

Tribal-utilized FGRs of Niyamagiri Hills in Odisha, India

'Dongria Kondh' is an ancient tribal group inhabiting the Niyamagiri Hills of southwest Odisha, located 400 kms away from the Capital Bhubaneswar. Spread over an area of 240 km², the Hill harbours tons of bauxite ore. These tribal stood as pioneers in making history by winning a decade-old battle against a British mining company that had invested billion dollars for bauxite mining operations in the area. However, the indigenous group now struggles for their livelihood due to hunger and deforestation. Through their traditional way of living, they get practiced to sustainably utilize the forest genetic resources occurring in the region.



Tapping date palm sap to produce liquor

Numbering some 10,000 people, the *Dongria Kondh* believe the forests and hills to be sacred sites, and have for centuries lived in harmony with the land, with a single family harvesting an average of 130 kg of wild produce in a single year. Their nutritional practices include a diverse species of plants procured from forests. Numerous hill streams serve as a source of clean fresh water for them. Although they had won the battle from the mining people, the present scenario in the area has not changed much due to continuous deforestation for larger infra projects coupled with monoculture plantations of fast-growing trees to meet the supply needs of pulp industries.



'Barada' leaves forms a rich source of iron

A data reveals that about 55% of adults suffer from protein-energy deficient and 60% of children remain malnourished. India is home to a substantial amount of malnourished people among the world with 275 million of strong forest-dwelling population. Though they live closest to readily available food sources they are starving for nutrition. This has made the UN to focus on forest protection due to their critical importance in alleviating hunger and mitigating the impacts of climate change, not just in India but worldwide.

The tribal of Niyamagiri Hills depend on various forest resources to sustain their livelihood. For instance, the date palm fruits they consume are rich in antioxidants and vitamin A. They also collect the sap and ferment to produce liquor. Bamboos form an integral part of their dietary as well as household needs. Rich in protein, young bamboo shoots are a delicacy among the tribal community. The outer skin is boiled with salt and chilli as a source of nutrition. During the monsoon season, when the shoots are plentiful, members of the tribe earn an income from bamboo.



Bamboo shoots are tasty and nutritious

The highly valued mahua flowers are collected, dried and made into liquor. Its seeds yield oil that can be used for cooking. Some tribal groups use 'mahua paste' as a medicine to facilitate childbirth. Honey is the *Dongria Kondh's* most precious forest product, valued for its nutrition, medicinal properties and high returns from sale. Because the tribe manages and protects large sections of the Niyamgiri hills in the eastern Indian, hundreds of wild honeybee colonies can still be found here. Freshly fermented liquor made from the sap of the Salapa palm tree is often used during rituals. This is one of seven trees considered a 'must' in the *Dongria Kondh's* sacred grove.



Collection of 'Mahua' flowers

Dongria Kondh forms a very small fraction among those tribal communities inhabiting in forests of India. If the indigenous knowledge from this small fraction is more enlightening, we can imagine about the entire traditional wealth that our country harbours. Hence, one should look up at the Niyamagiri hills for a lesson on an alternative economic model based on community management and control of land and resources, rather than the rampant destruction of living ecosystems for profit.

Source:

<http://www.ipsnews.net/2015/05/lessons-from-an-indian-tribe-on-how-to-manage-the-food-forest-nexus/>