

Dissolution of traditional Adivasi structures for modernity

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Written specially for Vikalp Sangam As the election season approaches in Odisha, the state government is busy pushing out front page advertisements in all the leading newspapers about the programmes it has launched for the development of the tribal population. The interventionist programmes are designed with the premise that tribal people are backward, primitive, and need to be taught how to survive in the world. While investigating life skills of Kondh Adivasis in south Odisha's Rayagada district, there seems to be a case to the contrary, one for protecting the traditional structures, in which children and adolescents especially thrived. A typical Kondh village functions around Kutumbh. Malvika Gupta, who is doing her DPhil in international development at Oxford University on indigenous education and Dr Felix Padel, renowned anthropologist who has worked extensively on indigenous issues in India, say, "Kutumbh is usually translated as 'clan' - unlike caste society, tribal social structures emphasize clan identity, which is organised ritually and politically through many activities." It is the central nervous system of any Kondh village. Usually, Kutumbh (community meeting) is called at least once a month, sometimes more often – depending on the requirements of the community, like arrangements for the village festivals, if there's any wedding in the village (entire village is part of the celebrations and arrangements), if there's a dispute between families, and if the village wants to take a collective decision on any issue. Since there is no history of inter-tribe fighting in this region, every single member of the village sits in, including the women and children. All decisions are taken on majority and all members are encouraged to participate. Tamba Saraka, around 80 years in age, lives in Darukona village in Bissamcuttack block of Odisha's southernmost district Rayagada. She is the Bejuni (priestess) of her village, and has the duty to talk to their Gods and ask directions for important things like time of sowing, time of festivals, which direction to go on hunting trips, etc. She says, "Kutumbh is the teaching ground. It is important that children sit in these meetings because that's how they learn about our customs – how to talk to people in the village, respect for elders, how to speak in front of people." World Health Organisation (WHO) defines life skills as development of self-awareness, empathy, critical thinking, creative thinking, coping with stress, and coping with emotions, interpersonal skills, effective communication, decision making, and problem solving. As Tamba Saraka says, "As a child if you start learning, it becomes a part of the personhood. You also make mistakes and correct them and that is learning. It becomes a part of memory." Pradeep Prabhu, retired dean from TISS Durjapur and one of the co-authors of Forest Rights Act, agrees with Tamba and adds, "It is true. There are a lot of lessons to be learnt from Adivasi communities, which have an equitable structure and provide opportunities for everyone to grow." While anthropologists and experts who have worked with Adivasis present views of a sophisticated society, mainstream thinking differs in point of view. When asked if there is something to learn from the Adivasi communities, the Block Education Official (BEO) at Bissamcuttack, Jaychandra Pathy, got surprised, almost taken aback at the question. After some thinking he says, "Adivasis are gentle, simple and non-complicated people there (gestures towards the head). That can be learnt from them." This is the challenge Adivasis face now. The change is around the corner, and is visible in the villages that are more accessible. Roads bring with them towns, markets, blingy shops, smartphones, middle men, money lenders, the government, almost everything related to modern concepts of development. At Lesing Podar village of Bissamcuttack block – only about five kilometres or so from Bissamcuttack town, Elamahi Hikoka (50) has views quite different from the older Kondh ladies the reporter has seen in the past five years in the area. Hikoka says, "Girls and women don't do four things - speak in Kutumbh, go to shamshan (funeral ground), roof repairing, and ploughing." She thinks that if women start speaking in Kutumbh, it will bring shame to them and their families in front of so many people. According to Debjeet Sarangi, founding member of Living Farms, an NGO working with Adivasis in Odisha, says, "Apart from gender segregation, shame is also a borrowed concept from Odiya population – one that is affecting voice, participation, rights, and well-being of women even in Adivasi societies, which traditionally had a more equitable structure." Prabhu feels this pressure to fit-in in the set notions is taking away the traditional wisdom and values of Adivasis, "After working with Adivasi communities for the past 30 years, I have compiled about 15 folk stories. These have such strong feminist stories – which were passed on through generations. Children of both genders listen to these and understand their roles in the society." Interestingly, young women of the village follow the newly formed rules, but also resent. After listening to Elamahi Hikoka, 22-year-old Mamata Hikoka says, "For problem solving; only old men sit. Even Bejuni doesn't sit for any Kutumbh meeting, except for festivals." Suddenly shifting to broken Hindi, she adds, "Hamare aadmiyon ko bahot importance milta hai, kisi ko bolne nahi dete. (Men are given more importance and don't let anyone else speak)." About five-six kilometres further away from Lesing Podar is Pinda village, where 60-year-old Niglu Pidikaka lives. He is the Jani (priest) of his village, one who performs rituals during the festivals and ceremonies. Pidikaka believes that change is coming through kids who go to school because they are always absent from the village life. "They return to village after school and don't understand what is happening here – it is an immediate disconnect," explains Pidikaka. Echoing almost the same thoughts in Singoroda village of Muniguda block in Rayagada district, is Langi Nathika (80) - a respected elder and also village Bejuni's (priestess) husband. Nathika feels that schools and advent of smartphones have brought in aggressive changes in the village lives. In his village, they almost had to force students to be a part of Kutumbh meetings, with boarding students being called back home to attend important ones. He says, "I am not opposed to education, because otherwise we used to get cheated. But schools have created a physical distance between the village life and students, and smartphones are even worse. As people can't see each other's face during interactions, there is more aggression in people and lack of truthfulness." Malvika Gupta and Felix Padel add, "Looking at the traditional systems of values and knowledge, that are not only absent from the school system but even intentionally undermined." Sharing her experience of speaking to a teacher at the girls' school for Dongria Kondh tribe in Chatikona village in Rayagada district, Malvika says, "His perspective was one of a frustration with traditional customs and how to contradict these to promote what he sees as 'real education'." When asked about traditional structures like Kutumbh of Adivasi communities, BEO Pathy echoes the same sentiment of the teacher and is befuddled as what one can learn from it. After a little stammering, he says, "handicrafts, we can learn handicrafts." [The work was produced under OneWorld Dream a Dream Media Fellowship on Life Skills] Contact **the author**