

**Debasree De**

## **MY DAYS WITH THE STARVING RICH – A VISIT TO DANDAKARANYA**

South Odisha is no doubt one of the mesmerising places in India having a wide range of mountains such as Niyamgiri, Panchpat Mali, Bapla Mali, Deo Mali, deepest forest ranges, rivers-rivulets, streams, and so on. Those who have visited Puri or Bhubaneswar would hardly find a single common feature here. It does not seem to be a part of Odisha, but a completely new area. Rayagada, Koraput and Malkangiri constitute a portion of today's Dandakaranya, a name which has become synonymous of movements and resistances, a place that witnessed brutal repressions. Every site of its hidden natural beauty tells that story, so calm and quiet, but so wild and mysterious, so known yet so unknown, like the gigantic wild spiders with black and green body weaving the net in the forest and concealing its existence with the help of green trees and dark vacuity. In fact there are very few people who had or would like to dare to experience its natural beauty. Even I was quite unwilling to visit the districts, obviously out of fear of being 'abducted' or 'killed'! But my research compelled me to take the risk and I could not even realise when this short trip became the greatest memory to be cherished forever.

Howrah-Koraput Express, the only train from Kolkata, takes about 20 hours to reach Rayagada. We reached Rayagada on 31 October almost starving since there was no pantry car or any food service (except tea) in the train. At the station there was a list hanging on a board bearing the photographs of the missing persons. The list was quite big. A car took us to the hotel. My travel guide-cum-interpreter joined us the next day. The next day began with a sudden attack of Nilam, a severe cyclonic storm and perhaps an omen for us.

On 1 November morning, G.N. Mishra, my guide, met me and said that we have to seek permission from the authority, i.e., the District Magistrate and have to submit it to the local police station in order to get entry inside the districts. He also informed me about the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups Act of March 2012, enacted by the Odisha Government that prohibits the foreign travellers/scholars to visit the tribal areas at night, taking photographs, entering inside their houses or any kind of physical proximity with the tribal

people. I was totally disappointed since my hardest journey was about to go in vain. I told him that I am not a foreigner and I respect the privacy and dignity of the tribal people. This is not my first field work. I have visited the turbulent Jangal Mahal of West Bengal and Jharkhand, the tumultuous Birbhum, the burning tea gardens of North Bengal, the diminishing Totopara and so on. I reconcile with their sentiments. We all belong to this country, then why the government authority will stop me to interact with my co-citizens? And as far as the question of 'abduction' is concerned let me experience the ultimate. We started our journey with an unknown fear.

Our first place to visit was Bhatpur village, Bissamcuttack Block, Rayagada district. The village was inhabited by Kondh tribal community. It was a linear village, i.e., one particular tribal community lives here. There are a variety of Kondh tribals, Desia Kondh, Dongria Kondh, Kutia Kondh, Kuvi Kondh, and so on. This village is particularly inhabited by Dongria Kondh community who speak Kui language. The tribal women of Odisha wear more than one nose-ring and ear-ring. Adama Kondh (30) said that there are two Self Help Groups in the village. With the financial assistance of the government women do take part in banana plantation. It is a micro-finance scheme for the backward tribal communities. There was a community house, a remnant of dormitory or *ghotul*. In tribal culture, 'dormitory' is a place where young tribal boys and girls used to practice pre-marital sexual intercourse. But now it is abandoned. There was also a sacrificial ground probably influenced by Hindu culture. An old Kondh woman was seen smoking cigar beside a *tulsi* plant. This was another sign of Hindu cultural impact on tribal culture. Kanchana Hemrika (28) took me inside her house. There was a photograph of Laxmi (the Hindu goddess), the household goods were hanging from the roof. Baskets, *saris*, utensils, and pails – everything was there in a scattered manner. The Kondh children were found reading books in Odiya at the courtyard. Houses are being built with the funds released under Indira Awas Yojana, but the houses do not suit the tribal culture and tradition. The tribals were BPL card holders, but the performance of Annapurna Yojana was not satisfactory. Tribal families were getting 25 kg rice a week.

Then we moved to our second place, the Dongria Kondh Development Agency (DKDA) of Rayagada. I interviewed the DKDA officers, M.K. Karkaria, Bhagirath Sahoo, Karno Kausaliya, Janak Bag, S. Trinath Rao and Ramesh Nalla. They introduced me to Kondh women. The women showed their ornaments mainly hair clips, one knife kept within the hair-knot, 25-30 ear-rings, *khagla* or necklaces with beads, nose-rings of mainly gold or brass and little tattoos. The officers told me that the government projects and funds for the development of the Dongria Kondhs are utilised through the Agency. The Odisha Welfare Service or OWS cadres help the government to implement the projects properly. Some Kondh women were digging the earth in the backyard of the Agency. When asked they said that they were preparing the

land for cultivation. I came to know that with the support of the government fund DKDA is trying to develop the Dongria Kondh people, mainly women. They were engaged to sustainable farming. The DKDA has its own plans related to the cultivation of the seasonal crops such as pine apple, jackfruit, mango, papaya, black pepper, coffee, lemons, orange, etc. DKDA gives training on how to grow crops on both the hill terrains and plain lands and which crop has to be cultivated in which season so that the women can go to their villages and carry on the process learnt here. The DKDA is imparting training to Kondh women in making different types of hand crafts specially designing shawls. The shawls are sold at Rs 700-1000 per piece. The Kondhs exchange their products during the weekly market which is held every Wednesday.

Our next destination was in Khojuri village, Bissamcuttack Block, Rayagada district. Kutia Kondh and Dongria Kondh are inhabited in the village. Tribal women are also working under National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. They are getting Rs. 126 per day as wages. They have no restrictions in collecting forest products under Forest Rights Act of 2006. But the Odisha government has put a ban on cutting of trees. The daily diet of the Kondhs is consisted of millet, gruel, dry fish, rice, chicken, and vegetables. Their occupation is mainly in primary sectors, i.e., agriculture and domestication of animals and horticulture. They have no land in their name. The Kondhs practice bride-price instead of dowry but that is in kind and not in cash. Usually animals such as goats and cows are given as bride-price. Child marriage is a rare incident. They have profound faith in witchcraft or sorcery. Their main festival is Ghanta Parba.

After lunch we visited Titijhola village. Titijhola is a tiny village in Kumbhikota Gram Panchayat under Sadar block at the tail end of Rayagada district bordering Koraput. The village is inhabited by the Jharia Paraja community. There is no Self Help Group in the village. We found the shifting cultivation tracts extensively under Swidden cultivation. Maize and rice are two principal crops being cultivated in these tracts. We entered the Titijhola Primary School, an upgraded school. The school is both for girls and boys. The small little Kondh and Paraja girls were wearing three-piece nose rings. They sang the prayer song before us and ended it with Jana-Gana-Mana. When asked about the mid-day meal programme we were told that on Wednesday and Saturday they are served with eggs and in the rest of the days with only *khichris* (a blending of rice, *dal* and vegetables). There is no fish or meat included in the meal. A Paraja mother (who came to drop her daughter to the school) said that she wants to see her daughter educated. Titijhola is a classic example of official apathy on electricity front. Rajiv Gandhi Grameen Vidyutikaran Yojana (RGGVY), a scheme for providing access to electricity in the rural area under the National Common Minimum Programme (NCMP) was launched by Union Ministry of Power on March 18, 2005. But when I visited Titijhola, there was no electricity connection.

Then we moved to Jhigidi and Ghasi Sahi of Jhigidi Gram Panchayat, Muniguda Tehsil, Rayagada. There we visited the Jharia Paraja Market. The market is of the luxury goods. The artisans were preparing the products inside the market. This is called Dokra craft. The art of preparing the products is called lost-wax technique, a process by which the metal sculpture is cast from an artist's sculpture. Charms, pendants, rings, necklace, different types of idols, ornaments, etc., are just a few items that can be made using a method called wax casting. In this process, a wax mould is used to create a piece of jewellery. The Parajas use clay instead of wax and brass as the metal. This clay mould, called a pattern, is first weighed so that the amount of brass required to fill the mould can be determined. Then the mould is attached to a base and a flask is slipped over the base. The Parajas use a pot as flask. Once the mould is in the flask, a kind of plaster that looks like pan cake or better called investment, is mixed up, put in a vacuum to get all the air bubbles out of it, and then poured into the flask. It is then left to dry and harden. This takes a minimum of two hours. Once the investment is dried, the base and flask are removed. Now the piece is put into an oven to burn out the wax or clay. Next a centrifuge is used to force the melted metal or brass into the investment mould. Finally, the piece is cleaned up by filling and polishing it. We found both the Paraja men and women working inside the market. They were blowing the wind with an animal-skin. I bought a necklace designing with small form of fishes.

Our last visit was in Gadaba village of Rayagada block, Rayagada, where we experienced the pottery making. The villagers were getting their livelihood from making and selling of different types of pottery. In the neighbouring Punjapai village we found that the fire woods were stored on the top of a tree for future use.

On 2 November I planned to visit Utkal Alumina Ltd. at Kashipur. We started our journey accordingly. Our first place was Karajhola village of Sankarada Gram Panchayat, Kashipur Block, Rayagada. Kanti Majhi; the President of the Self Help Group of the village said that the tribal women's contribution along with the loans provided by the government is being utilised to grow mango and mustard. Heronai Majhi and Kamla Majhi said that they sell the products to the local businessmen and then they sell it to the market. There were three Self Help Groups and the members range from 12 to 15. Last year the villagers bought goats with the bank loans, but the goats died of some diseases and they were compelled to return the loan amount with interest to the bank immediately. Tribals here are dying of diarrhoea because of polluted drinking water combined with an inefficient public health care system. Even the NGOs failed to perform efficiently. On our way to Utkal Alumina, we found large eucalyptus forest which is called the monoculture plantation. It commercialises the forest for timber and affects tribal livelihood system. The villagers talked about the incidents of starvation death in Kashipur. The very

first incident took place in 1997 when four people died out of hunger. The second incident took place in 2001 when more than twenty people died starving. The villagers of Surispadar and Musripadar village survived on a gruel of mango kernels during the course of starvation. Mishraji showed me the mango kernels. They said that the immediate requirement is to involve the local tribals in the government planning because it is the lack of commitment and ill-implementation of programmes on the part of the government that stall the development of the tribals.

We went to visit the Karajhola Primary School. Madhusudan Rao was the teacher who helped us a lot. The most interesting thing was that after ringing the bell the teacher has to call the students and then only he can start the school. The students dress up and join him. There were no toilet facilities not even for the girls and this is the situation in almost every school. There was hardly any school teacher who would like to do service in these extremist affected areas and Mr. Rao was no doubt a dedicated exception.

We then moved to Utkal Alumina International Ltd. situated at Tikiri. This is the Aditya Birla Group. The entire industrial complex is surrounded by Niyamgiri Hills. Its big quarters are really ostentatious. There are convent schools, school bus for the children of the owners and employees. I heard a lot about the tribal movements against displacement and rehabilitation. I wanted to talk to the authority. But the security did not let me enter the company.

On that very day we boarded Howrah-Koraput Express at 4.25 pm for Jeypore of Koraput. The phantom train was late by three hours and we reached at Jeypore at 12.30 am. We were later informed that since it was hilly area the train moves slow on the slopes and needs two engines. Any way, when we reached the station it was too late. There was no car service in the hotel to pick us up from the station. All the transport was stopped. Mishraji anyhow arranged a car. It took 15 minutes to reach the hotel at 1.00 am. I thought we were saved from a 'mishap'.

The next day, i.e. 3 November, we planned to visit the Tribal Museum situated behind the Jagannath temple in Koraput. At the gate of the museum there was Saora painting and a sculpture of *Demsa* dance of the Gadaba women. Inside the museum there were small rooms full of photographs of different tribal groups of Odisha, especially tribal women. In a small room there were various types of tribal tools and weapons. In a big room the photographs of the tribals were kept with explanatory tags. The entire museum was embellished with tribal arts and paintings.

Then we moved to a local library named Council of Analytical Tribal Studies, Koraput. We talked to Professor P.C. Mahapatra, the director of the library over phone. He granted us permission to work in the library. Mr. Bharatendu Sahoo was the librarian who helped us by providing books on Odisha tribals. The collection of the books is enormous.

On way to NALCO we came across Panchpat Mali Bauxite Mines at Kakiriguma in Koraput. It is an underground mine. The owner of the mine is National Aluminium Company Ltd. or NALCO. The mining is being carried out by mechanised opencast method. After reaching Damanjodi of Koraput our obvious destination was NALCO Alumina Refinery Plant defined as Asia's Largest Alumina Refinery Plant. I wanted to talk to the authority. So, we (Mishraji and I) first went go to the Central Industrial Security Forces of NALCO Mines and Refinery Complex of Damanjodi. They first gave me some extension numbers and told me to ask for permission from the officers. But no one agreed to talk to me. After several attempts Mr. R.N. Sahoo of HRD department agreed to see me. I was issued a temporary visitor pass for one day (security gate pass no. 6, serial no. 31323). I entered NALCO. It was like a big city inside with excellent roads and big buildings. The giant tracks full with bauxite were coming and going. I met Mr. Sahoo, a young officer quite cordial with me. He said that I should meet Mr. C.M. Mohanta, the Periphery Development Officer, for any kind of queries, but he was too busy and could not talk to me.

Mr. Sahoo talked to me and gave me some information on the developmental works of NALCO for the local tribal people. He said that when NALCO started working in Koraput the entire KBK region (Koraput-Bolangir-Kalahandi) was an underdeveloped region. But NALCO has done a great job in developing the local area. A team of CSR people (Corporate Social Responsibility) are visiting the tribal villages within 7 km of the plant and making plans to develop them. He said that NALCO is working for the upliftment of the tribal women as well. It is encouraging backyard poultry, distributing sewing machines, stitching machines, giving trainings on making terracotta figurines and sanctioning regular grants. CSR is also preparing long-term programmes to be implemented outside the district to improve the life style of the tribal people and making the women folk self-dependent. The CSR foundation is also encouraging cultural activities and promoting them in the international forum. In this way the tribals are able to take their paintings to the exhibitions. NALCO profits two thousand crore annually and two per cent of that profit is being spent on the development of the tribal areas. The immediate motif of NALCO is 'prosperity among poverty'. NALCO has adopted some villages in order to educate the tribal youngsters. More than three hundred children are being sponsored by NALCO through several phases. When asked about the tribal movements against displacement he replied that the tribal dissatisfaction is an undeniable fact because there is always the scope of development. He also said that presently there are about 2400 workforce out of which 600 are land displaced tribal people. But NALCO has already built colonies, like B.R. Colony, Sahid Laxman Nayak Colony, for the displaced tribals and provided them with proper monetary compensation and jobs. All the 600 tribals who were once displaced have been rehabilitated satisfactorily. According to him, NALCO is the forerunner in making proper

R & R policy for the displaced.

Our next destination was the village Janiguda, Laxmipur Tehsil, Koraput. The village is inhabited by the Bodo Paraja tribal community which has been recognised as PTG. Bodo Paraja community is the only tribal community that still bears matriarchal culture. There are two SHGs and undoubtedly needs more supervision on the side of the government to develop the tribals. Janiguda is situated very near to Narayanpatna. I was eager to go to Narayanpatna. But Mishraji told me that there were strict restrictions on entering the block since security forces were posted to handle any kind of unrest. We met Sonamuni Muduli, a Bodo Paraja woman who was pounding rice with a large and heavy tool. I took up the tool in my hand but it was too heavy and she was doing the job single handed! It seemed too laborious. The women of the village did not know the names of their Chief Minister or Prime Minister. They said that they go to the panchayat sabha or gram sabha but hardly speak there. They do not contest the panchayat elections. There was no woman sarpanch. Only Mastipur Panchayat has a woman panchayat member.

We then moved to the 200 acres forest land of coffee plantation on the foothills of Deo Mali in Semeliguda Block of Koraput. The forest was covered by cash crops starting from coffee, black pepper, silver oak trees, etc. These cash crops provide employment to the tribals for nearly six months. The climate of Koraput is conducive to coffee plantation. The coffee plantation of Koraput provides employment to a large number of tribal people including women. Tribal women take part in fertilizer application, weeding, bush management, nursery maintenance, harvesting and coffee processing. The workers receive their wages as per the rule of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, i.e., Rs. 120 per day. The produce from Koraput is exported to places like Chennai and Mumbai for marketing. Mishraji showed me the green and red coffee seeds. Mishraji also pointed his finger to the gigantic wild spiders with black and green body weaving the net in the forest and concealing its existence with the help of green trees and dark vacuity. They were completely unidentifiable.

The last day, 4 November, was for the visit to Malkangiri. I wanted to visit the Bonda Market. But I came to know that it is restricted to the outsiders mentioned in the Act. We started our journey early in the morning. Malkangiri is one of the most beautiful places in India fully covered with dense forests. This is the Maoist heartland as well. The district falls under the red corridor. On our way to Bonda Market Mishraji suddenly stopped the car and asked me to get down and walk back. Then he showed me the exact place where a land mine blast took place in July, 2008. It was a heavy explosion that took lives of 17 BSF jawans. He said that the mines are operated from inside the jungles. The road was closed for few years after the explosion and has been opened just the last year. The entire district has been folded with high security.

There are BSF camps after each twenty kilometres. There are also police stations more than required numbers. In front of the BSF camps there are security personnel on duty with arms. We found a BSF camp at Mathili having lots of sacks of sand. Mathili Forest Range begins from here.

We again stopped our car beside a big rocky river with a wonderful water fall. I was amazed to see its beauty. Suddenly I looked back and saw some men wondering and looking at me. I called Mishraji to help me to talk to them. After talking to them I came to know that they were the Didayis, the shifting cultivators of Malkangiri. They live in Saragiguda village, Odupa Panchayat of Malkangiri. Chandan Pujari told me that they do not have to face restrictions in collecting forest produces but their rights over the forest and forest products are still unrecognised. They have not been informed about the Forest Rights Act of 2006. Buddhu Pujari said that they collect mainly fire woods and different kinds of leaves.

On the way to the Bonda Market we met two Bonda women carrying liquor on their heads. Sambari Muduli coming from Mudulipada village of Malkangiri wore heavy rings on her neck. She was bald and wearing large size ear rings, head ornaments. Sangita Krisani, another Bonda woman was coming from Padaiguda village of Malkangiri. She said that livelihood of the Bondas is primitive form of agriculture, animal husbandry and hunting. Women also do hunting and collect forest products. The women prepare traditional liquor and the demand of the liquor was really high in the market. The Bondas are still deprived of the minimum basic needs of life like drinking water, sanitation, education, communication and all others.

We reached the Bonda Market situated at Mundiguda village close to Khairaput Block, Mudulipada P.S. of Malkangiri. The market is mainly consisted of dry prawn and other fishes, different kinds of vegetables, chillies and saris and other garments. At the edge of the market the Bonda men and women were selling traditional country liquor. I had a belief that Bonda women do not wear such heavy ornaments that they are usually shown in the pictures. But I was wrong. The women do wear a lot of rings on their head, neck, ear, nose, hand made with brass or nickel even in their day to day life. It is also important to mention that they wear it by boring the pins into their neck. It is really painful. I think since these tribes have to fight everyday with the hurdles of the nature to eke out a living, the sense of pain is not so vulnerable for them. The Bondas are generally very aggressive in nature. That is also because of their hard lifestyle. Lots of projects are being established in these areas by displacing thousands, such as Balimela Hydro Power Project at Balimela (only 30 km away from Malkangiri), but the tribals are still struggling for two square meal. In Mundiguda, Bonda Market is held every Sunday. Large number of Bonda men and women come to exchange their products. One can see the prevalence of barter system here. The market continues till 2 pm. Gadaba and Didayi people also join the market with their own products.



Then we moved to Tanginiguda village, Khairaput Block of Malkangiri. Here we noticed many big sal forests. The Bonda and Paraja women were getting ready to go to the market with vegetables and fruits in the village. Everybody was in a good mood during the market day. There we also found men digging the earth under National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. On our way back we visited the Bhuniya Market of Boipariguda. This was also a weekly market held every Sunday and participated by the Gadabas, Bhuniyas and Parajas. They were selling dry fishes, vegetables, garments, fruits including tobacco. It is interesting to note that the Gadabas wear two-piece nose ring whereas the Kondhs wear three-piece nose ring. The Bhuniyas wear two-piece nose-ring, sometimes one-piece, and anklets as well. Another surprising thing was the Laxmi Puja that was being performed by the tribal women inside the market place. Tribal women in white saris were distributing the *prasad* and giving the vermilion *tika*. Mishraji informed me that many Bengali refugee families came from Bangladesh and settled in Malkangiri and influenced the tribal culture over there. These are the many-time displaced people and not one-time.

After visiting Bonda Market we had our lunch at a village inn and then came back to Jeypore of Koraput to cover some Gadaba villages. Koraput has the highest concentration of Gadaba population. We first went to Kanjai village, Dangarachhini Gram Panchayat of Jeypore Block. The Gadaba women were preparing the leaf plates since somebody died on that day and they were busy in the arrangement of the fest as a part of the funeral ritual. When asked they said that the dead bodies are cremated. But in case of unnatural death they bury the dead bodies by the river bed. Gadaba women were found working everywhere starting from preparing the land for tomato cultivation, digging, carrying firewoods, transplanting, cleaning the grass and preparing the garden for plantation of a kind of small beautiful yellow flowers. At far we found a sacred grove called *sarna* which is the place of worshipping tribal goddesses. This is the sacred place for the tribals having Banyan tree or Peepal tree or Jackfruit tree. The *sarna* we found had a large Peepal tree. There was a mark of vermilion on a big rock which definitely bore the sign of Hindu influence on the tribals. The villagers said that sorcery is still being practiced by the *jani* or *janguru* in most of the Gadaba villages out there. They said that they believe that the *janis* can suck the spirit.

Then we went to Patrapura village of Jeypore Block, Koraput. It was a Bhuniya village, not linear but circular in nature. Some old women were eating puffed rice or *lia*. Somari Parajoni, a Bhuniya woman, said that they have no land in their names. She is getting the widow pension. Earlier the amount was Rs. 200 per month, but it has now increased by 100 rupees. She was the BPL card holder and getting 25 kg rice through public distribution system. She also said that there is no system of dowry, but bride-price that is paid in kind. Marriage ceremonies are organised with fests and dance.

Our next destination was Maliguda village, Jeypore, close to Boipariguda. It was a Gadaba village. A Gadaba woman was found husking and winnowing inside the house. We found some traditional agricultural tools kept outside the thatched houses, like plough, weeding tools and levelling tools made of wood. Another Gadaba woman was pulling water from the well to wash clothes. In this village, Mali, the sub-tribal group live with the Gadabas as well. Mishraji showed me a place with a large platform. It was a community gathering place where the Gadabas hold meetings and perform *Demsa* dance.

After completing my field survey, we came back to our hotel. The next day, 5 November, we boarded the train and stated our return journey to Kolkata.