unlike that of some foreign NGOs, is admirable. I highly recommend this film for use in courses on South Asian anthropology and village-level development, as well as on globalization in general.

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