

**A session with the postgraduate students, Department of Sociology, Christ University,
Bangalore, 8th July, 2016**

Facilitators: Arundathi, Shobha (Human rights activists and theatre artists who call ourselves ‘Mahua Tripps’)

Duration: 1.5 hours

Participants: Around 50 students and a few lecturers

Arundathi and I decided to meet at the entrance of Christ College at 9 a.m. I saunter into the huge campus, djembe in hand. The traffic in Hosur Road, the sea of students I see walking around are all playing on my mind as I look for Arundathi. She is at the cafeteria with a plate of hot masala dosa, lost in thoughts of her student days in the same college.

We are supposed to be addressing a group of around 45-50 post graduate sociology students. The class room is full. We ask the students to make some space for the exercises to follow and I perch myself on the bench while Arundathi introduces us to the group and briefly tells them about our trip and connect with Niyamgiri hills in Odisha. The group smiles when Arundathi says she passed out from the same college. We feel welcome. We show the group a video that we have put together about what’s happening in the Niyamgiri hills, their struggle to assert their land and forest rights and the tremendous resilience of the communities, despite all odds.

The link to the video is here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?>

We take questions from the students after the video screening. Here are some excerpts:

How were you received by the people in Niyamgiri?

“How would you expect to be met by a group you don’t know? Well yes, we got a few disinterested glances in the beginning, while we were absorbing all the beauty of the land and the people. (We mimic our expressions of awe when we first went to Niyamgiri. The group giggles).

We asked them if we could come and stay in their village for a few days. They readily agreed. The generosity of the people of Niyamgiri is something truly amazing. As one of the movement leaders told us, “Come stay with us. Share our homes. Share our food and our music. You are more than welcome. But what can we do when the company wants to come and evict us and take everything away? We will have to protest then for our rights. Come and stay with us and tell people in cities about your experience. About our struggle”

Do people there have access to education?

“If you mean formal education, then no. The people have decided that they will prioritise a different form of education for their children, for now, given the political climate. The elders of the community teach their children about their rights, the need to nurture and protect their forests and a sustainable form of living. Music is also used to educate children. Vedanta is making claims about providing education for girls as part of their corporate social responsibility. Their motto is ‘*Creating Happiness*’ or some such; but their claims to fame are polar opposite to the attitude of the people towards Vedanta. The people realize that it is just one of those gimmicks to control them. They

don't want that. ”

Are people in Niyamgiri cut off from the rest of the world? Do they have access to medical help, for example?

“People mostly rely on their rich indigenous forms of medicine to meet their health needs. There is no other accessible health care available. The question to think about is probably whether, people have a choice to access other forms of medicine and health care if they wished to.”

Are the people's daily lives affected because of the intimidation that they face?

“Yes. There have been instances of people involved in the movement, being arrested and tortured when they leave their village to go to the nearby town. The communities are mostly self reliant. They grow their own food too. However, when they trek down to go to sell their forest produce or buy essentials like salt in the local market, which is around 10 kms away, they are faced with the potential danger of being picked up by goons or framed under false charges of being a naxalite”

Are people affected psychologically because of the continuing intimidation?

“The people of Niyamgiri are extremely resilient people, as we know them. However they are definitely affected by the intimidation. There was a case of one of the leaders of the movement who was arrested, without a case being registered against him. He escaped from the police, returned to his village and committed suicide. The villagers say its because of psychological trauma”

What is Vedanta's position in the area now?

“Vedanta has expanded the capacity of its refinery in Lanjigarh, despite the clear ruling by the Gram Sabha and the Supreme Court that mining will not be allowed in Niyamgiri. We need to think and understand why this is so..”

Since the Supreme court has upheld the rights of the people of Niyamgiri, does this mean the struggle is over and the people can now live in peace?

“The Supreme Court has most definitely passed a landmark judgment upholding the rights of the communities living in the hills of Niyamgiri. Earlier this year, when Vedanta petitioned the Supreme Court to allow it to start mining, despite the gram sabha resolutions having clearly ruled otherwise, in the judgment, the Court asked Vedanta to petition the gram sabhas since they were the real owners and decision makers. For now, the verdict of the Court is very clear. However, we do know that the Supreme Court has the authority to review its own judgments”

Is the movement completely people led? What is the role of outsiders?

“The Niyamgiri people's movement is one of the fine examples of a completely people owned initiative. There are outsiders who express solidarity to the issue and offer to assist the movement in

their advocacy. The choice to take the support or not rests with the people. Many movements led by outsiders face a crisis when it comes to handing over the leadership to local communities who face the struggle. However this will only happen if its planned as a people led initiative from day one. The Niyamgiri movement, we believe is one such example.”

Does the media cover this issue?

“In the political climate that exists today, stories about movements fighting for their land and forest rights do not get covered enough by mainstream media. However, Niyamgiri has been able to make mainstream news, simply because it is not possible to ignore a landmark judgment or a mass movement of this nature. The movement has supporters from across the globe. The local media groups in Odisha which are run by people who are human rights activists or are supported by activists has also helped get some attention on the issue. But despite all that, there is obviously not much mainstream coverage. And for obvious reasons..In a place like Niyamgiri which has no cell phone network for miles, it takes a lot of effort to ensure that there is a flow of information. Especially when there is a constant threat to violations of rights. We need more attention.”

Are the people of Niyamgiri protected in any special way under the law? Would it have been different if they were not adivasis?

“The adivasi communities who reside in the hills of Niyamgiri belong to ‘Particularly Vulnerable Tribes’ as classified by the government. This implies that they have access to rights and state protection, much more than other communities. Especially in the context of protection of their culture, their land and forests.”

With the close of the question and answer session, we go on to ask the students to list out issues that come to their mind, from whats being talked about. They list out the following:

Marginalization

Discrimination

Loss of home/safe spaces

Isolation: access to mainstream medicine? (Somebody else says- there are indigenous form of medicine too). So is this an issue of choice or access?

Mental pressure/trauma

Human rights violations

Cultural hegemony

Cultural Imperialism

Identity Crisis

Lack of security/ Constant threats

“Development”? (Questioning the notion of development)

State repression

Exercise 1: Image work

We move on from this discussion to an Image exercise. We had around 15 minutes for this. We told the group to come into a circle and get ready for some theatrical expressions. The group seemed enthusiastic, a little nervous too. We gave them an introduction to the use of our bodies to communicate our feelings, responses, expressions and thoughts. We emphasise that this is possible to do, if the group chooses to be generous in what they give and take from each other.

We demonstrate Image work with two volunteers from the group. One person comes to the centre and freezes in an image. It can be an image of a response to the story they heard about, our discussions, our associations with personal stories of violations and resilience. We urged them to think about what they would want to express for themselves and to the group. The person coming to the centre was given a few seconds to freeze in the image and establish her/his presence and for the group to absorb the meaning of the image. A second person walks up gently to the centre and assumes another body shape and freezes. We mentioned that this could be a response to the first image or a new story altogether. The first person leaves from the stage and someone else comes and replaces the second person and so on. This went on for a while, and the exercise ended with a group of girls walking in, together, without talking, and getting into a close circle with their hands on each other's shoulders. We decide to end the exercise on this note.

Exercise 1 debrief

The participants spoke about their sense of discomfort when left alone in the center for a longer time. Some thoughts that were expressed were:

“Why is it that people don't come forward spontaneously and wait for others to go? I went so that I can do something myself. “

“I wanted to give the other person enough space, so I don't go and misinterpret or disturb what that person is trying to say”.

“I think we had our own interpretations to each image. There were so many stories that were shared. And each of us could have understood each image as a different story!”

“We decided to go and stand together in a group because we did not like what we saw, and wanted to stand together to address that issue”

Some participants also shared that they were taking their time to process the images as they were being presented and to take the initiative to express what was coming to their mind. However, they lost the opportunity to come forward and express themselves in an image in the process.

Exercise 2: Group Images

The next exercise that followed was a Small Group Image exercise. We decided to use the hallway outside the classroom so as to have sufficient space. The process of moving from inside the classroom to the corridor was interesting in itself. There were a few participants checking if it was 'okay' to do so, and a teacher reminding us of time (Acha, you have 15 more minutes ok?).

The participants were asked to get into groups of 6. Taking our cue from the list of issues generated earlier, we called out words and instructed the group to form an image within 5 seconds. A countdown of 5..4..3..2..1 and Freeze, was given. We emphasised that there should not be any exchange of words or directions to each other in the process of forming these images, that the

groups were to come together magically as one image.

The first word we called out was 'Marginalized'. The groups formed images. It was interesting to note that one particular group spaced out so much that they came across as individuals standing alone and by themselves instead of a group. The second word called out was 'government'. The groups were more cohesive in their expression this time. There were various images of power and subjugation, the expressions on the participants faces too were more varied and showcased a range of emotions. The third word we called out was 'culture'. This time, the greater cohesion amongst the group was observed, during the process of forming images, the participants were more responsive to the others in the group.

Exercise 2: Debrief

Some excerpts below:

“There were so many interesting stories that emerged- but they were mostly about violence.”

“We found it so hard to freeze in each image for a few seconds. How difficult it would be to actually feel that oppression?”

Conclusion:

At the end of the exercises, some participants shared that they observed a flow into personal stories from what they started off with. A young girl shared that she found herself thinking about and responding to the caste bias that she faces in her daily life.

The session concluded with the screening of another video clip of a song from the Niyamgiri hills. A translation was shared along with it followed by a kind of karaoke of the same song. We happily picked up our Djembe and cow-bells custom made into a musical instrument and sang the song while encouraging the participants to join in. It was a pleasant surprise to see a couple of students take musical instruments out of their bags and join in with the music. Certain other hummed along, and some used the desks to contribute to the beat too.

Going by the warm smiles and applause that met us, it seemed that the performance was a super-hit ;)

We wound up by with goodbyes and thank you's and a promise that we would be back to engage with the students for a longer, more sustainable period of time if the students expressed an interest to do so.

- Ends-