

**INSTITUTIONALISING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN
FOREST GOVERNANCE: A Case Study of Kandha
Community in Odisha**

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Chapter 6
CONCLUSION

Social lives of the women in the Dongria Kandha community are directly linked with the environment that they live in. All their activities starting from livelihood practices to celebration of their festivals and culture highlight a symbiotic relationship between them and nature. Dongria women by virtue of being the full members of the community held customary rights on the village commons like forest and land. Moreover, as the customary laws grant them rights over communal use of land, they hold the authority of decision-making regarding the management of forest and land resources. They develop various laws, rules, and norms for accessing and controlling the resources and management of the forest. Dongria women practice all the forms of forest activities such as foraging, paddy cultivation or lowland cultivation, and shifting cultivation (*podu chaas*). Their involvement in various livelihood practices enriches their traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) specifically pertaining to seed collection, selection, preservation, and processing, forestry, soil, medicinal plants, and sacred groves, etc. Moreover, they grow their food by integrating the exchange of labour, seeds, skills, services and counsel one another on decisions related to growing or collection food products. Dongria women along with contributing significantly to the family and village economy held a significant position in the Kutumb of the village, where they voice their opinions on village matters freely and play an important role in social and religious events of the Kutumb. Thus, their role and contribution in the economic, social, cultural, and religious activities help them in keeping the gender relation relatively balanced in the community.

However, maintaining this balance has become a difficult task for the Dongria women because of centralization of forest and onslaught of development intervention from external actors like state and civil society organizations. Dongria women along with experiencing a change in their forest, food systems and way of life, are also experiencing the weakening of their power and authority that they traditionally enjoyed in their community. With the changing forest use from shifting to settled agriculture, the engagement from food to high valued cash crops, and the change from community access of land to private access the Dongria women are facing new forms gender inequalities in their community and society at large. The insensitive forest policies that created forest institutions have not only integrated the values of patriarchy into the structures of the Kandha *samaj* but have also devalued and neglected their knowledge on agriculture and forest. Furthermore, the non-owning status (or patrilineality) of the Dongria women on the land has left them with no agency.

The territorialisation process undertaken by the state through survey and settlement in the Dongria land, the non-recognition of their customary forest ownership, and the banning of the traditional method of agriculture has created an adverse effect on the livelihood and welfare of the Dongria women. Moreover, their access and practice of cultivation in the customary lands have been criminalised by the state. Often the customary lands of the communities are diverted towards development projects, plantation programmes, or are converted into Protected and Reserved area to ‘conserve’ the forest and its resources without recognising the complex tenure relationship, and the socio-economic dimension that the Adivasi women share with their forest and land. In the case of the Dongria community, due to diversion of land and forest, many women have resorted to wage labour, and male members often migrate to other states in the search of employment. Moreover, due to uncertainty of tenurial rights, they live in the fear of uncertain displacement or dispossession from their homeland, livelihood, and resources. Many Adivasi communities in the state have been uprooted in this manner by establishment of dams, industries, development projects, and wildlife sanctuaries. Displacement has a devastating effect on Adivasi women’s consciousness due to their rootedness with their land and clan, and their inability to adjust in the new surroundings. Moreover, the compensation packages evolved by the state often neglect this important factor, and most of the time their relief packages are dismal, which makes their situation more vulnerable.

The situation of Adivasi communities in the state until today remains miserable and there are various reasons behind the prevalence of such situation. The foremost being the reinforcement of the colonial biases and prejudices about the tribal communities in the new paradigm of development by the Indian elites and bureaucrats. Often this elite’ contempt and disregard the culture, custom, knowledge of the tribal communities and try to assimilate them with the ‘mainstream’ in order to ‘modernise’ them. While disdaining the lives of the tribes, they create a discourse such as ‘practice of shifting cultivation is destructive’ or ‘tribes are backward and ignorant’ that are later on translated into the policy framework, which eventually marginalises the communities. Moreover, these colonial attitudes of the state were consolidated in the value system, worldview, and socialization process of the Adivasi communities through the church and other religious outfits, schools and civil society organisation. Every institution mentioned above believed that the communities are in the need of the ‘development’ and disregarded their culture, knowledge system, and way of life. Furthermore, these institutions suppressed the decision making authorities of the women, ignored their cultural and ritualistic knowledge, and denied their participation in forest management institutions thereby affecting their status in the community, and consolidating male hierarchy in gender relation. These forms of development have eventually excluded women from the large discourse of forest governance.

Therefore, Adivasi women across the country are struggling against such institutions and evolving resistance methods to achieve democratic rights, to live in dignity and to pursue a way of life and livelihood that centres on the relationship with their forest. Moreover, these resistance movements are an integral part of the larger struggle against patriarchal institutions, unjust forms of governance, and for achieving gender justice. For Adivasi women, the enactment of the Forest Rights Act became a step towards sovereignty over forest resources, gender, and environmental justice. This legislation provided the rights to way of life, livelihood, and recognized their knowledge and capacities to care and nurture for the forest and ecosystem. Understanding that women play a crucial role in the conservation and management of the forest resources, the legislation created a legal space to recognise the rights of women over forestland through the provision of land titles in the joint names and independent title to single women and women-headed household. Moreover, it restored the rights of the Adivasi on the community forest resources and their habitat and conferred the communities with power to protect and manage these resources according to their traditional modes of conservation practices. FRA shifted the discourse from the forest management to forest governance- by allocating authority to women to take constitutional decisions relating to their forest (for instance: from following the instruction and choices of the forest department towards single species in the social forestry to having the authority to decide the species and choices in forestry). Secondly, it shifted its focus from the state towards the role of the communities, judiciary, and civil society organisation that provided multiple layers of forest governance. The discourse shifted from ‘how the forest department manages the forest to ‘how communities could govern forest or how different actors in the society can play different roles in governing the forest’. Thus, rights, responsibilities, regulatory mechanisms, transparency, and accountability became dominant in the discourse of forest governance (Lele and Menon 2014: 11). FRA was not just enacted to include women in policy and programmes, rather it was a space, which recognised rights of the Adivasi women and legitimates their place as productive human beings who are entitled to dignity as political rights and not just as part of welfare and protection (Ramdas 2009: 66). However, the state’s attempt to negate the power of the Gram Sabha, inability to secure the community rights to forest resources, and encouragement to promote the plantation and afforestation programmes through JFM and CAMPA on the lands secured through the FRA demonstrates their continuous undermining of the democratic rights and dignity of the Adivasi women in the country (*ibid*).

The international discourse has emphasised on the fact that women’s ability to access forests, secured tenurial rights, their decision-making authority regarding resource utilization is crucial for the conservation and climate change mitigation (RRI 2017). Moreover, their participation in the forest governance and control over forest resources also helps in economic

development of both the community and the nation. Women play a crucial role in their community such as gathering and producing food resources, preserving indigenous seeds and crops and transferring the traditional knowledge to the younger generations. With the secured rights over the forest and having greater control and ownership over the forest resources, they can have an incentive to protect and conserve the local resources. In forest-dependent communities, women are relatively independent and communal linkages are stronger as there is less male domination. Therefore, community forest rights are the place where women can exercise maximum control. However, due to lack of the political will of the state, this specific provision of the Act has not been significantly implemented in the country. There still remains a fear among the forest department, bureaucracy, and the government that if the forest land goes to the communities then they have let go their vested interest towards industrialisation and their hold on the forest resources. This was realised when the state produced the Draft National Forest Policy, 2018 that reversed the gains in democratising forest governance to colonial era forest management by re-introducing focus on industrialisation, privatisation, and encouragement of the monoculture plantation. Furthermore, this Act speaks about subsuming the statutory authority of the Gram Sabha to manage and govern forest under the FRA by creating ‘community forest management’ within the framework of JFM. The state is continuously undermining the democratic rights of the communities and furthering the power of the forest department on the forest and forest resources, thereby threatening the democratic approach to forest governance.

Adivasi women in the country, however, are simultaneously working against the profit motivated state and market to advocate for the governance of the community forest resources. They are also fighting against the patriarchy that is gradually integrating with their community structures, and the privatisation of resources. While women from Dongria Kandha community are asserting control over their commons, through achieving the achieving sovereignty over their food systems, the women in Kaptapally village of Nayagarh district have opened up a forest rights information centre to take charge to fast track community forest rights¹⁹⁸. Similarly, Adivasi women of Kaimur region (UP, Jharkhand, and Bihar) have taken up plantation drive of trees like mango, neem, lemon, and mahua to protest against the plantation programme of the forest department funded by JICA¹⁹⁹. These movements of self-determination over the forest and the natural resources are spreading throughout the country. Therefore, the state and civil society actors need to understand that these initiatives are parts of

¹⁹⁸ Kukreti, I.(2017). Women in Odisha Village take Charge to Fast Track Community Forest Rights. Available Online at <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/governance/women-in-kaptapally-village-take-charge-to-fast-track-community-forest-rights-58932> (Accessed on 22nd September 2019)

¹⁹⁹ Roma, (2012). Women Control of Forest through Community Forest Rights and Building Institutions in the Context of Forest Rights Act. Available Online at <https://sanhati.com/excerpted/4988/> (Accessed on 22nd September 2019)

the growing movement among the Adivasi women- a movement to claim for identity, economic agency, cultural visibility, human dignity, and political assertion of rights and ownership over land and forest. Therefore, rather than negating these struggles, they should create a space where these processes of collectivization can be effectively organised towards sustainable forest governance.

Along with the state, it is important for other developmental actors and civil society organisations to support the reform of national laws and legislations, and recognise the equal forest rights for the indigenous and rural women. The state needs to give clear land entitlements to the women, establish a robust mechanism for the implementation of the FRA, and involve timely monitoring of impacts and assessing the progress made towards the gender mainstreaming in the policies. The frameworks of the policy should be formulated keeping in the mind that firstly women are not homogeneous groups therefore; policies should be contextualised according to the existing socio-political context. Secondly, the policies need to take into consideration the existing socio-cultural and existing modes of power and control that defines the social position of the women in the community for an effective gender mainstreaming in the policies. In addition to that, development actors also need to adopt a gender lens keeping in mind the above points while addressing issues like tenure rights, climate change, and conservation efforts, etc. Moreover, state and the civil society organisation rather than creating conflicts need to collaborate with the communities who have been managing the natural resources since ages to fight the larger issues of climate change, agrarian distress, and food and nutritional insecurities.