



M A N Y A M

A NEWSLETTER ON THE EASTERN GHATS

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COMMUNITIES, FORESTS AND CONSERVATION – FIELD STORIES FROM ODISHA’S EASTERN GHATS

The Eastern Ghats has been home to several indigenous tribal communities since eons, who have traditionally followed a largely forest dependent subsistence lifestyle through food gathering, forest produce collection and shifting cultivation. Odisha in particular has a large percentage of such tribal communities, such as the Kondhs and Saoras, spread across the Eastern Ghats which spans the districts of western and southern Odisha. The famous peaks of Odisha, such as Deomali (1672 m), the state's highest peak and Mahendragiri (1480 m), the second highest, have been held sacred by tribal communities such as the Kondhs since times immemorial. However, these mountains are threatened today by the economic growth driven juggernaut of exploitative development. And so are the Kondhs, the Saoras and numerous other tribal communities whose lives and livelihoods are connected intimately with these mountains and forests.

In this issue, we bring you some experiences of people working in the Eastern Ghats of Odisha. They focus on the indigenous communities of the landscape, their changing livelihood practices and their relationship

with the forests and the hills in the larger context of development.

Bijayashree Satpathy, a Research Scholar from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, shares some reflections of the communities living in and around Simlipal Tiger Reserve, located in the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha following their relocation outside the Reserve.

Poorna Balaji, a student from ATREE, recounts her experience of visiting Anajor, a Kondh predominant village in the Rayagada district of Odisha's 'bauxite belt', and highlights the dramatic transformations in religious beliefs and livelihood practices that the Kondhs have experienced.

Finally, Prashant Choudhury, an avid traveler in the region showcases the efforts of various local communities who have been actively engaged in the conservation of species and habitats across various parts of the Eastern Ghats in Odisha.

-Vikram Aditya



The hills and valleys of the Eastern Ghats in southern Odisha's Koraput district (Title bar image and above photo by Vikram Aditya)

A SAGA OF RELOCATION | BIJAYASHREE SATPATHY

“These are all legal drama. We are sandwiched between various policies and politics”, said Telenga, when I asked him about the recent relocation of 35 families from one of the core villages of Similipal. He is a resident of Jamunagarh, a village in the core area of the Similipal Tiger Reserve (STR) located on the northern fringes of the Eastern Ghats, which has been his clan’s home since many generations. While emphasising his rights on his land, he said, “where we are staying now was inhabited by *Mahanta*(s) (a land owning agrarian community of Odisha) once. Our forefathers had worked as agricultural labourers in their fields and that shows we have been settled here for generations.”

Telenga is the president of the Forest Right Committee, which is the village level institution for the implementation of Forest Rights Act. He is also leading the tribal struggle against relocation in STR. He shared his stories of struggles in various regional and national platforms; with the support of local and state level rights-based NGOs. When I asked about his village, he expressed gleefully that they get everything from the forest and they only need to buy tobacco from the market. He continued saying, “We have vast agricultural lands. We are cultivating both *kharif* and *rabi* crops and also *mung* (yellow lentils), *biri* (black lentils), *rasi* (til) and many variety of, vegetables etc. Every household in the village has livestock. We have our sacred grove, where we perform our rituals.” He sadly mentioned that his village does not have any basic amenities. When I asked about his children, he said, “After eighth class our children are not getting any education. Also we don’t have a doctor or a health centre nearby. Villagers have to travel more than 50 km to reach the block headquarter hospital.”

He worriedly narrated an incident that took place a few days before I met him, when a child died because a doctor from the block headquarter

hospital could not reach the village in time. This prompted me to ask him whether he wanted to stay inside the Tiger Reserve in such conditions or wished to relocate? he said, “I cannot leave my motherland. The government should provide us facilities at our place.” He went on assertively, “It has been two decades since I continued my struggle against relocation. I shared my struggle and suffering with lawyers, activists, and journalists. I also shared them with a person from Survival International. I was branded a naxal and jailed for six months. Every now and then I keep getting threats from local officials.” Again he strongly asserted for forest rights, saying, “We got Community Forest Rights titles on our forest resources. And if we go out of this place we don’t know whether we will be allowed to return to our forest land.” I can see the streak of helplessness on his face when he said that despite such collective efforts and wide-ranging support, villagers were, and perhaps will continue to be, relocated.

-Bjayashree Satpathy
Research Scholar
Tata Institute of Social sciences (TISS),
Mumbai
(All image copyrights: author)



Telenga at the center and the author with other villagers of Jamunagarh in Similipal Tiger Reserve, Mayurbhanj district, Odisha

“We have vast agricultural lands... We have our sacred grove, where we perform our rituals.”

THE TULSI PLANT IN A KONDH VILLAGE | POORNA BALAJI

Kushto Majhi, clad in a fading yellow dhoti was sitting on a charpoy at the centre of the village near a tulsi (basil) plant, as I entered Anajor for the first time. Anajor is one of the 400 odd villages in Kashipur Block of Rayagada district and is predominantly occupied by Kondhs and rest by Scheduled Caste communities. This block forms a part of the well-known 'East-coast bauxite belt' that snakes up from Andhra Pradesh to Odisha. Odisha alone has nine bauxite reserves along this belt. I had chosen this village to understand livelihood changes that have taken place due to land lost under compensatory afforestation. This village is also in close proximity to the Alumina refinery and Tikiri town. As Khambu, my trusted field aide, initiated conversation with Kushto Majhi, after initial customary exchanges, I prompted him to ask about the Tulsi plant. While this was my first Kondh village visit, I had ploughed through the 'Forest tribes of Orissa', series to 'understand' every aspect of Kondh life there is, and the presence of this Tulsi plant seemed out of place in my head laden with stereotypes.



The Tulsi plant in Anajor

By now, we were joined by four more men also dressed in similar yellow dhotis. Upon our query, Majhi answered "When I was young people were like animals and birds. Now, we are like human beings, before we had only skin of human but we were not human. Then we found God in the name of Hari-naam. We found Dharma. Before, our Kondha festivals required animal sacrifice - goat, hen, cow, but now we don't kill lives anymore."

This response was not something I remotely expected. But in retrospect, I am not sure why this was of surprise. Felix Padel's book "The Sacrifice of a Human-being: British Rule and the Kondhs of Orissa" develops an anthropological account of the drastic changes to religious beliefs and practices that have happened due to the imposition of British power and authority over this community. The Kondhs used to practice human or 'meriah' sacrifice that is believed to improve the fertility of the Earth. This practice was made illegal and over time human was replaced with buffalo sacrifice, as is still the case amongst the Dongria Kondhs of Niyamgiri. I had expected to come across something similar. But in this village, change seemed to have taken a different turn. Majhi continued "We follow Santatana Dharma, we don't kill lives, we do puja-paat only using flowers, dhoop (incense sticks) and deep (lamps). Earlier one festival was happening every month for which we sacrificed an animal. So how much sin we have been committing by doing this. We were celebrating so many festivals still people were dying from Malaria. Why? That is because we were committing sin by sacrificing animals." He traced this change in religious philosophy back to

22 years. A local government teacher had taught the ways of this Dharma. He had spoken to their various village heads – the Jani (priest), Dishari (medicine man) and Be-juni (shaman) about the 'cruel' ways in which their festivals were conducted. He inculcated in them the idea that animal sacrifice made them like



Kushto Majhi and other villagers at Anajor village, Odisha

animals and this was not the path to eternal peace. The village heads then encouraged the entire village to change their ways. This village is the only vegetarian Kondh villages I visited in Kashipur. Even Kambhu, a Kondh, was unaware of these changed ways of living in Anajor.

This initial introduction to the village set the stage for me to understand their livelihood choices. It came as less of a surprise for me to know that no household had practiced shifting cultivation over the last 20 odd years. The few households (mostly landless) that continued to practice shifting cultivation had also stopped after the compensatory afforestation plantation was set up in 2001. While this was partly due to other livelihood options that came about in the area during the construction of the railway line and refinery, they also believe that settled agriculture with the use of fertilizers is a superior practice to shifting cultivation.

These different elements of change be it livelihoods or religious practices can be viewed as the same process that seamlessly flow into each other. Even while dominant economic and social structures impinge on communities within which they are embedded, many times these changes are also very organic. Unpacking the processes of change in Anajor, brings to my mind the idea of 'Sanskritisation' made popular by M.N. Srinivas.

Anajor's significant disassociation with their traditions can be viewed as a possible attempt to join the mainstream. Even if they continue to speak 'kui' they do not like to remember the way they lived in the past. The first meeting with Kushto Majhi ended with him rushing along with a dolak (drum) to the nearby Hanuman temple for a session of Kirtans (bhajans). The lives of tribal communities in the Eastern Ghats are under constant transformation especially with the presence of several mines. While some communities struggle to keep up traditions and fight for their land rights, some others seem to embrace the changes more willingly; maybe they know there is no other alternative given to them.

- Poorna Balaji
PhD student, ATREE
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COMMUNITIES IN CONSERVATION IN THE EASTERN GHATS OF ODISHA

PUBLICATIONS

| PRASHANT CHOUDHURY

Conserving biological diversity is critical to ensure that natural landscapes, with their array of ecosystems, are maintained, and that species, populations, genes, and the complex interactions between them, persist into the future. The Eastern Ghats of India are endowed with a rich biodiversity. More than 2,600 plant species of angiosperms, gymnosperms and pteridophytes including 160 species of cultivated plants, are reported to occur in the region which also includes 454 endemic species belonging to 243 genera and 78 families. The conservation of biodiversity and sustainable use of the Eastern Ghats of Odisha is certainly the need of the hour.

The role of local communities in conserving biodiversity is very important, and I highlight this from the Eastern Ghats region of Odisha. At Balipadar, Bhetnoi (Ganjam district), local people are protecting blackbuck and have formed a Blackbuck Management Committee. They believe that the presence of blackbuck in the paddy fields brings prosperity, and so they do not kill them. According to an old story, there was a long spell of drought in the locality. During this period, a small group of blackbuck appeared in the area immediately after which the rains arrived.

At Mangalajodi (Khurda district), a wetland at the edge of the Chilika Lake is visited by over 1.5 lakh birds every winter. Traditional bird hunters gave up the practice, and the area, thanks to the effort of local bird protection committee, Sri Mahabir Pakshi Surakshya Samiti, is gradually becoming a paradise for birds. The Chilika Lake is also home to the threatened Irrawaddy dolphin and the Irrawaddy Dolphin Conservation Society has been protecting them. Similarly, people in South Odisha are also involved in conserving medicinal plants and forests in sacred groves.

In Aska (Ganjam district), the Peafowl is being protected by the local communities at Subhachandrapur, Ambuabadi, Kerikerijhola, Bharatapalli, Cheramarai, Sameiguda and Karanauli village of Pakkadi hills, resulting in the rise of peafowl population. Their initiative was recognized and the prestigious Biju Patnaik Award for Wildlife Conservation was conferred on them in 2006. The conservation activities have acted as a motivation for the villagers, who are now interested in creating a center for ecotourism where they can benefit from conservation efforts and can protect the nature they adore in a better way.

Aditya, V., & Ganesh, T. (2016). Camera trap records of Rusty-spotted Cat *Prionailurus rubiginosus* and Leopard Cat *Prionailurus bengalensis* (Mammalia: Carnivora: Felidae) from Papikonda National Park, northern Eastern Ghats, India. *Journal of Threatened Taxa*, 8(5), 8818-8819.

NEWS SNIPPETS

- A National Conference on the Conservation of Eastern Ghats was organized by Utkal University and Council for Green Revolution (CGR) at Bhubaneswar, Odisha from April 16-17th, 2016.
- A marbled map butterfly was reported from Maredumilli area of East Godavari district in Andhra Pradesh. ([The Hindu, 15th July 2016](#)).
- Grooves on a bedrock evidently used for sharpening Neolithic tools (circa 3,000 BCE) were found in Javadi hills, Eastern Ghats in the Thiruvannamali district of Tamil Nadu ([The Hindu, 21st July, 2016](#)).
- A breach occurred in the Polavaram main canal near Pallerlamundi (Krishna district) on August 1st, 2016, in the buffer area of Papikonda NP.

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