



*"We pledge to protect you,
Mother Forest!"*

A pictorial-narrative report on the Niyamgiri Kondh adivasi gathering near
Muniguda, Odisha, March 17-19, 2015.





Introduction

The rumble and roar of trains, trucks and trailers shattered the fragile peace of the beautiful hilly, forested landscape. They passed every half hour or so, more frequently in the day, less at night – a grim, nagging reminder of the menacing scramble to extract the mineral and coal resources of the region. It did not seem to matter if the forests had to be mowed down. Nor that a great ancient civilization with a fabulously rich bio-cultural heritage – incalculably precious to present and future generations – was being throttled to death.

The assembled forest dwelling/dependent folk had gathered from villages far and near. They had met before - many times. A year earlier, in February 2014, they had organized an ‘Adivasi Foods Festival’ which had brought together 600 adivasis or indigenous people (80% women) from 200 villages of eastern and central India – to celebrate the rich diversity of their traditional foods. More than 1500 food varieties – cultivated and uncultivated – were displayed, including 900 uncultivated forest foods, both raw and cooked for sampling. But now, the present gathering, facilitated by Living Farms, was specifically intended as a dialogue among the community elders and the youth – on the challenges before them, and what they needed to do.

India, at its roots, is a forest civilization, blessed with an abundance of Nature’s gifts. We sadly forget that the forests regenerate and revitalize our life-sustaining environment, essential for the well-being of all. But to the adivasis, their Mother Forest is inseparably linked with an umbilical cord – a deep biological, emotional, cultural and spiritual bond, based on caring and sharing. Today, if there are any people left on this earth who can teach our floundering ‘millennium generation’, the fine art and science of co-existing in harmony with the forests, it is these adivasis. We need to listen deeply to their anguished voices of sanity. They speak for all, not just themselves.

March 17, 2015

The meeting began with a customary, simple *pooja* to *Dharti Ma*. An elder cracked open a coconut on a rock, sprinkled its water around as an offering to Mother Earth, and lit some *agarbattis*, or incense sticks.

When the people settled on the floor in a round circle under the shade of a *shamiana*, Jagannath Majhi began, going straight to the burning question of their lives – “How can the adivasi *samaj* (society) survive? Speak out from your heart, your innermost thoughts; and all join in!” he beseeched the assembled gathering of almost a hundred.

Duduka, an adivasi woman sang:



*I am your daughter.
You are my mother.
I cannot live without you.
Nor you without me.
In your lap, I laugh.
Your face fills my heart.
Without you, Mother Forest,
I am an orphan!”*



Jagannath continued, “The Government plans to ‘develop’ us adivasis, but do they ever ask us what we need or want? The forested hills are like a mother to us. They are deeply linked with our very life; they define our adivasi identity. They provide us food and meet

all our needs. Our cultural and religious rituals revolve around the forest. And shall we feed poison to our mother?"

Lokenath Naori spoke up. "Those who destroy our rich forests, give us cheap PDS rice. They rob us and then give us alms, calling it 'development'. We don't want such 'development'. We get many foods and medicinal plants from the forest, and also grow our own crops to meet all our needs. The government 'welfare' may seem superficially good, but it is rotten at the core!"

Abhi from Kondhaguda village responded, "But our own youth are losing their roots. They are neither here nor there. Abandoning their parents, they go to the towns and cities to earn money. But they bring no money, only a mobile! They know nothing of the wealth of Niyamgiri and our rich adivasi knowledge and culture. In our young days, we were strong, carrying heavy loads, walking for hours without feeling thirst. But now our own sons have grown weak, and cannot work hard. If it continues this way, our future is bleak. Only we ourselves - adivasis - and none else can save our Mother Forest, our Mother Earth."

Chitrawadaka, from village Munda spilled his heart. "We are called poor because we have no money. But we lack nothing that we need. When I was young, my parents passed away. Mother Forest was a constant companion, providing everything I needed - clean water, food ... fruits, greens, kanda-mool (tuber roots), fish...The life was good!"

"In 2005, the Forest Department introduced mono-culture plantations of teak. We asked - what will we get to eat? When the survey people came with their tapes and instruments, we resisted. With much struggle, we managed to save our forest... Our youngsters should know all this. They should realize that even without money, we have everything we need. There is no reason to run after money, which quickly disappears on useless things - like mobiles and bazaari daru (commercial liquor)! In our villages, all are looked after without discrimination, and we work together for everything we need."

Pradip Prabhu, a tribal and forest rights activist from western Maharashtra, then narrated the story of 2 young adivasis walking in the forest, discussing - what is *vikaas*, or development? An elder joined them and asked, "What is it you that your innermost self wants in life? Answer with caution, for your dream may come true!"

"Really?" replied one. 'Oh, I would love to have 3 full meals a day, live in air-conditioned comfort, and drive around in a car, like the rich contractors and traders we see these days.'

"Sure enough," continued Pradip, "the dream (or nightmare) came true -- all the 3 wishes. The young adivasi died and was reborn a dog in a rich city household!" An outburst of laughter greeted the totally unexpected conclusion of the story. "So consider carefully," said Pradip, "do we want to be a *jungle-ka-sheer* (forest tiger), or a *bazaari-kutta* (market dog)?"

An adivasi elder rose, grey haired but erect,



his eyes glowing, voice firm: “We have intelligence, we have knowledge, and we possess a strong will. We have managed to save our forests from the Forest Department till now, and we refuse to become the pet-dogs of anyone. We shall remain as free masters of our own destiny.”

“As far back as 1840,” related Pradip, “the British tried to seize control of the Dongria hills. They tried for a full 50 years, until 1890. Some of you perhaps know this story of guns versus bows and arrows. The firmly united Dongrias prevailed. They saved their forests. And now, history is repeating itself.”



An adivasi woman raised her hand. “I greatly like your story of the market dog. As for me, I have very happy memories of my young days. How caringly our parents raised us. Mother Forest too looks after us like her own children. I say, we should not sign anything. The forests and hills are ours, and must remain ours.”

The people then asked Dr Ritu Priya, a doctor and professor of community health and preventive medicine at JNU, to share her thoughts. She said, “The PDS is a trap to weaken the adivasi *samaj* (community)! The few cheap grains the government provides, offer only imbalanced nutrition, and are often lacking in quality. By weakening the body, they create a dependence on doctors. By doling out alms, they also weaken the will to work with independence and dignity. And by enticing the youth to go to towns and cities for petty jobs that earn little, they weaken the adivasi unity.

Even if some paltry money is made as unskilled migrant labour, it evaporates in liquor addiction or medical expenses to treat new illnesses. By falling into such trap, the adivasis lose in every way!”



Following a two-hour break for lunch and a little rest, the people reassembled in the *shamiana*. Breaking up into smaller groups – to facilitate greater participation of all – they took up for discussion the question: What kind of *samaj* or society do the adivasis want? After almost 2 hours of animated discussion, one or two people from each group presented in turn a summary report of their deliberations.

Group 1 (men) : “We shall protect our independence and self reliance for our food needs. Besides what we collect from our forests, we want to cultivate our own diverse organic, poison free crops from our own traditional seeds. We want to live together as a community, and not be fragmented. We know what trees we must preserve, and what we can cut. Our environment – air, water and forests – are sacred to us. They must remain pure and unpolluted with toxic chemicals. We will keep the business companies and

traders out of our forests, hills and villages!”

Group 2 (youth) : “Ours is an age-old tradition, which we must keep alive. It is alright to consume our own home-made mahua liquor on special occasions. But the liquor from Bihari bhattis not only damages our health, but also drains our wealth... We will continue our tradition of consulting our *Jani* (wise elder), *Bejuni* (senior priestess), *Disari* (medicine man, guide), and *Nayak* (messenger). Our decisions will be reached through consensus after discussion.

“Regular school education is unrelated to our life, culture and our own knowledge and wisdom of the forest. Such alien education harms us. It has led to outward migration of youth from our villages to urban areas. Some do not come back, or come back with diseases. This trend needs to be checked.

“We want to grow organic crops from our age-old seeds. Our traditional way of mixed farming grew 40 to 50 crops together to meet all our needs. We reject monoculture farming with poisonous chemicals and modern hybrid/GMO seeds like Bt cotton. We will also continue to oppose monoculture plantations like eucalyptus, teak or jatropha in our forests.

“We value our earth related festivals and celebrations. We don’t want any new festivals or outside religions and priests. Modern style marriages with loud speakers blaring filmi/ Bollywood songs are an un-needed pollution.



Group 3 (women) : “First and foremost, we want to live in peace with our forests unharmed. But how? If we are a strong collective united force, we believe this is possible. Greed for money is a big danger. We will pass on our thoughts, values and knowledge to our daughters. We will teach them to preserve our ancient seeds handed down by our fore-mothers.

These are strong and suited to our land. That is why they are used in our religious and

cultural rituals, but not hybrids.

“In our way of community living, we share all our joys and sorrows. This is good life for us! Parents don’t have to worry about their daughter’s marriage, which is a collective responsibility. We care deeply for the happiness of our sons and daughters. The scattering of our *kutumba* (family) pains us.



“We should be able to recognize and confront the sweet-talking conmen/traders who visit our villages. We need to ask them: ‘What do you want to give us or take from us? We have everything we need.’ The outsiders usually want to sell us chemicals and seeds on credit. Some of them cut our forest trees and try to put the blame on us. We must also close the *bihari* (outsider) *daru-bhattis* (commercial liquor dens) which ruin our lives, draining our money for inferior quality liquor.

“The politicians too play their tricks, trying to divide us into groups. They make these small self-help groups which then create conflict and competition among us. We don’t want the government PDS, but prefer our good old traditional foods – our *mandua* porridge and our forest foods. We also know that some of the politicians want to uproot and scatter us. But we will steadfastly resist them.”

A common refrain of all the groups was: “We have to save our forests – to save our future!”

At the end of the group presentations, Pradip asked: “How will you inform these resolute decisions of yours to the rest of the people in your villages, and to the outsiders who visit you with ulterior motives? Perhaps you need to list the important decisions that all agree upon, and announce them on a notice board put up at the entrance of each village.”

March 18, 2015

The next morning began with Pradip asking: “What is your view on planting more fruit trees in the forests? Does the Forest Department ever seek your suggestions on planting tree/plant species that are useful to your communities?” From the total silence greeting this question, one could only infer that none could remember any such thoughtful initiative from the forest sarkari officers or guards!

One adivasi woman related, “About 7 years ago, some forest officer and his guards approached our village for help in planting thousands of teak saplings, just teak, nothing else. They only want to grow some money on trees – for themselves. They are least bothered about what we need or want!”

“In return for our help – to plant teak – these forest department people offered us money, vessels, pots, even loans for building our homes! Initially, we agreed to help. But later came their condition – after the teak saplings are planted, we and our cattle would be restricted from entering that part of the forest.

“Of course, we rebelled. At a meeting of all the people of 3 concerned villages, it was decided that we would uproot all the monoculture teak saplings. We then went to the forest department chaps, and informed them of our collective decision. Suddenly, all their earlier sweet talk and offers of help turned to threats of jailing us!

“We asked, ‘So will you jail all of us? Even if you do, one day – when we are released – we will respond suitably.’ The forest guards who knew us realized that we were deadly serious. They got quite scared, and apologized – requesting to be spared! They never showed their faces again after that day.”



At this point, Debyeet interjected, “There are many such villages here now, where forest guards have disappeared and not been seen for the last 10-15 years.”

Someone then related an old tribal saying, “If you are on a forest trail with a tiger in front of you, and a forest guard behind you, look out for the forest guard; he is more treacherous!”

The discussion then veered to Bt cotton. A few villagers had been lured by the tall promises, but reported a miserable experience. “This way of farming creates total dependence for

us on the market. We have to go the traders to buy all inputs, starting from their seeds to all kinds of chemicals fertilizers and pesticides. Then we have to go back to them again to sell all our produce. Usually, we suffered a big loss. Some have run into debts of Rs 40-50,000; and at 10% interest, this will drive our farmers to suicide by consuming pesticides! We have thus decided never to grow Bt cotton again.”



The afternoon session of the second day began with small group discussions – on the subject of self-governance. How would the villagers organize themselves to meet their needs and challenges more effectively?

Reporting from their discussions, the group representatives said:

“We have to take united decisions after thorough consultation, carefully deliberating the matters in our kutumba (community). The feeling of unity and loyalty is still alive among us, and many of us are prepared to give up our lives to safeguard our forests and our kutumba. But this feeling needs to be strengthened in our youth.

“The education we give our children and youth must imbibe in them pride in our adivasi knowledge, culture and lifestyle. ... Adivasi tolerance, simplicity and helpful attitude is good, but we must now be able to recognize people with ulterior motives. ... In our Kui samaj (united by the common Kui language) adivasis never beg. We prefer to be self reliant and to search in our forests for our food and other needs. ...

“We will further strengthen our ability to grow 40-50 crops for self-reliance, using our own seeds, without any kind of external dependence on the market. Our *mandua* (finger-millet) is wholesome and nourishing. So is our *kosela* (little millet). The *kosela* is very easy to grow, and from one acre, we can get 15 quintals. If or when we need money, we can get a price of Rs 2,500 per quintal.

“There is solidarity in our society – in both joy and sorrow. The death of any one is mourned by all... And in our marriages, every single villager comes to celebrate. None is left out. We do not have any dowry, and we do not yield to any kind of demands. It is

understood that the families will give/spend according to their ability. Of course, the villagers expect some liquor to celebrate along with song and dance! But this we usually prepare from our own mahua flowers.

“The brew sold by the *Bihari* (outsider) *daru-bhattis*, or liquor breweries, costs us much in every way – money, health and family peace. We must seriously consider banning such outside liquor from our villages.

“We will remain very cautious of the lure of money, and all the promises of *vikaas* (modern development). From our experience, providing electricity has not really helped. Rather, it has brought us more problems – the nuisance of television and mobiles! Even improved roads have brought more exploiters and exploitation to our villages. Most such outsiders are primarily interested in squeezing out from us and our lands. We understand well that we have to be united to face such threats.



The villagers then played ‘Tiger and Goat’. They formed a tight-knit circle of protectors, first with a solitary ‘goat’ inside, and a solitary ‘tiger’ outside; later, with more than one goat and one tiger! This physically energetic game thoroughly enlivened them.

So what could one learn from it? The general consensus was that with unity, alertness and determination, they could save their ‘goat’ by keeping it physically separated from the preying ‘tiger’.

“No one can even touch our goats if we are all together.... But we need a strong boundary; and we cannot afford to sleep or be careless.”

“We must put up a strong warning to exploiters on notice boards at the entrance of every village, cautioning them of the serious consequences of any misdeeds.”

“We know that exploiters may even take the form of a friendly NGO; and we have to be careful and discriminate. They come in all shapes. Many outsiders want to sell us hybrid

or Bt seeds and chemicals. Some come for our old artefacts and ornaments; some are money-lenders, charging high interest; some try to sell us lottery tickets, suggesting that we can become crore-patis (millionaires) overnight!



After dinner, there were three film screenings: (1) I cannot give you my Forest; (2) Cotton for my Shroud; and (3) Dammed (on the Onkareshwar dam over the Narmada). Intermittently, the screenings were 'paused' to provide translations in Kui/Odiya.



March 19, 2015

The following morning featured a talk by Saroj Mohanty (activist). He related that the whole south Odisha region is an adivasi rain-fed area. Being rich in minerals, there is a well-planned economic conspiracy to take over the land and its resources. An early milestone in this was the formation of IFAD (International Fund for Agriculture and Development). They had a clear plan of providing roads, water and infrastructure with their eyes on future extraction of minerals from these lands. They also targeted replacement of millets with plantations of cashews, coffee and other cash crops. At another level was a threat of non-advasis taking over/ buying our adivasi land. Saroj then narrated the story of the Kondh resistance.

And now, he said the government wants to bring the 'Green Revolution' to eastern India, intensifying the use of hybrid seeds



and chemical fertilizers and pesticides for growing monocultures of cash crops for the market, rather than poison-free, wholesome food for local consumption. He gave a grim warning that the loss of local traditional seeds would lead to a vicious chain effect resulting in total loss of self-reliance and self-sufficiency.

Saroj added that the modern education and schooling system promoted by the government was calculated to create an inferiority complex among the youth; and a yawning generation gap with their elders. Sometimes these so-called 'educated', 'modern' youth even feel ashamed to acknowledge their parents as their own!

"The government only pays hypocritical lip service about wanting to protect adivasi culture. In truth, they are least interested in preserving what is most valuable in adivasi culture – our forests, traditional seeds, and way of mixed cropping to meet basic family needs, rather than the demands of distant urban markets. Just presenting an adivasi

dance on a VIP stage is a farce and only cheapens our adivasi culture.

“The adivasi gods are in nature, not in man-made temples. Their religion is integrated in all of their life and culture. They do not make a double-faced pretence of religion, while actually desecrating and destroying Mother Earth in the name of ‘vikaas’ or development, like the outside exploiters who only worship the god of money!

“Adivasis have songs for every natural/agricultural season. But if the adivasi way of life – of mixed farming and gathering from their forests – dies, the song and poetry of their life also dies. Then the rich ancient culture which respected women as equals gives way to a new shallow money culture, singing Bollywood songs with a bottle of liquor in hand, treating women as mere sex objects or bonded labour!”



The concluding session of the gathering witnessed a community rite of working and building together. Each person added a few bricks symbolizing the specific contribution s/he pledged to the collective construction. Each participant was conscious of the momentous challenge their community faced. “If we do not attend to our work/responsibilities, Mother Forest will surely be destroyed.”

All together, they resolved – “We will not leave our forest and our *kutumba* (community), but shall remain united to protect and strengthen them!”

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