

## Sorrows Of Kondh

### Lanjigarh(Kalahandi)

They live in the infamous hunger zone of the country. But none of them have ever died of starvation. The reason: the Niyamgiri hills range that form part of the Eastern Ghat Range of Hills, is the source of survival for thousands tribes living in Kalahandi, Koraput and Rayagada districts of Orissa. Interestingly, 94 per cent of the population fights for survival keeping themselves below the poverty lines (BPL). But they do not starve like their brothers in other parts of the Orissa's Kalahandi and Balangir districts.

They belong to the Dongaria and Kutia Kondh tribes those come under the primitive tribal group (PTG). They live like kings and virtually lead the life of free human beings, much away from the bustling urban life. But the tribes have, of late, expressed worries over the recent development after the Orissa Mining Corporation (OMC), a state owned PSU signed an agreement with Vedanta Alumina Limited (VAL) for extraction, exploration and exploitation of bauxite ore from the top of the Niyamgiri hills that comes under Lanjigarh mines area in Kalahandi district. The private company has been eyeing on the 73 million tones of bauxite deposit for its proposed alumina plant which has come up at Lanjigarh.

With government going ahead with the VAL, the local adivasis have taken up agitation mode to protect the Niyamgiri Hills to which they consider as "Niyam Penu" (Niyam God). The tribals have come closer to save their "God" which is facing wrath of the company. "Niyamgiri is not only a hill range, it is our soul," says Dundhu Majhi of Danga Mati village adding that people of nearly 60 village depend on the hill range for their existence. Not only that the people get minor forest produces (MFP) from the hill range, they get food, water, shelter, medicine and above all an healthy climate to live in.

Panda Maji of Lakhpadar village discloses the secret of "no starvation deaths" in the locality. "The people who do not get food to eat, depend on the juice of Sago Palm tree, locally called 'salapa' which are abundant in the hill range," he pointed out adding that Niyamgiri apparently sets lifestyle of the people living in and around it.

Niyam Giri, the very nomenclature originates from the rules set for leading life on this hill range. Niyam means rule and Giri means hills. Therefore, Majhi says, this hill controls the life and living of every

individual living in the area. They believe that any kind of misdeed on the area would be punished by the "Danger Penu." That is the reason for which people behave according to the rules set since ages. They consider themselves as the descendants of the Niyam God. The social status of a Kondh family is known from the amount of land it possesses in the hill range.

According to an official survey, nearly 46 per cent of a Kondh family's income comes from the forests. Niyamgiri Surakshya Samiti(NSS) President Daisingh Majhi, however, argues that more than 60 per cent of income instead is generated from the forests. This is because, Majhi explains, the government survey did not include shifting cultivation carried out by tribes on hill slopes. "Had there been no Niyamgiri hills, we would not been able to survive. It is everything for us," he claims.

The tribals undertake different types of shifting cultivation suitable to the local climate on hill slopes. While most of the tribal farmers undertake rabi crops, some earn their livelihood by doing horticulture. Pine apple, orange, jack fruits, mango, banana, turmeric, ginger and others are sold in the local weekly markets of Dahikhal, Muniguda, Ambadola, Biswanathpur and Lanjigarh. Other minor forest produces like Siali leaves, amla and honey etc. add to the economy of the local tribes.

The survey further pointed out that a Dangoria Kondh earns only Rs 2633 per annum which is much below the state's average per capita income in Orissa. As a result of which, they face poverty in many forms. Per capita spending is only Rs 1354 as per the recent baseline survey done by the Kutia Kondh Development Agency (KKDA). Spending money on health is a day dream for the tribes here. Locally available medicinal herbs virtually cater health service to the people in at least 60 villages. Dundu Majhi pointed out that one has to spend at least Rs 6,000 to recover from the snake bite. "But for the people here juice of Naga Bela plant is enough to combat snake bite," he says adding that this plant is largely found in this hill range. Similarly, the people get herbal plants for skin diseases, pregnancy troubles and other ailments

The local people vehemently opposed to the criticism that they cause damage to the forest by cutting trees. Majhi says, the tribes for all practical purpose use trees and never take more than their basic requirement. One can find at best two wooden cots in a family. "They would have been fabulous, if the tribes start timber businesses," he pointed out adding that the people here do not have a bank account to hide their wealth. They are as open as the sky is. According to a KKDA

survey per household asset is not beyond Rs. 50,000. Niyamgiri hill range houses a many as 7952 Dongaria Kondh and 2442 Kutia Kondh in their hamlets scattered in hill slopes. However, there has been steady decline in the population of these two PTGs.

The plights of the tribes have been echoed in the Orissa Assembly several times. Dr Debasish Patnaik, a Congress MLA, in a memorandum to the President of India, Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam has pointed out that socio-economic and cultural character of the Dongaria Koandhs living in Niyamgiri hill range, is in danger. This is because the people's socio-economic and cultural ethos revolves round the Niyamgiri hills. "Once the hill range is handed over to the private company for mining, the locals would lose their identity forever," Dr Patnaik said. As the successive governments have ignored their genuine grievances, the adivasis are uniting to raise their voice of revolt in different forms, according to Kumuti Majhi, Convenor of NSS

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