

Niyamgiri, Orissa and the Movie 'Avatar': Real And Reel— Uncanny Resemblances

MAINSTREAM, VOL XLVIII, NO 30, JULY 17, 2010

[S G Vombatkere](#)

Prologue

Stories are based upon past events, or personal or recorded human experience, embellished by imaginative thinking. They sometimes carry a clear “message” but quite often these days, the message is subtly hidden. In contemporary story-telling that is increasingly audio-visual, hi-tech special effects often draw audience and critics’ attention and help to cleverly conceal the message. One such is a recent Hollywood film written, directed and produced by James Cameron, titled ‘Avatar’, which won the Golden Globe award. It has loads of special effects and an imaginative extrapolation both in time and space.

Cameron sets the story in the year 2154, and situates the action on Pandora, a moon of an imaginary distant planet inhabited by the gentle humanoid Na’vi people amidst fantastic forest with semi-sentient flora and fauna. Cameron’s knowledge of India’s current events is not known, but the story-line of ‘Avatar’ has an uncanny resemblance to events in some parts of India, in particular, the Niyamgiri Hills in Orissa.

Avatar: The Movie

The story is based upon demand on Earth for a mineral named ‘unobtainium’, which is in abundance on Pandora, particularly underneath a holy tree which the Na’vi believe is the centre of life and repository of all Na’vi memories. As may be expected 150 years from today, science and technology have made inter-planetary travel easy, and an American business corporation has established base on Pandora to mine and transport unobtainium back to Earth, where it commands a huge price in the free market. Besides the corporate executive in charge at the base, there are scientists, engineers and ex-US military corporate mercenaries wielding state-of-the-art fire power to subjugate the Na’vi people, who oppose the corporate venture that would violate their beliefs and dislocate their lives. Land and life are sacred for the Na’vi people, and their resistance to corporate take-over is based as much upon their religious beliefs as upon their material existence.

Among the personnel at the base is a young ex-Marine, Jake Sully, who allows use of his body to transfer his mind and personality to a laboratory-created Na’vi body to infiltrate the Na’vi society by living among them. Sully begins to suffer pangs of conscience and questions the ethical and moral bases of his mission, and joins the Na’vi. The Na’vi resistance is brutally suppressed by overwhelming hi-tech fire power against their bows-and-arrows defences. But the film ends with the eventual defeat of the earthlings.

Use the following information on Pandora and Niyamgiri in Odisha to compare similarities and differences between the Odisha and the film setting to help you decide if you agree or disagree with the following statement:

The Avatar film could have been based on the mining conflict of Odisha.

PANDORA

- The Na'vi people are a tribal society with ability to communicate with Pandora's animals, trees and plants non-verbally by exchange of energy. They worship a diety called Eywa, which is their guiding force that keeps Pandora's ecosystem in equilibrium.
- In 2154. Resources Development Administration (RDA), a self-governing American commercial corporation has established a mining industry colony on Pandora, which is inhabited by tribes of the Na'vi people. The colony is inhabited by humans who are part of RDA's military mission on Pandora under command of Colonel Miles Quaritch, to mine 'unobtainium' valued at \$ 20 million a kilogram on Earth.
- RDA has been on Pandora for mining operations by take-over of Na'vi lands for three decades already when the story begins.
- Unobtainium is to be obtained by evacuating the Na'vi people, and strip mining that will denude the forest. When the "sky people" (as humans are called by the Na'vi) come with their machinery to remove the forest and build roads, they are stopped by the Na'vi. The RDA officials try to negotiate with the Na'vi, offering them roads, development, education (as done on Earth) in exchange for their land and forest. But for the Na'vi, land and forest are not negotiable. So Colonel Quartich prepares to attack and take the land by force. But as an interim measure, Jake Sully is ordered to assume his Na'vi identity (he can switch back and forth due to advanced technology but can assume only one personality at any given time) and infiltrate the Na'vi people to persuade or convince them to allow mining, while also bringing back intelligence.
- When the Na'vi refused to move, Col Quartich wants to clear them out by using bulldozers and gas to minimise casualties. The Na'vi use bows and arrows to fight against RDA's military equipped with state-of-the-art weapons.
- RDA has arrogated to itself the right to mine and extract unobtainium on Pandora and overcome any resistance by whatever it takes. RDA officials begin by offering the Na'vi people roads, schools etc, but when resistance mounts, decide to move in with force.
- The aggressive humans who invaded Pandora are ultimately defeated. In the last scene, they are seen disarmed, being marched by the Na'vi towards vehicles that would presumably take them back to Earth. Thus, the Na'vi people, with the help of Jake Sully have been successful in ending the corporate attack on their land and livelihoods.

ODISHA

- The adivasi Dongria Khond people are tribal, and venerate the forests and all life within it, considering themselves as a part of nature. They have particular reverence for the Niyamgiri Hills and worship their deity, Niyam Raja, who helps them to survive and live peacefully.
- In 2002, Sterlite Industries, principal subsidiary of a multinational corporation named Vedanta Resources (VR), approaches the governments of India and Orissa to mine for bauxite, a mineral essential for the manufacture of aluminium, a strategic metal of high commercial value. The bauxite deposits, estimated at over 20 million tonnes, are in the thickly forested Niyamgiri Hills inhabited by the Dongria Khond adivasi people since time immemorial. The company plans its alumina plant at nearby Lanjigarh by displacing people of 12 villages.
- VR is trying to acquire adivasi land for mining five decades after it was protected by the law, and the Central Empowered Committee appointed by the Supreme Court of India has ruled out mining in that area.
- The bauxite is to be obtained by evacuating the forest-dwelling Adivasi people and strip mining that will destroy the dense forest. When people of Sterlite Industries came to survey the site for the industry that would process the mined ore, the Adivasi people of the villages objected and drove them away. In retaliation, Sterlite officials lodged false attempt-to-murder charges against them with the police, who are hand-in-glove with the industry officials.
- When the Adivasi refused to move, VR first arranged to forcibly bulldoze their houses. The Adivasi use their axes to fell trees across roads to prevent the men of VR from coming with their machines to the Niyamgiri hills. This was almost ineffectual.
- VR has obtained official permission from the government to mine the bauxite, and has influenced the local and State Government machinery including the police, to act in its favour. When VR first came, its officials, who promised a better way of life with jobs, handsome compensations and roads, schools and hospitals, were welcomed by the innocent adivasi people. Later, when the promises were found to be hollow, the Adivasi objected and resisted, but VR moved in with the help of the State Police, who used threats and force against the Adivasi, also filing false criminal cases against leaders.
- The fate of the Adivasi of Niyamgiri is undecided even as the conflict escalates with growing resistance and militancy and many casualties due to police atrocities, as VR gets the actual fighting done by the State and Central Police. Only time will tell what will be the final outcome of this conflict between the forces of industrialisation and traditional societies.
- The assault of industrialising societies on traditional societies forms a pattern across both time and place with only the people and location names changing.