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They Beat Vedanta, Now Odisha's Tribals Are Winning Back Their Wild Harvests

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Judicious use of wild uncultivated foods and revival of indigenous crops are helping the Dongria Kondh tribe of Niyamgiri to boost food security beyond their successful campaign

against mining giant Vedanta. Abhijit Mohanty takes a closer look.

The Dongria Kondhs of Odisha, one of India's vulnerable tribal groups, have been living in the foothills of Niyamgiri for centuries.

Niyamgiri is their supreme God and they call the hills Niyam Raja. The range of hills run across Rayagada and Kalahandi districts and are one of the most important biodiversity hotspots in the Eastern Ghats of India.

The region has witnessed a history of struggle—the Dongria communities have fought to protect Niyamgiri from Vedanta Resources, a London-based company that was awarded a contract to mine bauxite from the area.

From the very beginning, the Dongrias vehemently resisted the proposal as Niyamgiri is their source of livelihood. Thanks to the support and solidarity from community-based organisations, civil societies and international agencies, the Supreme Court of India passed a

historic verdict in favour of the Dongrias, disallowing Vedanta's mining project.

While the Dongrias' resistance against mining got wide public attention, the other problems they have faced over time have gone unnoticed.

Traditional crops which ensured nutritional security such as millets, pulses and tubers and uncultivated foods are on the verge of extinction. There has been an influx of hybrid crops and chemical inputs to these areas.

The Dongrias' once self-sufficient agricultural system has also been affected by the introduction of commercially high-yielding paddy. Such varieties have resulted in the loss of numerous landraces with important traits and with the rapid disappearance of indigenous varieties, the community has become dependent on commercial seed suppliers.

Landraces and uncultivated food systems are being revived to ensure food and nutritional security of the Dongrias.

Reviving indigenous crops

Susanta Dalai, a development professional, encouraged the community to revive indigenous crops to ensure their food sovereignty.

As part of this process, open village days were organised to provide a platform to discuss and share knowledge and raise awareness about crop diversity, preservation and multiplication of endangered seed varieties. Farmers from neighbouring villages were invited to observe demonstration plots.

The emphasis was on in-situ conservation of landraces.

The communities were sensitised about preserving and cultivating landraces in their fields which would lead to a continuous use of indigenous crops and subsequently to crop improvement and crop diversity.

According to Ghana Majhi, a Dongria farmer of Sindhbahal village, his family would grow 12 varieties of millets.

Farmers like Ghana were encouraged to revive mixed-cropping and inter-cropping of pulses besides using other millet varieties etc. “Pulses and millets need less maintenance but produce higher yields. We don’t need bio-fortified GM crops like golden rice when we have naturally bio-fortified crops such as pulses and millets,” said Susanta Dalai.

“We usually reserve a part of the harvest as seed bases for the next season. We also exchange varieties of seeds with neighbouring farmers,” Raibari Sisaka informed VillageSquare.in. Thus farmers produce grains and seeds while maintaining landraces that are suited to the local conditions. Eight years after starting their conservation efforts, the Dongrias have revived many indigenous crops.

Security derived from uncultivated foods

Many wild plant species serve as important nutritional sources. Dalai is working on promoting conservation and rational use of wild food plants which were once found abundantly in the region.

Throughout Niyamgiri, uncultivated plants provide a vital source of livelihood for the Dongrias. “Uncultivated plants have multi-functional roles which add diversity to the local food system, reinforce local culture and contribute towards diversity to farming systems,” said Susanta Dalai.

For instance, the leaves of the Mahua tree provide fodder while the flowers are used to make jaggery, liquor or porridge. The fruits are cooked and consumed as a vegetable dish. The seed is crushed to yield cooking oil and the residual cake is a valuable manure for farm crops.

Over the years, due to unrestrained logging, the forest cover has been decreasing at an alarming rate. After a series of awareness campaigns on

forest protection in several Dongria villages, the Dongrias now play a key role in protecting the forest from the timber mafia and poachers.

There was a special focus on sensitising women as they possess knowledge and experience in harvesting forest produce. In addition to this, systematic documentation of uncultivated plants has been taken up to monitor extinction of important species.

Safety net

“It has also been observed that uncultivated food acts as a vital safety net against the increasing trend of crop failure caused by climate change, erratic rainfall, and ecological degradation, including groundwater depletion, degraded soil and decimated biodiversity,” said Susanta Dalai.

Tubers play a crucial role especially in the lean season when availability of food at home is insufficient. Tubers of certain species are used

to make curry, while some are boiled. Some others are cut, dried and made into flour.

Varieties of leaves are collected in different seasons, cooked and eaten along with boiled rice. Plant species such as chakor are sun-dried and preserved for use in the off-season.

Way forward

Increasing farmers' access to a wide variety of traditional seeds and planting materials will help them in becoming more resilient to the ever-increasing climatic hazards.

Additionally, uncultivated wild foods form a major source of food security for the people in Niyamgiri. Yet these are largely neglected in food programs and policies. There is an urgent need to document and develop an inventory of important plant species.

“Policies on climate change, conservation, food security and agriculture need to be integrated to recognise and preserve the importance of uncultivated food,” said Susanta Dalai.

Farmers have a critical understanding of traditional local varieties and their manifold uses honed through generations of farming. The importance of this knowledge and know-how should not be overlooked while developing agricultural policies and schemes.

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