

Women and Forest: Changing Gender Relations Among the Kondhs in Odisha

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Abstract

The identity, knowledge systems, production practices and consumption pattern of Kondhs links them with their ecological realities. Their economy is underpinned with the ethos of communitarianism and reciprocity. However, this community is experiencing changes in its way of life due to different external interventions such as market based 'mainstream development', stringent forest policies and unsecured land rights. These changes have particularly affected the rights and status of Kondh women, considering their high dependence on forest for food, fodder and livelihood. This study not only focuses on the changes but also emphasizes the strategies utilized by Kondh women to deal with the changing consequences. It tries to understand if the state forest policies, as claimed, have been able to secure access and rights of the forest to the adivasi women. It is qualitative in nature and uses interview method to grasp the experiences of Kondh women in Rayagada district of Odisha. It concludes that forest policies often neglected women's worldviews, excluding them from making decisions regarding forest management and governance. It highlights the fact that securing community land rights to women is the most sustainable way to safeguard forest biodiversity.

Keywords: Women, forest, gender relations, Odisha.

I. Introduction

The access to forest is critical to the lives of the tribes (also known as adivasis), especially to the adivasi women in the country. As they are often considered as the primary producers of food, they continue to be the central point to the food production system in terms of work they do in the food chain (Shiva, 2010). It has been established that adivasi women particularly enjoy a more of an equal status with men even, if they have less access to cultivable land in case the particular area has a deep forest cover. Since the practice and possibility of foraging is high in these areas, women are economically independent and less dependent on the agricultural produce (Kelkar & Nathan, 1991; Shiva, 2010; Kelkar et al., 2003). Their roles as the custodians of the genetic diversity of food, medicine and other related things were highlighted in the FAO report¹. They are considered to be the source of traditional knowledge which includes crop diversification, insights on medicinal plants, herbs, roots, and tubers and value of biological diversity to the management of a particular resource (Kelkar et al., 2003). Conservation of seeds, growing of food for domestic process, preparing, storing and processing of food, gathering of the forest products, collecting fodder and fuel and providing labour in all the stages of agriculture are the works that are performed by women on a daily basis throughout the country. Thus, considering their high dependence on the forest for food, fodder, and livelihood women has an important stake in the preservation of forest and combating forest degradation.

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¹ Women Feed the World, Retrieved from <http://www.fao.org/docrep/x0262e/x0262e16.htm> on 8 May 2018

Adivasi women throughout history have played a central role in land management and community governance. They have developed their own customary laws, rules and norms for accessing, using, and controlling the resources in a sustainable way. Their traditional system of forest produce takes into account their deep understanding of the preservation of forest indefinitely, as the resources and as a subject of labour (Kelkar & Nathan, 1991). Therefore, from *Khejarali (Bisnoi Movement)* to recent *Niyamgiri movement*, women as individuals or collectively have not only fought for forest conservation but have also demanded their rights towards the access and control over them. They have their ingenious ways of passing down this traditional knowledge to younger generations through mediums like songs, folklores, poetry, legends, music, etc. Forest for them is a way of life. Their cultural, social, institutional, economic and religious activities revolve around the forests. They treat them as a living being rather than a mere economic product. Various studies have acknowledged the symbiotic relationship between adivasi women and forest, thereby highlighting the fact that securing community land rights to women is the most sustainable way to protect the rights of the entire community and safeguarding the forested land as a whole (Jodha, 1995; Nathan et al., 2003; Agarwal, 2010; Shiva, 2010; Kelkar & Krishnaraj, 2013). Despite a wide range of studies, adivasi women's right over these lands and resources, and their voices in the governance of the same are seldom protected or recognised in the national laws or legislations. A recent report of Right and Resource Initiative Report (RRI), 2017 highlighted the fact that statutory laws on the rights of indigenous and rural women to inheritance, community membership and community level governance are consistently falling far below the requirements of international law and related standards (Keene & Ginsburg, 2017). The assetlessness along with other factors such as overexploitation, ecological degradation, commercialization and privatisation has paved the ways to the process of alienation and dispossession of adivasi women from their land and livelihood. This has also resulted in erosion of rights which are enjoyed by women in certain traditional societies which has further deteriorated their status within the family and community as a whole. The independent rights or inheritance can help them in challenging the changes in ideology and emerging structures of patriarchy within the family and social relation. This can also help them in securing a sustainable livelihood option. Thus, understanding gender relation is a crucial factor in the management of land and forest as it points to the invisibility of women. The invisibility which compounds of poverty, shortage of food, fodder, fuel and the greatly increased workloads of the forest based women (Kelkar & Nathan, 1991).

II. Methodological Issues

The paper is qualitative in nature and has particularly focused on adivasi women belonging to the Kondh community in Rayagada district of Odisha. The researcher used the interview method to analyse the experiences of the Kondh women in relation to the changing nature of land and forest, and the strategies they are using to deal with the changing consequences. The fieldwork for this qualitative study was carried out by the author in 2018. This paper has also analysed the secondary literatures and research works done on the subjects of gender and forest. Thematic analysis method has been used to understand the effectiveness of the forest policies in providing autonomy to Kondh women over the access and rights of forest resources. Kondh women are facing a gradual change in their socio-economic and political status as the community is facing a restructuring from the intervention of various states and non-state actors. Kondhs form the largest group among the sixty-two tribes in Odisha, largely concentrated in the areas of Phulbani, Rayagada and Kalahandi districts. Their culture and way of life revolves around the natural environment that they live in. Women in this community are involved in all the forms of agricultural activities such as foraging and timber cutting, shifting cultivation and settled agriculture. There is no definite distinction in the division of labour between men and women in the community. Thus, when the domestic work is taken into account, women in this community perform a substantial family labour and contribute to the family economy. Women have the right to voice their opinions and take decisions in the village affairs in the village council known as *kutumb*. Though the head of the village council called *Nayak* is often a male, elderly women also play important roles in decision making. Especially *bejuni*, the ritualistic head, and *disari*, the healer of the community, are considered as the most respectable women in the community. Women

in this community are able to keep gender relation relatively balanced as compared to other tribal communities in the country regarding the usage of forest resources (Boal, 1997; Padel, 2009).

However, they are gradually experiencing changes in their culture and gender relation within their community. There are various reasons which have contributed towards this such as imposition of 'mainstream development' in forest management which have restricted women's space and exalted in the domestication of labour, widespread imposition of colonial education through missionaries and other religious outfit and later by public and 'secular' schooling, devaluation and neglect of traditional insights that women possess relating to the maintenance of biological diversity to the management of particular resources, and their lack of property rights. This study along with emphasising the aforementioned issue has also tried to analyse the implications of the forest policy on gender equality. Despite various commitments to gender equality by the state, women have been denied just entitlement to a secured life and productive livelihood. The policies, programmes or projects formulated for the tribal communities have often neglected their world views, nearly excluding women from decision making with local institutions for forest management and governance turning them into "women insensitive policies." This paper is descriptive in nature and is based on the understanding that the traditional knowledge of the women in the Kondh community is grounded in ecological principles like sustaining life of crops and the soil, recycling nutrients, sustaining biodiversity and conserving energy.

III. Intervention of Colonial State and Changes in the Forest Relation

Change in the women's role and status in relation to the forest management and governance accelerated after the advent of the colonial rule in the country. Though the tribal communities had already experienced the centralisation of forest during the earlier rules of kings and dynasties, the European foresters simply introduced further restrictions on their use of forest (Kelkar et al., 2003). The restrictions were put mainly in two ways, firstly, through passing of stringent forest laws and legislations and secondly, through the negation of their traditional knowledge and pushing them towards the modernization process. Thus, with respect to changes in the access of forest, there were changes seen in their livelihood options, decline in their traditional way of cultivation and also transformation in the social and institutional arrangements in the communities. The colonial state treated Kondhs as 'savages' and their culture as 'barbaric' (Padel, 2009). Their 'civilizing' mission aimed at exploitation, transformation, and commodification of the nature and setting up efficient governmental control on forest which gradually denied the local population their free access to the natural resources for their own benefit (Pouchepadass, 1995; Gadgil & Guha, 1992). Adequate supply of timber, tree felling and expansion became primary aims of the British. Large tracts of forest were also destroyed to build the railway networks. Thus, the destruction of the forest was a common feature of the colonial conquest. Land utilization through the application of the settled agriculture was considered as a revenue earner and for that forest seemed an obstruction and a bar to the prosperity of the empire (Gadgil & Guha, 1992). Thus, the most affected was the population which practised the shifting cultivation. Most of the practices related to the shifting cultivation such as fishing, gathering and hunting were also prohibited (Whitehead, 2010). Shifting cultivation was considered as the primitive and unscientific form of the agricultural practices. Mostly this form of agriculture was practiced under the principle of communal ownership of land but it was not legally recognised by the British rule (Munshi, 2012). With the passing of the Indian Forest Act, 1865 the customary use of the forest was considered as a privilege to the people rather than their right (Munshi, 2012; Gadgil & Guha, 1992). The opening up of interior parts of the different regions through building up of railway tracts, introduction of the new monetary system, increased trade and business, amendment of new laws and legislations, and codification of the customary rights and practices became the characteristic features of the modern Indian state built by the British (Gadgil & Guha, 1992). The establishment of the state control over the natural resources was meant to 'civilize', 'develop', and 'improve' the knowledge and life style of the communities. With the centralisation of the forest, women lost their important source of power. Their knowledge of forest flora, fauna, roots, etc., and their ritualistic connections with nature were neglected. While women continued to use forests after centralization, they often had to do it

clandestinely and in short visits (Kelkar et al., 2003) as the access to forest became a criminal offence under the colonial state. Along with that the practice of mono-cropping and plantation, women's control over the forest resources was further limited (Kelkar et al., 2003).

IV. Influence of the Religious Outfits and Modern 'Secular' Education

Colonial education was another major agency of change in their cultural system and gender relation. This was spread mostly through the missionaries or other religious schooling systems. Missionaries began their work through the conversion of the *meriah*² children taken from the Kondh villages (Boal, 1997; Padel, 2009). After 1950s, the conversion of the Kondhs became apparent as the missionaries no longer identified with the government and it offered a defence against the Hindu exploitation (Boal, 1997). Missionaries during the colonial period brought a cultural change which influenced the way of life of the Kondh women. For instance, women in this community used to wear heavy ornaments made up of beads and hand woven cloth of a distinctive and colourful design. However, the traditional way of dressing was considered as uncultured by the missionaries and they are, till today, on the mission to civilise these women. A Kondh woman from Tada village in Rayagada while talking about the church emphasised,

"The nurses who came to distribute medicines taught us how to wear blouses. They provided us with sarees. Earlier we used to wear nothing. They told us how unclean we were. We have now started keeping our houses and ourselves clean."

After independence the Christian missionaries and other Hindu religious outfits created a sense of shame within the women of the villages. The changes were eventually witnessed in the cultural life of this community. Alongside worshipping the nature, certain families have also started worshipping Hindu deities and celebrating Hindu festivals. These religious outfits often neglect the decisions of the ritualistic heads or the *bejuni* and the healer or *disari* in the village. They disregarded their knowledge terming it as unscientific, superstitious or sorcery. Their direct point of contact remained the head of the village or the *nayak* who is often a male member of the society. Schools set up by the missionaries or even *ashram* schools set up by the government channelled women into domesticity denying their past roles in economic and political lives (Kelkar et al., 2003). The modern schooling system has eroded the ideological basis and created a social base fostering patriarchal values in the community. It has altered the values of the forest and land among the younger generations. During a focus group discussion conducted in Tada village in Bissamcuttack block of Rayagada district, mothers of the village particularly emphasised the changing dietary preferences of their children who study in schools (ashram schools, missionaries or government hostels) from traditional food comprising of millets to rice and wheat. In the name of creating a civilised culture, modern and secular education has ignored and systematically destroyed the indigenous way of knowing, undermined the decision making authority of women and suppressed their language, rituals and culture. This has also led to a gradual emergence of male power and development of the gender hierarchy among the Kondhs, who had an egalitarian society. Thus missionaries, modern schools and other religious outfits often created 'others' for them with women becoming illiterates, savages and uncultured (Kelkar et al., 2003).

V. Change in Traditional Agricultural Practices

Kondhs usually raise their farms on lower hill slopes where they grow around 50-100 varieties of crops consisting of rice, millets, sorghum, tubers, pulses, legumes and leaves. According to them, *dongar* (hill) is influenced by the culture of forest. Forest provides them with everything including seed for the next year. In case a single crop fails they have another crop to depend upon. The sowing and harvesting periods start from April to August and from October to February respectively. During the dry season when there is no cultivation, in addition to the

² Meriah: the name given to the victims of sacrifice on the Kondh tract in Odisha, where young children were sacrificed to the earth goddess.

already harvested crops, they are depended on the forest or the uncultivated food such as mango, pineapple tamarinds, yams etc. It is during this period they celebrate what is called as the *bijun parab* or seed festival. Conservation of the traditional seeds is mostly done by the women and is often considered as a hard working process. Women in the villages have to save these seeds over all these months and seasons safeguarding them from unwanted moisture, insects and animals. They have their own techniques whether grinding the *haldi* (turmeric) and mixing it in the bags of the seeds or covering the basket with the layers of the cow dung which acts as a disinfectant. However, if any of the families was unable to save those seeds, the community as a whole contribute certain amount of seeds to that family in return of their labour or harvest. Nonetheless, the whole village has to celebrate and participate in the *parab* under the guidance of the *bejuni*. The *bejuni* of the Darukona village in Bissamcuttack said,

“People gather around in a common place in the morning, collect all their seeds starting from kangu (millet) to dali (pulses) in their respective leaf plates. We worship the earth and sacrifice a chicken in the hope for a better harvest. We dance and sing throughout the day. We assure our devata (mother earth) that we will take good care of our seeds as we have always done.”

The festival is celebrated before the process of clearing of the land and sowing of the seeds starts in the field. An elderly woman from Tada village while speaking about *podu* (shifting cultivation) *chaas* said,

“We do this before the rain comes because once it arrives everyone will have some seeds to sow in the mountains. We will go to top into the mountains, clear i, and throw the seeds there. And once the rain arrives it will start to grow.”

The relationship between the producers and the product does not end with the distribution process. It continues into the next cycle as both the seeds and means of subsistence have to be made available from one cycle to the next (Kelkar & Nathan, 1991). The traditional cropping pattern helps the crops to resist the extreme heat conditions or untimely rain. The sowing of crops takes into account the availability of water, sunlight and the speed of the water flows to check the process of denudation. While asking about how they protect the crops from insects or pests, a woman farmer from Darukona village said,

“We never stop the insects or pests. If they come, ants or flies will eat them. And the ants and flies are eaten up by the birds in the dongar. Sometimes we have to remain alert of the small pigs or mouse during the harvest period. But we do not use any chemicals on the crops.”

The natural system of chain works because the farmers do not use any kind of chemicals or pesticides on the crops. Thus, for a Kondh, agriculture is not about increasing the produce or making profit out of it, rather it is a way to co-exist with the nature. The main motive is not to harm nature, rather to sustain the soil, the ecosystem, and make food available to other co-existing species. Production of staple food such as millets like finger millet, pearl millet and sorghum suggest that the crops predominantly grown by the community are climate-smart, drought and heat resistant crops. Even the paddy varieties grown in the upland require less water and are harvested within 90 days of sowing. Thus, there is less chance that the crop will meet failure in adverse climatic conditions.

Recent studies have emphasised the fact that the forest not only provides them with nutritious food but also helps them to fight against the climate vagaries and attending certain amount of food security and sustainability (Mahapatra, 2017). A study conducted particularly on the food systems of the Kondh tribe found that household consuming about 20 percent of their food from forest have no sign of malnutrition (Deb, 2017). Forest is a critical storehouse of nutritious and undomesticated forest foods. Women in these villages often collect varieties of *saag* (spinaches), mushrooms or tubers enriched with vitamins, minerals and proteins from the forest which are considered as inedible by the mainstream population. As women in the community are

involved in collecting and gathering of these forest resources, they therefore are the provider of food and nutritional security to their family and community as a whole. However, with the introduction of timber, eucalyptus and other commercial plantations, promotion of commercial and hybrid agriculture, and gradual decrease in the forest land has changed the relation and status of the women within the community. Their traditional knowledge on the natural systems comprising of the knowledge of the local bio-diversity is being ignored and replaced by 'scientific' and 'systematic' knowledge. Women in the villages are taking up daily wage works as the forest area for cultivation is decreasing. Their dependence on the cash and markets for food products is gradually increasing as the availability of forest food is decreasing. The principles of sustainability and subsistence followed by women in the traditional agriculture are systematically being replaced by the principles of short cash and profit making. Along with that the change of the communal land ownership to settled agriculture and the lack of property owned by women have been initiated with this process.

VI. Government Policies and Programmes and their Impact on Tribal Lives

The Forest Rights Act (FRA) became the most progressive forest legislation in the country. It was for the first time that the state accepted its injustices done upon the tribes of this country and sought to restore their rights over the forest, land and management and governance of the forest. However, even after more than a decade of its enactment, the problems related to its conceptualisation and implementation are faced. In the recent CAG of India report titled *General and Social Sector*, Odisha emphasised on the fact that the state government's report on the distribution of the land rights mismatched the actual distribution of titles and the implementation of the FRA (CAG, 2017). The implementation of the FRA in the state has ignored the communal rights of the tribes over the forest land. Tribal communities like Kondhs often follow a clan based land tenure system which gives them the customary rights on land, trees, forest, etc. They consider land as the communal property. The government has systematically denied community claims of the tribes in various parts of the state. This has created a sense of fear among the tribal communities which think that the government might divert these lands for plantation or other projects if they do not get their right over their community forest. Further, FRA does not speak about women's inheritance to land in particular. This makes women's rights to forest vulnerable. The development of the sense of individual property through recognition of the individual rights alone is gradually destroying the residual land rights of women in the adivasi communities.

Land as the private property of the men (whether held by them communally or individually) is an important factor in development of the overall control of the men on the resources (Kelkar & Nathan, 1991). As mentioned above, even though there is no definite division of labour between men and women in the Kondh community, the non-owning status of the women (meaning patrilineality) along with patrilocality ensures that women are the non-owning producers. Today the Kondhs are facing a clear trend towards destruction of women's rights in property, cultural degradation, and route towards the establishment of patriarchy when the concept of private property is being established by the state. Often the forest and land policies such as FRA implemented by the state, despite its commitment towards gender equality, deny women their just entitlements towards empowerment and in fact get overruled by the socio-cultural norms that are tilted towards men. The recent government forest plans and projects such as the proposed Draft National Forest Policy, 2018 and Compensatory Afforestation Fund (CAF) Act, 2016 are facing backlashes from the tribal activists and rights organizations because of their inconsistency with the spirit of FRA.

The vision of the National Forest Policy, 2018 to increase the forest cover of the country from 25 percent to 30 percent through scientific management for the commercially important species is in conflict with the acknowledgment of the traditional and indigenous knowledge of the tribal communities by the state in the governance and management of the forest. Similarly, through the implementation of the CAF Act, 2016 the forest bureaucracy has been trusted with a huge fund of more than Rs. 50,000 crore for the plantation in the community forest land which required

neither the tribes or the gram sabha's consent (Sahu, 2018). The emphasis on the plantation of exotic trees like eucalyptus and other commercially profitable trees is not only degrading the forest diversity but also decreasing the livelihood options and food availability for the tribes. Change in forest diversity affects women's status as producer, collector and protector of the forest. Kondh women share a sharp understanding of their changing society, culture and their natural environment. They find the conceptualization and implementation of different schemes and developmental plans have been at odds with their way of life. They have been trying to resist these changes in their own ways. One of the mothers from *Darukona* village in Bissamcuttack block of Rayagada stated,

"We have been organising food festivals in Bhubaneswar for two years. We collect the seeds, fruits, leaves, millets and other crops from our village and tell people about their medicinal value and other utilization. We also share information with other villages. This way we are trying to recover our lost seeds as well. When children come on holidays, we make sure that they go with us to the hills and learn about our agriculture. They should at least know about crops or else how will they feed themselves?"

While talking about the eucalyptus plantation and control of the forest guards, another mother said,

"We took the pledge in the village that we will not let these Telugu people enter our village and take away our land. The person who did not listen to us was ostracised from the village until he came back and asked for forgiveness. The moment we planted cotton and eucalyptus, water from the mountains stopped flowing. This year we could not cultivate much crop in our land (settled agriculture) because of less water. Eucalyptus does not give us fodder or food. We have stopped leasing out our land."

In the policies launched by the state, whether it is FRA or National Forest Policy, 2018 women's rights to forest and land have always been ignored. The conceptual inability of the economists, scientists and the researchers to define women's contribution in the agricultural sector is known. As women do not have land titles, they are not counted as farmers and hence are left out from the government financial assistance schemes (Mahapatra, 2017). With youths and male members migrating to other states as low wage (mainly semi-bonded) labourers, the phenomenon of feminization of agriculture is evident. Women's access and control over land and forest resources will not only help them in acquiring power to pursue productive and sustainable livelihood but can also change the ideology and structures of patriarchy within the household and community at large. The larger state policies have ignored cultural values, women's role in management of biodiversity and their importance in a tribal household (Bose, 2018). Women, particularly in the Kondh community in this district, are exploring ways to control their own food and seed system and for that they are demanding their rights under FRA. Thus, it is important for the policy makers to understand that discussion on social and gender inclusion is the most important way to save our forest and the communities which are dependent on them.

VII. Conclusion

One of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to "*achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*" which recognises the fundamental role of women in achieving poverty reduction, food security and nutrition. One of the targets set under this goal is to undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as ownership and control over land and other natural resources, in accordance with national laws. In rural communities, access and ownership of women over land has been one of the many ways through which they can guarantee their economic security, reduce their dependence on their male counterparts, increase their bargaining powers within the communities and outside and avail government services without any hindrance. While countries like Bolivia has enacted legislation considering land and forest as living beings and their rights to be protected from exploitation, India is still contemplating on the implementation of FRA. Not recognising community rights in FRA has further created a gap

between the legislation and women's rights over forest resources. Kondh women are now demanding settlement of their land and forest rights from the state. They have realised that rights over land can only help them to protect their forest and for them to lead a dignified and sustainable life. They are finding out ways to put forward and negotiate their needs and demands with the state and non-state actors involved in their 'development'. For the indigenous communities like Kondhs, women are the food producers who manage their customary land and forest. Therefore, recognising their rights will not only help in the survival of the community but the forest as well.

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